

Opinion **Global Insight**

China envoy appointment signals deeper ties with Horn of Africa

Beijing seeks to extend influence in order to protect investments in the volatile region

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People hold Chinese and Djiboutian flags at the launch of a 1000-unit housing project in Djibouti in 2018 © AFP via Getty Images

Andres Schipani in Lamu, Kenya 8 HOURS AGO

For more than 30 years, Chinese foreign ministers have begun the year with a trip to the African continent. This year's visit brought with it a surprise — the announcement of China's first ["special" political](#) envoy to the Horn of Africa and a possible shift in Beijing's longstanding policy of non-interference.

In January, foreign minister [Wang Yi announced](#) that he would appoint a special envoy to foster "lasting stability, peace and prosperity" in the Horn of Africa, where "hotspot issues have intensified and sometimes erupted into conflicts".

The announcement, which came during Wang's [tour of Eritrea, Kenya, and Comoros](#), can be seen partly as an attempt to annoy the US and other western powers, whose diplomatic efforts to end [Ethiopia's civil war](#) and protect the democratic transition in Sudan have largely floundered.

The bigger reason behind the appointment, analysts say, is to better protect China's investments and lending in the Horn of Africa as violence escalates.

China remains the biggest bilateral lender to many in sub-Saharan Africa, where it accounts for about a fifth of all loans. Annual lending peaked at \$29.5bn in 2016, according to figures from the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, though it fell back in 2019 to \$7.6bn.

[parts of South Sudan](#). [Islamist militants al-Shabaab](#) have even [encroached into Lamu](#) — where China has completed the construction of port berths.

“There’s a reason to focus on conflict, peace and security, which has not been a policy priority before,” said Hannah Ryder, a Kenyan non-resident senior associate with the Africa programme at CSIS, a think-tank. “For certain Chinese companies, for example, in Ethiopia, continuing to invest can be more challenging if there’s conflict, therefore, how can China help in creating conditions for having less conflict.”

Since Xi Jinping became president in 2012, China has watered down a non-interference policy that it had formally adhered to for more than 60 years. Beijing has under Xi established its first [overseas naval base in Djibouti](#), passed a law allowing stationing of soldiers abroad. Chinese peacekeepers were killed in South Sudan, where China has significant oil interests. Yet, Xi said during the triennial [Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Senegal in November](#), that Beijing will cut the amount of money it supplies to Africa over the next three years by a third to \$40bn.

At the same time as China announced its new envoy, David Satterfield, the new US envoy [arrived in Sudan](#) last week, alongside assistant secretary of state for African affairs Molly Phee, for crisis talks amid the backdrop of a bloody crackdown, and travelled to Ethiopia. He replaced Jeffrey Feltman, who unsuccessfully tried to tame both conflicts.

It is still unclear what influence Beijing will in practice wield, if the new envoy will push peace talks. During a visit to Addis Ababa [last month](#), in what was seen as a veiled criticism of the US, Wang said that “we do not meddle in the internal affairs of Ethiopia, and we also oppose any external forces’ interference in the internal affairs of Ethiopia, and in particular disagree with the practice of some external forces to pressure Ethiopia”.

Some Horn of Africa countries have in general welcomed this approach, especially after Washington imposed [sanctions on Ethiopia and Eritrea](#) last year. When Wang went to Addis he “reaffirmed his government’s support for the government and people of Ethiopia,” [wrote Gabriel Negatu](#), an Ethiopian non-resident senior fellow with the Africa Center at the Atlantic Council. “This is the contrasting friendship and influence that the United States is missing out on.”

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