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CHINA IN AFRICA – THE SMART THING TO DO

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JCSP 44

Exercise Solo Flight

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

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2017 – 2019EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT***CHINA IN AFRICA – THE SMART THING TO DO**

By Commander J. Gordon Barnes

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INTRODUCTION

Africa has presented the world with a growth opportunity. It is a resource-rich, economically depressed continent that does not refine its resources to the full extent it likely could if it had the proper infrastructure. These same infrastructure hurdles have limited African countries in their desire to conduct international trade. Given its overall desire for investment and economic stimulus, it is no coincidence that resource-hungry China has increased its presence there over the last 30 years. This increased presence has been based primarily on economic development through investment; however, its military presence on the continent and in its surrounding waters has also increased as well and played an important part of this strategy. China boasts the largest military in the world; however over the last 100 years China has not had much military activity outside its own immediate borders and territorial (disputed and non-disputed) waters. It is therefore interesting to see how much it has grown its expeditionary military presence in Africa over the last 30 years, from having a small presence numbered in the hundreds during the 1990's, to now having a presence in the thousands, including a naval base in Djibouti, all while substantially increasing their economic investment and trade there. In fact, China has a United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping force that is larger than all the other permanent UN Security Council members combined¹. This growth has coincided directly with its economic activity and influence on the continent, and while not overly overt and aggressive, this paper will demonstrate this military presence is directly correlated its increased economic activities.

¹ United Nations Peacekeeping, Troop and Police Contributors, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>

The military strategy of presence in the area does not appear to be built on altruistic motives that Canadians sometimes attribute to UN Peacekeeping, but instead it has played a role through an assistance and presence strategy on the continent. This presence has been used as the baseline to its economic policies intent on exerting influence and political power as a means to increase trade and secure valuable resources to feed an expanding Chinese economy. These efforts appear to be working and it has resulted in many of the individual nation's leadership being closely aligned with China's economic strategy Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI was launched by China in 2013 and since that time, China has made extensive infrastructure investments around the world, in particular along key trade routes to Europe. Notably, China has looked to Africa as a key component of its investment strategy and has taken the opportunity to establish itself as a major player in African trade and infrastructure investment and development. This paper will demonstrate that China's growing influence and power within continental Africa has been successful largely based on its use of "smart power" in the deployment of its economic initiatives, most recently the BRI, combining a soft power approach of economic stimulus/investments with increased military activity in the area.

SMART POWER

Chinese investment in Africa is not necessarily something new, as they have been making investments in the area for many years. Military involvement is also something that is not new, although the reasons for military presence appear to have evolved from a political one to more of a protection and pursuit of furthering and providing security to their economic investments. While their military influence during the Cold War could be

classified as soft power with their training missions² and arms sales, versus large-scale operations; it could influence political agendas and encourage communism nonetheless. The belief is that Chinese military presence in Africa during the Cold War period of the 1960's and 1970's was intent on promoting communism and revolutionary ideals.³ So while it appears Chinese involvement at the height of the Cold War was more of a soft approach for propaganda reasons and encouraging/promoting communism in developing nations, their reasoning for military activity has appeared to have transitioned from one of support to training local forces to now being a support mechanism for their increased economic activities and to further their economic agenda. This has been demonstrated with larger scale UN peacekeeping operations, anti-piracy deployments in the waters of Eastern Africa and its expeditionary base located in Djibouti.

Hard and soft power have been terms used in international affairs for many years, with hard power typically being associated with coercion and military might, and soft power being influence through diplomatic means. Both approaches have seen varying level of success, but typically it is the hard power approach that will enforce the demands that may be made, and ensure the success of such demands. Unfortunately, for many countries that have employed hard power in the past as a method of success, it is growing more out of favour within the international community and therefore could be viewed as less effective. Gone are the days of Genghis Khan or the Roman Empire using military force to conquer lands and obtain their wealth and resources. In fact, recent history of the use of hard power to enforce the will of opposing nations with military interventions in Iraq in the 2000's and Libya in 2011, have seen negative outcomes for regional stability

² Christopher Kilford, *The Other Cold War: Canada's Assistance to the Developing World 1945-1975*, (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy, 2010), 184.

³ Kilford, 185.

and have received negative publicity for the subsequent socio-economic and security issues that have been created there. While a hard power approach is certainly not extinct, as it was Russia's method in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the approach has been met with widespread condemnation and resulted in NATO deployments and economic sanctions against Russia.⁴ What China appears to be doing in Africa is more than a play for control of land to gain or expropriate resources, as was done during the previous century of colonialism in Africa and currently being done in Crimea; China's approach appears to be more coordinated and balanced in that it seeks out a voluntary exchange of resources in return for investment. This approach is likely more appreciated than the traditional colonialization previously done by France, Belgium, and England (amongst others), that is still largely resented in many African nations. In fact, it could be argued that China has an advantage when it comes to not being aligned with the traditional issues that have come with colonial nations, as it does not come with the historical baggage and perceived abuse by African nations.

In 2004, Joseph Nye introduced the terminology of "smart power" as a way of balancing both hard and soft power. Smart power is defined as a balance between the soft power of attraction and the hard power of coercion,⁵ and appropriately related by Nye as being close to Theodore Roosevelt's famous quote of "speak softly and carry a big stick".⁶ This approach is in-line and apparent with the voluntary exchange approach that has been taken by China in Africa. It is important to note that China is not involuntary extracting resources or claiming land, or like Russia has done to Ukraine with the

⁴ Edward Hunter Christie, "Sanctions after Crimea: Have they worked?", last accessed 14 May 2019, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/Russia/sanctions-after-crimea-have-they-worked/EN/index.htm>

⁵ Joseph Nye, "Security and Smart Power", *American Behavioral Science*, Vol 51, Issue 9, 2008, 1353.

⁶ Joseph Nye, "Smart Power: Great Leaders Know When Hard Power is Not Enough," *Harvard Business Review*, 11/2008, 56.

annexation of territory. All the same, while they cannot be deemed as being overt or aggressive, given China's military might, the big stick of having a military presence and large-scale operations in the area is key component to their success there. Not just any nation could annex an area like Russia has. It takes a nation with hard power capability, which China has, given it possesses the largest military in the world.

China's growing influence in Africa also speaks to their overall increase in international affairs. Africa has a history of Western colonialism and China is attune to this by approaching power and influence in a different manner than perhaps England, Belgium or France have done in the past (or in some cases still do). China has made incredible leaps and bounds towards a more open economy since 1979 and the great economic changes brought by Deng Xiaoping⁷, while at the same time continuing to maintain its communistic government. China has embraced this new approach to power and influence in their global strategy. They are increasingly looking outside their own borders for economic development and as of 2013 have implemented an aggressive financing campaign thorough the BRI that has been estimated at roughly \$150bn a year in 68 countries involved as of 2017.⁸ In Africa specifically, they have also combined that with an exponential increase of its military presence on the continent over the last 30 years. Economic programs such as BRI that are underlined with military presence and play a vital role in its "smart power" approach to provide security to its interests on the continent.

United Nations Involvement

⁷ Richard Baum, "High Tide of Reform: Gengshen: 1980," In *Burying Mao, Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

⁸ John Parker, "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?" *The Economist*, 15 May 2017, Last Accessed 14 May 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/05/14/what-is-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>.

Since 1990, China has contributed over 7,000 peacekeepers to United Nations (UN) operations, and Chinese peacekeepers have served in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia and Sudan. In fact, China currently sends more peacekeeping troops abroad than any other permanent member of the UN Security Council.⁹

- Wu Zhengyu & Ian Taylor

China has made United Nations involvement a cornerstone of its approach to military presence in Africa. This approach not only allows it to integrate with a respected partner like the UN, but it also allows it to disperse in smaller numbers by reducing the need for a national support element with the ability to use established UN networks and infrastructure. It is important to highlight that China has increased its involvement in United Nations, specifically peacekeeping, in a time when the United States has demonstrated less and less interest in supporting it. Militarily, the United States, like other Western nations, have gone on their own versus working with the UN as demonstrated with total contributions to peacekeeping missions throughout the world by Western nations decreasing, leaving nations such as China to fill the void.

As of March 2019, China had the following uniformed contributions on African missions:

UN Mission in African	Chinese Contribution	Percentage of Contribution	Top 5 Contributors
MINURSO, Western Sahara	12	5%	Bangladesh, Egypt, Honduras, Russian Federation, China
MINUSMA, Mali	395	3%	Burkina Faso, Chad, Bangladesh, Senegal, Egypt
MONUSCO, Democratic Republic of the Congo	218	1%	Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Morocco, South Africa
UNAMID, Darfur	365	2%	Rwanda, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Egypt, United Republic of Tanzania
UNMISS, South Sudan	1055	13%	Rwanda, India, Ethiopia, Nepal, Bangladesh

* As of March 2019 - <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>

⁹ Wu Zhengyu and Ian Taylor (2011), "From refusal to engagement: Chinese contributions to peacekeeping in Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 29:2, 137-154.

While having just over 2000 personnel on UN missions in Africa may not appear to be an overwhelming contribution, it has to be balanced with who else is contributing and who is not. When the other contributing nations are looked at, it is clear that very few of the top UN peacekeeping contributors in Africa are first world powers. It would appear that the first world powers such as France (as they are doing in Mali) and the United States prefer to go it alone on their operations. China's involvement with the UN African peacekeeping missions gives it institutional credibility as well as deployments with personnel dispersed across the continent.

Djibouti Naval Base

In addition to China's increased military presence under the United Nations flag, it has also gone out on its own by establishing its only expeditionary base outside of China, in Djibouti. While they are not the only country with a military presence there¹⁰, it is clear that as a major gateway to both the Red Sea for maritime traffic to Europe, as well as being a key land gateway into Africa through Ethiopia; the presence in Djibouti is meant to support China's African strategy by directly projecting naval power to the continent.

Djibouti itself is a prime candidate for foreign investment and foreign influence. It has a foreign debt to GDP ratio of 85%, which is higher than all other developing countries, and it is in the top ten of countries in the world at risk of loan default.¹¹ It appears that in order to secure the base, China has provided close to US\$1.4 billion to fund major Djibouti investment infrastructure projects, including two new airports, a new

¹⁰ Other countries with military bases in Djibouti – United States, France, Great Britain, Japan and Saudi Arabia.

¹¹ John Hurley, Scott Morris and Gailyn Portelance, "Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective," *Center for Global Development Policy Paper 121* (March 2018): 16.

port in Ghoubet, an oil terminal and a toll road.¹² The fact Djibouti is heavily indebted to China has made it an ideal location for China's first expeditionary base and its military deployment and activities there allow it the ability of hard power, if required. The base was opened in 2017 and it allows China to significantly extend its lines of communication into both Africa and into the gateway to Europe, through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal. It also provides the Chinese Navy, which has been actively patrolling the Gulf of Aden since December 2008, an ideal spot to project power and maintain its fleet within its own port to allow for the security and distribution of goods into the African continent.¹³

While Djibouti may not have adequate monetary resources to finance its debt, it does have key land and other resources at its disposal. These types of collateral may answer questions of why Beijing is investing in risky projects that International Monetary Fund is saying may not be able to generate sufficient revenue to cover its debt to China.¹⁴ The strategic importance of Djibouti's location at the gateway to the Red Sea, as well as a key entry port for resupply of Chinese forces on the continent, allow China to be ideally placed to support both land and maritime operations.

Debt-Trap Dangers

Countries rich in natural resources, like Angola, Zambia, and Republic of the Congo, or with strategically important infrastructure, like ports or railways such as Kenya, are most vulnerable to the risk of losing control over important assets in negotiations with Chinese creditors.

- Moody's, from *The East African*

China, through BRI, has established itself and a formidable trading partner.

China's approach has been primarily been through mutually agreeable investment with

¹² Ibid., 17.

¹³ Yong Deng, "How China's Belt and Road is Reordering Asia," *Harvard International Review* 39(4) (October 2018), 33.

¹⁴ Hurley et al, 16-17.

debt repayment terms. This has been a more or less voluntary exchange, where countries are explicitly soliciting Chinese investment for infrastructure development. So what is the risk? China, as is the case in Djibouti, has been accused to setting up loans and investments that do not make fiscal sense; meaning the debts are set up for failure of repayment, with very little chance that the lender can repay. These types of loans are not uncommon in domestic politics as governments look to support economically depressed areas, but it begs the question of exactly what China has to gain from these types of investments. When it comes to debt repayment and negotiation of the terms of countries who are receiving BRI investments from China, it has not been necessarily uniform across all nations. With Djibouti having one of the highest debt to GDP ratios in the world, it makes one wonder how China will enforce debt repayment and if nations will voluntarily renegotiate the terms to allow for expropriation or whether the military presence in Africa could be used to ensure debt repayment or as a way to influence/enforce the renegotiation of the lending terms. China has granted some nations forgiveness¹⁵, while others such as Sri Lanka have been forced to agree to debt-for-equity agreements, such as the Hambantota Port. This situation resulted following an inability by Sri Lanka to service a loan of US\$8 billion at six percent interest that then led to a debt conversion to a 99-year lease where the Chinese now have control and manage the port.^{16,17} This type of approach to lending and then taking control of the infrastructure is the type of trap other countries are warning against.

¹⁵ Tim Fernholz, "Eight Countries in Danger of Falling into China's "debt trap"," *Port Authority*, last accessed 14 May 2019, <https://qz.com/1223768/china-debt-trap-these-eight-countries-are-in-danger-of-debt-overloads-from-chinas-belt-and-road-plans/>.

¹⁶ Hurley et al, 20.

¹⁷ James Griffiths, "Are the wheels coming off China's Belt and Road megaproject?" *CNN*, last modified 31 December 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/31/asia/china-kenya-belt-road-bri-intl/index.html>.

The strategy employed by China has certainly been met with criticism. The United States has been a particularly harsh critic of the debt-trap risks that many of these third world nations are entering into. Another important aspect of how it does business in Africa is that China does not operate with the same rules as the western world for economic development. These different standards include doing business with, and in, countries that many Western nations stay clear of due to the risks of corruption. This fact alone provides China with an advantage as an emerging super power and the military presence and influence provides an insurance policy against these corrupt nations. With the extensive investment and national interests, the presence of military from the world's largest military gives China the capability to protect its assets through the use of force. Interestingly, many of the investments being made by China are risky in nature and with China's history of expropriation and allegations of debt-trap economics to wield both economic and political influence, the question must be asked as to whether increased military presence is there to hedge bets and employ Roosevelt's "big stick", if necessary.

CONCLUSION

The types of investments that China is making in Africa are not short term and it is expected their presence will continue to increase over the coming years. China's international growth strategy in Africa is a "smart" one that has been underpinned by its military presence there. The fact that the Chinese government is employing soft power strategies of economic investment, along with a hard power approach of increased military presence and activity cannot be viewed as a coincidence and are interconnected as part of a larger "smarter" strategy. The Chinese economic policy of supporting infrastructure in Africa (and other parts of the world) can directly benefit the Chinese

economy. China wants to increase international trade, particularly with nations with unrefined resources like are in Africa, and they are using BRI to accomplish this. The employment of Smart Power in the delivery of BRI is the most effective way to enforce the types of economic policies of infrastructure investment that BRI is bringing, as the military presence China has in the area also brings the possibility/threat of enforcement. While delivering economic stimulus to developing countries provides soft power, the military presence, whether that is UN peacekeeping, military training or expeditionary bases like Djibouti, allows China the flexibility to employ hard power if they deem it necessary.

It does not appear China will slow down in its military activities/influence in Africa and these activities cannot be viewed as being driven by altruism. China is an economic powerhouse who requires resources and projecting “smart power” is proving to be the most effective manner to attain further global superpower status.

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