



**NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION**

**STRATEGIC TRENDS**

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**China’s engagement in Africa is strong, but not overwhelming**

The shift in foreign policy recently announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping, whereby China is set to play an active role in world affairs, has already been put into effect with Beijing’s decision to send 700 combat troops to South Sudan to take part in a UN peacekeeping mission equipped with all sorts of weapons, “completely for self-defence purpose” according to the Chinese press agency Xinhua.

The UN has more than 11..000 peacekeepers in South Sudan which became independent from Sudan in 2011 through a referendum and has since suffered from political instability and internal warfare. Oil accounts for more than 90% of the new country’s foreign revenues, most of which come from oil produced by and exported to China.

In the late 1990s, after American and Canadian companies abandoned South Sudanese oil fields in response to North American consumer and investor hostility, China stepped in and filled the void. The state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) owns the largest share in Sudan’s largest oil venture, the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company.

Not only did Khartoum use Chinese oil money to fund its ethnic cleansing of southern insurgents, but China sold them the weapons to do it. In violation of a UN embargo, $100 million worth of aircraft and small arms were sold to Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir between 1996 and 2003. The Chinese ambassador to South Africa, Liu Guijin, explained, “We don’t believe in embargoes. That just means that people suffer. From a practical consideration, embargoes and sanctions can’t solve problems.” Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong was quoted as saying, “Business is business. We try to separate politics from business. . . . I think the internal situation in the Sudan is an internal affair.”

Since then Chinese influence has spread throughout the African continent and China has become by far Africa’s biggest trading partner, exchanging over $200 billion-worth of goods a year and financing more infrastructure projects in Africa than the World Bank. It also provides billions of dollars in low-interest loans to the continent’s emerging economies. These loans and investments are typically made in exchange for securing access to natural resources. Based on its principles of non-intervention and respect for sovereignty, China gives this money with little or no strings attached.

The West, which typically conditions its loans on initiatives like democracy promotion and corruption reduction, strongly criticizes China's policy claiming that it will be damaging to Africa in the long run. However, Western investment criteria like conditionality have largely been development failures and therefore the Chinese approach, with no colonial past or explicit political agenda, is a legitimate challenger to the Western one.

Finally, the idea that Africa is becoming Chinese ventilated by some international analysts sounds a bit excessive. China is merely the largest of a growing number of countries, like India and Brazil, interested in Africa’s commodities. These new investors have the option to adopt China’s unconditioned approach or a more responsible engagement strategy. However what all players are beginning to realize is that ultimately Africans themselves must decide what form they want this increasing drive by foreign investors to take.