

China and Russia in Sudan: Surveying Data on Economic and Military Engagement

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Key Findings and Recommendations

On availability and reliance of data on China and Russia in the Horn of Africa

- ▶ Existing studies on China and Russia's engagement in the Horn of Africa employ primarily qualitative methods to gauge the scope, scale, and intent of both countries' interventions.
 - ▶ Further research is needed to connect the conclusions and assumptions of qualitative studies with the quantitative data available.
- ▶ Quantitative data on non-Western economic and security engagement in the Horn of Africa varies in quality and coverage and is scattered across different datasets. In some cases, the opaqueness of quantitative data is a purposeful effort by the intervenor.
 - ▶ Further quantitative research should seek to:
 - gather a diverse set of economic and security data,
 - work to vet and standardize information to inform a broader set of studies,
 - consider methods to safely gather data on illicit or clandestine networks, and
 - synthesize datasets where possible.
 - ▶ Funders should seek to ensure that the datasets they fund have windows to audit and update their data sufficiently. Such efforts would contextualize existing studies and capture trends in bilateral engagements that are currently underreported.

On China and Russia in Sudan

- ▶ Non-Western actors often purposefully blur lines between diplomatic, economic, and military engagement, using one set of tools to reinforce and substitute the others. In the case of Sudan, China and Russia have had only marginal direct involvement in mediation activities but are influencing peace and transition processes through economic and military leverage.
 - ▶ Further research is needed on how non-Western actors compensate for their perceived weakness in one set of activities, by engaging with other tools.

- ▶ Despite both being so-called "great powers," Russia and China engage Sudan in vastly different ways. China's focus on UN-authorized action, deep economic engagement, and loan-based investment is a stark contrast to Russia's more modest trade relationship, and focus on licit and illicit security engagement.
- ▶ Future research should seek to introduce more nuance when examining the spectrum of non-Western engagement in the Horn of Africa and the Global South more broadly. Studies embracing this approach will be better able to disaggregate the impact and intent of interventions, especially for researchers seeking to inform Western policy towards those intervenors and host countries.
- ▶ In Sudan, the available data shows that China is generally more open than Russia to multilateralism and the high level of transparency and international scrutiny that accompanies it. Russia shares China's perspective about the importance of achieving host-nation consent to underpin engagement, but it places less importance on working through multilateral organizations.
- ▶ Future research should assess how their different methods of engagement with Sudan and other countries in the Horn impact efforts in mediation and broader peace and transition processes.

Introduction

Non-Western actors are deeply involved in peace processes and transitions, but which actors are involved and with what tools is not consistent. Previous research conducted within the PeaceRep programme has highlighted that while UN conceptualisations of peace-related activities draw sharp distinctions between diplomatic, economic, and military measures (as seen in the language of peacemaking, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and peace enforcement), non-Western actors often purposefully blur these lines, using one set of tools to reinforce and substitute the others (Peter and Rice; 2022: 6). This makes it difficult to entirely distinguish their peacemaking activities from their normal foreign policy. In the case of Sudan, our new research shows that two actors – China and Russia – who are often considered key players in the Horn of Africa (the Horn) have had only marginal direct involvement in mediation processes in the region (Peter and Houghton; 2023).

To understand how non-Western actors influence peace processes, we need to expand study of their direct engagement in peacemaking to their broader military and economic activities. Focusing on this wider toolbox serves three interrelated purposes. First, research on economic and military engagement provides insights into the geopolitical context for peace processes, contextualising and situating mediation activities within a broader engagement of different actors. Second, it allows us to compare Western and non-Western approaches to security and economic engagement, providing deeper nuance in how different actors approach conflict management and potential conflict resolution. This is particularly important as previous case studies found that which third-party engages in peace processes at different times is impacting the trajectory of political transitions. In cases like Sudan, many non-Western actors prioritise stability, and thus prefer working with autocratic regimes over democratic opposition parties (Pospisil and Jenner; 2022). Third, such research also provides us insight into how economic and military engagement by individual actors intersects with conflict trajectories. As we enter a multipolar system where a wider variety of regional and global actors engage through trade, aid, security, and diplomacy, it is important to research how rising and falling levels of engagement correspond to acute crises like intrastate conflict, secessionist claims, border disputes, and interstate wars, and how this engagement corresponds with their management and resolution.

In this report, we track economic and military engagement of China and Russia in Sudan over a longer period. This is exploratory research to determine the availability and reliability of data for non-Western interveners in the two spheres. We deliberately chose the two non-Western global players sitting on the UN Security Council and a major area of both Western and non-Western conflict management efforts, to highlight how quantitative data can enrich our qualitative findings on the case study, but to also show how studying longer-term quantitative trends can counter stereotypical portrayal of non-Western engagement in Africa. The study provides substantive findings on the case but is also a methodological call for continued merger of quantitative and qualitative research. This study is accompanied by a related report providing an overview of mediation activities in Sudan (Peter and Houghton; 2023), and three qualitative studies on engagement of Turkey (Sofos; 2023), the Gulf States (Freer; 2023), and regional actors (Pospisil; 2023) in Sudan and the wider Horn of Africa.

In this report, we discuss the reliability of available economic and security data, and how this data influences our understanding of existing studies and could inform future work. We start by outlining Chinese and Russian approaches to conflict management, before examining the existing literature surrounding "Russia in Africa" and "China in Africa", as well as the more focused work on those countries' engagement with the Horn and Sudan specifically. We then turn to our empirical study and proceed by outlining the opportunities and limitations from the data we collected for analysing non-Western actors in places like Sudan. We examine both countries' economic and military engagement and demonstrate how the data supports or challenges existing understandings of engagement with Sudan. The paper concludes with a set of findings and future considerations for research on non-Western interventions in Sudan, the Horn of Africa region, and other conflict affected territories in general.

China, Russia, and Conflict Management

Academic and policy work on non-Western conflict management tends to be either so focused on a single case that generalisation is difficult or paints non-Western actors with such a broad brush that it misses the nuance between different non-Western actors ([Jütersonke et al.; 2021](#), Peter and Rice; 2022). Comparing smaller sets of third-party interveners and teasing out their similarities and differences is therefore a productive step forward. Here we provide an overview of similarities and differences between China and Russia and their conflict management approaches, which serve as a framework for a more focused analysis in the case study below.

China and Russia are similar in a few ways. First, both states are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. They are often pitted against the Western P3 members (US, UK, France), and are considered as forming the second strong grouping in the Security Council. Substance-wise, their privileged position on the Security Council gives them front-line access to conflict management, as they are directly involved in deliberations on key security issues, which reach the agenda of the UNSC. Their high-level diplomatic engagement in most global crises therefore comes as a default. Process-wise, this also means that both countries serve as guarantors to many peace agreements, which become part of the UN Security Council resolutions ([Badanjak; 2023](#)). This sets them apart from other non-Western powers, who do not have this guaranteed access. Beyond their privileged role on the UN Security Council, both China and Russia also have a global reach and ambition to be present in all geographic areas. For our purposes, they are able to project diplomatic, economic, and security influence across Africa, although not in the same ways. They are both major suppliers of arms to African states ([Marten; 2019](#)). This sets them apart from middle powers, such as Turkey or the Gulf States, who tend to focus on specific strategic regions, often geographically more proximate to the intervener.

Second, unlike some other non-Western actors, Russia and China share a very top-down approach to external assistance. Instead of working around or past the government in ways commonly attributed to Western-backed institutions and the Gulf States, Russia and China work primarily through state consent and in direct collaboration with recipient governments (Yuan; 2022). Their military and economic activities should therefore be methodologically easier to follow than those of states or organizations, who circumvent the host governments. For example, the states in the Gulf Cooperation Council can work with the host government, regional governments, regional organizations or informally through companies and individual networks (Freer; 2022). China and Russia can do so as well, but their eagerness to demonstrate their relationships with the state and a rhetorical respect for sovereignty means that their activities typically focus on government support.

Third, both China and Russia engage in quid pro quo when dealing with conflict affected spaces, although the extent of this is often a point of conjecture in existing studies. This does not take the same form as conditionality arrangements usually attributed to Western states and multilateral organisations. In fact, China has developed a request-based approach to aid in contrast to liberal approaches, which tend to stipulate reforms supporting accountability, transparency, and participatory governance. Instead, China has been known to condition aid, for example to Nepal, in return for non-recognition of Taiwan (Ghimire; 2018). Similarly, its loan policy often involves Chinese companies. Russia has recently been engaging with quid pro quo diplomacy in relation to the war in Ukraine, encouraging partners in Africa not to condemn the aggression. Russia also offers the services of the Private Military and Security Company Wagner group in exchange for political alignment and access to natural resources (Fasanotti; 2022).

Despite the impulse to collectively pit China and Russia against "the West", there are fundamental differences in their approaches to conflict management. While both states are seen as major geopolitical players, not least evidenced by their role on the UN Security Council, the material differences between them lead to unique approaches in practice. The most obvious difference is that of these actors' economies. Even before the war in Ukraine constrained Russia's economy, China's GDP was ten times larger than Russia's. While Russia's economy is not small, the difference in relative resources frames the nature and scale of their engagement with countries like Sudan. Additionally, Russia is a major producer of oil and natural gas, while China is in constant need of energy supplies to support its rapid economic and industrial growth.

This material difference, moreover, has led them to focus on different types of engagement as part of conflict management. While China prefers economic tools, Russia has prioritised military and security support. Chinese economic activities – both aid and broader economic engagement – form part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is heavily focused on Africa, a strategy likely connected to the continent's natural resources ([Alves; 2013](#), [Mariani; 2022](#), [Mitchell & Ehizuelen; 2017](#)). The BRI is not only targeted at conflict affected spaces, although in these China has used the concept of developmental peace. Developmental peace implies that China aims to foster peace principally through economic development ([He; 2017](#)). This contrasts with liberal actors, who stress political governance goals as a priority ([Call and de Coning; 2017](#)). It is important to note that developmental peace is a context-specific articulation of the broader BRI targeted at conflict-affected spaces. In contrast, Russia has primarily prioritised military support, either through official channels (such as military aid or training) or through the Wagner group. Research suggests that Russia sees military engagement (military aid, security provisions and training, and direct law enforcement and policing) as part of its conflict management and peacebuilding strategy abroad ([Mariani; 2022](#)).

Finally, the two countries have vastly different attitudes to multilateralism. China actively participates in multilateral peace approaches, evidenced in its position as the largest UN peacekeeping troop contributor of all permanent members of the Security Council ([He; 2019](#)). It also has a strategy to increase the number of heads of specialized agencies of the UN, thus pursuing its interests within what were traditionally Western-led multilateral institutions ([Fung and Lam; 2020](#)). Russia, by contrast, has always remained sceptical of global approaches, preferring to act independently or through the regional organisations it controls on both military and non-military matters. Elena Kropatcheva refers to this practice as "instrumental multilateralism" ([Kropatcheva; 2016](#)).

China and Russia in Africa and the Horn

Chinese and Russian engagement in Africa is a growing topic in academic and policy circles. The literature overwhelmingly focuses on engagement in the context of great power competition. Scholars often write on “China in Africa” and “Russia in Africa” implying that both countries have a coherent strategy for the continent. For China, academic literature focuses mostly on economic engagement, both in terms of investment and development finance, and interrogating policy claims that China is engaged in “debt-trap diplomacy” ([Singh; 2021](#)). Researchers on China’s “One Belt One Road” initiative find that the initiative meets Chinese geopolitical and economic goals, but also that internal actors and interests in China drive engagement with other countries more than formal strategy by the state ([Blanchard; 2017](#), [Jones and Zeng; 2019](#)).

While the literature on China in Africa is vast, there is a particular concentration of analysis covering resource-rich geographical areas. Sudan, and from 2011 the newly independent South Sudan, are fruitful topics due to Chinese investment in oil in the region. Many analyses of Chinese engagement in the Horn of Africa therefore draw direct causal relations between oil and Chinese activities, for example, observing Chinese disengagement from Sudan after 2011, when the oil-rich south became an independent country ([Berkshire Miller; 2015](#), [Moro; 2017](#), [Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel; 2014](#)). Similarly, the Chinese engagement in the UN mission in South Sudan is often seen as directly linked to protecting Chinese oil investments ([Coleman; 2014](#), [James; 2015](#)). The analyses of military engagement are less nuanced, with the most critical strain of literature identifying Chinese security engagement in Africa on issues such as anti-piracy, its base in Djibouti, and its growing contributions to peacekeeping as examples of China’s desire for global projection of military power ([Lanteigne; 2013](#), [Cabestan; 2020](#)).

China’s growing engagement in the Horn is most often linked to its longstanding interest in expanding its economic ties with Africa (Alden; 2005). China also has a deeper security involvement in the Horn than other parts of Africa so far, exemplified by arms sales of over \$1 billion USD to both sides in the Ethiopia-Eritrea war, peacekeeping deployments in UNMIS/UNMISS and UNAMID, participation in counter-piracy operations, and the construction of a naval base in Djibouti (Alden; 2005, [United Nations; 2021](#), [Barton; 2013](#), [Sun & Zoubir; 2021](#)). Additionally, a growing narrative within policy literature emphasizes China’s expanding use of security contractors across Africa. Chinese security contractors, according to one report from the Center For Strategic and International Studies, “give Beijing a tool to project force abroad while circumnavigating its own legal constrictions on the use of military force beyond its borders” ([Markusen; 2022](#)).

Given the rhetoric of “projecting power” and China’s deeper security relations with the Horn and Sudan, we expect to see significant data of activity in political or security affairs ([Nantulya; 2021](#)).

In contrast to China, whose engagement is generally portrayed as new, scholars and commentators frame Russia’s activities in Africa as a “return” (Marten; 2019). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian federation did not engage with African countries in a systematic way until the mid-2010s ([Duursma and Masuhr; 2022](#)). While Chinese engagement with Africa is framed as a need for resources and a desire to expand their reputation as a global actor, Russia’s strategy is generally portrayed as either opportunistic attempts to extract wealth where the West and China are not as deeply entrenched, or a concerted strategy to undermine “the West” by eroding their influence in countries like the Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan, and South Africa through security engagement or the use of Security contractors ([Eguegu; 2022](#)).

Scholars find that Russia’s activity in Africa, and specifically the Horn, is very different from other external actors. Whereas nearly every other actor is primarily interested in some combination of developing economic ties or distributing aid, Russia lacks the economic clout and regional focus to compete economically. Russia therefore focuses on “pariah” states with easily extractable resources in its Africa policy. In the case of the Horn their main partner has been Sudan, but there has been broader engagement, such as diplomatic engagement with countries like Eritrea to gain support for Russian foreign policy in Eastern Europe, an effort to hold Summits with African leaders, modest financial support, and significant arms sales to several Horn countries ([TASS](#), [Russia-Africa Summit](#), [Carnegie Endowment](#)).

With a growing but incomplete set of claims and findings on Russia and China’s activities in the Horn, how closely do they fit the available data?

China and Russia in Sudan – what does the data say?

Based on the findings from the literature about Russia and China's engagement with Africa generally and the Horn specifically, we would expect the data to reflect similar patterns in Sudan. Within the Horn countries, Sudan is the primary focus of our report because scrutiny of Chinese and Russian engagement ought to reveal archetypical intervention patterns from both states. Sudan has a large port on the Red Sea, was a major oil exporter for much of the observed period, is a major aid recipient, and is often considered a "pariah" state for the West and many international institutions due to its undemocratic governance and overlapping security crises.

When examining qualitative studies on China, we expect the need for large amounts of fossil fuels to support industrial growth to drive aid and investment independent of regime type. China's need for oil drove economic engagement much earlier in the rest of Africa (Kolstad & Wiig; 2011). While relations were mostly achieved through engagement with the oil companies themselves, Sudan's civil war, security crisis, and the independence of South Sudan threatened the interests of oil companies to the point of necessitating action by the Chinese government, driving diplomatic and security engagements with Sudan to mediate South Sudanese independence (particularly the transfer of oil from South Sudan to Sudanese ports for export) and the Darfur conflict (Mariani, Adhikari and Yiqi; 2023). In addition, Chinese firms are one of Sudan's primary suppliers of arms. Previous PeaceRep research argues that China's relationship with Sudan derives from its economic engagement with Khartoum as well as neighbouring states, as well as its rhetorical commitment to non-interference (Pospisil and Jenner; 2022). As Sudan lost access to most of its oil reserves after the independence of South Sudan in 2011, the literature would further expect a steep decline in Chinese engagement following 2011.

Previous PeaceRep work on Russian relations with Sudan emphasise that Moscow is disinterested in any peace process that liberalises Sudan or threatens their security relationships, arms sales, or gold extraction (Mariani; 2022). The research also highlights how Russia's clandestine relationship with paramilitary forces, particularly the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), is an obstacle to peace processes (Pospisil and Jenner; 2022). Based on the literature about Russia's role in the Horn and Africa more broadly, we would expect less Russian economic engagement in Sudan due to Russia's smaller economy and status as an oil exporter.

For both countries, the literature implies steady arms sales to Sudan, the use of security contractors to fulfil national interests, and military cooperation as Sudan's government continues to be at odds with Western arms manufacturers. The literature also suggests that Chinese engagement would be more open to working with international organisations, and securing UN approval for assistance than Russia.

Methodology and Challenges

Work previously undertaken by PeaceRep found a series of potential explanations for a state to involve itself in the Global South and the peacemaking process (Peter and Rice; 2022). The potentially overlapping explanations are grouped by material-based and values-based explanations. Material-based explanations focus on the economic and commercial interests at state-level for a potential intervenor, as well as the security and stability implications of not doing so. Values-based explanations focus on more abstract concepts like the reputational benefits of involvement and interest in countering an ideology the intervenor considers hostile. Quantitative data speaks more directly to tangible interests when discussing the motives for intervention, which highlights the need to mix quantitative data with the existing body of qualitative analysis to gain a clearer picture of how, when, and why non-Western powers show an interest in peacemaking and peacebuilding.

For this report we gathered data from scholarship and policy literature in addition to NGOs, international press sources, and international organisations to discuss current claims and findings about Russia and China's engagement in the Horn of Africa. To construct a dataset capturing different kinds of interventions, we additionally leveraged data from university-based research institutes, international organisations like the UN, and non-government organisations and research institutes. Uniting these diverse sources produces a collection of datasets that capture key metrics about Russian and Chinese engagement in Sudan in the post-Cold War era and can support existing studies or call attention to potential gaps for future research.

To gather relevant aid and economic data we leveraged the United Nations Comtrade database, BACI trade dataset, the AidData Chinese Development Finance (CDF) dataset, and the AidData Public Diplomacy Dashboard (PDD) dataset. Comtrade and BACI both deal with bilateral trade, although Comtrade was primarily used with BACI filling any gaps in data. Comtrade is a dataset compiled by the UN Statistics Division. The database "covers approximately 200 countries and represents more than 99% of the world's merchandise trade" ([United Nations](#)). BACI is a trade database compiled by the France-based Centre *d'études prospectives et d'informations internationales and aggregates* "bilateral trade flows at the product level" ([CEPII](#)). The AidData CDF and PDD datasets deal with China's bilateral aid as well as loans, investments, and other kinds of economic engagement. CDF deals with underreported financial flows such as pledged aid, investment, loans, and other kinds of financial assistance ([Custer et al; 2021](#)). PDD's data deals more directly with diplomatic engagement, such as Confucius institutes, diplomatic visits, and scholarships ([AidData](#)).

In addition to synthesising data, we were also selective in which data was brought into our analysis. This was both to clean up the data and resolve inconsistencies, but also to ensure that various sources were representing what we were querying. For instance, data from the AidData project in which the Chinese government facilitated a loan or line of credit through institutions like the Export-Import bank of China (Eximbank) were included as such "private" loans meant that the host country received aid from China. However, instances in which Chinese companies operating in Sudan borrowed from the Chinese government to finance their own work were not brought into the dataset, as they are not as directly related to the kind of influence that would encourage China to get involved in peace processes and ceasefires in Sudan.

Most data on security and military issues were gathered from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)'s Arms Transfers Database and aggregated from UN Peacekeeping Datasets. Additionally, some entries from AidData's CDF were related to military aid and included as appropriate. SIPRI's database includes all known transfers of "major weapons" to the current calendar year, allowing us to track the most notable arms sales from Russia and China to Sudan ([SIPRI](#)). Data on Russian and Chinese Peacekeepers in Sudan was collected by aggregating the UN's tally of peacekeepers by country and mission for December of each year and disaggregated by military, police, and support roles ([UN DPO](#)).

The process of gathering data highlights the challenges of trying to paint a complete picture of either Russian or Chinese engagement with Sudan. Different organisations only collect data within a narrow band of interest. SIPRI's data lists licit arms sales by value and type and excludes sales of so-called "Small Arms/Light Weapons" (SALW). However, we found no datasets that track illicit sales and datasets on small arms. The closest is the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers ([NISAT](#)), but this does not disaggregate arms sales enough to determine which arms are sold to the government and which to the consumer market, and we therefore did not include it. Additionally, different datasets utilised different timelines. SIPRI, the UN peacekeeping, the AidData PDD and the UN COMTRADE datasets cover the full period of interest from 1991 to 2021. AidData's CDF dataset ends in 2017. Additionally, while the CDF dataset is extremely comprehensive, some entries overrepresent Chinese involvement. For example, entries involving peacekeepers or medical teams do not capture continuous deployments with individual peacekeepers and medical personnel rotated in and out. This needed to be manually cleaned up. We also brought in elements of AidData's Public Diplomacy Dataset that were not in the CDF dataset, particularly as it relates to education and yearly scholarships, but the dataset did not offer more detail in terms of which universities or institutions ultimately taught Sudanese students. Lastly, while significant data was found for Chinese development finance, we found no datasets aggregating Russian development finance and loans, which limits our ability to compare Russian and Chinese development finance and loans in the manner we do for bilateral trade, arms sales, and peacekeeping. As discussed below, the lack of as much substantive data for Russia as there is for China is partially due to Russia's smaller economy, lack of transparency in assistance to Sudan, and focus on security engagement over economic interests in Sudan over the observed period.

Economic Engagement

To assess the economic influence of both China and Russia in Sudan over time, we have used publicly available data on trade activities, aid and loans, and some indications of soft power. This data is at times incomplete but allows for some comparison with qualitative findings on Chinese and Russian engagement in the Horn of Africa.

Trade

Data on annual Chinese and Russian bilateral trade with Sudan comes primarily from the UN Comtrade database. In instances where there was no Comtrade data for a year, data from the BACI dataset was used where available. BACI data is also used to offer some insight into the types of goods Sudan imports and exports. Most cases where there was no reported Comtrade data was from the early 1990s, when Chinese and Russian annual trade with Sudan were both negligible.

Russia and China's economic engagement with Sudan are noticeably different. This is not just because China has a larger economy and therefore engages with Sudan on a different scale, but also because Russia was not involved in the petroleum industry to the extent China was over the observed period ([Patey; 2017](#)).

The impact of oil is most noticeable when looking at the value of Russia and China's imports from Sudan (Graph 1). From the end of the Cold War to 2021, Russia's imports from Sudan were minimal, but also relatively stable. In 2020 Russia imported just \$169,000 USD worth of goods, none of which were petroleum products ([OEC; n.d.](#)). Chinese imports from Sudan were on a steep rise until 2011. In 2010 China imported over \$6 Billion USD from Sudan, which was almost exclusively crude oil (*ibid*). Imports fell sharply when South Sudan gained its independence in 2011. According to COMTRADE, China's imports fell to \$1.5 Billion USD in 2012, and just over \$500 million in 2016, most of which was still crude oil (*ibid*). This decline is connected to the loss of oil reserves, the majority of which are located in what is today South Sudan, as well as the South Sudanese civil war, since much of South Sudan's oil transits through Sudan for export abroad ([International Crisis Group; 2021](#)).



Graph 1 (Source: UN Comtrade database; BACI Dataset)

Chinese and Russian exports to Sudan (Graph 2) also show a difference in scale after about 2000. Up until the early 2000s, both countries had only minimal exports to Sudan, with Chinese exports steeply rising until 2011, and then remaining at the same level since.

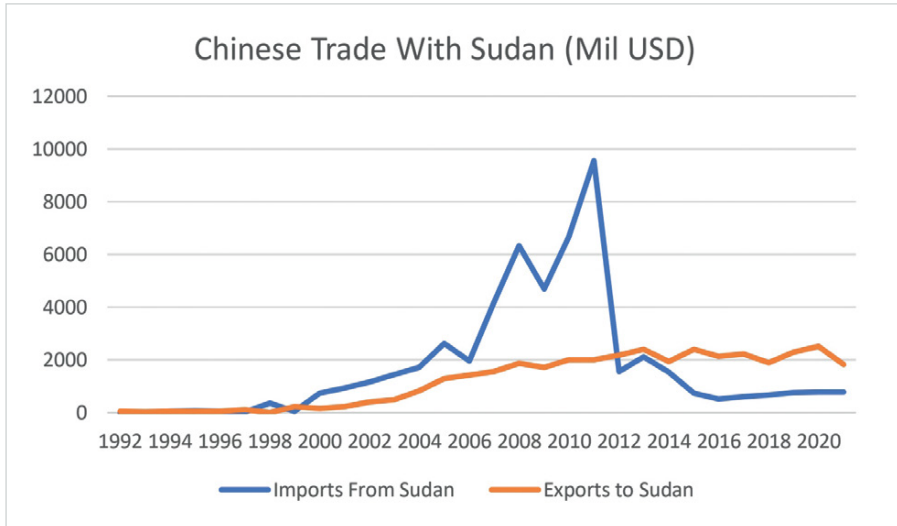
Chinese exports to Sudan are an order of magnitude larger, consistently exporting billions of dollars' worth of goods to Sudan. While the traditional narrative in the literature is that China's interest in Sudan was defined by the need for oil, China's exports of good to Sudan didn't consistently decline after 2011, indicating that Chinese economic engagement with Sudan was not entirely defined by oil, but also by other factors such as warm Chinese-Sudanese relations and the more general rise of China as a producer of consumer goods and construction services across Africa ([Patey; 2017](#), [Eisenman; 2012](#)).

Russia's exports slowly grew after 2004. While the trade data was only available to 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a fall in exports to Sudan for both countries.



Graph 2 (Source: UN Comtrade database; BACI dataset)

An examination of China and Sudan's trade relationship (Graph 3) shows a stark rise in economic engagement in the 2000s as China sought to import petroleum. Equally evident from the data is the impact of South Sudanese independence in 2011 on Chinese imports of Sudanese products. Sudan lost the majority of its oil reserves and 3/4s of its annual revenue (*Financial Times; 2011*). While the data supports sources that describe how impactful the loss of South Sudan was for Sudan's balance of trade, claims that Chinese interests in Sudan waned after South Sudanese independence is not readily apparent from trade data alone, as Chinese exports to Sudan since 2011 grew on average until the COVID-19 pandemic and imports also grew modestly after 2016.



Graph 3 (Source: UN Comtrade database; BACI Dataset)

If China's trade with Sudan was influenced by the need for petroleum, Russia's trade relationship is defined by petroleum's relative lack of importance (Graph 4). In terms of overall value, Russia-Sudan trade is much smaller over the observed period. Russia's trade shows a steady increase in exports to Sudan with negligible imports. Rather than dealing with fossil fuels, big jumps in Russian exports to Sudan, such as the single biggest jump in 2016, came from the sale of wheat.



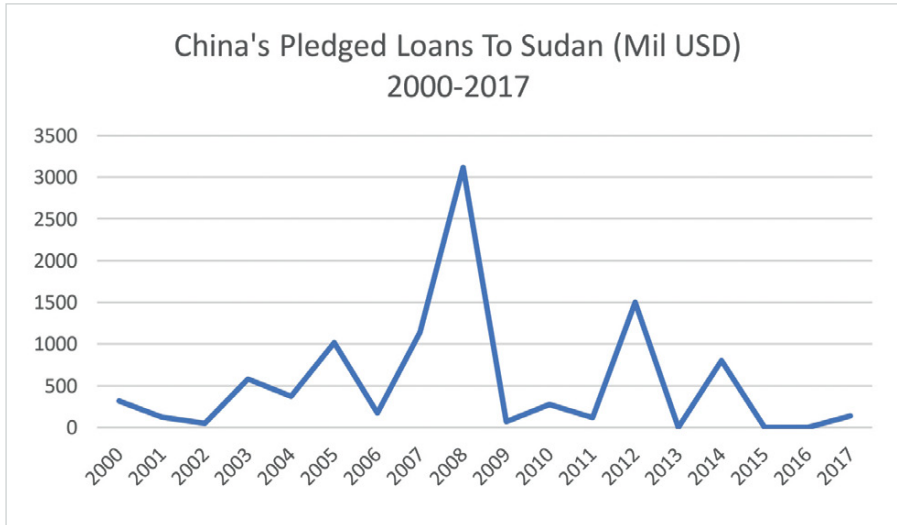
Graph 4 (Source: UN Comtrade database; BACI Dataset)

Aid

China is not just a larger trading partner with Sudan than Russia over the observed period. It was also a source of aid and loans to support investment. The literature refers to both Chinese bilateral assistance and loans, and sometimes argues that Sudan's security crisis in the 2000s challenged China's approach of non-interference beyond economic affairs (Patey; 2017, [Large; 2008](#)).

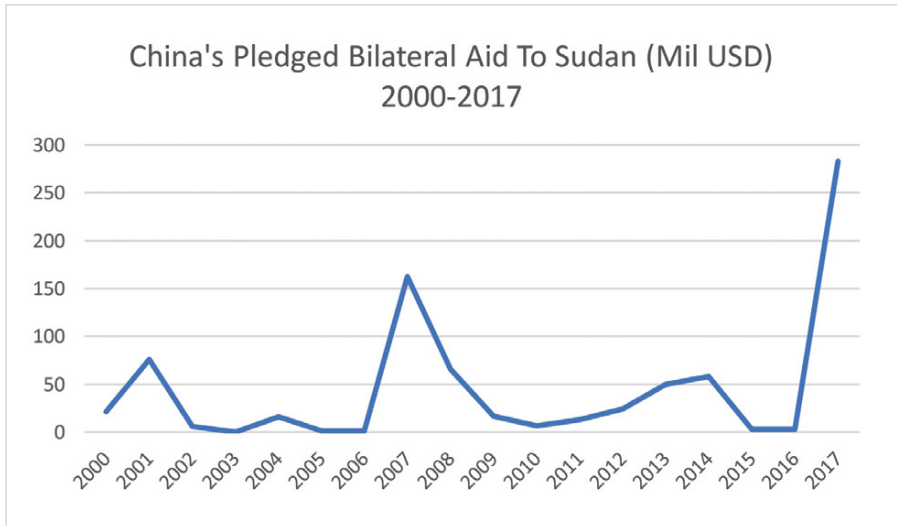
To compare direct aid to loans, we took a selection of data from AidData's CDF database. In order to isolate data that deals more directly with the Chinese government's engagement with Sudan, we did not bring over sections of the CDF dataset that involved Chinese companies taking loans from Chinese financial institutions to finance their operations, nor investments made in Sudan by Chinese companies unilaterally, notably those by telecommunications companies. To avoid double-counting pledges, we did not include entries that were part of an umbrella project. For the sake of simplicity, our category of "loan" is an amalgamation of AidData's category of loans and buyer's credit, as both involve lending money. While this is not a perfect measure, it allows us to trace broader trends and focus on any anomalies.

AidData's entries in the CDF dataset are not necessarily Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) as commonly understood in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) context. The CDF dataset tracks "any project that benefits from financial or in-kind support from any official sector institution in China is included, regardless of its purpose, level of financial concessionality, funding source, and overseas destination" (Custer et al; 2021). The dataset tracks official pledges of what it calls "Overseas Development Assistance-like" assistance as well as "Other Official Flows" (ibid).



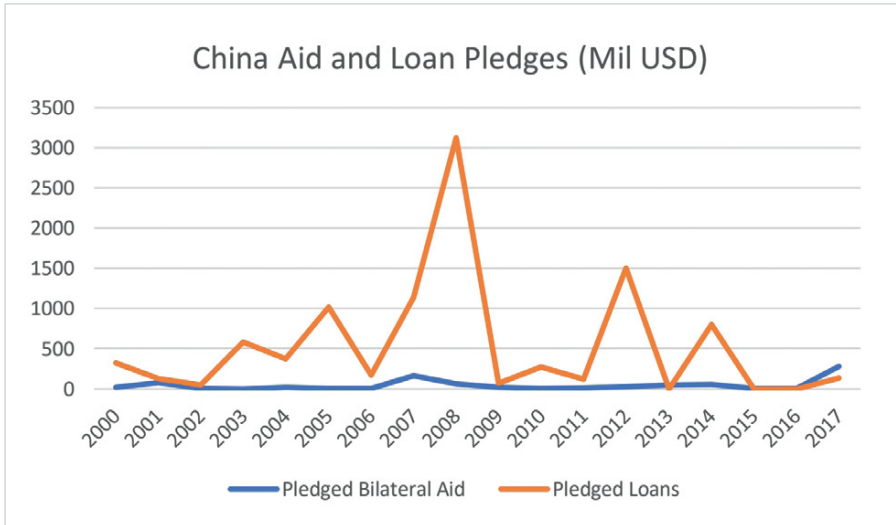
Graph 5 (Source: AidData Chinese Development Finance dataset)

Graph 5, focusing on "pledged loans" suggests that Chinese loan pledges declined after 2011. However, observers should note that the period with the highest loan pledges came after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which paved the way for South Sudan's independence. According to Kolstad and Wiig (2011), Sudan was the largest recipient of Chinese Foreign Direct investment in Africa from 2003 to 2006. Additionally, pledged loans and aid captured by our data are not necessarily disbursed immediately. For instance, a \$3 billion USD credit line via China's Import-Export bank in 2008 that financed various oil infrastructure was disbursed and implemented throughout the low point in pledges shown on the graph as 2009-2011 (Custer et al; 2021).



Graph 6 (Source: AidData Chinese Development Finance dataset)

As clearly seen in Graph 6, bilateral aid to Sudan rose sharply in 2007 and 2008 in response to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. This included debt cancellations for previous loans in 2007. In 2007 and 2008 China made several humanitarian aid pledges to support IDP camps and international missions in Darfur, as well as general grants such as equipment to provide clean water (ibid). Aid levels rose even more sharply in 2017, primarily due to China's decision to cancel \$160 Mil USD in debt and provide approximately \$70 Mil USD in financial assistance (Dao Fei; 2017).



Graph 7 (Source: AidData Chinese Development Finance dataset)

Comparing both loans and aid in one graph (Graph 7), the data clearly shows that in terms of value, China's pledged loans to Sudan are significantly larger than bilateral aid and assistance, although both intermittently rose and fell. China's loan pledges were often to finance economic investments in infrastructure, industry, and power generation, which could potentially have an indirect effect but were primarily intended to facilitate the export of petroleum products to China and other forms of economic engagement.

Nearly all recorded Chinese aid to Sudan from AidData was bilateral. However, this does not necessarily mean that there was no multilateral aid partially funded by China. China did donate and provide budgetary support to international organizations like the UN, but because that funding is not disaggregated by mission, it is possible that there is more Chinese-funded multilateral aid heading to Sudan than was recorded. For instance, in 2006 China contributed \$3.5 million USD to the African Union mission in Darfur, much of which was for non-military and humanitarian purposes ([ReliefWeb; 2006](#)). Nonetheless, the scale of Chinese bilateral aid to Sudan and paucity of consistent multilateral aid does indicate that China prefers bilateral aid.

The intention of Chinese loans to countries like Sudan is often under scrutiny from policymakers and commentators, most notably the claim that China is engaging in “debt-trap diplomacy” in which it loans money to developing countries with the express purpose of coercing states that are unable to repay. The argument goes that, “the heavier the debt burden on smaller countries, the greater China’s own leverage becomes” ([Cellaney; 2017](#)). While loans and lines of credit to the Sudanese government are indeed large, the available data does not suggest that China is engaged in “debt-trap diplomacy,” at least not in Sudan. Carmody et al. ([2022](#)) note that while the debt countries such as Sudan take on are a concern particularly after the economic contractions caused by COVID-19, claims that this constitutes an intentional effort to coerce “should be refuted”. Singh (2021) similarly argues that Chinese lending is “not a significant driver of debt distress in the region”. To the extent this data can speak to state intentions, behaviour matching “debt-trap diplomacy” has not been observed in quantitative data on Chinese engagement in Sudan. On the contrary, most loans supported efforts that increased Chinese material interests, such as building dual-use infrastructure or industrial capacity. Chinese corporations were already heavily invested in the oil sector, so successful projects financed by loans benefited from bilateral trade and disincentivized purposefully overloading Sudan with debt for geopolitical gain (Patey; 2017). Additionally, some of the single biggest instances of bilateral aid to Sudan were instances of Chinese loan forgiveness, which is inconsistent with the claim that China is encouraging countries to take on debt. An AidData working paper on Chinese loan forgiveness found that Sudan was a recipient of Chinese “rescue lending” when they appeared unable to meet their debt obligations ([Horn, et al; 2023](#)). Chinese President Xi Jinping’s 2021 announcement that China would reduce its commitments to Africa by a third and critique of African dependence on loans lends further credence to sceptics of coercive debt diplomacy ([Financial Times; 2021](#)).

Soft Power

Beyond trade and aid, education and scholarships are another method of economic engagement and influence. While no systematic data was found on Russian involvement in trainings and scholarships in Sudan and the data for Chinese involvement in education was incomplete, what data is available points to a growing role of China in educational activities and exchanges. In 2008, China set up a Confucius institute in Khartoum and exclusively taught non-military students until 2022, [at which point members of the military were allowed to attend for language lessons](#). Between 2010 and 2017, the number of Sudanese students heading to China through scholarships and training programmes grew from 681 students to 2857. These metrics indicate support for China's interest in growing "soft power," although more qualitative work would be required to establish the motives and impact of scholarship programmes on the Sudanese government and the perspectives of Sudanese students.

Compared to China, there is much more limited data on Russian economic engagement with Sudan beyond bilateral trade. This is partially due to more modest licit economic engagement and investment, more illicit economic activity (as will be discussed in the security contractors section below), and a lack of systematic data collection on Russian loans, investment, and bilateral aid in the manner that projects like AidData track Chinese engagement.

Security Engagement

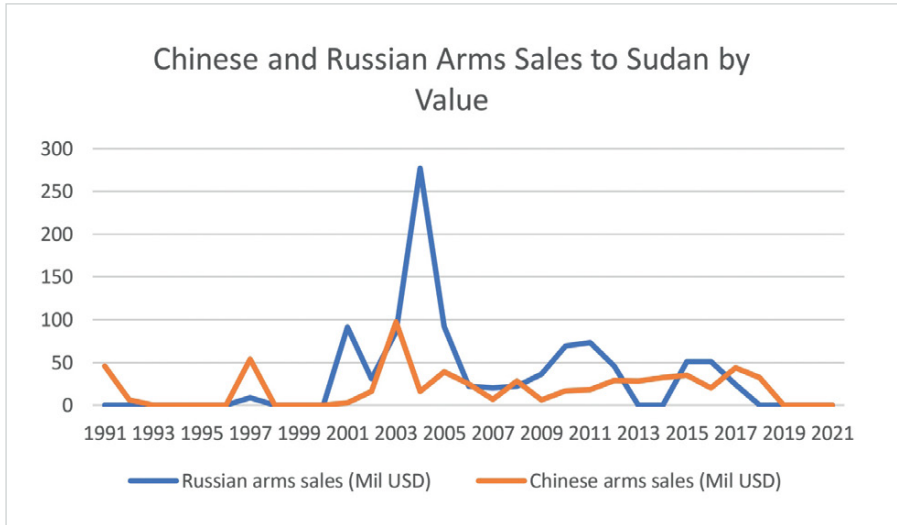
Military and security engagement of non-Western countries is particularly difficult to systematically trace over time. Here, we look at three key security engagements by both actors: arms sales, deployment to multilateral peacekeeping missions, and military and security companies. While data in these areas is somewhat limited, the available data indicates that China and Russia are both notable security actors in Sudan, but in different ways.

China is a major arms supplier and contributed peacekeepers and funding to multiple UN and AU missions in Sudan. Russia is also a major arms supplier over the observed period but eschewed formal participation in major peacekeeping missions like UNAMID, leveraged security contractors to engage in security assistance and illicit activity, and is more actively trying to establish a base in Port Sudan.

Arms Sales

Our arms sales data comes from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's arms trade database. As discussed in the methodology section, SIPRI limits its data to "major weapons," which does not include Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW). However, "major weapons" such as armoured vehicles, jets, and missiles account for a large proportion of state arms purchases, and therefore the lack of SALW does not skew the overall trends in arms sales. Additionally, as fewer countries make and export "major weapons" compared to SALW, they lend themselves better as an indicator of a strong bilateral relationship.

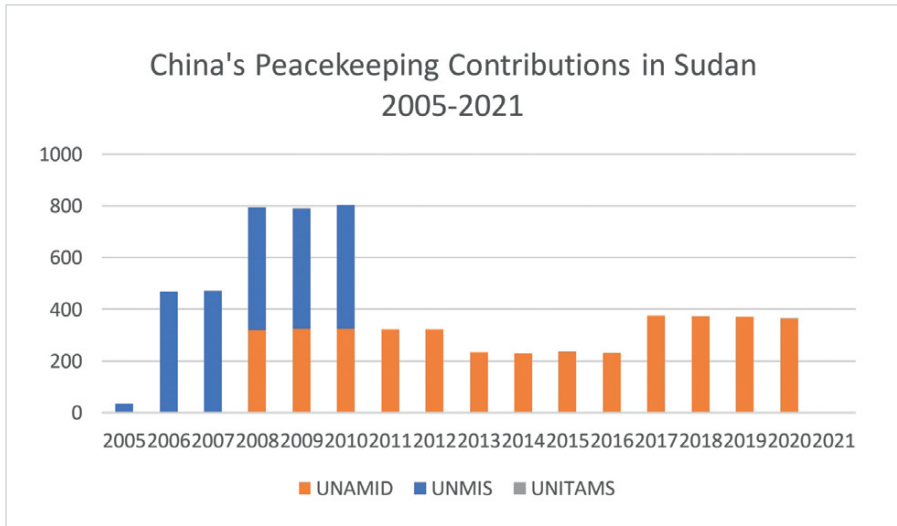
Since 1991 Russia and China have both increased their arms sales to Sudan, even during the period Sudan was under a UN arms embargo. Contrary to some claims in the literature that China is Sudan's premier arms supplier, arms sale data reveals that Russia supplied more arms in terms of overall value from 1991 to 2021 (Graph 8). However, Russia's overall sales are skewed by Sudan's 2004 acquisition of 12 MiG-29 aircraft from Russia ([Sudan Tribune: 2004](#)). Since 2008, Russia and China's arms sales have been roughly equal, with Russia mostly supplying attack and utility helicopters and China supplying Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and various different kinds of missiles (SIPRI).



Graph 8 (Source: SIPRI Arms Trade Database)

Contributions to peacekeeping missions

In line with scholarship on China's growing role in peacekeeping, Beijing deployed a substantial number of peacekeepers to two UN missions in Sudan in the 2000s. China contributed peacekeepers to both United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) and United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), with the UNMIS peacekeepers transitioning to United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) with the independence of South Sudan in 2011. As stated earlier, China contributed \$3.5 million USD to the African Union mission in Darfur in 2006, in addition to its regular peacekeeping contributions through the UN (*ReliefWeb*; 2006). China is also the largest contributor of the P5, however, China's peacekeeping force in Sudan remained limited in size and there is little evidence to suggest the peacekeepers themselves were influential in China-Sudan relations. According to UN records, there were never more than 800 Chinese peacekeepers in Sudan at time even when the UN had over 25,000 peacekeepers deployed across UNAMID and UNMIS.



Graph 9 (Source: UN Department of Peace Operations)

Much is made of China's peacekeeping contributions as a reflection (and tool) of Beijing's global expansion and power projection (Richardson; 2011, Zhengyu and Taylor; 2011). However, China's overall contribution to UN missions in Sudan was quite small over the observed period. For instance, in December 2006 UNMIS personnel numbered 10,006, making the Chinese contribution of 469 peacekeepers much fewer than the number sent by other contributors like Pakistan (1623), and India (2655), and just under five percent of the mission overall (UN). Nor were Chinese peacekeepers dominant in UNAMID. China's peak UNAMID contribution was 375 peacekeepers in 2017, neither the largest single contributor (Rwanda) nor an overwhelming part of the mission (2.6%) (UN). This is not to understate the impact of China's peacekeeping, aid, and diplomatic contributions, but rather to contextualise the claim that China's involvement in peacekeeping is large overall, even if it is generally a larger contributor than other P5 UN Security Council Members.

Substantive involvement in UN peacekeeping does appear to be part of China's rhetorical strategy. While both peacekeeping contingents were parts of a much larger missions, Chinese officials refer to those contributions when emphasizing Beijing's role as a peacemaker in Sudan and the Horn more broadly (*Global Times*; 2021). However, this messaging appears to be aimed at the international community more broadly, rather than a specific attempt to gain influence in Sudan itself.

By comparison, Russia's contributions were smaller and not part of any specific rhetorical strategy. Our data shows that the only peacekeepers Russia consistently kept in Sudan were about 160 for UNMIS from 2005-2010 until the independence of South Sudan. Even amid Russian narratives about supporting African nations and Sudan especially, Russia does not frequently highlight contributions to UN peacekeeping missions, even among its official statements about peacekeeping, which focus more clearly on work through other organizations like the CSTO and OSCE (*Russian Ministry of Defence*; n.d.).

Use of military and security companies

It is difficult to assess the role of security contractors quantitatively due to the opaqueness of their use, variance in their role when deployed, and, in the case of Russia, their involvement in illicit networks not captured by licit bilateral trade or arms trade data. While scholarship occasionally invokes numbers and trends, these are not systematically gathered in publicly available datasets.

Russia's use of security contractors in Sudan became more visible after the arrival of the Wagner group in 2017. Prior to the Wagner deployment, Russian private contractors were involved in Sudan throughout the 2000s and 2010s in a more traditional apolitical capacity, such as maintaining Russian-made aircraft or piloting them, some of which was done in support of UN missions in Sudan (*Sudan Tribune*; 2009, *UNAMID*; 2010). Since their arrival in 2017, the Wagner group and associated companies have been reported to be conducting a series of political and security activities that are directly related to Russia's goals in Sudan, such as supporting parts of the ruling government, training, and illicitly exporting resources like gold through Port Sudan (*France24*; 2023).

Recently, Wagner also assisted the Sudanese security services on the border with the Central African Republic, where Wagner also has a presence ([Ingasso et al; 2023](#)). Research suggests that several hundred Wagner and Wagner-associated personnel are in Sudan, but gauging their exact numbers in a systematic way is not possible due to the opaque nature of their deployment ([France24; 2023](#)). Methodologically, research into Wagner and its associated companies is difficult as their operations are closer to an illicit network than a state actor.

Russian use of the Wagner group and its affiliated companies is a notable example of how Russia might prefer security interventions that are small in scale, officially deniable, and which privatise much of the risk. However, recent literature argues that Russia incurs more costs than expected from using Wagner, which will require future scrutiny as these missions progress ([Eguegu; 2023](#)). These costs might also be damaging relations with the host countries, especially broader population, so the direction of influence on peace processes is not entirely clear. The economic and security role of Wagner and Wagner-linked Russian firms allows them to escape quantitative analysis in the near term. Wagner's activities are subject to press investigations, but the opaque nature of Wagner's work and the purposeful evasion of scrutiny through subsidiaries and other companies in the network forestall the collection of solid quantitative data in the near term ([Elbagir et al.; 2022](#)).

In the case of Chinese security contractors, there is limited systematic evidence to suggest that Security contractors are as large a factor in geopolitical influence as suggested by the policy literature, and no quantitative evidence to suggest that Chinese security contractors are engaged in activity beyond contract work and protecting the facilities of Chinese companies. Chinese security contractors involvement for site security is consistent with Western and non-Western commercial enterprises in the Global South. [Some sources point to Chinese PMSC focus on maritime security and Chinese VIP protection, rather than the training, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism operations associated with Russian security contractors.](#) China's traditional use of security contractors is a stark contrast to Russian use of security contractors. However, due to the lack of transparency about when Chinese security contractors are hired and where they work, there is a gap in what quantitative information can be collected about the number of security contractors active in the Horn as well as their staff and the extent of their engagement beyond a traditional site security role. As the literature on mercenaries and security contractors grows, there will need to be more and better data on Chinese security contractors before their impact on political transitions can be assessed.

Conclusions and Ways Forward

This report is an exploratory study into what systematic data is available on economic and military activities of non-Western powers areas undergoing peace and political transitions. Quantitative data on non-Western economic and security engagement in the Horn of Africa varies in quality and coverage and is scattered across different datasets. In some cases, the opaqueness of quantitative data is a purposeful effort by the intervenor. In other cases, the official data published does not capture the complete activity of the actor in a given field. Researchers have therefore focused primarily on small slices of engagement (such as peacekeeping contributions or arms trade) or specific actors (such as Chinese economic activities). Even such activities are resource intensive, with the AidData team which tracks Chinese loans and aid, consisting of nine senior researchers and about two dozen extra research staff. To better understand the roles and influences non-Western powers play around political transitions, further support is needed to ensure these individual datasets are updated, and that they are more often brought in conversation with each other though overview analyses such as this one.

Turning to the role of non-Western actors— and China and Russia specifically – in Sudan, our first general finding is that non-Western actors often purposefully blur lines between diplomatic, economic, and military engagement, using one set of tools to reinforce and substitute the others. In the case of Sudan, China and Russia have had only marginal direct involvement in mediation activities but are influencing peace and transition processes through broader economic and military leverage. Further research is needed on how non-Western actors compensate for their perceived weakness in one set of activities by engaging with other tools and when they choose to employ economic or security tools.

Our second general finding is that Russia and China, despite ostensibly having similar philosophies about state consent, engaged in Sudan in fundamentally different ways. China's focus on UN-authorized action, deep economic engagement, and loan-based investment is a stark contrast to Russia's more modest trade relationship and focus on licit and illicit security engagement. China's engagement was primarily focused on the economic benefits of Sudan's petroleum sector and engaged in bilateral aid and peacekeeping in more transparent and UN-authorized manners. The use of Security contractors was also not clearly state-directed or a geopolitical tool.

Russia also engaged in more limited peacekeeping activities, but its overall engagement since 2000 was framed by more disruptive engagement, such as larger overall arms sales and the use of Security contractors such as the Wagner group, whose activities are often illicit, come with direct support from the Russian state, and are much less transparent than China's security work via international organizations.

Our quantitative overviews mostly confirmed findings in the qualitative literature, which broadly reflect these developments. But there are two areas where the data suggest qualitative literature might be overstating the role played by China. Much is written on the use of debt-trap diplomacy by China in Africa. The available data does not seem to suggest that China is engaged in "debt-trap diplomacy," at least not in Sudan. Some of the single biggest instances of bilateral aid to Sudan were instances of Chinese loan forgiveness. More work is needed on whether and how this behaviour might relate to the importance of natural resource in Chinese-Sudanese relationship, with qualitative in-depth studies better suited for this purpose. Similarly, literature on Chinese peacekeeping contributions has been vast, often reading disreputable motivations into Chinese deployments, as well as ascribing the disproportionate role to Chinese military deployments. The data highlights that while China has been an important contributor to missions in Sudan (and since 2011 also in South Sudan), the military deployments have overall been small, with any links between peacekeepers and Chinese-Sudanese relationship difficult to substantiate. More work will need to be done on the unquantifiable roles of senior appointments, such as the appointment of Mr Guang Cong of China as Deputy Special Representative for South Sudan and Deputy Head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, which likely play greater roles in political transitions than bigger and more visible military deployments.

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About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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