

By Adam Dempsey, Research Associate, UK Defence Forum

Debates have polarised around whether China is engaged in a project of resource exploitation with Africa for its own needs, or if it is offering the continent an opportunity to focus on trade rather than Western aid. Chinese arms sales to African states provide fuel for both sides of the debate. Yet they also contribute to challenges to the security of the continent. The international community should consider opportunities or strategies to counter Chinese arms sales to Africa.

Like other regions of the developing world, Africa is integral to China's assertive economic and foreign policies. In 2006 China codified its relations with Africa with the production of a white paper. 'China's African Policy' details a comprehensive and long-term plan for enhanced Sino-African cooperation. The white paper was accompanied by China's 'Year of Africa.' Throughout 2006 senior Chinese politicians visited sixteen African states. In November 2006 China entertained high-level representatives from 48 African states at the Beijing Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. Between 2007 and 2008 China also received military delegations from African states. These states included Nigeria, Sudan and Zimbabwe.

China as an arms supplier to Africa has provided military assistance, logistics and training since the 1960s. However China's contemporary international arms transfer policy is guided by three declared principles. Firstly, Chinese arms exports should boost the legitimate self-defence needs of the recipient. Such sales should also not damage regional or international peace and security. Lastly, China should not interfere in the domestic affairs of recipient countries. Yet in many African countries it is difficult to identify what constitutes a legitimate government. In the case of Zimbabwe power is ultimately dependent upon 'capturing' the state and being part of the ruling cadre. As a result, China has often made arms sales to African states where the preservation of the ruling elite is the main priority.

Yet China's increasing need for natural resources helps to explain why Africa remains a key market for its arms sales. In recent years Chinese arms sales to Africa have outstripped those of the United States. Often arms are traded for oil and mineral resources. Amongst China's more popular exports to Africa are the J-7 fighter, K-8 trainer and Y-12 maritime surveillance aircraft. China also sees those states that have purchased these aircraft as potential customers for its FC-1 fighters. In the 1980s, for example, China exported 22 J-7s to Sudan. However Amnesty International declared in 2006 that China's relations with Sudan had adversely affected human rights within the country. Many of the weapons exported by China have been used by the armed forces and pro-state militias to commit atrocities in Darfur.

Whilst the West has labelled it as a state-sponsor of terrorism, China has made Sudan integral to its energy policies. Sudan now provides between 7 – 10% of China's imported oil. As of 2009 Sudan was known to have 6.3 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. China has also invested heavily in developing Sudan's oilfields. The China National Petroleum Corporation has become increasingly active in the oilfields of southern Sudan. China has also built a 900 mile

pipeline in the region linking these reserves with Sudan's Red Sea coast.

Zimbabwe is also regarded by China as a likely purchaser of the FC-1. However, it remains uncertain as to how Zimbabwe will be able to pay for this purchase. According to a source from the South African military industry China is interested in Zimbabwe's zinc and aluminium mines. Beijing is likely to be particularly interested in Zimbabwe's zinc reserves. China consumes 30% of the global zinc supplies and its own reserves are expected to diminish significantly over the next 16 years. It is therefore plausible that Zimbabwe will look to include its natural resources in future arms trades with China.

As with other parts of Africa, China's relations with Zimbabwe are well established. China armed Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union forces in their struggle against white rule. In 1989 Beijing began selling J-7s and radar to Zimbabwe. By 2004 Beijing and Harare had signed a \$240 million deal that included 12 jet fighters and 100 military vehicles. Such purchases were required to replace equipment that was no longer operational due to international sanctions. As a result, in 2006 Mugabe reminded the opposition that Zimbabwe had benefited from 'look east' policies that provided equipment and new military strategies for its armed forces.

Mugabe's statement might also allude to the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) presence in Zimbabwe. China has a small contingent of officers based at Zimbabwe's military academy. However, in 2008 western media sources reported that PLA soldiers were patrolling the streets of Mutare, eastern Zimbabwe. Further reports stated that PLA troops were also visiting strategic locations such as border posts and state institutions. If such reports were confirmed then a strong case emerges that China is breaking the principles of its international arms policy.

Yet as China continues to grow as a major global superpower, it seems unlikely that there will be an appetite for further international sanctions. In the case of Zimbabwe, the European Union (EU) has since 2002 implemented sanctions to forbid arms sales. However, China has demonstrated their ineffectiveness by continuing to supply arms, logistics and know-how to Zimbabwe. Without proactive international action China is likely to continue its disregard for sanctions and supply arms to Africa in return for natural resources. Consequently the international system needs to reconsider its options.

So what is to be done?

Since the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, both Europe and the United States have had an arms embargo in place against China. However, the European Union continues to consider the lifting of the embargo in a bid to improve relations with Beijing. Yet any proposed EU initiative is likely to encounter resistance from within and from the United States. Whilst France called for the embargo to be lifted in 2004, it now believes the ban should stay in place. This reflects the concerns of many EU states about China's increasingly assertive behaviour towards Taiwan. These states are unlikely to want to sanction an arms build-up that could isolate that island.

Further criticism of the EU's initiatives has come from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). The ECFR has branded the EU's proposals as ill-conceived because they do not try to gain any concessions from China. Yet as the EU has an embargo against arms

sales to Zimbabwe in place, a potential bargaining tool may exist for future negotiations with Beijing. However, using arms sales to Africa as a condition for lifting the embargo needs to take into account the West's general consensus regarding Taiwan. If a balance is not achieved between both considerations, then this is a bargaining tool that is unlikely to work.

Another option might be to focus upon attempts by the United States to reinforce a position of dominance over arms sales to Africa. In 2006 the United States made arms transfers to Nigeria totalling a very modest \$253,000. However as the security situation around the oil fields of the Niger Delta worsened, Nigeria asked Washington for additional supplies. In response to Nigeria's request for 200 patrol boats, the United States only provided four coastal patrol vessels. Washington's reluctance to meet these demands can be explained by the West's generalised concerns regarding corruption and human rights abuse associated with Nigeria's military.

Washington's reluctance to meet its perceived requirements prompted Nigeria to look to China for assistance. In 2006 the Nigerian air force purchased 12 Chinese versions of the MIG-21 fighter. Nigeria had previously purchased MIG-21s from the Soviet Union. They are situated at a desert airfield, the purchase price unpaid for several years. Nigeria also purchased an undisclosed number of J-7 fighters. The Nigerian navy also ordered maritime vessels to patrol the Niger Delta. In 2009 Defense News reported that Nigeria was now looking to order the K-8 trainer and the FC-1 fighter. Such purchases reflect declarations made by Nigerian military officials that they will increasingly turn to China for weapons to quell unrest within the Niger Delta.

However, since 2006 US arms sales to Nigeria have increased dramatically. As of 2009, Nigeria and Angola received a combined \$300 million-worth of military aid. Yet as the world's leading democracy Washington also needs to take into account Nigeria's poor human rights record. According to Human Rights Watch, sectarian clashes throughout 2008 and 2009 left scores of Nigerians dead. The Nigerian government is also accused of failing to hold to account members of the security forces implicated in extrajudicial killings and human rights abuse. Furthermore, the government's 2004 amnesty with rebels in the Niger Delta failed to overcome bureaucratic corruption and state-sponsored violence associated with the unrest. As Nigeria can expect Western condemnation for human rights abuse, China will likely remain a more reliable source of arms sales.

The final option worth consideration is potentially the most promising. In April 2008 the vessel An Yue Jiang docked at the Port of Durban. Its cargo included ammunition for AK47 rifles, the primary assault weapon of Zimbabwe's defence forces. The shipments destined for Zimbabwe were to be offloaded in Durban and delivered across South Africa. However public outcry prompted the High Court to forbid transportation. As a result, the ship left Durban to look for friendlier ports. Reports speculated that the shipment would head for Mozambique, Angola or Namibia, all allies of China. But as international condemnation grew for China's support of Mugabe, these states also refused the cargo. On the 24th April, the Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed that the cargo had been recalled.

On this evidence it would seem that the most diplomatic-intensive approaches to stemming

Chinese arms sales to Africa are complicated. There is unlikely to be widespread Western consensus that an agreement can be reached with China in return for lifting the arms embargo. The West needs to remain more receptive to messages from international civil society about human rights abuses. Such constraints will allow China to continue to trade arms with Africa. Yet as the latter option of combining elements of both civil society and diplomatic action demonstrates, effective opportunities may occur to counter Beijing's activities.