

Crouching Tiger, Blue Helmet: Chinese Combat Troops in UN Peace Operations

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The increasing contributions of the People's Republic of China (China) to United Nations (UN) peace operations has been the subject of considerable debate since 1989, when China sent 20 civilian experts to act as UN observers for Namibia's general election. For decades China had developed and expressed a policy of skepticism towards UN peace operations, believing that they violated the sovereignty of the affected countries and amounted to illegitimate interference in their internal affairs.^[1] Between the beginning of the Millennium and today, two key phenomena have been observed: first, the value of China's trade with Africa has skyrocketed from \$6 billion to \$107 billion.^[2] Second, China has vastly increased its contributions to UN peace operations, with over 2,000 personnel currently working as part of UN missions complemented by a significant increase in China's share of the UN peacekeeping budget, from 3.9% to 6.6%.^[3]

Until very recently, China was wary of sending combat troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to support peace missions and instead focused its contributions on civilian personnel, including military observers and police units that provide "infrastructure, medical, logistical and transport support" in challenging peacekeeping environments such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia.^[4] However, in June 2013, China — by far the largest personnel contributor to UN peacekeeping operations among the permanent members of the Security Council — sent 170 combat soldiers (amidst a contribution of nearly 500 troops, spanning medical, engineering, and security units^[5]) to a UN peacekeeping operation for the first time, to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) which took over from French troops responding to the Malian government's request for assistance to quell Islamist rebels in the northern part of the country.^[6] Just a few months later, in September 2014, China significantly bolstered its contribution to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) through the addition of 700 military personnel mandated not only to use "all necessary means" to protect civilians near oil installations, but also "to help guard the country's embattled oil fields and protect Chinese workers and installations," as a spokesman for South Sudan's president put it.^[7]

This paper will provide context for China's combat engagement in Mali and South Sudan — the 24th and 25th peace operations, respectively, in which China has been engaged since 1990^[8] — beginning with a brief overview of China's policy towards UN peacekeeping. An attempt will be made to explore whether previous analyses of China's interests and priorities regarding peace operations remain sound and relevant in light of China's now evident willingness to provide combat troops on a case by case basis. In other words, are pre-Mali assumptions regarding China's approach to, and interests surrounding, UN peace operations still valid? The paper will also examine attempts to evaluate and constructively critique China's engagement in peace operations. The larger question remains whether China can successfully protect its own strategic, political, and economic interests while making a positive contribution to "the UN system of collective security."^[9] Or is China merely using the UN as a pacifist and progressive facade for what is purely a "military deployment that serves Beijing's specific interests?"^[10]

Reluctance to Readiness: The Evolution of Chinese Engagement in UN Peace Operations

China joined the UN in 1971 and, since the beginning of its tenure, served as a highly influential voice *against* UN peacekeeping missions. These missions were cast as instruments of imperialism that intruded into the internal affairs

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of sovereign states, thus “endangering peaceful co-existence.”^[11] Around that time, China understood UN missions as enabling the United States (US) and the Soviet Union “to expand their respective spheres of influence and to continue their Cold War rivalry, on the UN field.”^[12] China, as such, did not contribute to UN missions and regularly abstained on votes in the Security Council concerning UN peacekeeping mandates. A watershed moment occurred in 1981, when China voted in favour of the UN peacekeeping mission in Cyprus. In 1988, China joined the UN General Assembly’s Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, and one year later sent its first group of civilian experts to monitor elections in Namibia under the auspices of the UN. China also supported the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia in 1990.^[13] Around 1999, Chinese officials began publicly articulating a “more flexible and less conservative” stance on peacekeeping, calling for the UN to intervene “earlier, faster and more forcefully,” to borrow the words used by the Chinese Ambassador to the UN, Zhang Yishan, at that time.^[14] The year 2000 marked another watershed moment, when China deployed its first civilian police contingent to East Timor.

China went on to contribute police, engineering, and medical personnel to UN missions in Bosnia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kosovo, Haiti, Darfur, Sudan, South Sudan, and Lebanon.^[15] Yet although no combat soldiers were involved, the Chinese troops still faced considerable threats. In 2006, during the war in Lebanon, China suffered its first casualty among its contributions to UN missions, as an Israeli airstrike killed Chinese Major Du Zhaoyu, who had been deployed as a military observer.^[16] In vastly expanding the number of Chinese peacekeeping troops, the government recognized the need to bolster training facilities. As such, the Chinese Civilian Peacekeeping Police Training Centre — which selects and trains police officers who will be sent to UN missions — opened in 2000 under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Security and the Chinese People’s Armed Police Academy. The following year saw the establishment of the Peacekeeping Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defence. There have also been a number of exchanges and training partnerships in association with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations.^[17]

As mentioned, China has also augmented its contribution to the UN peacekeeping budget, growing from approximately 0.9% in the 1990s to 6.64% for the 2013-2015 period. China’s current contribution thus exceeds those of Italy, Russia, Canada, and Spain, through China still trails the US (which covers nearly 30% of the budget), Japan, France, Germany, and the UK.^[18] Yet of all these countries, China has by far the most peacekeeping personnel on the ground — from civilian experts to combat soldiers — meaning that among the top donors to the peacekeeping budget, China is arguably the non-African country with the highest stake in the effective use and management of peacekeeping resources.

As of March 2014, China had 2,177 UN personnel deployed abroad, making China’s total contribution approximately 98,000 individuals.^[19] Of the 115 UN member states contributing troops to peacekeeping operations, China ranks 15th, and is a vastly greater contributor than any of the other permanent members of the UN Security Council.^[20] This steady increase in peacekeeping activity has attracted a great deal of interest from scholars and practitioners alike, eager to situate China’s material contributions within the frame of China’s evolving geopolitical role and position, as well as its expanding interests in Africa. The lingering question is whether such analyses require adjustment now that combat troops have been added to the cauldron of China’s contributions.

Despite the significant evolution in China’s policy towards UN peace operations, it is important to reinforce that China has maintained its adherence to two core principles: first, the principle of non-interference and respect for state sovereignty, and second, the absolute necessity of having host state consent for peacekeeping missions. For example, while China agreed that the UN Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo needed a mandate to use force for the protection of civilians, Beijing did not support a similar mandate for the UN Mission in Sudan, since the Khartoum government had not given its consent, unlike the government of the DRC.^[21] China has managed to adhere to these principles by examining each intervention on a case-by-case basis.^[22] While China continues to adhere to the policy of non-interference, many of the country’s leading officials have recognized the changing character of international conflict — from international to non-international armed conflict — resulting in a greater willingness by Beijing to accept “multilateral peace operations within states, especially in cases of state collapse and when international security is threatened.”^[23]

China’s approach to peace operations has continued to evolve as Beijing recognized, via the direct experience of its

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deployed personnel, “that traditional peacekeeping was ill-suited to the type of conflicts in which peacekeepers were currently operating.” Furthermore, debates within China have evolved from a Cold War-era mindset — in which there was a “stronger emphasis on sovereignty, neutrality and the pursuit of consent,” and in which China insisted that interventions be orchestrated “multilaterally and through the UN Security Council” — to a recognition of the *principles* behind the Responsibility to Protect.^[24] Saferworld labels this shift as one from “non-interference” to “proactive non-interference” or “constructive mediation.”^[25] In spite of this apparent evolution, and even as China begins sending combat troops to bolster specific missions, the principle of non-interference will remain a cornerstone of Chinese policy and any changes to this policy will be “gradual, cautious and in many cases restricted to ad hoc responses to specific contexts.”^[26] Yet the validity of China’s claimed adherence to a policy of non-interference has come under scrutiny. Simply put, in purporting to ‘look the other way,’ China, as will be further discussed, *has* impacted the internal affairs of states embroiled in conflict.

It is important to examine the development of China’s policy regarding UN peace missions as one element of multiple policy processes within China. For instance, the country’s increased engagement in peacekeeping fits squarely with the State Council Information Office’s 2010 *White Paper on National Defence*, which categorizes China’s involvement in peace operations as part of its increased engagement in “maintaining world peace and stability by adhering to the concepts of openness, pragmatism and cooperation,” alongside “international security cooperation,” as distinct from peacekeeping.^[27] Over the past few years Chinese leaders have strongly reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and the role of the UN in particular. For example, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his 2013 speech to the General Assembly, stated that China “will play a more proactive and constructive role in addressing international and regional hotspot issues to promote peace and dialogue, defuse conflicts and safeguard world peace and stability. We will...increase participation in the UN peacekeeping operations so as to contribute more to peace and security in Africa and other relevant regions.”^[28]

At the same time as China has reframed its approach to the UN, there have also been significant advancements in *formalizing* Sino-African relations, including through the triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The agreement drafted at the meeting is unique in that it was developed “outside of Western-orientated multilateral forums” and contains specific references to Chinese support for, and participation in, peacekeeping missions.^[29] While the agreement leaves little room for doubt that economic issues interests dominant, there is a strong possibility that the FOCAC could pave the way for China to contribute to the African Union’s efforts regarding peace and security, including the African Standby Force.^[30] This was enshrined in the 2010 Sharm el-Sheikh FOCAC Action Plan, in which China commits to “intensify co-operation with African countries in peacekeeping theory research, peacekeeping training and exchanges and in supporting the building of peacekeeping capacity in Africa.”^[31] Moreover, there are already examples of China working bilaterally to train the next generation of African peacekeepers, such as a \$160 million agreement with Ghana, signed in 2008, to “re-equip and prepare its armed forces explicitly for multilateral peacekeeping operations.”^[32] It is not yet clear whether investments of this nature — in ‘African troops for African peace and security’ — might be impacted by China’s shift towards the deployment of combat troops.

China’s Contributions to UN Peace Operations in Africa: Interests and Impacts

The question of *why* China has so significantly bolstered its engagement in UN peacekeeping has been the subject of considerable analysis and debate within governments, academic institutions, and think tanks. However, these analyses are primarily based on observations of Chinese contributions that excluded the deployment of combat troops. Thus it is useful here to outline the most authoritative analyses available and to examine whether they remain sound and relevant in light of China’s recent contributions of combat soldiers in Mali and South Sudan. Further research will be required to evaluate whether or not the addition of combat troops better enables China to advance these interests.

How does China benefit from contributing personnel, including combat troops, to UN missions?

1. International security is national security: Fundamentally, China recognizes that threats to international peace and security are also domestic threats, noting that China’s “security and development are closely

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- linked to that of the rest of the world.”^[33] Furthermore as China’s role in global politics expands, “its national security is increasingly linked to international peace and development.” China’s contribution of combat troops to UN peace missions represents an investment in international peace and security, with indirect benefits for China with respect to security.
2. **Multilateralism:** When examining China’s contributions to peace operations, there is arguably a tendency to overlook the *UN* dimension of these operations. Indeed, China’s decision to concentrate its resources in UN missions, as oppose to bilateral or regional initiatives, reinforces that Chinese leadership has deliberately chosen the UN “as one of the key venues in which to demonstrate its responsible Great Power status and its new willingness to provide global public goods.”^[34] Rosemary Foot argues that China’s norms and purported principles closely match those of UN peacekeeping, namely impartiality, neutrality, and consent of parties.^[35] Practically speaking, China’s on-the-ground engagement in peace missions “allows for Beijing to ensure that its views over what is and what is not a legitimate UN intervention are not only heard but are also consequential to decision making.”^[36] By contributing combat soldiers to bolster UN peace operations, China is signalling its respect for UN peace mandates and the importance of not simply rubber stamping them in the Security Council, but also of supporting their implementation. It is also important to recognize that within the framework of multilateralism, China is able to significantly advance its bilateral relationships, including with the US. American officials have responded positively to China’s role in peacekeeping, recognizing that “US and Chinese service members may one day find themselves working side by side in peacekeeping missions” and proposing “that the two countries’ armed forces should cooperate more closely on humanitarian operations and peacekeeping missions.”^[37]
 3. **Soft, responsible, undeniable power:** China’s current President, Xi Jinping, has made it clear he intends to pursue an active foreign policy. In a speech in late November 2014, Mr. Xi committed to “increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s message to the world,”^[38] all while holding to “our legitimate rights.”^[39] Participation in UN missions allows China to wield soft power and demonstrate its commitment to act as a responsible great power, working towards the protection of peace and security. In doing so China is able to do more than simply appear “benign and harmonious,” as it can also “reassure neighbours about its peaceful intentions, and softly balance US and Western influence while gradually but more firmly establishing China’s acceptance as a great power.”^[40] China also wishes to be viewed as the only great power — or at least, the only permanent member of the UN Security Council — able to engage in “south-south partnerships” with African states in the realm of peace and security.^[41] Contributing combat soldiers to bolster UN peace operations may seem to indicate the use of hard power, but in fact the contribution of combat force in pursuit of a UN mandate — with the use of force as a last resort — reflects China’s belief in the role of international institutions in protecting international peace and security, the very essence of soft, responsible power.^[42]
 4. **Protect economic interests:** Political violence and armed conflict in Africa poses a direct threat to Chinese economic interests, such as investments in energy and mineral extraction, which are in many cases located in close proximity to sites of ongoing tension.^[43] Certainly the decision by China to send soldiers to support the UN mission in South Sudan, where China has major interests related to oil imports as well as infrastructure, but not to numerous other UN missions in comparatively grave contexts — the Central African Republic, for instance — lends credence to the thesis that China’s contributions to UN peace operations are necessarily linked to economic interests. Unsurprisingly, this has attracted criticism from Western policymakers who accuse China of “expanding its presence in Africa to secure access to natural resources, subsidize Chinese firms and exports, cement and enlarge political alliances and pursue economic hegemony.”^[44]
 5. **Gain leverage:** Through its highly lauded contributions within the UN, China is able to accumulate considerable leverage that is useful for other diplomatic files.^[45] For instance, China has been able to manipulate other states into supporting China’s “One China” policy with respect to the status of Taiwan. Indeed China would not support UN missions in Liberia and Guatemala until those countries reversed their position recognizing Taiwan.^[46] Missions in countries that did not change their position — such as Haiti and Macedonia — received no Chinese backing in the Security Council. It is possible that by contributing combat troops to UN missions, China’s leverage will only increase. But what will be the implications for the citizens of states that refuse to align with China on unrelated, sensitive issues?
 6. **Allow the PLA to gain experience:** On a more pragmatic plane, the contribution of PLA troops allows them to

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gain valuable experience in challenging environments, which may prove useful in future (non-war) operations, such as disaster response, humanitarian relief and counter-piracy.^[47] Specifically, PLA units are able to bolster their “responsiveness, riot-control capabilities, [and] coordination of military emergency command systems.”^[48] At the same time, by directly implicating PLA troops in the promotion of peace and security, China hopes to demonstrate that the PLA’s “modernization is essentially defensive in nature, reinforcing the idea of China’s ‘peaceful rise.’...[and] the image of a responsible great power...which protects international peace.”^[49]

How do African nations benefit from Chinese engagement in UN peace operations?

1. Tangible impact: Chinese peacekeepers have accomplished a great deal in the field. The troops have, for example, built or fixed over 200 bridges and 8,000 kilometres of roads. They have disassembled 8,700 mines or explosive installations, transported over four million tonnes of goods, and provided medical treatment to over 60,000 people.^[50] In Sudan, Chinese engineers constructed bases and fortifications and did so more effectively than Lockheed Martin, which had been contracted by the UN to do the same work.^[51] In Darfur, China led the construction of a camp for peacekeepers and also provided “engineers, transport battalions and field hospitals.”^[52] China’s tangible impacts, as well as the professionalism of their troops, have been publicly praised by Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, among other leaders. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine whether combat troops — as contributed by China or another state — can contribute positively to the fulfillment of UN peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and/or peace enforcement mandates, assessments of China’s role in South Sudan and Mali generally indicate that the deployment of combat soldiers was necessary and helpful.
2. A permanent ally in the UN Security Council: As China is by far the largest contributor of troops to UN peace operations among the permanent members of the Security Council — and since one can argue that having troops on the ground gives the contributing country greater depth perception with respect to operational realities — African nations benefit from China’s increased understanding of, and *stake* in, African peace and security and the role and capacity of the UN therein. Specifically, PLA troops and civilian experts deployed to UN missions gain field-level insights that may permeate the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing and may influence Chinese policy, and in turn, voting at the Security Council, on issues related to peacekeeping. For example, it is conceivable that China’s direct involvement in the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo influenced Beijing’s recognition of the need for a Force Intervention Brigade, authorized by the Security Council in 2013. China has not contributed combat troops to the offensive Brigade, which has a mandate to “neutralize and disarm” armed groups in the DRC, although notably China voted in favour of the resolution — rather than abstain, as per its traditional practise even with *less* offensive peacekeeping mandates. However, China’s support was conditional upon the resolution *not* creating “a precedent or undercut[ing] traditional peacekeeping principles.”^[53] China has evidently become African nations’ most valuable partner for amplifying the region’s voice within the Security Council as well as other international fora.^[54]
3. Potential for Chinese contributions beyond the UN: As the PLA deepens its exposure to African peace and security challenges, there is a strong likelihood that Beijing will increase support to African militaries to further their capacity to maintain peace and security. This is enshrined in the aforementioned Sharm el-Sheikh FOCAC Action Plan.^[55] The same reasoning may apply to the African Peace and Security Architecture and, in particular, the fledgling African Standby Force. However, it is important to recognize that at time of writing, such commitments by China to provide support to AU initiatives have been “”^[56]

How does the UN, including the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, stand to benefit from China’s personnel contributions?

1. Addressing troop shortages: China’s personnel contributions help address widespread shortages, which impede the fulfillment of increasingly multidimensional peace operations mandates. China may be able to encourage contributions from other member states, however this remains hypothetical.
2. China’s troops are an asset: UN peacekeeping missions benefit from “professional, well- trained, effective and disciplined” personnel, all adjectives that have been used to describe Chinese personnel in their

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- provision of “critical logistical, transportation and engineering support.”^[57] Most importantly, Chinese peacekeepers have not been the subject of any misconduct complaints, and this is essential for the legitimacy of the UN peacekeeping enterprise at a time when the organization is grappling with allegations of “sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and corruption” occurring within numerous missions.^[58]
3. Chinese peacekeepers add legitimacy to UN peacekeeping: UN peace operations are overburdened and cash-strapped, and China — as a permanent member of the Security Council — “adds legitimacy” to the entire enterprise.^[59] By lending combat troops to UN missions, China reaffirms its confidence in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations to fulfill mandates while conforming with peacekeeping principles and the UN Charter. This is significant, given China’s historic trepidations concerning international interventions.
 4. China can bring difficult nations onboard: China is able to convince challenging governments like the Bashir regime in Khartoum to consent to UN peace operations, such as the AU/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur.^[60] These nations trust Beijing’s calculation that involvement in, or consent for, UN peace operations does *not* pose a politically problematic contradiction of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference. Since the 1955 Bandung Conference, African countries have formally recognized China as a country that has a “strong record of political solidarity and partnership with developing countries” and that will defend the “inviolability of African sovereignty.”^[61] For states like Sudan and the DRC, China’s engagement “helps to temper the host governments’ suspicions that the missions are really Western-led military interventions.”^[62]

Challenges and Contradictions Inherent in China’s Engagement in UN Peace Operations

The previous section portrays a responsive and responsible China increasing its participation in UN peace operations and doing so with great effectiveness. However, there are a number of concerns, challenges, and contradictions associated with this increased participation. The contribution of combat soldiers only accentuates the issues outlined below.

1. China’s supposedly rigid adherence to core principles is hypocritical: The reality is that despite claims to be a leading proponent of the principle of non-interference, China *does* influence the internal affairs of African nations. Much of this influence derives from China’s relationships with ruling elites in countries facing armed conflict. Those relationships, in turn, cause Chinese investments to be “a target for opposition leaders, civil society activists and rebels.”^[63] The second principle China claims to prioritize is the requirement of host state consent, yet there are numerous scenarios in which strict adherence to this principle hampers UN peace operations. For example, China’s insistence on the Khartoum regime’s consent prior to approving a UN mandate to protect civilians in Darfur slowed down the UN at a time when rapid response was necessary to stop mass violence.
2. Chinese commercial activity may undermine contributions to peace operations: Observers have expressed concerns that the constructive achievements of Chinese peacekeepers “may be undermined by other activities of the Chinese Government [such as military support to ruling regimes, not discussed in this paper] or those of the increasing number of Chinese state-owned companies, entrepreneurs and émigrés in the region.”^[64] All countries, but especially China in light of its size and market density, face challenges in ensuring that the actions of private sector actors abroad conform with China’s basic positions regarding peace and security in Africa.
3. There is a risk that peace and security objectives will be dwarfed by economic interests: It would be naive to suggest that China should, or could, act in way that weakens dominant economic interests. Yet Beijing recognizes that these interests are impacted by the outcome of peace operations, so China finds itself (and not accidentally) “promoting peace in countries where Chinese banks and commercial actors have made significant investments.”^[65] However, the integrity of UN peace operations is in part grounded in member states’ willingness to prioritize the fulfilment of UN mandates and to sacrifice narrow domestic concerns in favour of improved international stability. Stated bluntly, “Beijing can’t simply send its own troops to protect its investments and citizens when they’re in danger, as they currently are in South Sudan.”^[66]
4. Beijing is constrained by its refusal to engage with non-state actors: Consistent with its emphasis on the inviolability of sovereignty, Chinese policy — at least on the surface — precludes engagement with non-state armed groups that are parties to armed conflicts in which Chinese peacekeepers are intervening

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under UN mandates. Yet the effective fulfillment of these mandates requires as much contact “with private militias and rebel movements as with regular forces.”^[67] China’s stubbornness here limits its ability to bring about positive developments within non-international armed conflicts.

5. Chinese peacekeepers are inhibited and isolated by their language barrier: It has been observed that Chinese troops — combat, non-combat, and civilian personnel — “tend to keep to themselves and do not interact much with other peacekeeping contingents or with local populations” due to their lack of proficiency in English or French, the primary languages used in UN peace missions.^[68]

Introducing Chinese Combat Soldiers into UN Peace Missions: A Point of No Return?

This paper is among the first to inquire whether or not the introduction of combat soldiers as part of China’s contributions to UN peacekeeping renders previous analyses of China’s interests and strategies irrelevant. For example, Wu Zhengyu and Ian Taylor have argued that China’s rigid position regarding state sovereignty constrains China’s support for, and participation in, UN peace missions.^[69] It is not yet clear whether this analysis still holds, nor can one fully grasp the extent to which China is more or less constrained now that combat troops are ‘in play’ as part of its repertoire of contributions. Moreover, some have suggested that China — in spite of its hesitance regarding Western-sponsored initiatives and its desire to be seen as a proponent of South-South cooperation — is now “actively facilitating the implementation of the principle of [the Responsibility to Protect doctrine]” by contributing to UN missions with a mandate to use force for the protection of civilians.^[70] When one considers China’s evolving contributions from the perspective of the Chinese government, the governments of African nations, and the UN secretariat, it becomes apparent that the introduction of combat soldiers does not undo previous analyses but rather reaffirms China’s commitment to support the fulfillment of UN peacekeeping mandates — mandates that China itself endorsed (or at least declined to veto) in the Security Council.

It is important to note that Chinese officials had been considering providing combat soldiers since 2006, when China initially offered to deploy up to one thousand troops to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.^[71] There were no vacancies for soldiers, and China instead sent logistical, medical, and transport personnel, as well as military observers. Yet beginning that year Chinese officials continued to discuss the possibility of sending combat soldiers in the future, and the officials involved were undoubtedly aware of the UN’s need for infantry troops and “force enablers or force multipliers...including light tactical and transport helicopters and ground transport units.”^[72] In 2012, China sent combat forces to protect Chinese engineers and medical personnel who were working in South Sudan.^[73] Analysts are primarily seized with the question of whether the provision of combat troops is a game-changer or rather a natural extension of a pre-existing set of objectives and principles. With regard to principles, China has sought to reassure the international community and domestic audiences that Chinese troops will adhere to UN regulations concerning the conduct of peacekeepers, with a retired Major General explaining that “Soldiers are allowed to open fire only for self-defense purposes, and never take positions to help either party during a civil war.”^[74] China wishes to be viewed as a nation that follows the rules when intervening in conflict situations.^[75] Now that the PLA plays a key role in China’s engagement in UN missions, there is a heightened urgency “not to foster negative perceptions of a resurgent China.”^[76] As the *Economist* put it pointedly, “Rifle-toting Chinese troops might help in restoring stability to conflict zones, but images of them might trouble the West.”^[77]

Case 1: China in Mali

In the summer of 2013, following the conclusion of the French military’s intervention in Mali in response to a 2012 military coup, the Africa-led International Support Mission in Mali was replaced by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), a mission designed to employ nearly 13,000 peacekeepers.^[78] China initially contributed 135 peacekeepers to MINUSMA, and later added an additional 245 personnel in January 2014. The total contingent numbered nearly six hundred personnel,^[79] most of whom were engaged in repairing critical infrastructure and serving as security guards and medical aides. As this contingent included infantry troops, it marked China’s first deployment of security forces to participate in the fulfillment of UN mandates. Nearly 400 Chinese troops were stationed in Gao, half of whom were engineers tasked with building a hospital and a UN “supercamp” containing UN regional offices, while infantry troops were responsible for securing the camp. The Chinese peacekeepers’ lack of fluency in French, Mali’s official language, limited the tasks with which they could

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assist.^[80]

Meanwhile, China maintained adherence to the core principle of host state consent, noting that the Malian government had requested military contributions to help thwart the advancement of rebel groups in the north of the country. Indeed this was a mission intended to “protect a regime rather than to undermine or depose one,” and China was eager to demonstrate that UN peace operations can reinforce rather than undermine claims to sovereignty.^[81] Yet domestic interests never strayed too far; in examining China’s contribution to advancing peace and security in Mali, it is vital to acknowledge an enduring feature of China-Mali relations: Mali has long supported China’s One China policy.

China’s participation in Mali was significant. Leading up to the mission, Chinese officials were particularly cautious regarding the development of China’s image as a responsible power. As such, “Beijing had been greatly sensitive to any international views that saw it seeking to interfere unilaterally in internal conflicts.”^[82] Moreover, this case is significant in that China and Mali have comparatively small economic ties, yet China is among Mali’s four top trading partners, with Mali’s main exports being cotton and shea butter.^[83] Mali has also figured prominently in China’s expanding interactions with Africa. With multiple state visits between 2004 and 2010, Mali clearly plays role in China’s “cross-regional diplomacy and positive identity-building with the whole of sub-Saharan Africa.”^[84] However, unlike in South Sudan (discussed below), China had no major projects to protect — such as oil refineries — and yet still chose to contribute combat soldiers and thereby establish a new precedent for its repertoire of personnel contributions.^[85] It is interesting to note that China deliberately did not trumpet the involvement of combat soldiers “in the hopes of deflecting international criticism of perceived Chinese military expansion.”^[86]

The situation in Mali offered China an opportunity to experiment with contributing combat forces to UN peace missions without compromising its adherence to the principles of non-interference/respect for sovereignty and host state consent. In addition, China was able to engage in such an experiment not only to reinforce its brand as a responsible power, but also to protect expanding economic interests in Africa. As China’s economic interests in Mali were not as critical as in South Sudan (see below), experimenting with the deployment of combat troops in Mali *before* South Sudan essentially gave China a much-needed test run — although not one without risks to the safety of its troops.^[87]

Case 2: China in South Sudan

In September 2014, China announced it would contribute 700 military personnel to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in order “to help guard the country’s embattled oil fields and protect Chinese workers and installations,” according to a spokesman for the president of South Sudan.^[88] This was not a sporadic decision. On the contrary, Chinese infantrymen from an “elite” combat unit had already been in the region since 2011, protecting PLA engineers working as part of UNMISS.^[89] This is a situation in which China has clear economic imperatives, as China purchases 82% of South Sudan’s oil exports and is heavily invested in infrastructure projects in the world’s newest nation.^[90] Put another way, before the most recent tensions erupted, South Sudan provided 5% of China’s crude oil imports. Yet at the same time, China faces more difficulty here in adhering to the principle of non-interference, since there is no question that China greatly impacts the internal affairs of South Sudan. Yet this is apparently not a strong deterrent for China, whose investments were threatened by the outbreak of civil war in December 2013 following the start of fighting between President Salva Kiir and forces loyal to his former vice president, Riek Machar.^[91] Given China’s ‘crude interests,’ it is not surprising that Chinese infantrymen were stationed in the Unity and Upper Nile states, which house “the only operating oil fields still under the control of the central government.”^[92] China has had a constructive impact in the region beyond the use of combat force. For example, China was instrumental in securing a resumption in the flow of oil in 2013. It is too soon to evaluate the impact of Chinese combat soldiers in South Sudan, as well as the impact of the combat units on other Chinese personnel involved in UN missions.^[93] However, even in the absence of on-the-ground analysis, the case of South Sudan is still crucial in demonstrating the willingness of China to advance peace and security in a region notable for major Chinese economic interests and investments.

Future Directions

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In spite of the reality that it is too soon to offer cogent analysis of China's combat contribution to UN peace operations — just as it is too early to conclude definitively whether or not existing analyses of China's interests and strategies concerning UN peace operations remain relevant or sufficient — a number of observers have discussed possible future directions for China's engagement in advancing peace and security in Africa. In order to project itself as a responsible power and not merely a formidable power, China must confront its history as a “bystander or...balancer” in non-international armed conflicts, and instead work in cooperation with the West and African governments and regional organizations.^[94] However, one must acknowledge that the moves China has already made — particularly with respect to deploying combat troops — are bold and unfamiliar, requiring China to examine how strictly it can adhere to the principles of non-interference and host state consent. While this has not occurred in Mali and South Sudan, a future scenario might involve a host state withdrawing consent for an offensive UN mission. How would China respond, without compromising its new-found strategic identity as a peace keeper and enforcer in Africa? Furthermore, Chinese officials must consider how they might react in the event of a UN force embarking on swift operations to protect civilians, operations associated with a significant risk to the lives of UN mission personnel.^[95] As Rosemary Foot puts it, “any expanded Chinese involvement in peace operations increases certain kinds of risks for the government in Beijing, including a weakening of the norms it has wished to promote, an escalation of tension with host (mainly African) governments and an increased proximity to violence.”^[96] It would be unwise for China to shrug off these concerns in light of the positive notices it has received in previous peace missions, as “the benefits to China's image, both domestic and global, arising from PLA involvement in UN peace operations could easily be squandered” in new, more offensive peace enforcement operations involving combat troops.^[97] Moreover, China's entire aura of “middle power” may prove unsustainable, limiting “China's ability to promote peacekeeping.”^[98] On a more forward-looking note, Beijing has numerous options to consider. Firstly it could deepen its focus on new ways of engaging with African regional bodies, such as the African Union. This may involve additional support — “financial, equipment and logistical contributions, personnel training, or capacity building” — to the African Standby Force.^[99] China could also increase its involvement at the planning level in the work of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Special Committee for Peacekeeping Operations.^[100] Moreover, China may consider ‘hedging its bets’ — given the risks of deploying combat soldiers — and contribute more substantially to holistic peacebuilding efforts in Africa.^[101] This would be consistent with the 2009 FOCAC Action Plan, in which China agreed to “strengthen co-operation with countries concerned in the UN Peace Building Commission and support countries in their post-war reconstruction processes.”^[102]

China could also play a greater role in building consensus between the UN and state parties to armed conflicts, as in Darfur where China used “its influence for the Sudanese government to make them accept peacekeeping forces.”^[103] On the contrary, as China introduces combat soldiers into UN peace missions, the world's largest country appears to be gravitating away from peacebuilding in favour of peace enforcement, yet the two dimensions of UN peace operations need not be mutually exclusive. China has the resources to be engaged in multiple ways in the advancement of African peace and security, beginning with “respecting the will of Africa, listening to the voice of Africa and caring about the concerns of Africa, thus earning the trust of most African countries.”^[104] Perhaps its greatest strength moving forward is its reputation as a country “that looks at Africa as a business opportunity rather than as a hopeless development challenge.”^[105]

Major questions remain surrounding the impact of China's combat contributions and the extent to which these contributions conform with China's evolving approach to multilateralism, the UN, and African security. Scholars may wish to delve more rigorously into questions like those that follow: what are China's motivations for sending combat troops rather than maintaining its previous preference for deploying non-combat personnel to support UN mandates? How does this evolution of China's role in UN peace operations reflect adjustments in the scope of China's global interests, including its increasingly prominent stake in African security and in efforts to protect international peace and security in conformity with the UN Charter? Does China's investment in peace enforcement — the ‘harder,’ more offensive end of the UN peace operations spectrum, with peacebuilding being the other end — indicate a softening of position regarding core principles of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty? Finally, it will be essential to more systematically evaluate the marginal benefit, if one exists, and marginal cost of adding combat troops to the bouquet of China's game-changing contributions to UN missions.

Footnotes

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