

China's role in the DRC: practising “non-interference” or fuelling the conflict?

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1. Introduction

“Business is business. We try to separate politics from business.”

(Former Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister, Zhou Wenzhong: 2004)

“African Countries are capable enough to solve their problems.”

(China's Minister of the Embassy to the UK, Qin Gang: 2011)

These two quotes encapsulate some of the key characteristics of both the well-acclaimed and criticized Chinese non-interference policy; at the same time they contain the essence of the Sino-Western debate around Chinese engagement in African conflict countries. The debate is mainly fed by the fears of the old fashioned Western powers, that see their dominance over the African continent challenged by a newly fashioned power characterized by a different set of values, principles, rights, and ways of doing business. These fears combined with the fact that the majority of African conflict countries are well endowed with natural resources makes the debate more vivid. It also

becomes more visible how the West is losing control over African natural resources while the Chinese focus on gaining this control and finding new and alternative ways of doing business. However a direct confrontation is something that the West currently cannot afford, due to its dependence on the economic growth of China, and that China constantly avoids. Recently, a new approach to the debate has surged amongst Western powers claiming the need for Sino-Western cooperation over Africa, but there are some big challenges to overcome before making it happen.

This paper will analyze the role played by China in the conflict within the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and it will explore different possibilities for multilateral cooperation in the country. The paper will first start by describing the main characteristics of Chinese engagement in African conflict countries. Second, it will explore the evolution of the Sino-Congolese relationship. Third, it will discuss different possibilities and challenges for Sino-European multilateral cooperation in the DRC. Fourth, it will conclude.

2. Chinese Role in Conflict Countries

Since the end of the Cold War, and as a result of violations of China's sovereignty and interventions into China's internal affairs by foreign nations, China's bilateral relations with African countries have been determined by the principles of equality, respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit (Li: 2007). These principles, together with the no-strings attached approach, have been welcomed by African governments in contrast to the forceful conditionality of the West. Moreover, China tries to differentiate itself from the previous colonialist approach of the West by reinforcing

the idea that Chinese engagement in Africa is a win-win situation (Large: 2008).

However, Chinese economic activities, diplomatic relations, cooperation on military affairs, and arms trade have a direct internal impact on many African countries. Traditionally in cases of violent conflict in Africa, China has tended to maintain the position of recognizing the legitimacy of the relevant government's position, which has awakened the concerns of the West and has allowed crises to continue. In recent years Chinese scholars have started to argue that Chinese interpretation of its non-intervention policy has become more flexible and willing to take an active diplomatic role in the resolution of internal conflicts (Saferworld: 2011).

Chinese scholars acknowledge that underdevelopment can be a determinant of conflict and argue that Chinese trade, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and aid are contributing to African economic growth and consequently playing a positive role in promoting African peace and security (Saferworld: 2011). However, even if economic growth is important it cannot be effectively delivered in a situation of violent conflict and it can never be a substitute for peace building. Moreover, this approach has been seen as both the cause and potential solution of certain conflicts (Large: 2008).

Chinese economic engagement with African conflict countries can contribute to fuel the conflicts in four ways. The first is arms supplied by the Chinese, even if it is not the only supplier its role has increased in recent years, disobeying different arms trade treaties and supplying particularly light arms. Second, China's increasing thirst for oil has driven Chinese investment to conflict countries, contributing to prolong the conflicts. The third is Chinese mineral resource extraction from conflict regions like Katanga in DRC, China being the major exporter from the region. Finally, China plays an important role in the illegal trade of timber, as sixty per cent is estimated to end up in the Chinese market (Large: 2007). Moreover, in the case of Sudan, Chinese engagement has contributed to

fuelling the conflict both by emerging as a main oil-exporter after the withdrawal of a major Canadian investor and by supplying weaponry and the construction of a plant for arms manufacturing (Kaplinsky et al.: 2007).

Western observers have criticized Chinese investment in the continent, stating that Chinese money is fuelling conflicts, enriching corrupt leaders, and buying favours and influence in exchange for resources and political support (BBC as cited in Prah: 2007). Nevertheless, authors like Prah argue against Western countries that have dealt with similar situations, like the dictatorship of Equatorial Guinea for oil interests, the US intervention in Iraq, and some European policies in the Middle East that do not meet the highest levels of fairness and honesty (2007). What seems to be clear is that there is room for China to become more supportive of peace and security in Africa. This could be done through policies against the illegal arms transfer and, in terms of economic engagement, through more sensitive policies to conflict risks. All these should be accompanied by higher levels of dialogue between Chinese and Western policymakers, to promote cooperation towards the achievement of common development goals on the African continent (Saferworld: 2011).

Due to the multidimensionality and complexity of Chinese engagement with African countries, it is necessary to study each particular case separately to reach conclusions about the role of China in solving or fuelling each specific conflict.

3. Chinese Engagement in the DRC

The former Belgian Congo won its independence in 1960 and it became the independent Republic of Congo. In 1965 Mobutu Sese Seko, supported by the US,

became the leader of the country and ruled for three decades. In 1997, during the first Congo War, Laurent Kabila toppled Mobutu and the name of the country became the Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC. During the leadership of Kabila the relationship with Rwanda and Burundi deteriorated and this originated the second Congo war, which lasted until 2003 and amounted to over five million deaths (Guenther: 2008). In 2001 Laurent Kabila was assassinated and was succeeded by his son Joseph, who won the first multiparty elections in DRC in forty-one years (Bertelsmann Stiftung: 2010). DRC is the third largest country in Africa and holds the world's largest reserves of untapped natural resources including copper, diamonds, cobalt, gold, platinum, oil, and gas. However, the economy is mainly based on subsistence agriculture, the country lacks of reliable infrastructure, the governance situation is bleak, and the situation in the Eastern and Southern regions is still unstable (Jansson et al.: 2009).

Sino-Congolese relations started right after the independence of Congo, but they were interrupted the following year due to the establishment of relations between Congo and Taiwan. In 1972 president Mobutu acknowledged the role of China as a balance between the US and the Soviet Union, and the Sino-Congolese ties were re-established with the adherence of DRC to the one China policy (Global Witness: 2011). In 1997, after Kabila toppled Mobutu, China and the DRC signed an 'Agreement on Mutual Protection and Encouragement of Investment', which led to large transfers of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) from China at the end of the 90's (Jansson: 2009). This good relationship has been maintained with Joseph Kabila and after the elections in 2006 it has developed at a rapid pace. The Chinese have been involved in many different sectors in DRC: telecommunications, infrastructure, defence, and natural resource extraction (Global Witness: 2011). However, some of these dimensions have contributed in great measure to fuel the conflict.

Natural Resources

One of the most important sectors of Chinese investment in DRC is mining, where a whole range of micro, small, medium, and large Chinese companies operate. The majority of Chinese investment takes place in two main areas: the Katanga region (Southern DRC) and North and South Kivu (Eastern DRC). The Katanga region is characterised by the existence of copper and cobalt mines, China consuming over 90 per cent of its production in 2008 (Global Witness: 2011). The regions of North and South Kivu extract tin ore, coltan, diamonds, and gold, of which a great part ends up in China for the production of cell phones (Enough: 2008). These two regions are considered amongst the most instable and insecure in DRC and possibly in Africa.

Goldstein et al. argue that even if the global rise of commodity prices and increased Chinese investment in mining offer the DRC a good opportunity to develop and reconstruct after years of war, its lack of effective administrative control may result into an increase in the rents of the political elites (2006). Additionally, high prices of hard commodities will increase the motivations of state and rebel groups to gain control over the resources and trade. This situation contributes to the secessionist violence in the Katanga region and exacerbates instability in the eastern region, where a variety of rebel groups fight over the control of loutable resources that are unofficially traded with the involvement of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda (Guenther: 2008).

On the 22nd of April 2008, China and the DRC signed a US\$ 9 billion “win-win cooperation agreement” for the construction of infrastructure in exchange for natural resources, this being the biggest loan by far ever granted to the DRC (Davies and Jansson: 2009). This soft loan was extended by China Exim Bank and comprised US\$ 6 billion worth of transport and infrastructure including the construction of 3,600 km of roads, the rehabilitation of another 3,000 km, and the construction of hospitals and

universities. The remaining US\$ 3 billion would be devoted to mining infrastructure investments through joint ventures in the Katanga region (Jansson et al.: 2009). Under this deal, it has been estimated that the Chinese consortium will get up to 10 million tonnes of copper, and around 600,000 tonnes of cobalt in exchange (Global Witness: 2011).

This agreement has incited an intense debate amongst the DRC, Western donors, and international organizations. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has criticised the loan, as it could have negative macroeconomic impacts given its size (Davies and Jansson: 2009). Moreover, a number of NGOs and academics have argued that this should be considered a “mining contract” rather than a “cooperation agreement”, and that even if its results in the short term can fall into the definition of a win-win situation given the construction works, in the long run it will lead to an unequal exchange in favour of the Chinese parties (Marysse and Geenen: 2009).

Arms Trade

On the 28th of July 2003, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) established an embargo on the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, the Ituri region, and to any groups that had not joined the new peace agreement. In 2005 the UNSC reported that Rwanda, Uganda, and South Africa were shipping arms to embargoed areas in DRC, consequently the UN decided to expand the embargo to the entire DRC (Kopel et al.: 2010). In 2008 the UNSC lifted the restriction to the Congolese Government and established the obligation for exporting countries to inform the Sanctions Committee in case of a proposed arms transfer (Bromley and Holtom: 2010).

China has been one of the major suppliers of SALW to both Kivu and Ituri, via direct shipments to the DRC, through Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, or via Zimbabwe or Albania. Moreover, China assisted and subsidised an arms factory in Uganda that has

been shipping arms into Eastern DRC (Kopel et al.: 2010). However, the number of notifications to the Sanctions Committee does not match the number of Chinese weapons and munitions found amongst armed groups in Eastern DRC (Bromley and Holtom: 2010). Some recent critiques have emphasized the double role played by China in the DRC, both by contributing to peace building and reconstruction through UN peacekeeping missions and by continuously disobeying the arms embargo of the UNSC (Enuka: 2011). Nevertheless, the UNSC has remained impassive to these massive violations of the arms embargo (Kopel et al.: 2010).

4. Practising Multilateral Cooperation in the DRC

Recent studies have indicated the possibility of widespread violence in the DRC around the national elections scheduled for November 2011. This event could exacerbate the emergence of antigovernment movements and could contribute to increasing instability in the regions of North and South Kivu, Katanga, Bas Congo, and Equateur (Marks: 2011). In view of the potential seriousness of the upcoming events, there is a growing need to rethink the ways in which foreign nations engage with the DRC. The response of Western countries, more particularly the EU, has concentrated on the idea of promoting a trilateral cooperation presupposing that the EU, China, and Africa share the common goal of promoting peace and stability to sustain the development of the African continent (Wojna: 2008). However, developing effective trilateral cooperation is not an easy task.

One of the main characteristics of China's foreign policy is its strong preference for fostering bilateral relations rather than multilateral (Tull: 2008). This bilateral approach

and the reluctance of China to fully integrate into multilateral donor forums, apart from the UNSC, can be considered one of China's strong competitive advantages in Africa (Large: 2008). Coordination between China and the EU around active policy in Africa is a necessary precondition for initiating effective trilateral cooperation with the participation of African countries (Wojna: 2008). These initial steps towards coordinating and taking common responsibilities over Africa can serve as a training ground and are central to shaping global governance in the future (Wissenbach: 2009). The first action required is the need for Chinese policymakers and academics to recognise China's real impacts on conflicts in Africa and translate their rhetorical ambitions into clear policies (Saferworld: 2011).

In the specific case of the DRC, China and the EU should identify those areas where cooperation is most needed to ensure and promote peace. As argued in the previous section, natural resource extraction and arms transfers are two key areas to take into consideration. In terms of the extraction of natural resources, DRC, China, and the West need to engage in a dialogue about how the management of natural resources and the role of the global markets can be improved. In the same way, these actors should cooperate to identify the links between resource extraction and conflict, and take the necessary steps towards more accountable and better-governed management of these resources (Saferworld: 2011). In the case of the resources for infrastructure deal, the benefits of cooperation are clear, as Western donors could finance those projects that best complement the Congo-China deal and are most beneficial for the DRC (Global Witness: 2011). In terms of arms transfers, multilateral cooperation is needed to improve the regulation of the arms trade, strengthen end-use controls and monitoring, and increase the transparency of arms deals. China and Africa should also make a common effort to bring the illegal trade of SALW back onto the FOCAC agenda and the EU, China, and Africa together should accelerate the implementation of the norms and

agreements derived from sub-regional and international SALW agreements (Saferworld: 2011).

Effective multilateralism is the EU's goal (Humphrey: 2011), but it is not going to be an easy or quick bargaining and adapting process. The EU still has some hope that in the long run China will decide to adapt to Western approaches rather the other way around (Tull: 2008). On the other hand, Chinese officials and scholars are sceptical about the real motivations of promoting a multilateral cooperation in Africa and they question the benefits that this cooperation would have for China (Saferworld: 2011). Meanwhile, Africa's voice remains unheard while suffering the consequences of the lack of foreign coordination on its ongoing violent conflicts.

5. Conclusion.

The official China's African policy discourse has been driven by the principles of equality, respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit. This approach has been permanently challenged by Western powers, driven by their principles of human rights and good governance. In addition to disagreeing over principles and values, the West has witnessed how China has been rapidly winning power, influence, and business opportunities throughout the African continent. These differences and the debate surrounding them are more visible and intense in the case of conflict countries.

This paper has focused on the study of Chinese engagement in the DRC, both in natural resources extraction and arms trade. Through this study, the paper has proven that the reality of Chinese engagement in African conflict countries differs from the China's official African policy discourse. Moreover, it has proven that by obtaining

natural resources from conflict areas and by supplying arms illegally to groups in these regions, China is taking an active role that fuels the conflict in the DRC. However, China is not the only actor responsible for the prolonged violent conflict in the country, a number of countries and organisations have also taken part.

Acknowledging that the EU, China, and Africa share the common goal of promoting peace and stability to sustain the development of the African continent, this paper has explored different ways of implementing multilateral cooperation as the way forward to solving the conflict of the DRC. Additionally, it has suggested that China and the EU could use the DRC as a training ground that would help them to shape global governance in the future. However, in the short term it is unlikely that effective multilateralism will take place, as the debate is still intense and China sees no clear benefit from engaging with the EU in multilateral cooperation in Africa.

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