



Discussion paper

China's military education and Commonwealth countries

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Summary

Since Barbados announced that it will remove the Queen as head of state in 2021 – a decision which, according to a UK Member of Parliament, was [influenced by China](#) – and China's activities in Commonwealth countries are increasingly under the spotlight.

Chinese military colleges are taking in growing numbers of foreign students. Beijing's provision of foreign military training should be understood in the context of its growing efforts to [train foreign elites](#) in general.

China increasingly uses its military training for foreigners as a method of promoting its models of governance; military training typically includes ideological education. Scholars describe how China promotes China's 'Party-Army model' in which the army is subordinate to a ruling party. However, this model is liable to be 'antithetical [to] multiparty democratic systems' and will tend to 'reinforce elite networks and hierarchies, which [in China] often supersede institutional and constitutional procedures.'

In Zimbabwe, a former Commonwealth country, evidence suggests that the relationship that China developed over decades with the military elite may have allowed Beijing to help determine the model of the government itself. After President Mnangagwa took power in a military coup, his government urged the return of western investment. However Mnangagwa now appears to favour a 'hybrid economy' along Chinese lines, featuring 'crony capitalism and civil-military corporatism'.

Officers from Commonwealth countries are joining China's foreign training programmes in growing numbers. In Barbados, the armed forces have received a \$3m [donation](#) from the PLA while its members are joining training courses in China. Other Commonwealth countries receiving Chinese military training include Cameroon, Rwanda, and Guyana; China has also funded Namibia's Command and Staff College; it is developing the training on offer to Sri Lanka's soldiers; Beijing has partnered with the ruling parties of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia to fund Tanzania's Mwalimu Nyerere Ideological School, once a training centre for African anti-colonial movements, which [will train](#) 400 officers and civilians annually. Uganda's Oliver Tambo Leadership Academy is another China-sponsored 'politico-military school'; and China has begun [training](#) Kenya's paramilitary National Youth Service.

Given China's military training programmes and their potentially serious consequences for the governance of Commonwealth countries, the UK should consider how best to rejuvenate shared Commonwealth military aid and education programmes and to reinforce the Commonwealth's liberal and democratic structures of government in the coming decades.

Introduction

In April 2021, the *Fiji Times* [reported](#) that two senior officers of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), including the Acting Land Force Commander, had received their Masters in Military Science degrees from an institution of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).

This is one example of wider training opportunities that China is promoting to foreign militaries, not only in the South Pacific but in other regions of the Commonwealth. Interest in the extent and impacts of China's diplomatic reach generally in Commonwealth countries is growing, especially since Barbados announced in September 2020 that it planned to remove the Queen as head of state, a decision which, according to a UK Member of Parliament, was [influenced by China](#). China is increasing its diplomatic efforts towards smaller countries, in part for the needs of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as to push countries to end their diplomatic relationships with Taiwan. In 2019, for example, the Solomon Islands, also a Commonwealth country, ended its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan [in favour of China](#).

Chinese military schools and universities are taking in growing numbers of foreign students every year for military training, including for military education in topics such as security studies, counterterrorism, and national defence. More than 20 schools and universities in China are involved in the [military training](#) of foreign troops and officers.

Military training institutions

Having trained members of foreign military forces since the 1950s, many of China's programmes date from shortly after the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955, where Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai discussed newly-independent nations' struggles against colonialism, outlining China's implicit leadership aims. During the Cold War, Beijing [backed Marxist-oriented movements](#) which later became their countries' ruling parties, such as ZANU-PF¹ in Zimbabwe and FRELIMO² in Mozambique, and training became more rigorous and professional, with soldiers and officers regularly [coming to China](#) for training. Today, China's foreign military training should be understood in the context of Beijing's growing efforts to [train foreign elites](#) generally.

¹ Zimbabwean African National Union-Patriotic Front

² Liberation Front of Mozambique

Tiers of military education

Three tiers of military education for foreigners in China [have been identified](#). Students at all tiers can expect to receive ideological training in the Chinese Party-Army relations model.

- First, regional academies for cadets and junior officers, which includes the PLA Air Force Aviation University;
- Second, command and staff colleges include the Army Command College and Command and Staff Colleges of PLA service branches. Most foreign students train at these levels; and
- Third, the upper tier includes the National Defense University and National University of Defense Technology (NUDT).³

In [testimony](#) to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission on China's Strategic Aims in Africa in May 2020, Paul Nantulya outlined how those deemed likely leadership candidates attend higher levels of the military education system.

The Army Command College is administered by the PLA and based in Nanjing. Beyond its use as an academy for commanders in the PLA Ground Forces, it hosts students from foreign countries, recently including the Gambia and Pakistan. The college was among the first group of military academies to provide long-term military training courses for foreign officers, which it has done since 1957. Most of the College's training of foreign military officers takes place at the International Military Education Exchange Centre (IMEEC), created in 1957 and originally a classified organisation which is overseen by the Army Command College. IMEEC submits its own training plans to the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, the headquarters of the PLA (until 2016 known as the PLA General Staff Headquarters): once these are approved, countries around the world may [select officers](#) for enrolment.

The other university that is central to the training of foreign officers in China, the National Defence University in Beijing, is under the guidance of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Like the Army Command College, it was [one of the first](#) Chinese colleges to provide training to foreign officers, having done so since 1956. The university, in particular its branch the International College of Defence Studies (ICDS), has trained thousands of soldiers from dozens of countries over the past decades. This includes national military heads and individuals who later became leaders of their countries, which Chinese state media boasts [includes](#) former Commonwealth member Zimbabwe's late President Robert Mugabe. It is now one of the largest educational platforms for international [military training](#). (The smaller institutions involved in the training of foreign military students [include](#) the Army Engineering University, headquartered in Nanjing (about 3,800 from over 80 countries), the

³ We discussed the connection of UK universities to Chinese military establishments, including the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT), in our previous paper *Inadvertently Arming China?: The Chinese military complex and its potential exploitation of scientific research at UK universities*. Tylecote R. and Clark R. Civitas, February 2021.

Army Infantry College, and various specialist colleges such as the Army Academy of Artillery and Air Defense.)

China has trained thousands of officers at middle and senior levels, as well as government officials, from over 100 countries over [recent decades, and numbers are rising](#): the [China-Africa Action Plan](#) 2018-2021, for instance, grants 5,000 training places to African soldiers, against 2,000 in 2015-2018.

Training approaches

China says its training programmes are intended to encourage friendly attitudes towards China and its forces among foreign officers; some of these officers have received training [before coming](#) to China. The *Global Times* describes how many officers' pre-conceived notions of China, fuelled by 'Western media', are changed through their experiences in China. Training programmes even aim to persuade officers that China performs better on human rights: the extent to which they are convinced of this is because, as a professor at ICDS with over 30 years' experience training foreign countries' officers told the [Global Times](#), 'personal experience and visits are the best human rights lessons'.

Beijing also uses its state press to generate forms of 'public commitment' to China from visiting officers. Officers interviewed by the *Global Times* expressed admiration for China and its development, sometimes criticising the West's attitude towards China, especially if this attitude is also seen to apply to [their own countries](#). Among others, Nigerian sailors have criticised Western powers in the [Chinese state media](#) after educational visits to China, such as the methods with which the US has provided aid to fight Boko Haram, while expressing the belief that China can become the world's leading military force by 2050. Some officers appeared at the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) founding in 2019 wearing [T-shirts](#) with the words 'I love you China'; others showed enthusiastic [support](#) for military reform plans and other goals set out at the recent 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017.

These positive beliefs about China are fostered by a training regime centred around mutual benefit between China and their own countries, including China's role in regional security, with opportunities to visit military and navy bases, see Chinese warships and fighter aircraft and watch military drills (including the 70th anniversary parade on 1 October 2019, 'to [enhance](#) ties and trust') as well as to visit Chinese cities such as ancient capital [Xi'an](#) and the southern coastal city of [Shenzhen](#), among China's first special economic zones.

Implications for democratic government

Zimbabwe has had especially close military relations with China. However there has recently been widespread speculation about China's possible role in the coup led by Emmerson Mnangagwa that replaced President Robert Mugabe. Mnangagwa, who claims to have been friendly with [four generations](#) of Chinese leaders, fled Zimbabwe for China shortly before the coup, where he [was joined](#) by General Constantino Chiwenga. Both men had received military training in China and had been behind many of China's business projects in Zimbabwe; Beijing had feared that there would be chaos in the country should Mugabe have died without a clear successor.

While Mnangagwa's new government urged the return of western investment to Zimbabwe, Mnangagwa himself [is described as seeking](#) a 'hybrid economy' more like the contemporary Chinese model featuring 'civil-military corporatism'.

It might ultimately be asked whether the relationship that China was able to develop over decades with the country enabled it to help determine the model of the government of Zimbabwe itself. While Zimbabwe is a particular case, and the guerrilla movement led by Robert Mugabe received the largest proportion of its materiel [from China](#), China's use of military training and other links to promote its model of governance increasingly appears to be the norm, not the exception.

Paul Nantulya of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in Washington, DC, [has described](#) China's military training as a method by which China promotes its 'Party-Army model' abroad. The model, which renders the army subordinate to a ruling party, is seen as 'antithetical [to the] multiparty democratic systems' enshrined in most of Africa's post-Cold War constitutions.

It is important to emphasise, as Nantulya does, that many of Africa's senior military commanders are against a political role for their forces. Yet China's Party-Army model 'has obvious appeal' to those who would seek to use militaries to cement their power: the model will typically also 'reinforce elite networks and hierarchies, which [in China] often supersede institutional and constitutional procedures.' China is also increasingly [gaining support](#) in Africa for its *Community of Common Destiny* initiative, while in the United Nations African countries' votes have been vital to PRC nationals gaining the leadership roles of four of the fifteen specialised agencies.

Growing military training cooperation with Commonwealth countries

Officers from Commonwealth countries appear to be joining China's foreign training programmes in growing numbers. The following is only a sample, but examples of these interlinked phenomena are as follows.

- Various concerns have been raised about China's approach to **Barbados**, which was among the first English-speaking Caribbean countries to establish ties with China and where Beijing has combined growing military donations with cultural education programmes whose targets include members of the Barbados Defence Force (BDF). In 2018 the BDF received a \$3m [donation](#) from the PLA in the form of military equipment and the BDF has participated in training courses in China [since 2000](#). One civilian-oriented initiative gives BDF members scholarships to study in China. The recently formed Barbados China Returned Scholars Partnership (BCRS) is a civil society network to [enable](#) 'enhanced service to Barbados'.
- **Cameroon** has sent officers to train in China and has historical military ties with Beijing. Having joined the Commonwealth in 1995, it has also been intensifying military cooperation with China, including purchasing Chinese weaponry for the Cameroonian army and through the [defence cooperation agreements](#) signed between the two countries in 2014.
- **Namibia** recently received funding from China to establish the Namibia Command and Staff College in Okahandja, the country's highest military training institution, which opened in 2019. China's ambassador to Namibia said this would prove a [milestone](#) in efforts to 'deepen... cooperation and exchanges in the national defence area' and looked forward to working 'shoulder to shoulder'.
- Described as an example of '[shifting allegiances](#)', in November 2019 the **South African** navy took part in '[unprecedented](#)' trilateral military exercises with Russia and China, as the Chinese frigate *Weifang* docked at Cape Town. This came just a few months after a high-level Chinese delegation from the National University of Defence Technology (NUDT) visited [South Africa](#). Chinese naval experts have described the exercises as being part of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) strategy to protect Chinese international interests.
- In April 2019, the PLA sent drill instructors to [train forces](#) in **Rwanda**, which joined the Commonwealth in 2009. It is claimed that Rwandan officers shouted commands in Mandarin during an event commemorating 25 years since the end of the 1994 genocide.
- The PLA [provides training](#) to **Guyana's** officers and troops, and has donated equipment to help the infrastructure development capacities of the Guyana Defence Force (GDF).
- The Institute for South Asian Studies [reports](#) that an April 2021 visit by China's Defence Minister, General Wei Fenghe, to **Sri Lanka** demonstrated the strengthening military relationship between the two countries, with more Sri Lankan officers trained by China. While Sri Lanka still sends more soldiers to India for training, China has increased the number of courses on offer to Sri Lankans.

- Paul Nantulya has catalogued the development and impacts of China’s training efforts in Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and South Sudan. In **Tanzania**, the Mwalimu Nyerere Ideological School, once a training centre for African anti-colonial movements, has received significant Chinese investment (in partnership with South Africa’s ANC, ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, FRELIMO in Mozambique and Namibia’s governing party SWAPO⁴) and [will train](#) around 400 military and civilian members of these former movements annually. In 2019 China launched a joint military training programme with Tanzanian troops.
- On a 2019 visit to Chairman Mao’s birthplace in Hunan, **Uganda’s** President Yoweri Museveni [proclaimed](#) ‘Revolutionaries come to Hunan like Catholics go to Rome.’ Uganda’s Oliver Tambo Leadership Academy is regarded as an example of one of the ‘politico-military schools’ China has sponsored for Africa.
- Until recently **Kenya** had limited military contact with China, while its permanent British Army Training Unit for Kenya (BATUK) was based on similar institutions in South Africa, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and previously Zimbabwe. However since [Kenya emerged](#) as a major BRI partner, its officers have become regular students of China’s elite military institutes including the National Defense University, while China [trains](#) Kenya’s paramilitary National Youth Service (the relationship is cemented by China’s [growing presence](#) in Kenya’s civil society: Nairobi is home to Xinhua’s largest bureau, with 400 staff).
- **South Sudan** became independent from Sudan in 2011 and has applied to join the Commonwealth, but was beset by civil war between 2013 and 2020. It has been suggested that the [long-term influence](#) of Maoism on the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which ‘adopted many Maoist traditions’, may have been one of the causes of this complex conflict. The ‘thin layer of insulation’ between party and army appears to have helped a leadership dispute spiral into violent conflict in December 2013, following a ‘stormy’ meeting of the government, two-thirds of which was made up of officers.

China has growing interests in the Commonwealth and military and other security activities are an increasingly important component of China’s engagement. These efforts include training programmes aimed at future military and political leaders. An opportunity now exists for the UK and allies, including Commonwealth countries, to better understand and map these efforts. The UK should also consider how best to apply and rejuvenate shared Commonwealth military aid and education programmes.

⁴ South-West Africa People’s Organisation

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