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RUMOR HAS IT, CHINA PLANS SECOND NAVAL BASE IN AFRICA

Observers say that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is looking at opening a second naval base in Africa, in either Equatorial Guinea, Angola, or Namibia — an allegation the Chinese government formally denies. The persistent rumor, however, signals a potential shift in China's military strategy on the continent, from its traditional focus on near coast defense to far seas operations. It would be in keeping with "China's drive to become a global military force capable of projecting power far from its shores," notes a recent analysis from the Pentagon's Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

The news has potentially major implications for Africa's balance of power. The African Union has historically voiced concern over foreign basing on the continent, and the body has the power to potentially stall the notional Chinese plans. It does not, however, have the ability to derail China's eventual goal of having an extensive strategic presence on the continent, touching both the Atlantic and Pacific. Already, in service of that objective, the PLA has stationed troops at a Chinese-owned port in Djibouti and added a pier to accommodate an aircraft carrier at the facility, advancing its ability to project power in the Pacific. (African Center for Strategic Studies, May 12, 2022)

ETHIOPIA'S TPLF FORCES THE YOUNG TO FIGHT

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is forcing young people to join their struggle against Ethiopia's central government and both threatening and jailing relatives of those who resist. The TPLF's push for forced recruitment, notes Reuters, suggests that the group "is preparing for a possible resurgence in combat" in the current conflict, which began in November of 2020. In a bid to counter Tigrayan efforts, the Ethiopian government has imposed a blockade on aid and food supplies to the Tigrayan population, further exacerbating the country's humanitarian crisis.

However, analysts say that the government of Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed is increasingly on the back foot. "Economic hardship, battlefield casualties among allied nationalities, and now lawlessness have eaten into Abiy's country-wide popularity," write Ahmed Hassen and Simon Rynn for the UK's Royal United Services Institute. "Meanwhile, the anti-government coalition he faces is looking increasingly broad-based." As a result, they suggest, "the conflict may be heading towards a bloody conclusion." (Reuters, May 16, 2022, RUSI, May 6, 2022)

AFRICA'S ENERGY, EUROPE'S PREDICAMENT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused many of its energy clients to look elsewhere for natural gas in the short term — and to seek alternative sources in the long term. The European Union, for instance, is planning to cut supplies from Russia by two-thirds by the end of 2022. And Africa is emerging as a promising alternative to Russian energy. Although for the moment the continent exports less than half of what Russia does to Europe, projects like the Trans-Saharan Pipeline project (stretching from Niger to Algeria) and the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline could potentially link West African countries to Europe in the future. There is now growing interest on the continent in these projects, and energy economist Carole Nakhle predicts that, in the medium to long term, "you will see greater investment to increase the capacity to bring more gas out of the ground and bring them to Europe." (BBC, May 16, 2022)

MALI WITHDRAWS FROM THE G5

Mali has withdrawn from the West African anti-jihadist grouping known as the G5 Sahel Security force after political pushback from its neighbors. "The government of Mali is deciding to withdraw from all the organs and bodies of the G5 Sahel, including the joint force," the country's government announced in an official statement. The withdrawal follows internal upheaval in Bamako that saw the country undergo multiple military coups, as well as a severe deterioration in its relations with France, Mali's former colonial power. The result has been political stagnation that has left the country unable to resolutely assume leadership of the G5 bloc in recent months. (Africa News, May 16, 2022)