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An East-West Showdown in the Heart of Africa?

By Tom Engelhardt

July 31, 2014

For the last two years, TomDispatch Managing Editor Nick Turse has been following the Pentagon and the latest U.S. global command, AFRICOM, as they oversaw the expanding operations of the American military across that continent: drones, a special ops surge, interventions, training missions, bases (even if not called bases), proxy wars. Short of a major conflict, you name it and it's probably happening. Washington's move into Africa seems connected as well to the destabilization of parts of that continent and the rise of various terror groups across it, another subject Nick has been following. With rare exceptions, only recently have aspects of the Obama administration's largely below-the-radar-screen "pivot" to Africa made it into the mainstream media. Even more recently, global chaos from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria to Ukraine has driven it out again. As a result, most Americans have no sense of how their future and Africa's are being entwined in possibly explosive ways.

With this in mind, and with the support of the Nation Institute's Investigative Fund (as well as the generosity of Adelaide Gomer), Nick has gone to Tanzania and South Sudan to explore the situation further himself. Today, as the first fruits of that trip, TomDispatch has a major story on a development that has, until now, remained distinctly below the radar screen: the Africa-wide contest between the globe's "sole superpower," the U.S., and its preeminent rising economic power, China, over which will benefit most from the exploitation of that continent.

Over the next several months, there will be more pieces from Nick on America's growing stake in and effect on Africa. The next will address a looming crisis in the world's youngest nation. He offers a preview: "My aid agency contacts say that, in September, the United Nations will officially declare a famine in large swaths of South Sudan. As one humanitarian worker here put it to me, add famine to war and you have a powder keg. 'It's going to get worse,' says another, 'before it gets better.'" ~ Tom

China, America, and a New Cold War in Africa?

By Nick Turse

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Juba, South Sudan – Is this country the first hot battlefield in a new cold war? Is the conflict tearing this new nation apart actually a proxy fight between the world's two top economic and military powers? That's the way South Sudan's Information Minister Michael Makuei Lueth tells it. After "midwifing" South Sudan into existence with billions of dollars in assistance, aid, infrastructure projects, and military support, the U.S. has watched China emerge as the major beneficiary of South Sudan's oil reserves. As a result, Makuei claims, the U.S. and other Western powers have backed former vice president Riek Machar and his rebel forces in an effort to overthrow the country's president, Salva Kiir. China, for its part, has played a conspicuous double game. Beijing has lined up behind Kiir, even as it publicly pushes both sides to find a diplomatic solution to a simmering civil war. It is sending peacekeepers as part of the U.N. mission even as it also arms Kiir's forces with tens of millions of dollars worth of new weapons.

While experts dismiss Makuei's scenario – "farfetched" is how one analyst puts it – there are average South Sudanese who also believe that Washington supports the rebels. The U.S. certainly did press Kiir's government to make concessions, as his supporters are quick to remind anyone willing to listen, pushing it to release senior political figures detained as coup plotters shortly after fighting broke out in late 2013. America, they say, cared more about a handful of elites sitting in jail than all the South Sudanese suffering in a civil war that has now claimed more than 10,000 lives, resulted in mass rapes, displaced more than 1.5 million people (around half of them children), and pushed the country to the very brink of famine. Opponents of Kiir are, however, quick to mention the significant quantities of Chinese weaponry flooding into the country. They ask why the United States hasn't put pressure on a president they no longer see as legitimate.

While few outside South Sudan would ascribe to Makuei's notion of a direct East-West proxy war here, his conspiracy theory should, at least, serve as a reminder that U.S. and Chinese interests are at play in this war-torn nation and across Africa as a whole – and that Africans are taking note. Almost anywhere you look on the continent, you can now find evidence of both the American and the Chinese presence, although they take quite different forms. The Chinese are pursuing a ruthlessly pragmatic economic power-projection strategy with an emphasis on targeted multilateral interventions in African conflicts. U.S. policy, in contrast, appears both

more muddled and more military-centric, with a heavy focus on counterterrorism efforts meant to bolster amorphous strategic interests.

For the last decade, China has used “soft power” – aid, trade, and infrastructure projects – to make major inroads on the continent. In the process, it has set itself up as the dominant foreign player here. The U.S., on the other hand, increasingly confronts Africa as a “battlefield” or “battleground” or “war” in the words of the men running its operations. In recent years, there has been a substantial surge in U.S. military activities of every sort, including the setting up of military outposts and both direct and proxy interventions. These two approaches have produced starkly contrasting results for the powers involved and the rising nations of the continent. Which one triumphs may have profound implications for all parties in the years ahead. The differences are, perhaps, nowhere as stark as in the world’s newest nation, South Sudan.

A Midwife’s Tale

Starting in the 1980s, the efforts of an eclectic, bipartisan collection of American supporters – Washington activists, evangelical Christians, influential Congressional representatives, celebrities, a rising State Department star, a presidential administration focused on regime change and nation-building, and another that picked up the mantle – helped bring South Sudan into existence. “Midwife” was the word then-chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee John Kerry chose to describe the process.

In recent years, no country in Africa has received as much Congressional attention. And on July 9, 2011, South Sudan’s Independence Day, President Barack Obama released a stirring statement. “I am confident that the bonds of friendship between South Sudan and the United States will only deepen in the years to come. As Southern Sudanese undertake the hard work of building their new country, the United States pledges our partnership as they seek the security, development, and responsive governance that can fulfill their aspirations and respect their human rights.”

As the new nation broke away from Sudan after decades of bloody civil war, the U.S. poured in billions of dollars in humanitarian aid and pumped in hundreds of millions of dollars of military and security assistance. It also invested heavily in governmental institutions, and built infrastructure (constructing or repairing roads and bridges). It sent military instructors to train the country’s armed forces and advisors to mentor government officials. It helped to beef up the education sector, worked to facilitate economic development and American investment, and opened the U.S. market to duty-free South Sudanese imports.

The new nation, it was hoped, would bolster U.S. national security interests by injecting a heavy dose of democracy into the heart of Africa, while promoting political stability and good governance. Specifically, it was to serve as a democratic bulwark against Sudan and its president, Omar al-Bashir, who had once harbored Osama bin Laden and is wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in that country’s Darfur region.

When South Sudan broke away, it took much of Sudan’s oil wealth with it, becoming sub-Saharan Africa’s third-largest oil producer behind Nigeria and Angola. In taking those resources

out of Bashir's hands, it offered the promise of more energy stability in Africa. It was even expected to serve Washington's military aims – and soon, the U.S. began employing South Sudanese troops as proxies in a quest to destroy Joseph Kony and his murderous Lord's Resistance Army.

That was the dream, at least. But like Washington's regime change and nation-building projects in Iraq and Afghanistan, things soon started going very, very wrong. Today, South Sudan's armed forces are little more than a collection of competing militias that have fractured along ethnic lines and turned on each other. The country's political institutions and economy are in shambles, its oil production (which accounts for about 90% of government revenue) is crippled, corruption goes unchecked, towns have been looted and leveled during recent fighting, the nation is mired in a massive humanitarian crisis, famine looms, and inter-ethnic relations may have been irreparably damaged.

The China Syndrome

During the years when America was helping bring South Sudan into existence, another world power also took an interest in the country – and a very different tack when it came to its development. After having invested a reported \$20 billion in Sudan – a country long on the U.S. sanctions blacklist – China watched as the new nation of South Sudan claimed about 75% of its oil fields. In 2012, newly inaugurated South Sudanese President Salva Kiir traveled to China where he sipped champagne with then-President Hu Jintao and reportedly secured a pledge of \$8 billion to build up his country's infrastructure and support its oil sector. (A top Chinese envoy later dismissed reports of such a sum, but hinted that China was willing to make even greater investments in the country if it achieved a lasting peace with its northern neighbor.)

Two years later, the China National Petroleum Corporation, with a 40% stake, is now the largest shareholder in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, the top oil consortium in South Sudan. It also leads another important consortium, the Greater Pioneer Operating Company. During the first 10 months of 2013, China imported nearly 14 million barrels of oil from South Sudan. That adds up to about 77% of the country's crude oil output and twice as much as China imports from energy-rich Nigeria. While South Sudanese oil accounts for only about 5% of China's total petroleum imports, the country has nonetheless provided Beijing with a new African partner. This was especially useful as a U.S. and NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 created chaotic conditions, causing China to suffer heavy losses (\$20 billion according to Chinese sources) in various energy and other projects in that country.

“At the end of the day, China's main interest is stability so that they can function on a commercial basis. And to achieve that stability they've had to get more involved on the political side,” says Cameron Hudson, director for African affairs on the staff of the National Security Council at the White House from 2005 to 2009. “They have a very large presence in Juba and are doing a lot of business beyond the oil sector.”

In fact, just days before South Sudan plunged into civil war late last year, the deep-pocketed Export-Import Bank of China was reportedly preparing to offer the country \$2 billion in loans and credit to build six key roads – including a 1,500-mile highway to link the capital, Juba, with

Sudan's main port – crucial bridges across the Nile River, schools and hospitals in every county, a hydropower plant, a government conference center, and a staple of Chinese construction schemes in Africa, a stadium.

Recently, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang promised to expand cooperation with South Sudan in trade, agriculture, construction of infrastructure, and energy. Meanwhile, a separate \$158 million deal to repair and expand the airport in Juba, financed by China's Export-Import Bank and carried out by a Chinese firm, was announced. In addition, China has just shipped nearly \$40 million in arms – millions of rounds of ammunition, thousands of automatic rifles and grenade launchers, and hundreds of machine guns and pistols – to Salva Kiir's armed forces.

Continental Competition

China's interest in South Sudan is indicative of its relations with the continent as a whole. Beijing has long looked to Africa for diplomatic cooperation in the international arena and, with the continent accounting for more than 25% of the votes in the General Assembly of the United Nations, relied on it for political support. More recently, economics has become the paramount factor in the growing relationship between the rising Asian power and the continent.

Hungry for energy reserves, minerals, and other raw materials to fuel its domestic growth, China's Export-Import Bank and other state-controlled entities regularly offer financing for railroads, highways, and other major infrastructure projects, often tied to the use of Chinese companies and workers. In exchange, China expects long-term supplies of needed natural resources. Such relationships have exploded in the new century with its African trade jumping from \$10 billion to an estimated \$200 billion, which far exceeds that of the United States or any European country. It has now been Africa's largest trading partner for the last five years and boasts of having struck \$400 billion worth of deals in African construction projects which have already yielded almost 1,400 miles of railroad track and nearly 2,200 miles of highways.

Resources traded for infrastructure are, however, just one facet of China's expanding economic relationship with Africa. Looking down the road, Beijing increasingly sees the continent as a market for its manufacturing products. While the West ages and sinks deeper into debt, Africa is getting younger and growing at an exponential pace. Its population is, according to demographers, poised to double by the middle of the century, jumping to as many as 3.5 billion – larger than China and India combined – with working-age people far outnumbering the elderly and children.

With its ability to produce goods at low prices, China is betting on being a major supplier of a growing African market when it comes to food, clothes, appliances, and other consumer goods. As Howard French, author of *China's Second Continent* notes, “a variety of economic indicators show that the fortunes of large numbers of Africans are improving dramatically and will likely continue to do so over the next decade or two, only faster.” According to the International Monetary Fund, 10 of the 20 economies projected to grow fastest from 2013-2017 are located in sub-Saharan Africa. Last year, the World Bank attributed 60% of Africa's economic growth to consumer spending. Beijing may even fuel this rise further by relocating low-skilled, labor-

intensive jobs to that continent as it develops more skilled manufacturing and high-tech industries at home.

One Chinese export integral to Beijing's dealings with Africa has, however, largely escaped notice. In the space of a decade, as French points out, one million or more Chinese have emigrated to Africa, buying up land, establishing businesses, plying just about every conceivable trade from medicine to farming to prostitution. These expats are altering the fundamentals of cultural and economic exchange across the continent and creating something wholly new. "For all of China's denials that its overseas ambitions could be compared to those of Europeans or Americans," writes French, "...what I was witnessing in Africa is the higgledy-piggledy cobbling together of a new Chinese realm of interest. Here were the beginnings of a new empire."

This mass influx of Chinese pioneers has bred resentment in some quarters, as have heavy-handed tactics by Chinese companies that often ignore local labor laws and environmental regulations, freeze out local workers, mistreat them, or pay them exceptionally low wages. This, in turn, has led to instances of violence against Africa's Chinese, as has Beijing's support for unpopular and repressive governments on the continent. Such threats to the safety of Chinese citizens and business interests, as well as general political instability and armed conflicts – from Libya to South Sudan – have given China still another reason to build-up its presence.

Traditionally, Beijing has adhered to a non-interference, "no strings attached" foreign policy – meaning no requirements on partner nations in terms of transparency, corruption, environmental protection, human rights, or good governance – and, as opposed to the United States, has avoided overseas military interventions. While it has long contributed to U.N. peacekeeping operations – the only kind of foreign intervention Beijing considers legitimate – China has generally operated far from the front lines. But things are subtly shifting on this score.

In 2011, after the U.S.-backed revolution in Libya imperiled 30,000 Chinese living there, the People's Liberation Army coordinated air and sea assets in the largest evacuation mission in its history. And as the war in Libya destabilized neighboring Mali and a U.S.-trained officer overthrew that country's elected president, China sent combat troops – for the first time in its history – to join U.N. forces in a bid to stabilize a nation that the U.S. had spent a decade bolstering through counterterrorism funding.

Then, when U.S.-backed South Sudan slid into civil war late last year – and 300 Chinese workers had to be evacuated – Beijing departed from the hands-off approach it had taken only a few years earlier with Sudan, ramped up diplomatic efforts and pushed hard for peace talks. "This is something new for us," said China's special envoy to Africa, Zhong Jianhua. This was, he noted, the beginning of a "new chapter" in policies by which China would now "do more [in terms of] peace and security for this continent."

More recently, Beijing managed to broker an unprecedented arrangement to expand the mandate of the U.N. Mission in South Sudan. In addition to "protection of civilians, monitoring and investigating human rights abuses, and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance," according to Foreign Policy, "Beijing quietly secured a deal that will put the U.N.'s famed blue

helmets to work protecting workers in South Sudan's oil installations, where China has invested billions of dollars." Although protecting the oil fields is akin to taking the government's side in a civil war, the U.S., France, and Great Britain backed the plan to protect oil installations under a U.N. mandate, citing the importance of the energy sector to the future of the country. In return, China will send an 850-man infantry battalion to bolster the U.N. mission, adding to the 350 military personnel it already had on the ground here.

When it comes to protecting their infrastructure, "the Chinese have gotten very good at deploying peacekeeping forces," Patricia Taft, a senior associate with the Fund for Peace, tells TomDispatch. "The Chinese have, in East Africa and also West Africa, inserted themselves as a security presence, mainly to protect their oil interests, their infrastructure, or whatever economic projects they're deeply invested in."

Yun Sun, a fellow at the Stimson Center and an expert on China's relations with Africa, doesn't see these recent developments as a militarization of China's mission, but as a symptom of increased investment in the countries of the continent. "China cares more about security issues in Africa... due to its own national interests," Sun tells TomDispatch. "It means China will contribute more to the peace and security issues of the continent." And it seems that Beijing is now doing so, in part on America's dime.

Winners and Losers

U.S. taxpayers, who fund about 27% percent of the cost of United Nations peacekeeping missions, are now effectively underwriting China's efforts to protect its oil interests in South Sudan. Washington continues to pour aid into that country – more than \$456 million in humanitarian assistance in fiscal year 2014 – while China has pledged far less in humanitarian relief. Meanwhile, Juba has tied itself ever more tightly to Chinese energy interests, with plans to borrow more than \$1 billion from oil companies to keep the government afloat as it battles the rebels.

Taft sees these deals with largely Chinese firms as both risky for South Sudan's future and potentially ineffective as well. "It's putting a band-aid on a hemorrhaging artery," she says. David Deng, research director for the South Sudan Law Society, echoes this: "We're mortgaging our children's future to fight a pointless war."

South Sudan seems emblematic of a larger trend in the race between Washington and Beijing in Africa. In 2000, China's trade there passed \$10 billion for the first time and has been growing at a 30% clip annually ever since. Nine years later, China overtook the U.S. to become the continent's largest trading partner and, by 2012, its trade was nearly double that of the U.S. – \$198.5 billion to \$99.8 billion. While the United States recently announced that \$900 million in unspecified "deals" with Africa will be unveiled at an upcoming U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, it will nonetheless continue to trail far behind China in terms of trade on the continent.

For the Chinese, Africa is El Dorado, a land of opportunity for one million migrants. For America, it's a collection of "ungoverned spaces," "austere locations," and failing states

increasingly dominated by local terror groups poised to become global threats, a danger zone to be militarily managed through special operators and proxy armies. “In Africa, terrorists, criminal organizations, militias, corrupt officials, and pirates continue to exploit ungoverned and under-governed territory on the continent and its surrounding waters,” reads the Pentagon’s 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). “The potential for rapidly developing threats, particularly in fragile states, including violent public protests and terrorist attacks, could pose acute challenges to U.S. interests.”

“Recent engagements in Somalia and Mali, in which African countries and regional organizations are working together with international partners in Europe and the United States, may provide a model for future partnerships,” adds the QDR. But a look at those poster-child nations for U.S. involvement – one in East and one in West Africa – instead provides evidence of America’s failings on the continent.

In 2006, the Islamic Court Union (ICU), a loose confederation of indigenous Islamist groups seeking to impose order on the failed state of Somalia, defeated the Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism, a U.S.-supported militia, and pushed the U.S.-backed warlords out of Mogadishu, the capital. In response, the United States green-lighted a 2007 invasion of the country by Ethiopia’s military and secretly sent in a small contingent of its own troops (still operating in Somalia to this day). This succeeded only in splintering the ICU, sending its moderates into exile, while its hardliners formed a far more extreme Islamic group, al-Shabab, which became the key Muslim resistance force against Washington’s Ethiopian proxies.

Al-Shabab experienced a great deal of military success before being beaten back by the Ethiopians, troops from a U.S.-supported Somali transitional government, and well-armed peacekeepers from the U.S.-backed African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). These forces were, from 2009 onward, joined by proxies trained and armed by U.S.-ally Kenya, whose own army invaded the country in 2011. Their forces in Somalia, eventually folded into the AMISOM mission, are still deployed there. On the run and outgunned, al-Shabab responded by threatening to take the war beyond its borders and soon began to do so.

In other words, what started as a local Islamic group achieving, according to a Chatham House report, “the unthinkable, uniting Mogadishu for the first time in 16 years, and reestablishing peace and security,” quickly became a transnational terror organization in the wake of the Ethiopian invasion and other acts of intervention. In 2010, al-Shabab carried out a bomb attack in Uganda as a punishment for that country’s contribution to the African Union mission in Somalia. In 2011, it launched an escalating series of shootings, grenade attacks, and bombings in Kenya. The next year, the formerly Somalia-centric outfit further internationalized its efforts as one of its leaders pledged obedience to al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri. In 2013, the group carried out a devastating attack on the Westgate Mall in Kenya that killed 67.

Earlier this year, al-Shabab extended its reach even further with its first-ever suicide attack in Djibouti, the tiny Horn of Africa nation that contributes troops to AMISOM and hosts French troops, a key European proxy force for Washington on the continent, as well as the only avowed U.S. base in Africa. “The attack was carried out against the French Crusaders for their complicity in the massacres and persecution of our Muslim brothers in the Central African Republic and for

their active role in training and equipping the apostate Djiboutian troops in Somalia,” read an al-Shabab statement that also highlighted a U.S.-backed French military mission in the Central African Republic.

In the months since, the group has repeatedly launched murderous assaults on civilians in Kenya and continues to threaten Uganda and Burundi, which also contributes troops to AMISOM, with future attacks. It has even gained regional affiliates, like Al-Hijra, an underground group accused of recruiting for al-Shabab in Kenya.

After 9/11, on the opposite side of the continent, U.S. programs like the Pan-Sahel Initiative and the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership, pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into training and arming the militaries of Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Nigeria, Algeria, and Tunisia, again in order to promote regional “stability.” While U.S. Special Operations forces were teaching infantry tactics to Malian troops, the Chinese were engaging very differently with that West African nation. Despite Mali’s lack of natural resources, China constructed a key bridge, a hospital, a stadium, a major government building, several factories, miles of highways, and a \$230 million waterworks project.

The U.S. wasn’t, however, left totally out in the cold on the construction front. The State Department’s Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), for example, spent \$71.6 million to expand the Bamako Airport. The contract, however, went to a Chinese firm – as did many MCC contracts across Africa – because American companies were uninterested in working there despite guaranteed U.S. financing.

What Washington was trying to build in Mali came crashing down, however, after the U.S. helped topple Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, causing that country to collapse into a morass of militia fiefdoms. Nomadic Tuareg fighters looted the weapons stores of the Gaddafi regime they had previously served, crossed the border, routed U.S.-backed Malian forces and seized the northern part of the country. This, in turn, prompted a U.S.-trained officer to stage a military coup in the Malian capital, Bamako, and oust the democratically elected president.

Soon after, the Tuareg rebels were muscled aside by heavily-armed Islamist rebels who began taking over the country. This, in turn, prompted the U.S. to back a 2013 invasion by French and African forces which arrested the complete collapse of Mali – leaving it in a permanent state of occupation and low-level insurgency. Meanwhile, Islamist fighters and Gaddafi’s weapons were scattered across Africa, contributing to greater instability in Nigeria and Libya, as well as increased threat levels in Chad, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. It evidently also spurred an audacious revenge attack in Algeria that left more than 80 dead and an assault on a French-run uranium mine and a nearby military base in Niger in which at least 25 people were killed.

Two Systems, One Continent

In 2000, a report prepared under the auspices of the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute examined the “African security environment.” While it touched on “internal separatist or rebel movements” in “weak states,” as well as non-state actors like militias and “warlord

armies,” there is conspicuously no mention of Islamic extremism or major transnational terrorist threats. Following the 9/11 attacks, a senior Pentagon official claimed that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan might drive “terrorists” out of that country and into African nations, but when pressed about actual transnational dangers on that continent, he admitted that even hardcore Somali militants “really have not engaged in acts of terrorism outside Somalia.”

Despite this, Washington dispatched personnel to Africa in 2002 and began pouring money into counterterrorism efforts. Since then, the U.S. has steadily increased its military footprint, its troop levels, and its missions on the continent – from night raids in Somalia and kidnap operations in Libya to the construction of a string of bases devoted to surveillance activities across the northern tier of Africa.

For all the time spent training proxies, all the propaganda efforts, all the black ops missions, all the counterterror funds, the results have been dismal. A glance at the official State Department list of terrorist organizations indicates that these efforts have been mirrored by the growth of radical militant groups, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group added in 2004, al-Shabab in 2008, Ansar al-Dine, Boko Haram, Ansaru, and the al-Mulathamun Battalion in 2013, and Libya’s Ansar al-Shari’a in Benghazi, and Ansar al-Shari’a in Darnah, as well as Ansar al-Shari’a in Tunisia, and the Egyptian militant group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, all in 2014. And that’s hardly a full list. Not included are various terror organizations, rebel forces, separatist movements, armed groups, and militias like the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, fighters from the group formerly known as Seleka and their rivals, anti-balaka militiamen in the Central African Republic, Taureg separatists of Mali’s National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, the Congolese Resistance Patriots, Burundi’s National Forces of Liberation, and others.

Over these years, as the U.S. has chased terror groups and watched them proliferate, China has taken another route, devoting its efforts to building goodwill through public works and winning over governments through “no strings attached” policies.

“Our goal is not to counter China; our goal is not to contain China,” President Obama said during a trip to Asia earlier this year. In South Sudan, as in Africa as a whole, America seems increasingly unable to even keep up. “On certain levels, we can’t or won’t compete with China,” says the Fund for Peace’s Patricia Taft. “China will continue to eclipse us in terms of economic interests in Africa.” The U.S. is, however, still preeminent in the political sphere and that influence, she says, will continue to trump anything China can currently offer.

The question is: For how long?

Cameron Hudson, formerly of the National Security Council and now the acting director of the Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Museum, thinks strengthening partnerships with the Chinese could lead to major dividends for the United States. “They have more skin in the game,” he says of Beijing’s relationship with South Sudan. “They have a growing set of interests there.”

Benediste Hoareau, head of political affairs for the East African Standby Force – a rapid intervention force in-the-making, consisting of troops from the region’s militaries – expresses

similar sentiments. He believes in the often repeated axiom of finding African solutions to African problems and says that the foreign powers should provide the funds and let African forces do the fighting and peacekeeping in South Sudan.

Hoareau, in fact, sees no need for a contest, new Cold War or otherwise, between the foreign titans here. There are plenty of opportunities for both the United States and China in Africa and in South Sudan, he tells TomDispatch. A rivalry between the two powers can only bring trouble. “They’re elephants,” Hoareau says of China and America, “and you know just who will get trampled.”