

Is it time for a China-Africa Command?

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Chinese

peacekeepers. NET PHOTO

Lucrative deals force Red Dragon to increase military presence on continent

On June 13 this year, 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, Gen. 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 dexterously dodge to try and 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 in which over 400 Chinese were caught up in and had to be evacuated to neighbouring Kenya.

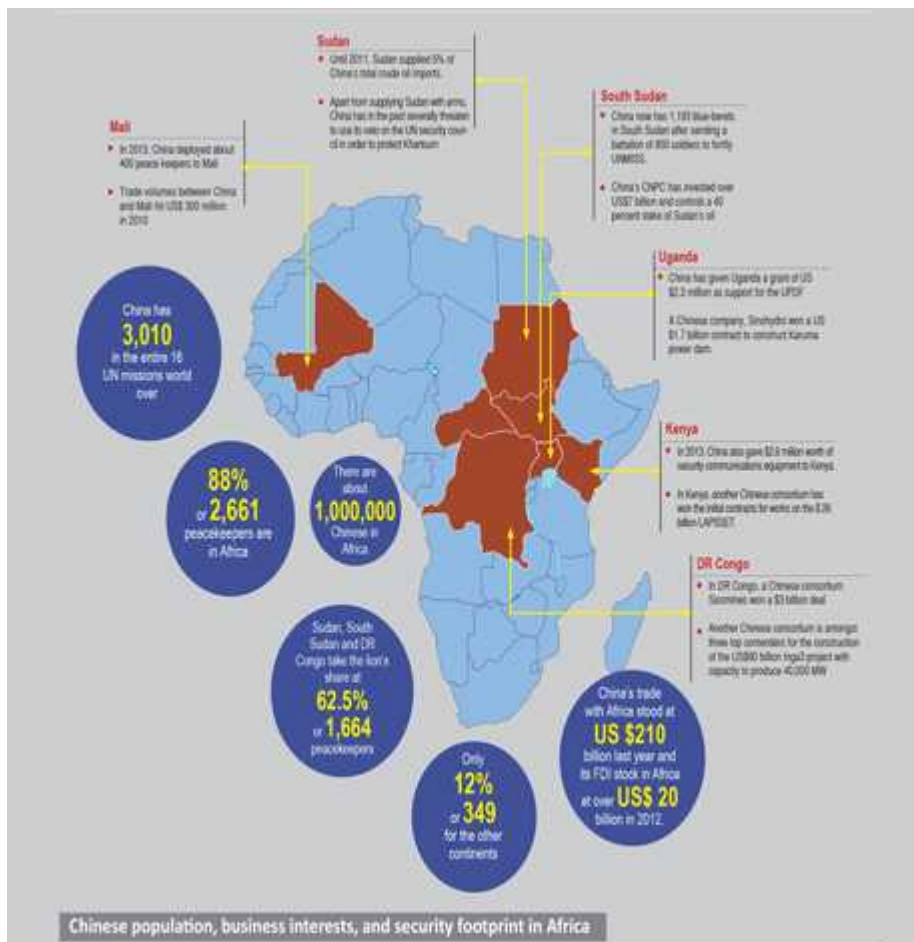
However, even before the smoke from the guns cleared, the Chinese were back, surprising even the Ugandan soldiers who had fought the battles on President Kiir's side to restore normalcy. Sensing the pivotal role the Ugandan troops had in the evacuation and restoring order, the Chinese government has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

China is keen on securing its investment in the region. Lucrative deals 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 neighbouring DR Congo, a Chinese consortium Sicomines won a \$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 Inga3 project—part of an even grander project—the US\$80 billion Grand Inga project, which could produce 40,000 MW— twice the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest.

In Kenya, another Chinese consortium has won the initial contracts for works on the \$ 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 Karuma power dam, Uganda's biggest. These lucrative deals to 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 and the Uganda government over the award of the Karuma dam and even sparked speculation that the Europeans were contemplating withdrawing support to the Uganda army.



“We are

saying that it should not only be the E.U, other stakeholders should also contribute,” said then-Head of the EU Mission in Uganda, Roberto Ridolfi. Brig. Gen. Gerald Aherne, the head of the European Union Training Mission-Somalia [EUTM], also chipped 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.”

Peace keeping roles China is 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 fields remained in the south where the 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, the 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 United Nations 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 world over—completely dwarfing the contribution of all the other five UNSC members combined.

The distribution of Beijing’s blue-berets is telling. Of the 3,010 peacekeepers, Africa hogs 88% or 2,661 peacekeepers, leaving only 12 percent or 349 for the other participating nations. Even within Africa, it is Sudan, South Sudan and DR Congo—where China has the biggest oil and mining concessions— and these take the lion’s share at 62.5% or 1,664 peacekeepers.

Only 38% or 997 peace- keepers are left to cover Mali, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, and Western Sahara. China is touting the role of its blue-berets. In its China’s 2013 white paper on the state of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) issued in

April, it speaks of them as “tough, brave, and devoted” peacekeepers, who “accomplish all their tasks in an exemplary manner”.

Security experts at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in a June 2014 report, ‘Protecting China’s Overseas Interests’, 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 300,000 of the over one million Chinese immigrants in Africa. The rest are scattered in Kenya, DR Congo, CAR, Zambia, Angola, Sudan and South Sudan among others where China has huge mining, construction and crude oil concessions.

These interests have put pressure and forced China increasingly to 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 several efforts employed to solve the South Sudan crisis have pushed China’s involvement a notch higher and even sparked predictions that going by this rate, China might in the near future even consider an African Command just like the U.S., which boasts of the 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,” Dr. Anthony Ross, the interim head for the Center for Chinese Studies (CSS) says.

Apart from its significant oil interests in the region, Ross 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 reputation in the region.

“This is possibly why China is encouraging military support from Uganda,” Ross says, “This is marking a shift in Beijing’s security role in Africa.” As for Mali where China does not have significant commercial interests, Ross 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,” Ross 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 bullet was shot in the civil war, signs of destruction were still vivid in Bor, the main town of Jonglei State.

At Bor airfield—a stretch of cracked brown earth—was a group of Indian and South Korean peacekeepers. These peacekeepers were involved in one of the worst fighting with a militia of youths, who broke into the UN base in Bor and opened fire on people who fled the fighting. By the time the peacekeepers overwhelmed the militia, 50 people were dead and over 100 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 unit of medical experts, engineers, and logistical experts. It was typical Chinese

deployment, as happened in the United Nations Mission in Congo (MUNUSCO) in neighbouring DR Congo.

In hot zones like the DR Congo, the Chinese peacekeepers are not amongst those seen patrolling the streets. Instead they are part of the peacekeepers manning checkpoints like the one at Ruzizi border between Burundi and DR Congo. 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 \$2.6 million 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 U.S. and European Union, 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 in May said China possesses substantial political, diplomatic

and financial assets, which, if fully applied, amount to a game-changer in the region's peace and security.

Following the attack on a Kenyan shopping mall in 2013, Prof He Wenping of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said China being a leading Foreign Direct Investment contributor to 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 usually a loser as opponents of incumbent governments target it.

In Libya amidst the collapse of the Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, for instance, Beijing suffered losses of about US\$20 billion, according to some 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 oil field 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 all foreign oil companies 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 is trading petroleum for “our blood”. The following year, militants kidnapped some CNPC employees from an oil field in South Kordofan, and five of them were killed during the ordeal.

Four years later, 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, is 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 what fuel the wars. An October 2013 SIPRI report, China's exports of small arms and light weapons, named China the leading exporter of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and a popular supplier among 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, DRC, South Sudan and even Somalia. Even as negotiations over the current South Sudan crisis continue, China which had initially pushed an arms deal with South Sudan off the table but went ahead and closed it.

However, CCS's Ross says that one has to keep in mind the fact that the US, Russia and European states are also large sellers of arms to African countries. From the broader perspective, Ross says, as China puts more personnel and investments 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,” Ross says, but having a growing interest in securing its investments here will entail that, at some point, they may have to take sides.”

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