

As instability continues to spread across the African continent, **John Chisholm** explores the growing security threat which could undermine its development

We are all Africans. This is a fact of human development, and something that, as a race, it would be wrong for us to forget. But Africa as a continent has been left behind, in terms of infrastructure, education, economics, and seemingly politics. This has been matched by a continual population growth, despite the fact that many countries remain ravaged by HIV, continual exploitation of the continent for its raw materials, a corrupt political class and seemingly endemic conflict.

This is a continent in transition. It would be grossly unfair to use the yardstick of Western Europe or North America to measure African development. Africa does not have the luxury of going through an industrial revolution, and all the facts of history that have led to the foundation and stability of successful "first world" economies and democracies. Africa is playing catch up in a game where the rules were made elsewhere and the dice have been continually loaded against it.

Emerging from colonialism into a Cold War world where both sides played countries off against each other and supported their friendly dictators, the same countries now face a transition to democracy amid continual ethnic and religious tensions while the brightest and best often vote with their feet and become economic migrants.

A new player in Africa over the past decade or so has been China. The growth that China has experienced has demanded an ever-greater access to raw materials, and a major source has been Africa. By 2012, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce claimed that US\$2.5bn had

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been invested in Africa by Chinese companies – or, put another way, 2,372 investment programmes have been approved by the Chinese government. The figures are probably higher than this as China demands little in the way of transparency from its companies, so many smaller investments and enterprises probably slip through unnoticed, such as all the Chinese shops scattered across the continent. China does export to Africa, to the tune of some \$2.49bn, but in return it sucks in commodities such as cotton, rubber, sisal and palm oil. Of more importance is the industrial market Africa represents for Chinese goods: nearly 50 per cent of all Chinese exports are mechanical or electrical.

But Africa represents only a small fraction of China's overall global trade – just over five per cent in 2012. Yet, because of the relative poverty of Africa, what looks like a small amount can have very far-reaching effects. A huge element often missed is the construction sector: from roads to hydroelectric dams, Chinese companies are selling their expertise to African states, and these have two significant advantages. Firstly, they are often the least expensive option available, and secondly they come with no strings attached in relation to democracy and human rights. The West is not the only show in town when it comes to technological expertise any more.

Today China is Africa's largest trade partner. Almost all the trade from Africa to China is in the form of raw materials, while in return China is furnishing finished manufactures and construction projects. So what are the key raw materials being sought after by China? An obvious one is oil: China's voracious demand for energy to feed its booming economy has led it to seek oil supplies from African countries including Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Republic of Congo. The state-owned Chinese energy company, CNOOC Ltd recently announced it would buy a 45 percent stake in an offshore oil field in Nigeria for \$2.27bn. But it does not stop with oil. China imports about 90 per cent of its cobalt, 35 per cent of its manganese, 30 per cent of its tantalum, and five per cent of its hardwood timber from Africa.

So far so economic. But there is a significant political dimension to all of this. Firstly, in the United Nations, the African states make up about a quarter of the full members and they have been reliable supports for Beijing in diplomatic spats with Taiwan. It should come as no surprise that the \$200m African Union HQ at Addis Abbaba was built by Chinese companies, at a suspiciously knock-down cost. African countries are also supportive when China is attacked over human rights or in the WTO.

Another attractive aspect that China offers is loans, and loans on a purely commercial basis. To quote the Sierra Leone Ambassador to China: "They don't hold meetings about environmental impact assessment, human rights, bad governance and good governance. I'm not saying it's right, just that Chinese investment is succeeding because they don't set high benchmarks." Evidently, African countries prefer China's unconditional aid rather than assistance from the West that insists on acceptable human rights practices, economic policy reform, or democratic

governance. Because China also stands accused by the Western world of violating its own citizens' rights, China finds common ground with these African nations and maintains that human rights are relative, and that countries should be allowed their own definitions and practices. In fact, China has argued that attempts by foreign nations to discuss democracy and human rights violate the rights of a sovereign country. Finally, China's permanent UN Security Council membership attracts African members. China uses the threat of its veto in the Security Council to counter or water down sanctions against some African countries.

In other words China has found, in Africa, a source of raw materials and political support, and in return African countries have found a far less demanding commercial partner with a UN veto and growing international influence. All that China demands is political stability so it can have a good return on investment and effective trading partnership. The problem is that stability is usually not provided for by dictatorships, rogue states or rigged democracies. To borrow an example from outside of Africa, Burma looked "stable" for a time, but the local demands and outside pressures gradually corroded to ability of the military there to retain political control indefinitely. For Africa, China offers significant opportunities but also worries. Unless African countries find ways of negotiating the complex webs of international politics, the continent will once again become a theatre for imperial competition by proxy.

One African country clearly bedevilled by continual unrest is the Democratic Republic of Congo. But recently the DRC has managed to find some good news to shout about. After 20 months of fighting it looks like the M-23 rebel movement has finally been defeated. Four days of defeats culminated in the rebels being forced to abandon their former strongholds in Kibumba, Kiwanja and Rutshuru. Rutshuru became the main rebel base after a string of victories over the Congolese army last year. But now the tables are turned, and although vowing to maintain the struggle, the M-23 movement looks doomed to defeat and disintegration. Congolese President Laurent Kabila has ruled out a blanket pardon for the rebel leaders, which does not, of course, rule out deals on a case-by-case basis. But the M-23 movement's ability to flare, and then eventually be extinguished, is illustrative of the problems the DRC faces. M23 began in early 2012 as a mutiny by soldiers demanding the government implement the terms of a 2009 peace deal signed with a previous Rwanda-backed rebel group, many of whose members had been integrated into the army. So far so good, but...

In another part of the country, about 10,000 Congolese refugees have fled into Uganda to escape fighting between a new rebel faction called M18 and local militias, according to Red Cross and DRC military officials. So who is M-18? The short answer is that nobody knows; even the name is a mystery, although the UN says they are not linked to M-23. According to a military spokesman from neighbouring Uganda: "We know that M18 is a new rebel group in Orientale Province and they've been

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clashing with some militias there and forcing people to flee, but we don't know their leadership yet or what they want. We are still trying to learn those details."

The military threat posed by M-18 may be low, although the fact they are stimulating a refugee flow in the thousands may belie that. But of more importance is that they have flared up at all, with little information available as to numbers, motive or leadership. Nothing could more strikingly illustrate the stability problem faced by the DRC. The Eastern provinces of the country are wealthy, with lots of raw materials like copper and diamond, but they also suffer from poor infrastructure, lax oversight and endemic corruption. The DRC is also not shy about accusing its neighbours of fomenting trouble: the finger has consistently been pointed at Rwanda, alleging support for M-23 on both a tribal basis and access to raw materials for export. But M-18 is utterly unknown, and for the DRC to start accusing neighbouring Uganda as well as Rwanda of supporting rebel groups may only have the effect of making Kabila's government appear paranoid while looking for external scapegoats.

So who would choose to invest in DRC? Plenty do, as the raw materials and the profits available are very high indeed. But who would trust the government of the DRC to provide the security necessary to make a success of such an investment? Perhaps not so many, so they hire their own security, make an accommodation with the local elites and bribe anyone who looks threatening. Kabila may wave his metaphorical piece of paper, but the DRC looks set to be bedevilled by flare-ups by rebel groups for the foreseeable future.

Of course another form of instability is that presented by the conflict between religious groups in Africa, notably Islamic and Christian communities. Overlaid on this is the baleful influence of international Islamic terrorism. The

most recent was the terrorist attack at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi on 21 September, the siege not being resolved until 24 September. Seventy-two people were killed, including 61 unarmed civilians, and more than 200 were wounded in this major attack against this softest of soft targets.

This attack was allegedly in response to Kenyan intervention in the Somali civil war, especially the Linda Nchi operation against the al-Shabaab movement. Retaliation had been promised by al-Shabaab; just one week before the incident at the Westgate Mall and a month after the United Nations warned of possible attacks, Kenyan police claimed to have disrupted a major attack in its final stages of planning after arresting two people with suicide vests packed with ball bearings, grenades and AK-47 assault rifles. So, as Kenya celebrated the International day of Peace, five terrorists entered the mall and began indiscriminately killing civilians.

African countries do not have the resources to employ such large and sophisticated counter-terrorism operations as are found in the West. The fact that Nairobi was getting intelligence through the UN underlines how reliant African countries are on outside intelligence resources. This makes them far more vulnerable to attacks, especially on such a soft target as a crowded shopping mall. It also proves, if that was ever needed, that Islamic terrorist groups will define virtually anyone as "the enemy" in order to make up for their military weakness. Ironically, such groups are fond of staking out for themselves the moral high ground they are convinced goes alongside belief in Islam.

The effect is the same as instability in the DRC: it makes Africa look unstable. The difference is that rebel groups in the DRC are parochial, with local aims and objectives. Al-Shabaab's objective is international: to create an Islamic caliphate in Africa and instability is the first step to that end. Humanity can be in short supply in Africa.

Ending M23: a soldier of the FARDC government forces mans a rocket launcher near the front line in Kanyaruchinya

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