

BOOTS ON THE GROUND: CHINA'S GROWING ROLE IN PEACE AND SECURITY ON THE CONTINENT

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HAGGAI MATSIKO is an award-winning Ugandan investigative journalist who reports mainly on politics, natural resources and security. In his four years at Uganda's *The Independent*, he has reported on the DRC's M23 war, Sudan and South Sudan wars, the war against al Shabaab in Somalia and the role and business deals of international players like the US, EU and China in the region. He used a grant from the Wits China-Africa Reporting Project to travel to South Sudan's capital, Juba, Jonglei State's Bor town and the DRC, and also drew from his previous reporting on the African Union Mission in Somalia to highlight China's growing security role in the region.



On a typically sweltering day in mid-June 2014, three Chinese men carrying bulky backpacks disembarked from a plane at Juba International Airport in the capital of South Sudan. At any other time, the Chinese might not have been conspicuous as they walked hurriedly towards the terminal building. But this was at the height of the civil war that erupted in late 2013 when South Sudanese President Salva Kiir accused his sacked vice president, General Riek Machar, of attempting a military coup.

For one of the South Sudanese officials attached to a contingent of Ugandan troops at the airport, the return of the Chinese was a sign that normalcy was being restored. "You see," the official said excitedly, "the Chinese are back to carry on with business."

The Chinese can often be seen on the streets of Juba where they jostle for space on crowded narrow pavements as traffic, including heavily guarded convoys carrying government officials, roll along and dodge dexterously to avoid pond-sized potholes that dot the country's main roads.

"Looking at how busy this place is," a Ugandan soldier says, "one can't imagine that only a few months

ago, these streets were littered with dead bodies." The soldier is recalling the horrors of the war that over 400 Chinese were caught up in, and who had to be evacuated to neighbouring Kenya.

However, even before the smoke from the guns cleared, the Chinese were back, surprising even the Ugandan soldiers who had fought battles on President Kiir's side to restore normalcy. Sensing the pivotal role the Ugandan troops had in the evacuation and in restoring order, the Chinese government has supported the continued presence of Ugandan troops in Juba even with international pressure for them to pull out.

Lucrative deals

China is keen on securing its investment in the region. Until 2011, Sudan (before it split into two) was China's second largest provider of oil in Africa after Angola, and supplied 5% of China's total crude oil imports. In the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a Chinese consortium Sicominex won a US\$3 billion deal

in which the consortium will construct infrastructure for the government in exchange for mineral concessions with Congo's state mining agency, Gécamines.

Another Chinese consortium is among three top contenders for the construction of the Inga III project, part of an even more ambitious project, the US\$80 billion Grand Inga project, which could produce 40,000 MW annually, twice the capacity of China's Three Gorges Dam.

In Kenya, another Chinese consortium has won the initial contracts for work on the US\$26 billion Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor project. In Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan, Chinese companies are winning all the contracts for the construction of the region's other biggest infrastructure project, the multibillion standard gauge railway that, once completed, will connect the three.

Last year, a Chinese company, Sinohydro, won a US\$1.7 billion contract to construct the Karuma power dam in Uganda. These lucrative deals for Chinese companies have sparked a sentiment in Uganda's diplomatic circles that China seizes all the opportunities, often unfairly, even if it doesn't contribute as much to the region's priorities like peace and security. In 2012 friction emerged between the European Union (EU) and the Ugandan government over the awarding of the Karuma dam contract, which even sparked speculation that the Europeans were contemplating withdrawing their support for the Ugandan army.

"We are saying that it should not only be the EU, other stakeholders should also contribute," said then-head of the EU Mission in Uganda, Roberto Ridolfi. Brig. Gen. Gerald Aherne, the head of the EU Training Mission-Somalia (EUTM), also chimed in, "All I can say is that the European Union is the single biggest contributor of peace and security in the region. It doesn't always get credit for it but it should."

Peacekeeping roles

However, China is busy changing its approach to Africa and expanding its security footprint, if only by deploying more peacekeepers to the region. Following South Sudan's split from Khartoum, most of the oilfields were in the south where China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has invested over US\$7 billion and controls a 40% stake in the country's biggest oil consortium, the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC).

The fighting had threatened to completely halt oil

production. With this at stake, China mounted pressure at several other levels. In Addis Ababa, three top Chinese diplomats – the Ambassador to Ethiopia, Xie Xiaoyan; special representative on African Affairs, Zhong Jianhua; and China's Foreign Affairs Minister, Wang Yi – pushed for talks between Kiir and Machar.

As the three engaged locally, China pushed the UN Security Council members to expand the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to include the protection of its oil installations, according to the online publication, *Foreign Policy*.

The decision followed intense negotiations, and as a sweetener, China pledged a battalion of 850 soldiers to fortify UNMISS. China initially had 343 peacekeepers in Wau, Bahr El-Ghazal State, under UNMISS. The latest deployment pushed to 1,193 the number of its blue berets in South Sudan, and to 3,010 in the entire 16 UN missions the world over – completely dwarfing the contribution of all the other five UN Security Council members combined.

The distribution of Beijing's blue-berets is telling. Of the 3,010 peacekeepers, Africa hogs 88% (2,661), leaving only 12% (349) for the other nations. Even within Africa, it is Sudan, South Sudan and the DRC, where China has the biggest oil and mining concessions, that take the lion's share at 62.5% (1,664). Only 38% or 997 peacekeepers are left to cover Mali, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Western Sahara.

China touts its blue berets

China's 2013 white paper on the state of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) describes its soldiers as "tough, brave, and devoted" peacekeepers, who "accomplish all their tasks in an exemplary manner". In a June 2014 report, *Protecting China's Overseas Interests*, security experts at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) attribute this trend to the need to protect a growing number of Chinese nationals in international conflict zones, several of which are in Africa, and the expansion of Chinese energy interests overseas.

So far, South Africa has an estimated 300,000 of the over one million Chinese immigrants in Africa. The rest are scattered in Kenya, the DRC, the Central African Republic (CAR), Zambia, Angola, Sudan and South Sudan (among others) where China has mining, construction and crude oil concessions.

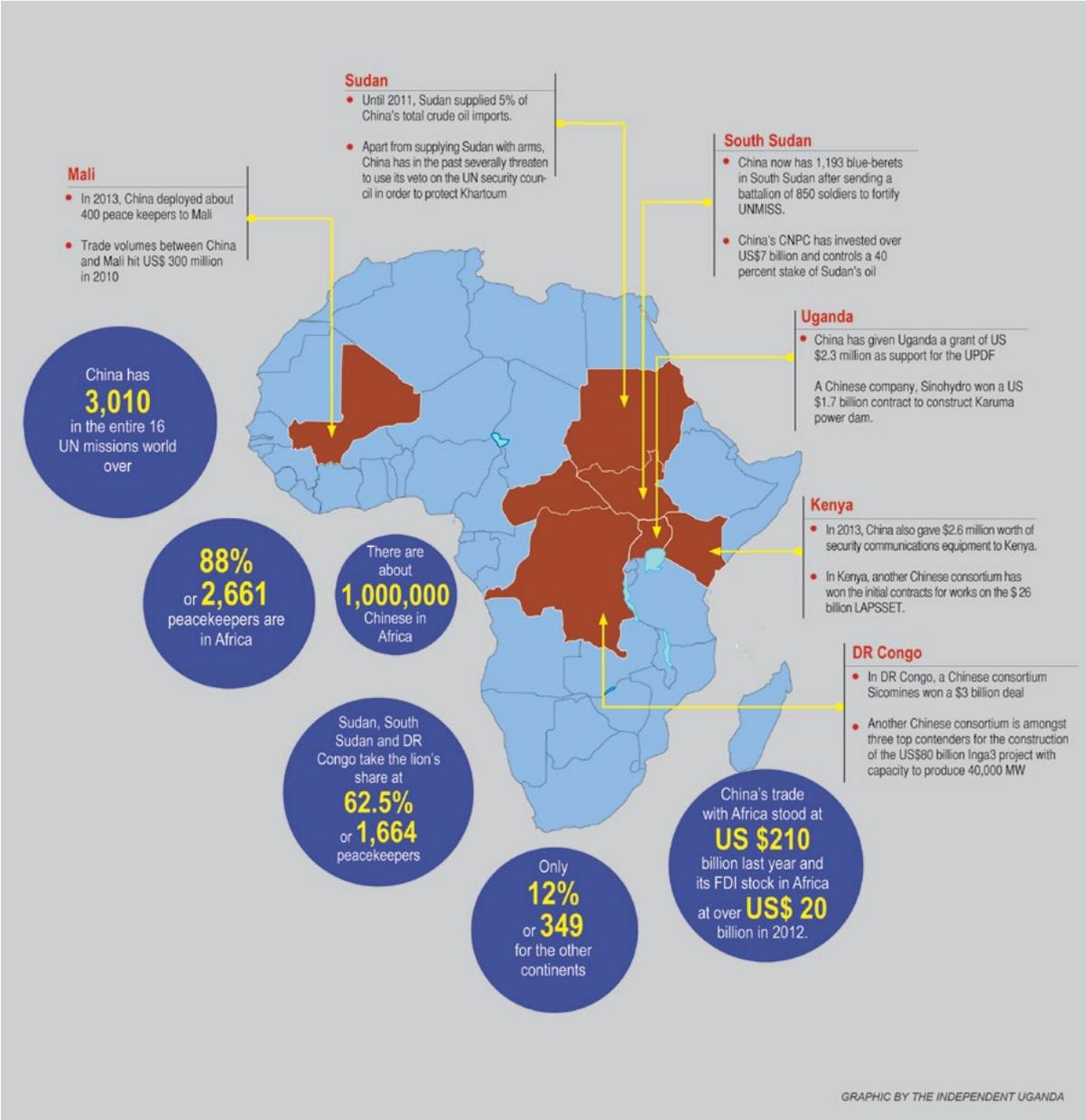
These interests have put pressure and forced China

to increasingly get involved in promoting security in the region even if that involvement has meant contradicting its non-interventionist policy. The deployment of combat troops in Mali and the various efforts employed to solve the South Sudan crisis have pushed China's involvement a notch higher and even sparked predictions that at this rate China might in the near future even consider an African Command just like the US, which boasts the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the Lemonnier military base in Djibouti.

"I think the most prominent shift in China's foreign

policy in this regard has been putting boots on the ground through the auspices of the UN, both in Mali and now in South Sudan," says interim head for the Centre for Chinese Studies (CSS), Dr Ross Anthony.

Apart from its significant oil interests in the region, Anthony says, China was significantly involved in facilitating the South-North peace process and purely in terms of reputational capital China wants South Sudan to be a success story as it increases its standing in the region.



“This is possibly why China is encouraging military support from Uganda,” Anthony says, “This is marking a shift in Beijing’s security role in Africa.” As for Mali where China does not have significant commercial interests, Anthony says, Beijing might have realised that keeping the Sahel stable contributes toward more general stability within West Africa, where China does have significant investments.

“Additionally there is more pressure on China to become a responsible world power,” Anthony says, “I think a key priority for China is to contribute toward stability in Africa so that it creates a better investment climate for them in Africa.”

More needed from China

But peacekeeping has evolved and is an increasingly risky venture. Six months after the first shot was fired in the civil war, signs of destruction are still vivid in Bor, the main town of Jonglei State.

A group of Indian and South Korean peacekeepers were stationed at the stretch of cracked brown earth that is Bor airfield. These peacekeepers were involved in some of the worst fighting with a militia of youths who broke into the UN base in Bor and opened fire on people who had fled the fighting. By the time the peacekeepers overwhelmed the militia, fifty people were dead and over a hundred injured.

There were no Chinese peacekeepers in Bor. China’s only 343 peacekeepers at the time were in neighbouring Bahr El-Gazel. These were mainly a small unit of combat troops meant to offer security to the bulk of the units of medical experts, engineers, and logistical experts. It was a typical Chinese deployment, as occurred during the UN Mission in Congo (MUNUSCO) in neighbouring DRC.

In hot zones like the DRC, Chinese peacekeepers are not among those seen patrolling the streets. Instead they are part of the peacekeepers manning checkpoints like the

one at Ruzizi on the border between Burundi and the DRC. This is enemy territory, home of the notorious M23 rebels opposed to the government in Kinshasa who have refused to disarm in spite of UN Security Council resolutions.

Occasionally, the other peacekeepers are seen mumbling a few things to the locals, but the Chinese only nod and smile. “The Chinese are hardworking,” one of the officials says, “their only challenge is that they do not speak any of the languages spoken here, which makes communication with them hard.”

Apart from putting boots on the ground, Beijing has occasionally given money, including a US\$2.3 million cheque as support for the Ugandan army, which still has the largest number of troops in the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

In 2013, China also gave US\$2.6 million’s worth of security communications equipment to Kenya, which also has troops with AMISOM. The rest of the assistance has gone directly to the AU. But the growing sense that Beijing can do better is felt in several African capitals.

Compared to the US and EU, which are considered the key regional security partners, China has over the years also only offered small grants and often stuck to its non-interventionist policy.

In the Kenyan capital Nairobi, President Uhuru Kenyatta said in May 2014 that China possesses substantial political, diplomatic and financial assets, which, if fully applied, could amount to a game-changer in the region’s peace and security.

Following the attack on a Kenyan shopping mall in 2013, Professor He Wenping of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said that China, as a leading investor in Kenya and other terrorist-prone parts of Africa, needed to get involved in fighting terrorism in Africa to at least secure its investments.

Other experts argue that because most of China’s engagements with Africa are managed largely through state-to-state relations, it is often criticized by opponents of incumbent governments.

In Libya amid the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in 2011, for instance, Beijing suffered losses of about US\$20 billion, according to Chinese media reports. China was also stuck with over 30,000 stranded citizens and had to borrow planes and ships to evacuate them.

In October 2007, the Defra oilfield in Sudan run by the Chinese was attacked by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel group. Its commander, Mohamed Bahr Hamdeen, gave the oil companies in South Kordofan a week to leave Sudan, saying that the rebels consider

APART FROM PUTTING BOOTS ON THE GROUND, BEIJING HAS OCCASIONALLY GIVEN MONEY, INCLUDING A US\$2.3 MILLION CHEQUE AS SUPPORT FOR THE UGANDAN ARMY,

all foreign oil companies to be killers because they help the government buy the weapons which they use to kill women and children.

Two months later, JEM attacked another Chinese-run oil field in South Kordofan, the Heglig oilfield, saying that China was trading petroleum for “our blood”. The following year, militants kidnapped some CNPC employees at an oilfield in South Kordofan, and five of them were killed during the ordeal.

In 2011, another 29 Chinese construction workers were abducted in the same province and were released after almost two weeks of intense negotiations. The lesson, observers say, was that as long as China is seen as a partner of host governments, those who oppose these governments will target its interests, either as a means to reduce its support for these governments or as a means of leverage.

Some critics, however, suggest that China has to take more interest in security matters in the region because its weapons are fuelling the wars. An October 2013 SIPRI report named China as the leading exporter of Small Arms and Lights Weapons (SALW) and a popular supplier for states looking for inexpensive or alternative sources of SALW.

The report showed that Chinese-made arms have been found in conflict zones like Sudan, CAR, the DRC, South Sudan and even Somalia. Even as negotiations over the current South Sudan crisis continue, China went ahead and closed an arms deal with South Sudan which had initially been suspended.

However, Dr Anthony says that one has to keep in mind that the US, Russia and European states are also large sellers of arms to African countries. From the broader perspective, he says, as China puts more personnel and investment into Africa, it will have a growing stake in peace and security in the region. “China will continue to try and be seen as a benevolent military presence in Africa, but having a growing interest in securing its investments here will entail that, at some point, they may have to take sides.”