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## DRIVERS OF CONFLICT IN THE WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION: HOW CHINA'S ACTIVITIES ARE ESCALATING THE SITUATION

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**ABSTRACT:** *Conflict is a phenomenon that is associated with human society anywhere. The frequency, intensity, dimension and causes of conflict vary from one society to another and also vary from time to time. This paper examines conflict situation in West Africa and the role of China in escalating conflict in the Sub region. This paper relies on primary and secondary sources of data. It reveals that West Africa's enthusiasm for China may rapidly fade due to some social costs and ugly side of the China-West African relations. It concludes that, China has ideological fixations in foreign policy, coupled with investment opportunities to boost its domestic economy.*

**KEYWORDS:** conflict situations, sub-Sahara Africa, china's complicity

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## INTRODUCTION

China's rise to the second largest economy in the world has been marked by rapid economic growth and increasing engagement with the world economy. Far from the Maoist era, present-day China is more pragmatic and less ideologically focused in its activities abroad<sup>1</sup>. China's growing presence in the West Africa has spanned several decades<sup>2</sup>. China's second major customers in West Africa are Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra-Leone, Gambi, Cameroon, followed by Benin<sup>3</sup>. No doubt, China's economic investments have brought benefits to Sub West African countries, giving them a new export outlook and more importantly bringing a welcome and significant rise in the price of raw materials. Despite, the foregoing, the future of China African relations is clouded.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald, G.G.(2017)"China's Economic Engagement with West African:Present Realities,Problems and Prospects"  
*American Journal of Chinese Studies*, Vol.24, No.1, pp.13-28.

<sup>2</sup> Akyeampong, E. (2015)China in West Africa's Regional Development and Security Plans" *African Development*, Vol.40, Issue 4, pp1-19.

<sup>3</sup> Francois, L. (2005 ) "China's Presence in Africa" published in *China's Perspectives*.

## **Rational for Chinese Engagement in West Africa**

There are various reasons and motives behind China's engagement in Africa in general and West Africa in particular. They range from:

### **Geopolitical and propaganda factor.**

Geopolitical and propaganda priorities are a further impetus for Chinese activities in Africa, e.g fostering of south-south agenda. FOCAC supports that narrative by showcasing China as a continental-scale partner that tends to support Africa's position in forums, such as, at the UN Security Council, at least when it suits Chinese interest(Kovrig,2018)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Demand and Supply Factor.**

Another factor or driver is one of supply and demand, the swelling capacity of its military and industrial base and African governments interest in its relatively affordable arms, flexible financing terms and comparatively unrestricted approach including non-interference in matters such as governance and human rights. China's own expanding economic interests are a further driver. Africa's largest trading partner since 2009, China increasingly counts on the continent for natural resources and market to maintain its own growth and social stability. BRI supports this vision. Moreover, roughly a million Chinese are estimated to live and work in Africa, particularly in West Africa. The foregoing among others explain China's growing role in ensuring peace and stability in the region. Hence, Chinese multilateral pledges to support West African peace and security initiatives are welcome,(Kovrig, 2018)<sup>5</sup>.

## **Causes of Conflicts in West Africa and China's Complicity**

Several factors drive conflict in Sub Sahara Africa, but the most prominent ones are examined hereunder:

### **Natural Resources as Driver of Conflict in West Africa**

Chinese investment and trade sits at the centre of its economic relationship with Africa, particularly in West Africa. Chinese commercial actors have invested in regions that are unstable and risky. Of course, given that nearly one third of the world's civil wars take place in oil-producing countries, any state that needs to import oil is likely to find itself sourcing it from a conflict-ridden state. Today, China is the world's largest consumer of oil. (Wall-Street Journal, 2010;Saferworld,2011)<sup>6</sup>. Chinese workers and investments have been subject to attacks by armed groups and militants across the continent. The movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) detonated a bomb in the Niger Delta area shortly after President Hu's 2006 visit to Nigeria, warning that the "Chinese government by investing in stolen crude, places its citizens in

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<sup>4</sup>Kovrig, M. (2018) "China Expands its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa" *Commentary Asia*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/northeast/china/> accessed 27 May, 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Wall-Street Journal(2010) "China Tops US in Energy Use" July 18, 2010 ;Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May,2020.

our life line” (BBC News, 2006)<sup>7</sup>. Since then several Chinese nationals have been kidnapped by MEND (Peoples’ Daily, 2007; BBC, 2007; Saferworld, 2011)<sup>8</sup>. As Abiodun Alao explains, there are clear links between natural resources and conflict; their accumulation or control can become an objective of war; their high profits are used to fuel and sustain conflict; they can be a source of political grievances when their ownership is contested, and they can have a distorting effect on governance, (Alao, 2010; Dan, 2007)<sup>9</sup>. Definitely, the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone had links with natural resources control and profits there from were used to prosecute wars.

In 2007 when Nigerian government cracked down on illegal mining operations at Kampan in Zurak, a rural area about 150 miles from Jos, several Chinese nationals were arrested working at the remote site (Natsa, 2017)<sup>10</sup> under the leadership of a co-opted Nigerian businessman nicknamed- Dan-China, the illegal operation had extracted ₦100 Billion (\$278 million) in illegally mined lead, zinc and other ones over several years (Ewepu, 2017)<sup>11</sup>. These culprits are protected by bribed security agents and local chiefs.

Beyond the economic and financial damage, illegal mining causes, (loss of tax receipts, customs revenue, formal employment opportunities) it also inflicts environmental damage, deepens community grievances, criminalises local youths and corrupts government and security officials. (Mathew, 2018)<sup>12</sup>.

The local security effects of Chinese Economic Activities, can also be seen in the petroleum industry in the Niger- Delta. Chinese companies’ investment in Nigeria’s Petroleum sector has been problematic because the Chinese companies (e.g. Sinopec) engage in unethical practices that fuel criminality and poor governance. The corporate social responsibility practices of Chinese companies and contractors operating in the Niger-Delta appear to be lacking (Xuejun, 2013)<sup>13</sup>. This has made the kidnapper to continue to target Chinese nationals in the Niger-Delta, while

<sup>7</sup>BBC News (2006) “Car Blast Near Nigerian Oil Port” April 30, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Peoples’ Daily (2007) Nine Kidnapped Chinese Workers Safely Released in Nigeria” February 5, 2007. ; BBC News (2007) “China Launches Nigerian Satellite” May 14, 2007; Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China’s Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020.

<sup>9</sup>Alao, A. (2010) “China’s Role in Managing Africa’s Natural Resources for Peace,” *Paper presented to the China-Africa Civil Society Forum on Peace and Development, Beijing, 2-4 June, 2010, pp.1-2.* ; Dan, L. (2007) “Arms, Oil and Darfur, Sudan,” *Issue Brief No 7, Geneva: Small Arms Survey.*

<sup>10</sup>Natsa, R.T.(2017) “Government Indicts Firms in N100 Billion Illegal Mining Activities” *Leadership, September 4, 2017, [www.leadership.ng/2017/09/04/fg-indicts-firms-n100bn-illegalminingactivities](http://www.leadership.ng/2017/09/04/fg-indicts-firms-n100bn-illegalminingactivities)* accessed 30 April, 2020.

<sup>11</sup>Ewepu, G. (2017) “FG Accuses Two Mining Firms of Taking N100bn- Worth of Mineral Out of Nigeria” *Vanguard September 3, 2017*

<sup>12</sup>Mathew, T.P. (2018) “The Intersection of China’s Communal Interests and Nigeris’s Conflict Landscape” *United States Institute of Peace SPECIAL REPORTS, 428, September 2018. Pp. 1-19 at 6.*

<sup>13</sup>Xuejun, W.(2013) “The Corporate Social Responsibility of Chinese Oil Companies: Implications for the Governance of Oil Resources” in *China-African Relations Governance, Peace and Security*, Berhe, M.G. and Hongwu L. (eds.), *op.cit* pp. 128-145.

(MEND) and other militants have continued to attack/ harass Chinese oil interests in Nigeria. (Obi, 2008)<sup>14</sup>(Daina, Shu &Bouso, 2017; U.S. Embassy Abuja, 2009; Matthew, 2018)<sup>15</sup>.

### Water Resources as Driver of Conflict on West Africa

By the year 2025, Africa's population is expected to reach 1.3 billion people. It is predicted that by the same year, around twenty-five African countries will face water scarcity problem (ISS, 2010)<sup>16</sup>. It is for this reason that water is fast becoming a major issue in conflict,(Alao,2010;Saferworld,2011)<sup>17</sup>. In areas of water scarcity, localised communal clashes breakout between groups over access to water sources. Farming and pastoralist communities have frequently clashed over water. Water has also become a national security concern for some governments. Africa has more than sixty trans-boundary river basins containing ninety three percent of the fresh waters of the continent (ISS, 2010)<sup>18</sup>. Hence, interstate tensions have arisen over these shared resources and this is especially pronounced in the Nile River Basin where water has acquired particular prominence as a major factor that defines peace and security in the North and Horn of Africa. (ISS, 2010;Saferworld, 2011;International Rivers, 2008)<sup>19</sup>.China plays a role in Africa's water management infrastructure and has been involved in the construction of over twenty dams in Africa. Recently,Lake Chad was almost becoming an issue between Nigeria,Chad and the surrounding countries it.

### Land as Driver of Conflict in West Africa

Since the majority of people's livelihoods are dependent on the arable economies, land disputes are a central driver of conflict across Africa. (Pantuliano, 2009;Saferworld, 2011)<sup>20</sup>. Armed groups fight to control territory, population and resources. In some cases, whole communities are

<sup>14</sup> Obi, C.F. (2018) "Enter the Dragon? Chinese Oil Companies and Resistance in the Niger Delta" *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 117, p.429.

<sup>15</sup>Denina, C., Zhu, J., and Bouso, R. (2017) "Exclusive: China's Sinopec Looking to Sell Nigeria Business-Sources" *Reuters*, December 6, 2017; US Embassy Abuja, "Chinese Oil Companies Not so Welcome in Nigeria's Oil Patch Politics" December 2, 2009, [www.wikileaks.org/pluid/cable/09ABUJA2170\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/pluid/cable/09ABUJA2170_a.html) accessed 28 May,2020. ; Mathew, T.P. (2018) "The Intersection of China's Communal Interests and Nigeris's Conflict Landscape" *United States Institute of Peace SPECIAL REPORTS*, 428, September 2018. Pp. 1-19 at 6.

<sup>16</sup>ISS (2010) "Emerging Regional Security Threats in the Nile Basin," *ISS Peace and Security Council Report*, No. 13.

<sup>17</sup>Alao, A. (2010) "China's Role in Managing Africa's Natural Resources for Peace," *Paper presented to the China-Africa Civil Society Forum on Peace and Development, Beijing, 2-4 June, 2010, pp.1-2.* ; Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020.

<sup>18</sup>ISS (2010) "Emerging Regional Security Threats in the Nile Basin," *ISS Peace and Security Council Report*, No. 13.

<sup>19</sup>ISS (2010) "Emerging Regional Security Threats in the Nile Basin," *ISS Peace and Security Council Report*, No. 13. ;Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020. ; International Rivers (2008) "The New Great Walls: A Guide to China's Overseas Dam Industry", *Berkeley*, p.17.

<sup>20</sup>Pontuliano, S. (ed.) (2009) *Uncharted Territory: Land Conflict and Humanitarian Action*, London: Practical Action Publishing. p.1; Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020.

forcefully displaced from their ancestral homeland. The scarcity of available arable land for rural communities only makes these pressures worse. The addition of other actors “competing for this scarce and contested resources can add to socio-political instability in developing countries (Von-Braum&Meinzen-Dick, 2009)<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, several West African states have been keen to sell huge tracts of land to foreign investors with little regard to the plight of the host communities that claim customary rights to its use. This is prevalent in the West African countries. China is one of such actor, with the state “now encouraging agricultural companies to buy farmland in West Africa”(Cotula, 2009)<sup>22</sup>.

Chinese agricultural investments in rural areas of Nigeria and across West Africa are potential drivers of conflict and violence. For instance, the ongoing Chinese investment in agriculture in the rural area of Jigawa State of Nigeria, where opposition from local farmers and some politicians could spark conflict over land use. In the Northern Nigeria, a major Chinese agricultural investment has become a political football pitching the local farmers with deep ties to their ancestral land, against headstrong state officials. Caught in the middle of this tussle is the Lee Group, a major Sino-Nigerian conglomerate (Giginyu, 2017)<sup>23</sup>. In order to facilitate the project, the Lee Group has offered to pay ₦1 billion (\$2.8 million) in compensation to be distributed by the Jigawa State government to the ten thousand farmers who will be displaced by the project. (Punch,2016)<sup>24</sup>. The local opposition to the project runs deep, and farmers who have accepted compensation reportedly have been ostracised from their communities, while the opposition have openly accused the state government and Lee Group of “Land Grabbing” (Vanguard, 2016)<sup>25</sup>. The actual depth of China’s accumulation of land in West Africa is not clear.

### Effect of Conflict on Development

Conflict and insecurity have plunged Africa, particularly West Africa into a development dilemma, which is rather difficult for Africa to shake off. There exists an extensive literature on the link between conflicts, security and development. Conflict and insecurity undermine development because of both the direct cost (such as military expenditure or destruction of infrastructure) and the indirect cost (such as rapidly declining investment, capital flight, inflation, economic shock, the destruction of market unemployment debt and lack of public services) (World Bank Report, 2003; Xuejun,2010; Saferworld,2011)<sup>26</sup>. These costs are placed not only on governments and citizens, within their own borders, but on neighbouring countries too. Undebatably, armed conflict

<sup>21</sup> Von- Braum, J.&Meinzen-Dick, R. (2009) “Land Grabbing by Foreign Investors in Developing countries: Risks and Opportunities,” *IFPRI Policy Brief 13*, p.2

<sup>22</sup>Cotula, L. et al (2009) Land Grab or Development Opportunity: Agricultural Investment and International Land Deals in Africa”, *FAO, IIED, IFAD*.

<sup>23</sup>Giginyu, I.M. (2017) “Jigawa Land Lease: We are in Nigeria to Create Wealth Not Confusion- Lee Group” *Daily Trust*, June 24, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Punch, “Chinese Firm to Generate 15000 Jobs for Sugarcane Farmers” November 23, 2016.

<sup>25</sup>Vanguard (2016) Reps Raises Alarm Over Land Grabbing in North by Chinese Firm” November 29, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> World Bank Report, 2003; Xuejun, W. (2017) “Development Peace: Understanding China’s Policy Towards Africa in Peace and Security” in Alden, C., Alao, A., Chun, Z., Barber, L. (eds.) *China and Africa, Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 67-82. ; Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China’s Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020.



and persistent insecurity are barriers to socio-economic development in West Africa. (Saferworld, 2011)<sup>27</sup>. China has played positive role in the economic dimension of peace building in post-conflict countries. After the civil war in Sierra Leone, China provided assistance and worked with other donors to help the country's post-conflict economic recovery. China cancelled several debts and signed at least eight separate agreements with Sierra Leone between 2001 and 2007 and involved grants, zero-interest loans or a combination of the two (Saferworld, 2011; Brautigam, 2010)<sup>28</sup>. China has also provided direct budget support to some post conflict governments, for example, it gave \$3 million to Liberia in 2004 and a further \$1.5 million in 2006 (Collier, 2010)<sup>29</sup>. The Chinese companies and entrepreneurs have also made investments in post-conflict countries. This combination of official assistance and commercial investments from China, particularly in infrastructure reconstruction and the development projects created substantial opportunities for economic recovery in post conflict states (Collier, 2010)<sup>30</sup>. In the post-war Sierra-Leone, Chinese companies have built telecommunication networks and hydroelectric power stations (Brantigam, 2010; Corkin and Burke, 2008)<sup>31</sup>. Chinese development and humanitarian aid in West-Africa "targets the root cause of conflict, which is poverty" (Li Anshan, 2017; Nadu, 2010; Saferworld, 2011)<sup>32</sup>.

### China and West Africa Security Relations.

Less noticeable to outsiders but broader in impact is China's direct defence and security cooperation with African counterparts in general and West African countries in particular. This takes place through a growing number of joint exercises, naval patrols and exchanges. In the first half of 2018 alone, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> anti-piracy escort task forces reportedly visited ports in Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana and Nigeria, while PLA units conducted drills in the same countries and its medical teams did work in Sierra Leone and other West African countries. Few months after Burkina-Faso's decision to switch diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing, the PLA started working to develop military ties that will likely emphasise counter-terrorism cooperation (Kovrig, 2018)<sup>33</sup>. The first Forum on China-Africa Defence and Security (FOCAS) held from 26<sup>th</sup> June to 10 July 2018 marked a new more formal and

<sup>27</sup>Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020.

<sup>28</sup>Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020. ;

<sup>29</sup>Collier, P. & Hoeffler, A. (2004) "Greed and Grievances in Civil War" *Oxford Economic Paper* no 56.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> ; Corkin, L., & Burke C. (2008) Constructive Engagement: An Overview of China's Role in Africa's Construction Industries" in *New Impulses from the South: China's Engagement in Africa*, Edinger, Herman, H. and Jansson, J. *Centre for Chinese Studies, University of Stellenbosch*.

<sup>32</sup> Nadu, S. (2010) "China's Engagement in Africa and the Prospects for Sustainable Development", *Paper submitted to the China-Africa Civil Society Forum on Peace and Development, Beijing, 2-4 June 2010*. ; Saferworld Report (January 2011) on China's Growing Role in African Peace and Security, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk> accessed 35 May, 2020.

<sup>33</sup>Kovrig, M. (2018) "China Expands its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa" *Commentary Asia*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/northeast/china/> accessed 27 May, 2020.

comprehensive level of dialogue. It brought senior military officers and officials from 49 African states and the AU to Beijing for discussion on regional security and military equipment.

The 2018 FOCAS plan of action goes even further calling for an ongoing China-Africa Peace and Security Forum and China-Africa Law Enforcement and Security Forum, and commit both sides to more intelligence sharing. It also pledges to support programmes in consular services, immigration, justice and law enforcement including running anti-corruption course that aims to train 100 African officials by 2021. For police, there will be more exchanges, donations of equipment and training and formalised engagement with the African Police Cooperation Organisation. Chinese and wider Asian demand for African wildlife and its products, particularly ivory, rhinoceros horn and pangolin, drives poaching, smuggling and trafficking, the profit from which often fuel violence and organised crimes across the West African sub-region and African continent in general. China's ivory import ban, which took effect on January 1, 2018, was a welcome and long-overdue step, but it requires enforcement. FOCAS has helpfully added a three-year plan under Interpol to combat such activities. As a commitment to FOCAS, China is complementing these cooperation mechanisms with more military assistance for the AU. In the first major disbursement from China's \$100 million commitment, it concluded an agreement in February 2018 to provide \$25 million in military equipment and hardware for the AU's logistics base in Cameroon (Kovrig,2018)<sup>34</sup>.

China has also given a small amount of financial assistance to the ECOWAS Peace Fund (Concord Times, 2008)<sup>35</sup>. Given China's particularly influential role in sales of small arms, light weapons and ammunition, it should do more to improve transparency, monitoring of end users and cooperation with the UN investigators to prevent these weapons ending up in the wrong hands. (Kovrig,2018)<sup>36</sup>.

FOCAC initiatives have indeed built on the increasingly pervasive Chinese presence in West Africa's security sector, of which the most visible example is its growing participation in UN peace operation. Beijing in 2015 set up UN Peace and Development Trust Fund and in 2016/2017 allocated \$11 million for building African capacity to train police and soldiers for peacekeeping mission in support of AU's initiative to "silence the gun" and end conflict in Africa, through initiatives such as the African Standby Force and African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis (Kovrig, 2018)<sup>37</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the rational for China's engagement in the West Africa; the causes of conflict in the Sub region; effect of conflict on development; as well as the security relations

<sup>34</sup>Kovrig, M. (2018) "China Expands its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa" *Commentary Asia*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/northeast/china/> accessed 27 May, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Concord Times (2008) "China Gives \$100.000 to ECOWAS Peace Fund" December 18, 2008.

<sup>36</sup>Kovrig, M. (2018) "China Expands its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa" *Commentary Asia*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/northeast/china/> accessed 27 May, 2020.

<sup>37</sup>Kovrig, M. (2018) "China Expands its Peace and Security Footprint in Africa" *Commentary Asia*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/northeast/china/> accessed 27 May, 2020.

between China and West African countries, among others. There is apparently no doubt, that China has impacted positively on the individual country in the Sub region. However, it is our humble conclusion is that China is both an investor as well as a predator in its partnership with Sub Sahara Africa. According to a former President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Olisa Agbakoba, Senior Advocate of Nigeria, SAN) the Nigerian trade relations is skewed in favour of China, a situation of unfair and unbalanced investment relationship (Yusuf & Adeleye, 2019)<sup>38</sup>. Countries engaging in partnership with China in the Sub-region should therefore always put their national security interest over and above anything else and should also avoid signing agreements that will ultimately lead to the loss of their State Sovereignty under any guise.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid. see also Emeka, U. (2005) “ China’s Engagement with Nigeria: Opportunity or Opportunist” *African East-Asian Affairs*, Issue 3 & 4, pp54-78.