

China's evolving motivations and goals in UN peacekeeping participation

International Journal

2018, Vol. 73(3) 464–473

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DOI: 10.1177/0020702018795898

journals.sagepub.com/home/ijx



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Abstract

This brief examines how the motivations and goals of China's participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations have evolved since 1990 as a result of China's changing national interests. We conclude that China is unlikely to abandon its long-held foreign policy principle of non-interference. However, motivated by a desire to be seen as a responsible global power, Beijing is seriously considering a more proactive approach to humanitarian crises, which may include direct intervention. Furthermore, as a significant contributor of troops and financing, China is uniquely positioned to represent the perspectives of both developing and developed countries in UN peacekeeping. To do so, Beijing will need to increase its leadership role in UN peacekeeping operations and offer creative ideas about how to promote reconciliation and development in post-conflict societies.

Keywords

Peacekeeping, China, United Nations, Africa, Responsibility to Protect

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Introduction

China is currently the largest troop-contributing country among the permanent members of the Security Council, with more than 2600 peacekeepers in 10 of the 16 ongoing missions. After the United States, it is the second largest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget.¹ In addition, on 22 September 2017, China completed the registration process for providing an 8000-strong peacekeeping standby force at the United Nations, fulfilling the pledge that President Xi Jinping made in 2015.² China has certainly come a long way since it began to participate in UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs) by sending five military observers to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in the Middle East in 1990.³

What explains China's increasing commitment to UNPKOs, especially in recent years? While humanitarianism is most certainly part of China's (or any country's) motivation to participate in peacekeeping activities, this instinct alone has rarely been enough for states to agree on what needs to be done and act accordingly. Furthering one's own interests in the provision of a global public good is necessarily an important part of a country's motivation to join such efforts. Therefore, China's incentive to step up its contributions to UNPKOs should be examined in the context of its rise as a global economic and military power, and its changing interests during that rise.

Breaking international isolation

A range of motivations have been identified to explain China's participation in UN peacekeeping activities, including the desire to be recognized as a responsible global power, to gain operational experience for its own military, and to protect its overseas economic interests.⁴ In contrast, little attention has been paid to the particular timing of China's entrance onto the peacekeeping scene.

In 1990, China was experiencing diplomatic isolation from Western countries in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests a year earlier. Externally, with the end of the Cold War, the shared security interests of the United States and China had disappeared. Internally, China's economic reform was barely a decade old, with much uncertainty surrounding its future trajectory. In this context, joining UNPKOs that year emerged as a means to break through the international isolation. UN peacekeeping provided a platform for China to gradually rehabilitate its

1. The assessed contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget are 10.25 percent and 28.47 percent for China and the United States, respectively, for the 2017–2018 fiscal year. IPI Peacekeeping Database, <http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/contributions/> (accessed 16 May 2018).
2. "China registers 8,000 standby peacekeepers at UN," *Xinhua*, 28 September 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/28/c_136645953.htm (accessed 16 May 2018).
3. United Nations Peacekeeping, Troop and Police Contributors website, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors> (accessed 16 May 2018).
4. "China's growing role in African peace and security," *Saferworld*, January 2011; Courtney J. Fung, "What explains China's deployment to UN peacekeeping operations?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 16, no. 3 (2016): 409–441.

international image, and maintain a working relationship with Western countries, especially the United States.

In the following decade, China's motivation to create or restore a more favourable external environment for domestic reforms, combined with its lack of experience in peacekeeping, led to a low-key and accommodating approach to UN peacekeeping.⁵ By January 2000, China had fielded only 532 personnel in total over the previous decade, and had contributed a mere 1 percent of the UN peacekeeping budget.⁶

Countering the “China threat”

The year of 1999 was a turning point for China's participation in UN peacekeeping. The change in China's approach was triggered by NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, an operation that bypassed UN authorization.⁷ Alarmed by the threat of weakened UN authority, China became more active in UN peacekeeping, in both its voting behaviour and its personnel contribution. China had reasons to be concerned about the UN's role in global security matters diminishing. The UN is the only major international security institution in which China has significant voting power, giving the country an important say on global as well as its own security concerns. A marginalized UN would mean more unilateralism by the United States and its allies, presenting a potential threat to China's own security. Thus, buttressing UN authority through stepping up support for UN peacekeeping was in China's interests.

Many argue that China's desire to be seen as a constructive and responsible global power is another motivation behind its active participation in UN peacekeeping after 1999. However, if viewed in light of China's broader foreign policy objectives in this period, behaving as a responsible power was a strategy rather than a motivation. In the decade following 1999, the narrative of the “China threat” emerged and was discussed intensely in the Western media and policy circles. The nature of the threat was rarely made clear; however, the term captured the uneasiness that China's rise engendered in the West and some of China's neighbouring countries. The Chinese government coined the term “peaceful rise” in the same period, but it was not enough to assuage concerns; more costly signals—that is, actions—were necessary. Showing a stronger willingness to work within the UN framework by taking on more peacekeeping responsibility was thus seen as a

5. Zili Deng and Cuiwen Wang, “Explaining China's participation in peacekeeping operations in Africa after the Cold War” [in Chinese], *Quarterly Journal of International Politics* no. 2 (2012): 1–37.
6. James Reilly and Bates Gill, “Sovereignty, intervention and peacekeeping: The view from Beijing,” *Survival* 42, no. 3 (2000): 41–59.
7. Fung, “What explains China's deployment” p.414 in Fung's article; International Crisis Group, “China's growing role in UN peacekeeping,” Asia Report no. 166, 17 April 2009, p.11 in the report; Masayuki Masuda, “China's peacekeeping diplomacy and troop dispatch: A new avenue for engagement with the international community,” *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security* no. 12 (2011): 3–25; Reilly and Gill, “Sovereignty, intervention and peacekeeping,” pp.46–48 in the Reilly and Gill article

strategy to counter the China threat narrative.⁸ Moreover, working under a UN mandate conferred legitimacy upon UN peacekeeping activities, and did not go against China's long-held foreign policy principle of non-interference.

But more robust participation in UN peacekeeping is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it may reduce other countries' concern that China will act more unilaterally once it acquires more capability; on the other hand, a large troop presence in overseas missions might invite further speculation about Chinese intentions. Navigating these two countervailing forces has led China to exercise restraint regarding greater peacekeeping activities.⁹

Protecting overseas interests?

A significant aspect of China's continued rise is the expansion of its overseas economic activities. A natural question is whether China's peacekeeping activities have responded to the need to protect those new interests. In particular, China has vast trade and resource investments in Africa, and it is plausible that China's peacekeeping activities in that continent are partly motivated by a desire to protect and promote its economic interests there. However, a close examination of some of the facts on the ground suggests that the relationship may not be so straightforward.

First, the proportion of Chinese peacekeepers in each mission has been rather small: China's average contribution by mission-month was 2.7 percent between 1990 and 2016.¹⁰ This ratio has not changed much since 2012, when China's personnel contribution to UNPKOs became larger than the combined total contribution of the other four permanent members of the Security Council. In May 2015, for example, China contributed 3084 peacekeepers, the largest monthly personnel contribution it had ever made. Nevertheless, this amounts to an average of 308 peacekeepers, or 3.6 percent, in each of the ten missions in which China was engaged at the time. If Chinese peacekeepers represent a small fraction of a much larger UN peacekeeping contingency in each mission, it is difficult to make the case that they could wield sufficient influence in the host country to advance China-specific interests while being deployed as part of a UN mission.

Second, China does not seem to be particularly selective about where it participates. Out of the 29 peacekeeping missions in which China has participated since 1990 (including ongoing ones), 15 have been in Africa, roughly 52 percent of its total participation. The figure is not out of step with 47 percent of UN

8. Yin He, "China's changing policy on UN peacekeeping operations," Institute for Security and Development Policy Asia Paper, July 2007.

9. Ibid. p.10; Dongyan Li, "China's participation in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding: Prospects and ways forward" [in Chinese], *Foreign Affairs Review* 29, no. 3 (2012): 5–18.

10. Mission-month measures a country's average contribution every month in each mission. Although China has increased its personnel contribution over the years, because the number of UN peacekeeping missions has increased as well, the mission-month average has not changed very much in this period. IPI Peacekeeping Database. <http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/contributions>, (accessed 16 May 2018).

peacekeeping missions being in Africa in the same period.¹¹ Further analysis of Chinese peacekeeping operations within the African continent points to the same conclusion. By August 2017, Chinese peacekeepers constituted eight percent of the total UN peacekeeping forces in South Sudan, two percent in Sudan, and one percent in Congo, despite the fact that China has significant trade and resource interests in these countries. By way of comparison, Chinese peacekeepers accounted for five percent of the total UN peacekeepers in western Sahara, three percent in Mali, and 20 percent in Liberia, where China has little, or at best moderate, economic interests compared with other countries on the continent.¹²

Thus, based on the overall proportion and distribution of Chinese peacekeepers, it is difficult to establish a direct link between China's economic interests and its peacekeeping activities in Africa. More likely, participating in UN peacekeeping is seen as having an indirect effect on China's interests by promoting a stable regional security environment and generating goodwill toward the country in the region. It is also the case that China so far has not been in the driver's seat, proposing peacekeeping initiatives that could more directly target locations of interest to China; at best, it has been a willing participant. This may change as China seeks more influence at UN headquarters. Peacekeeping may indeed become part of China's comprehensive strategy to protect its overseas interests.

Seeking a leadership role

In recent years, establishing a reputation as a responsible global power has become a more urgent driver of China's stronger support for UN peacekeeping. As the rest of the world continues to show ambivalence toward the implications of China's rapid rise, promoting such an image will help alleviate such concerns while also responding to growing calls for Beijing to take up more global responsibilities. In addition to setting up a permanent peacekeeping force of 8000, President Xi Jinping announced at the UN General Assembly in September 2015 that China would contribute US \$1 billion over the next decade for the establishment of a China-UN peace and development fund. He also pledged US \$100 million to the African Union to support its standby force and build up an emergency response force.¹³

Two important signals are conveyed by these new initiatives: that Beijing continues to see the UN as the primary forum for addressing global security

11. There have been fifty-nine UNPKOs since 1990, and twenty-eight have been in Africa. UN, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/operations/> (accessed 16 May 2018).

12. The percentages are calculated based on the UN publication *Summary of Contributions to Peacekeeping by Mission, Country and Post Police, UN Military Experts on Mission and Troops 31/08/2017*, https://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2017/aug17_5.pdf (accessed 16 May 2018).

13. Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "China's Xi says to commit 8,000 troops for UN peacekeeping force," *Reuters*, 28 September 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-china/chinas-xi-says-to-commit-8000-troopsfor-u-n-peacekeeping-force-idUSKCN0RS1Z120150929> (accessed 16 May 2018).

challenges, and that Beijing is seeking a leadership role in UNPKOs. When China created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015, it was widely seen as competing with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The move thus intensified speculation that Beijing would pursue a strategy of reshaping the world order. Within China, views range widely regarding what the country's grand strategy should be, from working primarily within the existing system to radically redesigning the system with different underpinning philosophies to the present ones.¹⁴ However, there is little disagreement on the wisdom of continuing to work within the UN framework on security matters.¹⁵

From a Chinese perspective, the UN is an inclusive multilateral organization in which China enjoys significant decision-making power, especially compared with international economic organizations. Moreover, given Beijing's long-standing foreign policy principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, a UN mandate provides necessary legitimacy when China sends forces overseas to participate in peacekeeping. Finally, some argue that the UN is an important platform in which China can work with other great powers on non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism, global epidemics, environmental crises, food security, and refugee challenges; a working relationship on such issues may have positive spill-over effects on bilateral relations by increasing communication, reducing mutual distrust, and thus promoting cooperation on traditional security issues.¹⁶

While the forum is the same, Beijing is seeking a more significant leadership role in UNPKOs in the future. Given China's combined troop and financial contributions, there is a sense in Beijing that China has not had proportionate input on peacekeeping decisions. Some Chinese analysts go so far as to say that the discrepancy has become an impediment for China's further engagement in such activities.¹⁷ The disproportion is seen in two areas: a lack of leadership roles for China in UN peacekeeping, and a dearth of Chinese input on the agendas and ideas behind UNPKO activities.

The lack of leadership roles is, to some extent, the result of China's own past limitations. For a long time, China did not have enough experienced personnel to staff high-level positions in UNPKOs, though this has been changing. Since 2007, four senior Chinese officers have commanded UN peacekeeping missions, and in 2010, the Peacekeeping Center of China's Ministry of National Defense hosted a

14. Fan He, Weijiang Feng, and Jin Xu, "On the challenges of global governance mechanism and China's countermeasures" [in Chinese], *World Economics and Politics* no. 4 (2013): 19–39; Zhongying Pang and Wang Ruiping Wang, "China's strategic response to global governance," *China International Studies* no. 4 (2013): 57–68.

15. From our interviews of Chinese analysts, July–August, 2017.

16. Dongyan Li, "Global security governance and China's options" [in Chinese], *World Economics and Politics* no. 4 (2013): 40–54; Bo Zhou, "How China can improve UN peacekeeping: The right way for Beijing to step up," *Foreign Affairs*, 15 November 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-15/how-china-can-improve-un-peacekeeping> (accessed 16 May 2018).

17. Yin He, "UN peacekeeping affairs and China's discourse power" [in Chinese], *World Economics and Politics* no. 11 (2016): 40–61; Li, "China's participation in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding," pp.10–11.

senior commander training course, attended by 19 officers from the People's Liberation Army.¹⁸ More efforts in these directions will help further elevate China's leadership role in UN peacekeeping.

China has also been hesitant to offer ideas about a significant aspect of peacekeeping: post-conflict reconstruction or peacebuilding. Chinese peacekeepers have built roads, bridges, and buildings where elections were held, but they have largely remained on the sidelines when domestic reform efforts have unfolded with the assistance of Western peacebuilders. There is a nascent willingness to do more in this regard. Consistent with recent scholarship on peacekeeping,¹⁹ Chinese observers point out that the political reforms that attempt to build Western-style democracy in conflict-ridden societies have not been particularly successful in bringing about stable peace and development.²⁰ Despite this criticism, China has not articulated a clear alternative path for promoting reconciliation and development in such societies, along with peacekeeping. Moreover, Chinese peacekeepers have yet to develop substantial experience and skills in working with local populations—building trust, gathering intelligence, and so on. If China is to play a leadership role in peacekeeping, these issues need to be addressed.

To intervene or not

Beijing's deeper commitment to peacekeeping overseas entails a rethinking of its non-interference policy. When China dispatched combat troops for the first time in 2015 to join UN peacekeepers in South Sudan, this was seen as a significant departure from China's practice of providing enabling units only (logistics, engineering, and medical units), and a sign that Beijing was now willing to use force when the need arose. That has not happened. Chinese analysts emphasize that the combat troops in Sudan were deployed to protect civilians, other UN peacekeepers, or officials; they were not meant to be involved in combat against local warring parties.²¹ This position has created difficulty when protecting civilians necessitates such engagement; in fact, China, along with peacekeepers from other countries, was criticized for not responding to an NGO's SOS call in Juba in July 2016.²² Increasingly, Beijing will be confronted with the challenge of fulfilling the UN mandate to protect civilians while insisting on China's tradition of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries.

18. "China holds high-level UN peacekeeping training class," *People's Daily Online*, 21 September 2010, <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90786/7147474.html> (accessed 16 May 2018).

19. Naazneen H. Barma, *The Peacebuilding Puzzle: Political Order in Post-Conflict States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Michael Barnett, Songying Fang, and Christoph Zurcher, "Compromised peacebuilding," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2014): 608–620.

20. From our interviews of Chinese analysts, July–August 2017.

21. *Ibid.* This is from interview.

22. "China denies allegations its peacekeepers abandoned South Sudan posts," *Reuters*, 11 October 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-southsudan/china-denies-allegations-its-peacekeepers-abandoned-south-sudan-posts-idUSKCN12B01B> (accessed 16 May 2018).

However, few in Beijing advocate abandoning this long-held policy.²³ Not only does China continue to be concerned about its own vulnerability with regard to its sovereignty, but the commitment is also seen as necessary to alleviate concerns among China's neighbours and other developing countries with whom China has had significant economic ties. In the meantime, there is a widely shared view that to be seen as a responsible global power, Beijing needs to step up and respond more forcefully when facing global humanitarian crises. According to these analysts, the key question for Beijing to rethink is not whether to abandon the non-interference policy, but how to be more proactive in addressing new global security threats while upholding the policy.

The space for Beijing to manoeuvre within this framework is not quite as limited as many external analysts believe. Some call this new approach—still in the early stage of its formulation—“constructive intervention.”²⁴ Among the ideas proposed, one thought is that when a domestic crisis generates negative international consequences, Beijing could argue that the issue is no longer a domestic affair.²⁵ However, this justification is unlikely to be enough when a country faces a severe domestic humanitarian crisis without an immediate large international impact. Another scenario warranting constructive intervention might be when there is an international consensus regarding a humanitarian crisis. This idea reinforces the importance of working with the UN, but also points to the need to work closely with regional organizations—for example, the African Union—which may have the authority to sanction an intervention in a member state's domestic affairs during a grave humanitarian crisis.²⁶ In the eyes of regional actors, this might legitimize an international intervention, particularly in cases where a UN mandate may not have strong regional support. Acquiring authorization from a regional organization may thus serve as a substitute for the host country's consent, and allow Beijing the flexibility to intervene under certain circumstances.

Conclusion and recommendations

On 20 September 2017, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2378, which calls for peacekeeping reform. The resolution is an explicit

23. Yaling Pan, “China's non-intervention diplomacy: From defensive advocacy to participatory advocacy” [in Chinese], *World Economics and Politics* no. 9 (2012): 45–57; Ni Zhen and Zhimin Chen, “The principle of non-interference in internal affairs and China's voting behavior in the Security Council after the Cold War” [in Chinese], *China International Studies* no. 3 (2014): 21–36; Yuan Yang, “A study on the direction, purpose, conditions and methods, and degree of constructive engagement” [in Chinese], in *China and the World in 2016* (Beijing, China: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016), 108–113.

24. Yang, “A study on the direction, purpose, conditions and methods.”. pp.108–113.

25. Pan, “China's non-intervention diplomacy.”. p.55.

26. See *Constitutive Act of the African Union*, article 4 (h): “The right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity,” <http://www.achpr.org/instruments/au-constitutive-act/> (accessed 16 May 2018).

acknowledgement that UNPKOs have been plagued by serious problems, especially with respect to accountability and effectiveness; however, it is also a fresh affirmation that countries around the world continue to see UNPKOs as central to maintaining the collective security system established by the UN Charter.

China's participation in UN peacekeeping has served its own interests well while providing global public benefits. At the moment, as a significant contributor of both troops and financing, China is uniquely positioned to be a bridge between the perspectives of troop-contributing developing countries and of richer donor countries in the Security Council, thereby lending more legitimacy to UN peacekeeping missions. This will ultimately benefit China's reputation as a responsible power and facilitate its further peaceful rise.

Beijing can do more in three areas. First, to increase its decision-making power in UN peacekeeping, Beijing needs to step up its training of additional qualified military and civilian personnel who can hold leadership roles at UN peacekeeping headquarters. In the meantime, the international community can reinforce China's motivation to contribute more toward much-needed UNPKOs by lending support to such training and by giving greater consideration to Chinese candidates for high-level leadership roles in UNPKOs.

Second, China should be much more proactive in discussing and offering creative ideas about how to promote reconciliation and development in post-conflict societies. This would also require Beijing to direct a great deal of attention toward helping its peacekeepers develop the necessary skills for interacting with local populations, working with NGOs, and gathering intelligence to safeguard peacekeepers and workers. Learning from much more experienced Western countries and NGOs could shorten the learning curve.

Finally, working closely with regional organizations such as the African Union could add legitimacy to more intrusive UN operations, and help China resolve the dilemma between its non-interference policy and the UN mandate to protect civilians. Beijing might achieve such a goal in two ways: by increasing the peacekeeping capabilities of regional organizations through providing financial and training support, and by intervening more directly in accordance with a regional organization's mandate which authorizes intervention in times of humanitarian crises.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: United States Institute of Peace grant #95314417P1QA00701.

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