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The Headlines of Today. The Battles of Tomorrow.

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The New 'Scramble for Africa'



Chinese personnel disembarking from a Y-20 transport.

As China seeks to exert its power on the world stage, will this eventually see it rub up against older imperial powers? Much has been written about how China is expanding its power in its 'near abroad' by extending its territorial claims to the 'Nine-Dash Line' in the South China Sea and ratcheting up its pressure on Taiwan.

However, this transformation from an inward-looking state to a global superpower has also seen Beijing seek to extend its influence further afield, such as in the Arctic, Western Europe (via its Silk Belt and Road Initiative) and increasingly in Africa.

This has been predominately through 'soft power' in the form of massive investment in African

countries with huge infrastructure projects, such as dams, railways, airports, roads (and even an entire city in Angola), creating massive dependence and debt from these developing nations to Beijing. One estimate is that over \$300bn has been pumped into sub-Saharan Africa since 2005 by China. This strategic investment gives work to Chinese

construction ventures, secures access to valuable minerals and natural resources and also creates an 'empire' of friendly client states.

But where merchants lead, 'hard power' in the form of military bases and armed deployments tend to follow to protect

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Armed UAVs.

these investments as Europe's imperial powers found out in the original 'Scramble for Africa' in the 1880s. Rivalry and disputes in Africa among these powers such as Great Britain, France and Germany at the time threatened to be the touchpaper that would ignite a larger conflagration and war in continental Europe. Indeed, it was Germany's participation in this imperial adventure in Africa that would stimulate its naval expansion – setting in train a fateful arms race with Britain that would culminate in 1914. Parallels with today as a new rising power uses Africa as

a launchpad for its global ambitions, are thus striking.

Alarm bells of the extent of China's growing 'hard power' in Africa started ringing in the West when in 2017, China opened a large military base in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa. Interestingly co-located with other bases from US, France and Japan, which keep an eye on the rampant piracy off the coast of Africa, China's base is ostensibly for peacekeeping and humanitarian purposes, but it also provides an important power projection foothold on the continent. Supporting Chinese naval forces, its garrison of 400

also maintains a runway and military hospital. Some hint that its mission may not just be peace-keeping came in 2018 when the US formally complained that its military pilots flying into the nearby Camp Lemonnier were being dazzled by lasers from the PLA base.

Africa also provides a natural market for growing Chinese arms exports – which are highly affordable and are not limited by any 'end-user' restrictions compared to Western equipment. These include JF-17 fighters to Nigeria, the K-8 jet trainer to multiple countries and corvettes to Algeria. In particular, China's willingness to supply high-end armed MALE (medium altitude, long endurance) UAVs, in the class that falls under the Missile Control Technology Regime (MCTR) that restricts US exports of systems like Reaper, has seen China power ahead as the world's leading drone supplier. In Africa, this has seen CH-3/4/5 family UAVs supplied to Algeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Nigeria and Zambia, while the Wing Loong has been bought by Algeria, Egypt and Nigeria. China has also exported large amounts of light weapons to African states and

non-state groups and Chinese-supplied small arms have been linked to the repression of rebels in Darfur.

A skirmish against other powers in Africa is also not necessarily a Vietnam-style quagmire for China and, in fact, could provide some benefits. Its personnel, equipment and training remains largely untested (recent violence on the Indian-Chinese border was limited to baseball bats and WW1 style hand-to-hand combat) and the last state on state war it was involved in, in Vietnam in 1979 saw Beijing badly humiliated. A limited conflict, far away from China's own backyard and the ability to 'blood' its forces would therefore be a useful testing ground and battle laboratory for its military, giving its pilots, soldiers and sailors valuable combat experience. If successful, it would validate that China's military modernisation had worked and significantly boost China's military standing in the world. Russia has already reaped the benefits of Syria as a testing ground for new equipment and tactics and furthermore been able to study Western powers at close range in this style of 'sub-threshold' conflict.



Omar al-Bashir.

“For its part, Beijing would argue that its African strategy is just trade and economic development, and that it is pursuing an explicit non-colonial approach”

Indeed, keeping any conflict ‘sub-threshold’ with plausible deniability may prove an attractive strategy for China aiming to flex its muscles outside of its natural sphere of influence. This, of course, has a long history with Soviet pilots flying MiGs in the Korean War, and also flying Egyptian fighters against Israel in the Cold War. Today using mercenary forces, ‘private military contractors’ or volunteers may give China itself a way of intervening while still maintaining this deniability. For example, Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group have been reported to be flying MiG-29s in Libya, on the side of Moscow-backed forces in the country’s civil conflict.

Finally, some sense of how hard and soft power is combining and China’s new vision of itself as a global power, ready to intervene in Western-style operations, can be seen from the success of *Wolf Warrior 2* – China’s most successful box-office action movie, which centres on Chinese forces and a rebellion in an unnamed African

country. Notably the villain is an American mercenary.

For its part, Beijing would argue that its African strategy is just trade and economic development, and that it is pursuing an explicit non-colonial approach free from the exploitation of European empires of the 19th century or the ideological rivalry that saw the developing world become a superpower battleground in the Cold War in the 20th century.

China in Sudan

One of China’s biggest client states in Africa is Sudan, which cut off from US influence since 1995 due to sanctions over terrorism, has allowed Chinese power and presence (especially in exploitation of oil) to multiply without any checks. China’s role as an external power-backer has thus been extremely useful for the regime. China has come to dominate Sudan’s oil sector and takes 50-60% of the country’s oil exports.

However, Beijing’s cosy relationship with the previous



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Sudanese strongman, Bashir al Omar, was overturned by a coup-d’etat in April 2019, which saw him deposed after three decades of rule and the country is now shifting to a civilian governance. While rebels have now signed a peace deal with the Government, the situation still remains fluid while Bashir remains under trial for war crimes committed in Darfur since 2003.

Meanwhile, relations with its neighbour Chad have been complicated when the war in Darfur overspilled into Chad, igniting a civil war within that country that lasted until 2010 and a proxy war between the two countries. The partition of the south of the country into the new state of South Sudan in 2011 also raises extra complications – given that the vast majority of Sudan’s oil resources fell into this new

territory – the third largest oil reserves in Africa.

Sudan’s own armed forces operate a mix of Russian and Chinese equipment, including locally upgraded versions of T-72 and Chinese Type 59D tanks, Mi-24 gunships, Su-25 attack aircraft, Su-24 strike aircraft and MiG-29 fighters – as well as a number of Chinese-built Nanchang Q-5s fighter bombers, now getting considerably long in the tooth. With only a short coastline, Sudan’s navy consists of a few patrol boats.

Meanwhile, older former colonial powers still maintain strong ties to countries in Africa. France, in particular, has deployed troops to sub-Saharan Africa since 2013 under the auspices of Operation Serval and then Barkhane, to assist former colonies of: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and



Sudanese MiG-29s.



French Special Forces in Chad.

Niger against Islamic insurgency across the region. This operation has seen French AF fighters, UAVs, attack helicopters and special forces units all deployed to fight militants, with the HQ of the anti-jihadist operation based in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad. Operation Barkhane has

also seen international participation, with UK C-17 airlift support and Chinook deployment in Mali as well as Dutch and German helicopters. N'Djamena International Airport also serves as an air base for French Air Force units supporting this operation.

The selection of Chad's capital as the HQ to mount this effort, should be no surprise to regular Africa watchers, for Paris maintains strong links with its former colony. In the 1980s this the French Air Force deployed to assist the government in a little-reported conflict against Libya. This

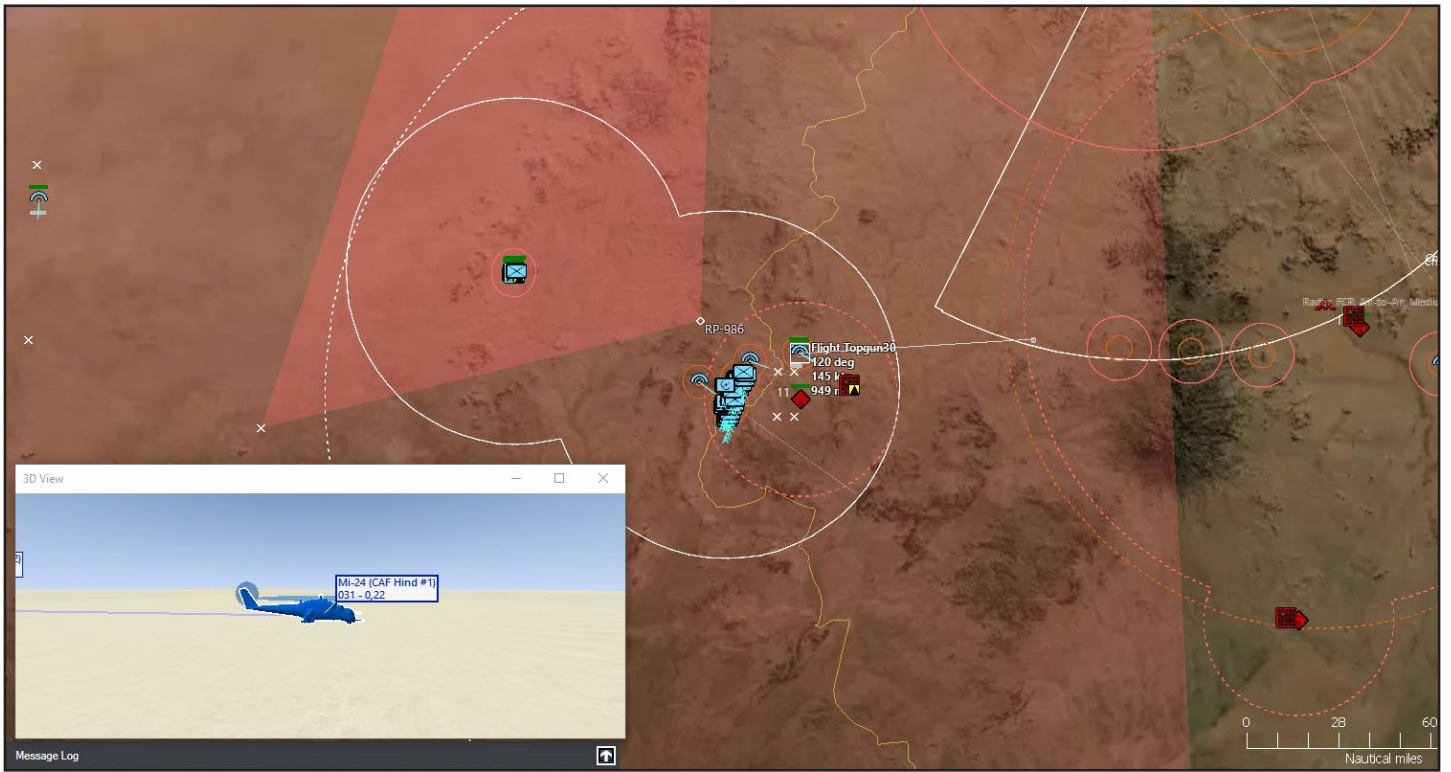
saw French Air Force Jaguar and Mirage fighters take part in what was then the biggest expeditionary force mounted by Paris since the Algerian War. More recently, French forces intervened to back-up the current government after a rebellion was crushed in 2008 – a civil war that had seen the rebels backed by Sudan.

Though a peace deal was agreed in 2010, it is clear that Paris still views Chad as a key ally and would assist in any hostilities – especially given its key role in supporting counter-insurgency operations across the wider Sahel region.

Chad's armed forces feature a heavy French influence with its army, gendarmerie, a national guard and a small air force. The Air Force Force Aérienne Tchadienne operates a mix of helicopters, and fixed-wing transport aircraft with the only dedicated attack platforms a handful of Su-25 attack aircraft and Mi-24 gunships. Beyond any very limited COIN operation, it would seem that Chad would have to again call on French help to bolster its forces in any larger-scale conflict such as the Chad-Libyan war of the 1980s.



Mirage 2000 and Rafale Fighters.



Mi-24s patrol the border.

Summary

This new neo-colonialism in Africa and the potential for China's global ambitions to rub up against existing powers is thus a cause of concern, especially since that Western Europe has now reluctantly woken up to China's more malign influences. The crackdown in Hong Kong, sabre-rattling over Taiwan, incarceration of Muslim Uyghurs in camps, as well as attempts to crush all dissent, have dashed hopes in Western capitals that the China's form of consumer communism would eventually give way to full democracy. A rudderless US administration, meanwhile, has simultaneously allowed China to advance its interests by retreating from international agreements, while at the same time painting Sino-US rivalry as a new Cold War. What remains unknown, however, both to US, the West and China's leaders itself is, (beyond Hollywood-style action blockbusters), how effective its military modernisation has really been.

For China, there is also the aspect of 'sunk costs'. Having invested considerable sums, time and resources into Africa, Beijing may feel compelled to defend its interests from other powers

– especially if there is a sudden shift in local alignment. What for example, would the response be if Sudan's new civilian government were to seek US help in balancing its dependence on China? Though China maintains that it does not seek to interfere in domestic politics in its 'client states', there are plenty of lessons from history where colonial powers have sponsored coups, rebellions or limited wars to advance their interests. The calculation here is not protecting Chinese-built shopping malls, but access to valuable oil, rare earth minerals and other natural resources that

are helping to power China's industrial development.

France, meanwhile, has been heavily engaged in its front on the 'War on Terror' in the Sahel since 2014. Its commitment and loyalty to its former colonies such as Chad should not be underestimated. Paris, perhaps even more that the current UK post-Iraq, is not afraid of getting its hands dirty in overseas foreign interventions, should the need be. With the US pivoting to Indo-Asia-Pacific and losing interest in Africa, it is thus likely that France will remain the key Western player in security in this part of the world.

Over 100 years ago the original 'Scramble for Africa' provided a foretaste of bigger international schisms and cemented the perception of Kaiser's Germany as an expansionist rising power in London and Paris. Germany's 'Weltpolitik' adopted in 1890 combined 'aggressive diplomacy, the acquisition of overseas colonies, and the development of a large navy' and although 'colonies' would not be the word we use today, this strategy has echoes now that Beijing's mask has slipped. Is history set to repeat itself?

