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## BEIJING IN BAMAKO: BURDENS OF INVOLVEMENT EVEN FOR THE NON-COLONIAL NON-INTERVENTIONIST

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### ABSTRACT

In pursuit of the AU's 'Silence of the Guns', Foreign military involvement on the African continent has become a heavily polarized conversation. China, with its non-colonial ties to the continent and non-intervention policy for the first time sent actual combat troops to a peacekeeping mission in Mali sparking questions about China's changing role in the world. This article takes a different view. It analyses the dynamics that caused China to become militarily involved on the continent. , The paper focuses on the interconnected nature of conflict in Africa, the role of Continental and local authorities, and the role of foreign (extra-continental) authorities in causing Beijing to conclude that it was necessary to become military involved with Bamako. The conclusions drawn will provide recommendations on what areas of continental conflict resolution must be addressed in order to curb foreign military involvement.

### INTRODUCTION

Africans have rightfully become weary of the mixed nature of foreign military involvement on the continent, particularly Western interventions. A history littered with assassinations, Western backed coups, and regime destabilization has made any intervention, no matter how “humanitarian” hard to view optimistically along murky colonial ties. However, there seems to be a consistent channel of foreign military involvement pursued by both foreign states and African states alike. Discussing the topic has had little alternative for colonial dynamics; that is until China's participation in Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In 2013, China for the first time sent combat forces to the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission MUNISMA. Though wearing blue helmets, the deployment of Chinese troops on African soil marked a key moment in the relationship between Africa and China in regard to security concerns. The reason for this is China's presence in MINUSMA has three unique features of foreign involvement on the continent that provide a fresh perspective in a traditionally strained conversation. The first is that China is a rising power that does not have colonial ties with the continent. The second is China's military presence (albeit under the UN) in Mali is particularly noteworthy due to China's strong policy of non-intervention. Finally, China's lack of direct (particularly economic) incentives to become militarily involved with Mali. This begs the question: What continental and extra-continental dynamics resulted in a non-interventionist state with no colonial ties to Africa deploying its troops to intervene in an African conflict it had little economic interest in?

This article will briefly examine the African and extra-continental events that defined the Mali conflict and how they compelled China to become militarily involved in the conflict. By doing so the Article wishes to expose three crucial variables, (1) the interconnected nature of conflict in Africa, (2) the role of Continental and local authorities, (3) the role of foreign (extra-continental) authorities. The interaction of these three variables will be used to examine from the Beijing perspective why military involvement became necessary in the Mali conflict. The resulting conclusion will return to the question of what China's intervention under MINUSMA may indicate about the dynamics that result in foreign military intervention on African soil outside of the polarizing colonial context. In answering this question this paper will try to highlight what concerns remain paramount for Africa in establishing dominance over its conflict resolution mechanisms as it pursues the African Union's (AU) goal of 'silencing the guns'.

### DEFINITIONS

It is first important to clarify what is meant by foreign military involvement. This is broad concept encapsulates both foreign military presence and forms of intervention. In this paper foreign military involvement refers to the intervention, assistance, or engagement of armed conflict within Africa by one or



more extra-continental states. On the opposite end the concept of non-intervention will also be critical for understanding the Chinese perspective in foreign military involvement. Traditionally non-intervention is a legal prohibition of the use of force, as well as a requirement that a state not intervene in the internal or external affairs of other states in coercive ways not involving the use of force. The scope of non-intervention is often debated. It is difficult to separate what is intervention and what is meddling. The Chinese position on this definition is unique, in that rather than look for a clear-cut distinction between intervention and meddling, the Chinese definition puts the two on a similar platform. Non-intervention or non-interference is a long-standing defining feature of Chinese foreign policy. The term 'non-interference' is also often used in Chinese foreign policy publications. The interchange between interference (干涉) and intervention (干预) in Chinese policy reflects the fragmented boundary between meddling and legitimate diplomatic practice. As Chen argues The Chinese government has not made any clear distinction between these concepts to ensure an ambiguity that creates space for diplomatic flexibility. Consequently, when referring to non-intervention this paper will be referring to the concept interchanged between non-interference and non-intervention in the Chinese context. This broad concept of non-intervention will, however, be limited to military (force) of intervention for the purposes of this paper.

## **THE MALI CONFLICT**

### **The Interconnected Nature of Conflict in Africa**

The Mali conflict can be broken into three main variables. These analyze the interactions and expressions of the conflict. The first is the interconnected nature of conflict in Africa. As stated in the Common African Defense and Security Policy, “security of each African country is inseparably linked to that of other African countries and the African continent as a whole”. The Mali conflict is an explicit example of this. The timeline of the Mali conflict is universally understood as being one of the many destabilized countries in the Sahel catalyzed by the fall of the Qaddafi government in Libya in 2011 and the resulting military chaos. The arming and infiltration of rebels and extremists in Northern Mali is directly correlated with the war and instability in Libya. This is more explicitly understood when taking into account the role of local and foreign authorities in the conflict.

## **THE ROLE OF CONTINENTAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

### **The Malian Government**

The modern Malian nation faced an uphill battle from the onset of its creation in 1960. Julius Nyerere, the father and first president of the modern state of Tanzania accurately described one of the core challenges faced by Mali along with all continental African countries, noting “It is impossible to draw a line anywhere on a map of Africa which does not violate the history or future needs of the people”. Mali's borders were imposed by colonizers and this was and still is problematic for a number of reasons. The most prominent difficulty is that the borders ignore the historical, cultural, and socio-political identity of Mali's inhabitants. Consequently, under democratic governance, identity conflicts and discrimination are constantly enflamed, especially since a dominant ethnic group holds political power. Upon independence, Mali's government was tasked with somehow establishing an entire national system that was inclusive and turned output to meet the Malian people's needs. This task Mali's government, and all African government's face, is one with little room for error. In January of 2012 it became clear that the Mali government had not met this task and failed to make a nation for all Malians. A historical lack of understanding and mutual distrust between Bamako (the capital city) and the northern territories of Mali, worsened by underdevelopment of the North in comparison to the South, as well as poor political representation for the North in government, all but sealed Mali's fate. The extremist group Ansar Dine, which was fundamental to the conflict, found sympathizers and a base in the disenfranchised Northern Tuareg territories. It is this failure to support and include the North that formed the basis of a stronghold for violent rebellion against the government.

Poor support and inclusion of the North also included weak mechanisms to maintain the territory along the northern border. It is easy to forget just how massive Africa and its countries are. Taking Mali as a key example, around 1,240,000 square kilometers in size with a population of 19.1 million that is more than double France's continental size with three and a half times smaller the population. Mali's border control was



stretched thin with such a large territory and the already relatively small population centralized around major cities in the South. Poor governance and inclusion of the North exacerbated the situation. Ample claims of nepotism and corruption with senior officers diverting resources for personal gain led to Mali's northern border forces being badly equipped, poorly trained, and suffering from low morale. The Northern border which pushes deep into the Sahara Desert was consequently more porous. This allowed radical groups from surrounding territories to feed insurgents, weapons, and logistic lines into the territory quietly building Ansar Dine and other extremists. It is precisely this weakness that allowed insurgents and extremist from a destabilized Libya as well as other northern and Western African groups such as Le Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to establish themselves in the north of Mali. The government's disregard and eventual inability to control extremist groups in the north among the other governmental difficulties it was facing resulted in a military coup in March of 2012 that removed then President Amadou Toumani Touré. However, the new government under former Acting President Dioncounda Traoré found itself also unable to deal with the demands of addressing the now collationed extremist groups in the North and frantic concerns in the South. Resulting in the government calling for external assistance.

## **THE CONTINENTAL RESPONSE**

### **ECOWAS**

When the Mali government found itself overwhelmed by the situation in the North two main entities were meant to lead a response on the continent: The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the AU. ECOWAS has two main security mechanisms. The first is the Mechanism of Conflict Prevention 1999 (1999 Mechanism). In accordance with Article 3 of the 1999 Mechanism the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) was created. The second mechanism available is the 2001 Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy (ECOWAS 2001 Protocol). Article 45 (1) ECOWAS 2001 Protocol states that “in the event that democracy is abruptly brought to an end by any means or where there is massive violation of Human Rights in a member state, ECOWAS may impose sanctions on the state concerned”. It is under Article 45 (1) ECOWAS 2001 Protocol that ECOWAS became involved in Mali, in response to the military coup of March of 2012. ECOWAS immediately suspended Mali accordingly and initiated response procedures. Like clockwork the procedure brought forward a promising plan. A Technical Assessment Mission (TAM) to Mali in mid-July of 2012 with the Malian Prime Minister and ECOWAS, as well as AU and UN representatives brought forward a strategy to deploy the ESF as part of a multidimensional ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA). However, MICEMA never deployed. The reason for this was ECOWAS's lack of financial and logistical resources for the mission and the failure to coordinate and secure support from the UN and the AU.

### **THE AFRICAN UNION (AU)**

From the onset of the Mali conflict it seems as though the AU found itself constantly needing to catch up to other actors. Following ECOWAS's March response the AU released its response to the Mali conflict in April. The AU's sluggish response was extremely harmful and it was very much aware of this. With the additional pressure from the October Security Council Resolution 2071, which set a deadline for both African organizations and the UN secretary general to provide a plan, the AU finally declared a strategy. The plan, authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 2085, was an African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) to be deployed in September 2013. However, three challenges drastically changed AFISMA's trajectory. The first was a sharp disagreement between the UN and the AU in terms of funding. Though the Security Council authorized AFISMA, it did not follow the AU's request to create a UN funded support package for the mission. Second, with the Mali conflict involving Libya (a non-member state of ECOWAS), a dispute arose as to whether the AU or ECOWAS would lead the mission. The conflict resulted with the AU taking the lead, under the aegis of ECOWAS. Third, the rapid deterioration of security in Mali while the AU organized itself and the Malian government's resulting bilateral oriented request for assistance with the French. By the early January the extremist militants had captured strategically important towns and had now established a concerning clear aggression towards Bamako.



## THE ROLE OF FOREIGN POWERS

While the AU, ECOWAS, and the UN found themselves in mild but time-consuming disputes France acted. In January 2013 France with Western approval launched Opération Serval. This action was not without its notable problems. The ignoring of the option of channeling resources through the African mechanisms as a less intrusive assistance, the seeming disregard for the regional and continental frameworks, and the scramble back to interference to protect strong economic security interests in the Sahel region all are concerning. However, France argued that ECOWAS meetings “were inconclusive and the feeling in Paris was that many African players wanted to benefit from the Malian crisis, but were not interested in solving it”. What cannot be ignored is that real lives, and interests were saved by the intervention and by the end of January all the major population centers in northern Mali were retaken and the rebels were displaced. It was the rapid success of France in Mid-January that spurred the quarreling ECOWAS-AU-UN framework to abandon their September 2013 plan and deploy the first AFISMA troops on 18 January. The massive successes resulted in a provisional peace agreement between Bamako and the Taureg rebels in June 2013. This progress allowed for elections in July 2013. However, the peace was not to last, and frequent sporadic attacks maintained the North in a state of conflict. To address this and to establish the whole state of Mali once more, providing protection to citizens, interests, and historical sites MUNISMA was authorized April 2013 under UN Security Council Resolution 2100. The French lead was respected and progress towards stabilizing the whole Sahel became one of the new goals. It is under MUNISMA in January 2014, that China's deployed combat troops set foot on Malian soil.

## CHINA

The non-intervention stance taken by China has its contemporary roots in the 1950s and most explicitly in the 1960s. Originally defensive, non-intervention ensured an international principle of “(mutual) non-interference” with other newly independent countries in Asia and Africa as competition between the Soviets and the West escalated while China was trying to secure its new nation. As China began to rise, a difficult balance became more and more apparent. The more China engaged with the outside world and became largely invested, especially in less stable regions, the more its policy to not intervene came at considerable costs. The entire timeline of Mali would have been abundantly apparent to the Chinese government. However, Mali, and the conflict that had consumed the country, was not in and of itself a major relational concern for China. The bilateral economic links between the two nations were not significant enough to demand anything outside of China's traditional practices. Mali also does not share geographic proximity with China, nor does Mali have a noticeably strong historical, cultural, or security connection to China. This paper argues that China took into account the three variables mentioned above in deciding to become militarily involved in Mali.

First, the interconnected nature of conflict in Africa. A resounding background of literature links China's presence in Mali to the possible threat a destabilized Mali would pose to the rest of the Sahel, a region where China has considerable interests. Ghiselli notes a key example in Algeria, which shares a long border with Mali. He argues that Algeria and other states reaching even to Sudan would be critically in danger in the case of a failed Mali state. Algeria hosts the largest number of Chinese contract workers in North Africa and at the time of the conflict in Mali the total value of the engineering and construction projects awarded to Chinese companies in Algeria was around USD 61 billion. Algeria would have been one of the states in the region where billions of USD worth of Chinese investments were at risk with Mali's conflict by virtue of the interconnected nature of conflict in Africa, prompting China to intervene.

China would also be aware of the weak local and intra-continental responses observed not just in Mali but in China's own experiences with less stable regions in the continent. In January of 2012 South Sudan unilaterally stopped oil production during its civil war, resulting in the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars to Chinese companies. A few days later 29 Chinese citizens were taken hostage by the extremist Sudan People's Liberation Movement North (SPLMN). As in Sudan, as China sought to codevelop projects in Africa, weak local governments were unpredictable and could do little to protect their own, let alone Chinese



interests. Additionally, internal checks and balance structures within the country failed to use effective resolution mechanisms. Although they are drastically becoming less frequent, 40 military coups removing heads of state have occurred in Africa. Where the issue lies is that the overthrow of regimes without a robust plan to resolve the problems that brought the coup about in the first place, characterizes not only Mali but countries as far North as Egypt and as far south as Zimbabwe. Local measures to address instability are consistently not meeting the mark. Regional responses have also been ineffective. As discussed above, China would have observed the escalating progress of the extremists as they took more and more towns and made their way South. The initial response by ECOWAS was promising but the lack of funding and coordination that resulted in MICEMA never deploying was one of many blows to the confidence of stakeholders in the region. The Continental agent, the AU also left stakeholders disappointed, with disputes with the UN, slow responses, and seeming failure to consolidate the overlap and interaction between itself and ECOWAS.

When looking at the role of foreign governments, China would have noticed that long time stakeholders in the continent were willing to go back on their word than trust Africa's conflict resolution. In October of 2011 France had declared that its support for the Malian government would be restricted solely to material goods and yet with the delays of ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN France was willing to endure the controversy of going back on its word to secure its interests in the region. Lanteigne notes how when France went back on its word and deployed its troops China called once again for an "African-led" intervention rather than condemn the unilateral action, a clear default to China's non-intervention policy but with signs of a more flexible position. He goes on to note how analysts recommended China's traditional response of non-intervention, arguing the former colonists were simply seeking a stronger strategic presence in Africa and France in particular, as was its tendency, was pursuing economic aims in Western Africa. Fung in a fairly similar line with Lanteigne argues that China ultimately made its decision to send troops to Mali because of its identity as simultaneously a great power and a Global South member. This entailed that China behaved under both its responsibilities of a powerful UN member and with respect to its fellow Global South counterparts. Zheng as well as Verhoeven argue that China's losses prior to Mali had become too much to maintain the same form of non-intervention. China made an economic calculation and chose to assist in protecting its interests. These two conclusions are the main categories in which China in MUNISMA is perceived. Both, however, demonstrate a clear lack of confidence in the local, regional and continental responses.

## CONCLUSION

The central question when observing China's involvement in MUNISMA, is what dynamics caused the non-colonial non-interventionist state to get involved in the Mali conflict. Three variables involved in the conflict that are applicable to other conflicts in Africa were noted, these were namely: the interconnected nature of conflict in Africa, the role of continental and local authorities, and the role of foreign powers. When assessing involvement in the Mali conflict, it is highly plausible that China took into account four main issues with the intra-continental conflict resolution mechanisms. First, the interconnected nature of conflict was a dominant factor in compelling involvement even if direct interests were not involved. Second, some of Africa's relatively new nations dealing with the colonial dynamic of borders and extremists in their territories have difficulty creating a government that represents all its people, as well as one that can hold its own against extremist infestations. A tendency of opting for coups to remove incompetent regimes has often been marked with equally ineffective incoming governments. Thirdly, where these nations fail, the regional communities lack the funding and coordination to provide an effective regional response. The continental response of the AU has been slow to react and issues such as funding delay it even further as it discusses with the larger international community. Lastly, with time being of the essence, what is clear is foreign stakeholders have such low confidence in the continental mechanisms that they would even risk controversy to secure their interests. These dynamics on the continent resulted in China becoming militarily involved in Africa. As Africa pursues the goal of continental peace, it must first tackle those dynamics that cause extra-continental states to get involved in its conflicts, especially if those who would prefer not to be involved still find themselves sucked into war. Strengthening regional cooperation is fundamental to Africa's progress and potentially game changing for its international relations. A world where Africa's voice is the loudest in determining what happens on African soil is one that would reflect the silence of the guns.