



China's Arms Sales in Africa

Earl Conteh-Morgan

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One of the negative aspects of China's increasing engagement with African states is the spread of small arms and/or light weapons especially in conflict zones and where opposition is violently suppressed. These weapons have undoubtedly contributed to the enhancement of closer ties between China and authoritarian regimes and served as an instrument for consolidating its presence in the continent.

China has developed an extensive presence in Africa through infrastructure such as airports, roads, hospitals, convention centers, media investment, agricultural and health education, among many other activities that seemingly put China in a good light. At the same time many of China's seemingly worthwhile activities by have not consolidated its ties to the African political elite and incumbent regimes as much as its arms sales to authoritarian regimes have. Its positive contributions in the continent have been offset by the lure of the benefits that are associated with arms sales to African states despite their negative consequences in growing African states.

Chinese small arms have been implicated in ethnic violence and war crimes in Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) among others. They have also been instrumental in the suppression of democratic progress in Zimbabwe, and at the same time expanding its influence and political economic ties with the authoritarian regime of President Robert Mugabe. China's worldview which puts social and economic rights over individual liberties and political rights is often quick to supply weapons to authoritarian African states because it does not make human rights observance a condition for arms sales to any country. Incumbent African

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regimes that face severe threats to their survival are therefore quick to turn to China as a source of arms supply in the struggle to preserve their power.

Apart from the lure of profits for China's arms sales to Africa, there is also the added benefit of China finding employment opportunities for its skilled Chinese citizens. This contributes to spreading its technical and personnel influence in the continent. At times, an arms supply relationship also involves establishing an arms factory in a recipient state that requires the expertise of skilled Chinese scientists, engineers, and industrial managers. Such a relationship for China leads to a long term business and security relationship with the African country. This is one reason why China's influence in Sudan is so strong.

However, what happens is that weapons that are sold by China or produced by China in Africa end up fueling and feeding the conflicts in countries such as the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, among others.

Regime survival or incumbent regime power consolidation efforts fuel arms transfers in South Sudan and Burundi. Chinese arms are often implicated in these conflicts because of China's aggressive arms sales strategy which is based on the following:

- A “catch all” customers strategy that has established an arms transfer or military relationship with several large African states such as Egypt, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, as well as smaller states like the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Burundi, and Sierra Leone, among others;
- A favorable financing strategy especially for African countries that cannot afford to buy sophisticated weapons and afford to pay the market price for small or light weapons; and

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- China's use of frequent and aggressive small arms marketing of its and more sophisticated military hardware at annual arms exhibits in various states within the continent. The wide array of Chinese arms enables China to sell weapons to both rich authoritarian African states as well as poorer smaller ones. The Chinese policy of placing no human rights or democracy conditions on arms sales as well its overall policy of non-interference in the politics of African states translates into the availability and affordability of Chinese arms in many African states.

The bloody footprints of China's arm sales in Africa

It is not therefore surprising that arms from China have been implicated in the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict in which China is known to have supplied arms to both sides in the conflict. It is also well documented that Chinese weapons were used in Sudan's suppression of rebels in Darfur following a revolt in 2003 which led to a genocide against the region's people. It is alleged that the light weapons used in the massacres in eastern DRC were of Chinese origin. There, children as young as 11 years old were given weapons by warlord Thomas Lubanga, and forced to participate in interethnic killings in the early 2000s. Furthermore, Chinese trained Congolese troops have been implicated on several occasions in ethnic killings of innocent civilians in the eastern DRC. Similarly, in 2009 Chinese-trained Guinean Commando units were responsible for the killings of about 150 people during a protest against authoritarian and undemocratic rule in the country.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) [report](#) of 2010, China was found to be the foremost exporter of arms to Africa. The Chinese Type 56 which is China's version of the Russian Kalashnikov (AK47) assault rifle is much easier to use as a light weapon. The

argument could be made that in spite of China's claim that it does not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, the fact that it supplies weapons to warring factions within a sovereign nation is itself inherently interventionist by nature. Such interference produces consequences such as gross human rights violations, murder, rapes, tortures, and extra-judicial killings. China's arms sales to Africa attract negative attention especially because they are made available to states like Sudan and Zimbabwe and the DRC, known for blatant human rights violations in Africa. This often means that China is reaping the profits of selling weapons to both incumbent regimes and rebel groups. The general outcome is the consolidation and expansion of its ties and presence in the continent.

Looking forward: an unsustainable arrangement

China's propensity to spread small arms and light weapons (SALW) among African states will end up undermining whatever positive perception it has generated in the continent as well as taint its goals to support sustainable development and contribute to the national development goals of individual African states. In particular, it will cast doubt on its willingness to support Millenium Development Goals, and other specific development goals in the continent such as the Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa and similar such programs.

So far, China's military to military ties with African states has been a source of frustration for the United Nations. While it China contributes to peacekeeping efforts in the continent, the United Nations does not know details of its military engagement, or specific military ties, with the countries in which its peacekeepers are deployed such as the DRC, South Sudan, Liberia, Mali, among others. In other words, the expanding military ties with African states,

and perhaps the access by rebels to Chinese arms are factors that are likely to undermine UN peacekeeping functions of disarmament of ex-combatants. It is difficult to know whether Chinese arms complement or undermine the efforts to enhance security in fragile African states. It is a question of whether China is willing to ensure that its military ties with countries of concern such as the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe, complement peacekeeping activities there or help to promote peace, stability, democracy and development.

Human rights [organizations](#) have often called attention to the destabilizing role that Chinese arms play in conflict zones in Africa. China so far seems determined to support and forge closer ties with authoritarian regimes in their goals of power consolidation, oppression of the opposition. China on the other hand is preoccupied with spreading its influence, consolidating its ties and deepening its engagement with every African state regardless of whether it is democratic or authoritarian. Accordingly, Chinese SALWs are supplied to both national armies in Africa as well as to rebel groups in the DRC, Chad and Uganda, and now the warring factions in South Sudan.

China's supply of arms to both rebels and national armies is often a violation of embargoes as well as a blatant case of economic self-interested behavior. The glimmer of hope in all this is that China has at times bowed to international pressure to cease supplying weapons in areas of gross human rights violations such as was the case with Darfur. But overall China still gives priority to concern over sovereignty and often defers to incumbent regimes such that human rights observance and non-proliferation of SALWs are relegated a secondary role in China's foreign policy rights towards Africa states.

Image credit: [Lance Corporal Jad Sleiman/Wikimedia](#).

Earl Conteh-Morgan is Professor of International Studies in the School of Interdisciplinary Global Studies at the University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript on Sino-African relations from a Political Economy Approach.

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101 Clerkenwell Road London
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