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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This Special Report assesses China's evolving participation in international peacekeeping missions in the context of its rise as a major economic and military power. The report is based on data collection on Chinese foreign and security policy issues as well as fieldwork in China and Norway. Supported by the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace, the report is part of USIP's broader effort to understand China's engagement in the peace processes and internal conflicts of other nations.

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Marc Lanteigne

The Role of UN Peacekeeping in China's Expanding Strategic Interests

Summary

- Despite its growing status in the international system, including in the military sphere, China continues to be a strong supporter of United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKO), a stance commonly considered to be more the purview of medium powers. China is also a major contributor of peacekeeping personnel and support.
- Beijing's current UN peacekeeping policies have helped China expand its diplomacy throughout the developing world, a notable action given the ongoing evolution of its Belt and Road trade initiatives.
- In spite of recent Chinese peacekeeper casualties, the country continues preparations—including new training programs and units—to permit its peacekeeping personnel to more effectively operate in active combat zones such as Mali and South Sudan.
- China is now in a position to become more active in UNPKO reforms and provide greater input into mission parameters, given its greater contribution to the UN budget and expanded international commitments.
- China's support for UN peacekeeping operations has become more visibly integrated into its military reform policies. However, Beijing must engage in a policy dialogue about how modern peacekeeping can be reconciled with traditional Chinese views on state sovereignty, impartiality, and being a "responsible great power."

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Introduction

Although China is now almost universally acknowledged as a great power and a potential global power, Beijing continues to approach United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKO) with policies more akin to those of a medium power. For much of the Cold War period, China was highly skeptical of the concept of United Nations peacekeeping, but the past thirty years have seen a dramatic reversal of this view and a greater acceptance of participation in peacekeeping operations as a major component of Beijing's still-evolving "military operations other than war" (MOOTW) policies.

Among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, China continues to be the largest contributor of personnel for UN peacekeeping operations (see table 1). As of July 31, 2018, 2,519 Chinese UN personnel were stationed abroad, nearly 3 percent of the 91,249 UN peacekeepers deployed around the world. Since the early 1990s, China has deployed approximately 36,000 personnel for UN missions.¹ Beijing also agreed to raise its annual contribution to the UNPKO budget from 3.9 percent in 2012 to 10.3 percent between 2016 and 2018, thus making China the second-largest financial contributor after the United States.² At the end of 2016, it was even reported that Beijing was seeking the leadership of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, a position that to date has been dominated by France. Even though China has demonstrated a deepening commitment to and greater visibility in UNPKO, there has yet to be a Chinese national as head of a major peacekeeping mission.³

China's commitment to UN peacekeeping was further underscored in September 2015, when President Xi Jinping announced in a speech to the UN General Assembly that China would be creating a standby UN contingent of 8,000 Chinese personnel, with some forces being seconded to a rapid-response force. That year, China also agreed to join the UN's Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System, and pledged a ten-year, \$1 billion UN Peace and Development Trust Fund for joint China-UN peace initiatives.⁴

At present, the main question is will Beijing be able to continue this level of engagement with UN peacekeeping as China evolves as a great power? Unlike medium powers such as Australia, Canada, and South Korea—which tend to be perceived as "joiner" states and nonpartisan actors—great powers often are less likely to remain neutral, or to be seen as such, in policies addressing international or civil conflicts.⁵ As a result, great powers such as the United States and Russia have been less inclined to participate directly in UN peacekeeping operations beyond a support role, although both countries have considerably more forces deployed as part of non-UN missions. While the US government called for drastic cuts to its contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget in April 2017, it has since softened that stance while still vowing to hold to nothing more than a 25 percent share of the overall budget.⁶ Washington's potential retreat from UNPKO may therefore open the door to further Chinese influence in peacekeeping development.

China's Positive Stance on UN Peacekeeping

Ever since China began to reform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in late 2015, UN peacekeeping has been an integral part of the restructuring processes. China will likely continue to invest in peacekeeping for four main reasons.

First, China's "rise" has been both strategic and economic in nature and, compared with that of previous great powers, has taken place very swiftly. This rapid rise has created concerns, especially in the United States, that despite China's earlier "peaceful development" foreign policies, the Xi government is becoming more confident in challenging the strategic status quo. This concern has increased as China's power-projection capabilities have

Table 1. Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Operations by the Five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council (as of July 31, 2018)

Country	Police	UN Military Experts on Mission	Staff Officers	Troops	Total
China	18	32	51	2,418	2,519
France	34	2	49	650	735
United Kingdom	0	4	27	674	705
Russia	29	37	5	0	71
United States	9	3	41	0	53

Source: United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations

matured. China’s shift has been especially noticeable in the territorial disputes in the East and the South China Seas, as well as in Beijing’s growing interest in the Indian Ocean region. By maintaining support for multilateral security initiatives, including UNPKO, China seeks to counter concerns that it will be a revisionist great power.

Second, Beijing’s greater commitment to UN peacekeeping missions has not only provided the Chinese military with increased experience in participating in multilateral operations and military-to-military diplomacy but has also helped the People’s Liberation Army achieve its restructuring goals, which involve greater effectiveness in MOOTW situations. Beijing also has improved training, sought to reduce overall PLA numbers by 300,000 (primarily from ground forces), and created a PLA “Strategic Support Force” to provide communications and intelligence support to other branches of the Chinese military and to oversee cyber- and electronic-warfare capabilities.⁷ Along with these initiatives, China’s overall military spending has increased steadily over the past two decades, prompting questions about the evolution of its military strategies.

Third, Beijing’s deepening engagement with UN peacekeeping is a building block for the development of China as an “internationally socialized country” that can operate effectively in a multilateral environment, as well as a “responsible great power.”⁸ The latter concept presents the development of Chinese peacekeeping activities as a means for Beijing to develop its own approaches to multilateral security cooperation in keeping with great power status. Beijing also wishes to underscore the idea that China is developing into an “atypical” great power—namely, one that respects international sovereignty, in keeping with its traditional views of peaceful coexistence. Moreover, China’s commitments to peacekeeping since the 1990s have made its security policies more versatile—a better match for Beijing’s growing global diplomacy toward states and regions beyond China’s periphery, as well as making it better prepared to respond to nontraditional security concerns such as terrorism, insurgencies, and weak or collapsed states.

Finally, China under Xi Jinping has embarked on regime-building endeavors designed to further integrate it into the global financial system. At the vanguard of this process has been the Belt and Road Initiative, representing more than \$1 trillion in funding and partnerships with more than sixty countries inside and outside the Asia-Pacific region. Other Beijing-led institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, and the Silk Road Fund, have been established alongside existing Western economic

China's decision to participate more vigorously in UN peacekeeping operations stems from its interest in building an identity as a "peacebuilder" that understands the connections between underdevelopment and insecurity.

organizations. For these initiatives to succeed, Beijing requires security and stability; participation in UN peacekeeping, including missions that involve war-to-peace transitions, may help Beijing achieve those desired outcomes.

Thus, China's decision to participate more vigorously in UN peacekeeping operations stems from its interest in building an identity as a "peacebuilder" that understands the connections between underdevelopment and insecurity, which are inherent in many current civil conflicts.⁹ Nonetheless, as China continues to deepen its engagement with peacekeeping and war-to-peace transition policies under the UN aegis, challenges are starting to appear.

Emerging Challenges

Currently, China's participation in UN peacekeeping enjoys both governmental and domestic public support. Yet, as Chinese blue helmets continue to find themselves in more dangerous "peace enforcement" situations with less-clear mandates and "exit strategies," and the danger to overseas Chinese UN personnel also grows, it is by no means certain that this support will continue. At the beginning of 2018, Chinese UN peacekeepers were deployed in ten different operations in North and sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, with the largest number of personnel currently deployed for missions in South Sudan, Mali, the Darfur region of Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Recently, China has also sought to augment its peacekeeping capabilities by beginning special-operations training for select Chinese UN forces at a base in Hainan Province. As of late 2017, the PLA had organized nineteen separate units for engineering, helicopter crewing, infantry, transport, security, and rapid-reaction forces that could be deployed for peacekeeping missions.¹⁰ China also opened a logistics support base in Djibouti in mid-2017 to act as a hub for peacekeeping and other strategic policies in Africa and the Indian Ocean region.¹¹

With China's growing commitment to more "robust" peacekeeping missions, including in regions locked in civil war, Chinese personnel are increasingly placed in harm's way. These changed security conditions have made China more willing to deploy combat forces alongside traditional support units such as civilian police, engineering specialists, and medical staff. Chinese personnel are therefore at greater risk of being caught in a combat situation or being directly targeted by hostiles. In May 2016, Chinese UN peacekeeper Sgt. Shen Liangliang was killed while on duty in northern Mali, and four other Chinese personnel were injured. The Chinese government strongly condemned the attack, and promised to take steps to protect Chinese peacekeepers in the country.¹² Yet all of two months later, in July 2016, an exploding shell killed two Chinese UN peacekeepers (Cpl. Li Lei and Sgt. Yang Shupeng) operating in South Sudan, and injured five others. In January 2018, Chinese troops found themselves in a standoff with armed rebels near the South Sudanese capital of Juba. Although the incident ended without casualties, it illustrated the changed circumstances that Chinese UN blue helmets currently face.¹³ As a 2016 *China Daily* editorial noted, "peacekeeping operations have entered an area of unpredictable deep waters."¹⁴

China's involvement in current and potential peacekeeping activities will continue to test its enthusiasm for the role, especially as it becomes involved with UN missions farther from East Asia. Beijing's most recent Defence White Paper, published in May 2015, states that China will continue pursuing military-to-military relations and multilateral security cooperation, as it also continues to "participate in UN peacekeeping missions, strictly observe the mandates of the UN Security Council, maintain its commitment to the peaceful settlement of conflicts, promote development and reconstruction, and safeguard regional peace and security."¹⁵

Chinese policymakers have supported UN peacekeeping reform initiatives, including a September 2017 UN Security Council resolution that called for improvements in UN peace-

keeping capabilities and further coordination with specific peacekeeping initiatives in Africa. At the same time, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Liu Jieyi, stated that the UN should adapt a "holistic" approach to peacekeeping, acknowledging the specific problems of civil conflicts while respecting state sovereignty and seeking to address the distinct origins of a given conflict.¹⁶ This position may influence China's decisions regarding the peacekeeping operations in which it chooses to participate, as well as the criteria for selecting new missions.

Conclusion

China continues to view its participation in UN peacekeeping operations as a positive strategy for several reasons, including training personnel for MOOTW, furthering Chinese diplomacy in developing regions, and blunting international perceptions about a "China threat" as its military budget continues to grow and concerns about flashpoints such as the South China Sea and Taiwan persist.¹⁷ However, Beijing is becoming more cognizant of the increased threats to Chinese peacekeepers as the UN engages in operations within active combat theaters such as Mali and South Sudan, as well as in situations where the line between traditional conflict and terrorism is blurred. To further complicate matters, modern peacekeeping does not always fit into Chinese perceptions of impartiality, respect for sovereignty, the requirement for consent, and "win-win" situations.

Chinese power has grown considerably since its first tentative forays into peacekeeping operations almost three decades ago, and as a potential global power Beijing has found it increasingly difficult to avoid bias when addressing conflicts. Efforts to balance these views may become more complicated, especially if China participates in future peacekeeping missions that are more akin to "peace enforcement," and the proposed Chinese rapid-reaction force becomes a reality. So far, Beijing has not overtly addressed these looming contradictions. If China wishes to continue to be viewed as a "peacekeeping power," it must adjust its thinking to reflect the more complex—and often messier—aspects of modern conflicts.

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