

Kony 2012 and America's Conquest of Africa's Mineral Wealth

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As public interest in African affairs briefly found a place in mainstream talking points following a controversial viral video campaign about Ugandan rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), both the United States and the African Union are mobilizing military forces to Central Africa to counter further threats to civilian safety posed by the group. Following the US deployment of one hundred military personnel to Uganda in 2011, the African Union has deployed a 5,000-soldier brigade to LRA affected areas, tasked with pursuing the group and its leader, Joseph Kony [1]. In the United States, a new bill co-authored by U.S. Representative Edward Royce has been introduced to the Congress calling for the further expansion of regional military forces into the nations of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic and the newly formed South Sudan [2].

Although the Lord's Resistance Army has been accused of recruiting child soldiers and conducting crimes against humanity throughout its two-decade campaign for greater autonomy against the Ugandan government, the group is presently comprised of less than four hundred soldiers [3] and remains a questionable threat. Meanwhile, China's deepening economic engagement in Africa and its crucial role in developing the mining and industrial sectors of several nations is reportedly creating "deep nervousness" in the West, according to David Shinn, former US ambassador to Burkina Faso and Ethiopia [4]. As the Obama administration claims to welcome the peaceful rise of China on the world stage, recent policy shifts toward an increased US military presence in several alleged LRA hotspots threaten deepening Chinese commercial activity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, widely considered the world's most resource rich nation [5].

As China maintains its record of consistently strong economic performance, Washington is crusading against China's export restrictions on minerals that are crucial components in the production of consumer electronics such as flat-screen televisions, smart phones, laptop batteries, and a host of other products. As the United States, European Union and Japan project international pressure on the World Trade Organization and the World Bank to block financing for China's extensive mining projects [6], US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's irresponsible accusations of China perpetuating a creeping "new colonialism" of the African continent remain rather telling [7]. As China is predicted to formally emerge as the world's largest economy in 2016 [8], the successful aggregation of African resources remains a key component to its ongoing rivalry with the United States.

The villainous branding of Joseph Kony may well be deserved, however it cannot be overstated that the LRA threat is wholly misrepresented in recent pro-intervention US legislation. The vast majority of LRA attacks have reportedly taken place in the north-eastern Bangadi region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, located on the foot of a tri-border expanse between the Central African Republic and South Sudan. However, the small

number of deaths reported by official sources in recent times relies on unconfirmed reports where LRA activity is “presumed” and “suspected” [9]. Considering the Congo’s extreme instability after decades of foreign invasion, falsely crediting the LRA with the region’s longstanding cases of violence for political gain becomes relatively simple for those looking to gain enormous contracts for Congolese resources.

In a 2010 white paper entitled “Critical Raw Materials for the EU,” the European Commission cites the immediate need for reserve supplies of tantalum, cobalt, niobium, and tungsten among others [10]; the US Department of Energy 2010 white paper “Critical Mineral Strategy” also acknowledged the strategic importance of these key components [11]. In 1980, Pentagon experts acknowledged dire shortages of cobalt, titanium, chromium, tantalum, beryllium, and nickel, eluding that rebel insurgencies in the Congo inflated the cost of such materials [12]. Additionally, the US Congressional Budget Office’s 1982 report “Cobalt: Policy Options for a Strategic Mineral” notes that cobalt alloys are critical to the aerospace and weapons industries and that 64% of the world’s cobalt reserves lay in the Katanga Copper Belt, running from southeastern Congo into northern Zambia [13].

During the Congo Wars of the 1996 to 2003, the United States provided training and arms to Tutsi Rwandan and Ugandan militias who later invaded the Congo’s mineral rich eastern provinces to pursue extremist Hutu militias following the Rwandan genocide. Although over six million deaths were attributed to the conflict in the Congo [14], findings of the United Nations suggest that neighboring regimes in Ugandan, Rwanda and Burundi benefitted immensely from illegally harvested conflict minerals, later sold to various multinational corporations for use in consumer goods [15]. The US defense industry relies on high quality metallic alloys indigenous to the region, used primarily in the construction of high-performance jet engines. The sole piece of legislation authored by President Obama during his time as a Senator was S.B. 2125, the Democratic Republic of the Congo Relief, Security, and Democracy Promotion Act of 2006; Section 201(6) of the bill specifically calls for the protection of natural resources in the troubled regions of eastern Congo [16].

The Congo maintains the second lowest GDP per capita despite having an estimated \$24 trillion in untapped raw minerals deposits [17]; it holds more than 30% of the world’s diamond reserves [18] and 80% of the world’s coltan [19], the majority of which is exported to China for processing into electronic-grade tantalum powder and wiring [20]. The control of strategic resources in the eastern Congo is a vital element of the ongoing US-China rivalry, as Chinese commercial activities in the DRC continue to increase in the fields of mining and telecommunications. The Congo exported \$1.4 billion worth of cobalt to China between 2007 and 2008 [21], while the majority of Congolese raw materials like cobalt, copper ore and a variety of hard woods are exported to China for further processing [22]; 90% of the processing plants in resource rich southeastern Katanga province are owned by Chinese nationals [23].

In 2008, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) blocked a trade deal between a consortium of Chinese companies, who were granted the rights to mining operations in Katanga in exchange for US\$6 billion in infrastructure investments, including the construction of two hospitals, four universities and a hydroelectric power project. The framework of the deal allocated an additional \$3 million to develop cobalt and copper mining operations in Katanga, but the IMF argued that the agreement between China and the DRC violated the foreign debt relief program for so-called HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries) nations [24]. The marginalization of China by financial regulatory bodies is a strong indication of its

throttling rivalry with American and European corporate communities, many of who fear being diluted in China's increasing economic orbit.

While subtle economic warfare rages between partnered superpowers, the increasing western military presence in the Congo is part of a larger program to expand AFRICOM, the United States Africa Command, through a proposed archipelago of American military bases in the region. In 2007, US State Department advisor Dr. J. Peter Pham offered the following on AFRICOM and its strategic objectives of "protecting access to hydrocarbons and other strategic resources which Africa has in abundance, a task which includes ensuring against the vulnerability of those natural riches and ensuring that no other interested third parties, such as China, India, Japan, or Russia, obtain monopolies or preferential treatment" [25]. The push into Africa has more to do with destabilizing the deeply troubled Democratic Republic of the Congo and capturing its strategic reserves of cobalt, tantalum, gold and diamonds. More accurately, the US is poised to employ a scorched-earth policy by creating dangerous war-like conditions in the Congo, prompting the mass exodus of Chinese investors. Similarly to the Libyan conflict, the Chinese returned after the fall of Gaddafi to find a proxy government only willing to do business with the western nations who helped it into power [26]. The European Union's recently offered contribution of \$12 million to joint military operations against the ailing Lord's Resistance Army suggests signs of a coming resource war in Central Africa [27].

Notes

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- [7] [Hillary Clinton Warns Africa Of 'New Colonialism'](#), Huffington Post, June 11, 2011
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- [26] [Gaddafi demise leads to questions over contracts](#), Russia Today, October 20, 2011
- [27] [EU earmarks €9m for joint military operation against LRA](#), Sudan Tribune, March 25, 2012

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