

China's Involvement in Africa's Security: The Case of China's Participation in the UN Mission to Stabilize Mali

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Abstract

China has been much more involved in Africa's economy and trade than in its security. However, over the past decade or so, China has increased its participation in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UN PKOs), particularly in Africa. It has also taken steps to better protect its overseas nationals and, in 2017, established a naval base in Djibouti. This article focuses on the participation of China's People's Liberation Army in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) since 2013. It aims to unpack the diplomatic process that led China to take part in this mission and to analyse the form of this participation. Mali was the second time (the first being in South Sudan in 2012) that China opted to deploy combat troops under the UN banner, underscoring a deepening involvement in PKOs and an increasing readiness to face risks. Finally, this article explores the implications of China's participation in the MINUSMA for its foreign and security posture as a whole. Often perceived as a realist rising power, by more actively participating in UN PKOs China is trying to demonstrate that it is a responsible and "integrationist" great power, ready to play the game according to the commonly approved international norms. Is this really the case?

Keywords: peacekeeping; United Nations; MINUSMA; responsibility to protect (R2P); People's Liberation Army; China security policy; Chinese foreign policy; China–Africa relations

China is not only currently perceived to be a rising power but also an assertive one that is largely influenced in its foreign and security policy behaviour by realist international relations theories.¹ At the same time, since the beginning of its reform process in the late 1970s, and even more so at the end of the Cold War, China has gradually integrated itself into the international system, beginning with the institutions and norms of the United Nations (UN), to which it

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¹ Cabestan 2016.

was admitted in 1971, and continuing with the World Trade Organization (WTO), to which it acceded in 2001, providing constructivists with much to discuss. It can be argued that this integration has been and will remain selective, partly because of the nature of the Chinese political regime and partly owing to its geo-strategic interests. For example, China has not yet ratified the UN Covenant of Political and Civil Rights, which it signed in 1998, and its interpretation of the UN Convention of the Law of Sea (UNCLOS) does not concur with the one endorsed by most countries – it refuses third party arbitration. Beijing’s highly negative reaction to The Hague international tribunal’s 12 July 2016 arbitral decision on maritime rights in the South China Sea has confirmed this uncooperative stance. However, at the same time, China has become more and more active in international organizations, and particularly so in the UN system.

The prominence given by China to the UN system highlights both China’s own priorities as well as the limits of its integration in the international community, as the UN largely operates on the smallest common denominator accepted by most countries, and especially the five permanent members of its Security Council (UNSC), where China has had a seat since its creation in 1945. In other words, China is more comfortable with the UN than with any other intergovernmental international organization because the UN is still largely a Westphalian or, to be more accurate, a neo-Westphalian institution.² The Chinese government treasures sovereignty and non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs and has only recently (around 2005 and because of the Darfur crisis) and carefully articulated its own interpretation of the “responsibility to protect” (*baohu de zeren* 保护的责任, hereafter R2P) in times of extreme domestic crises. Although China formally endorsed this principle at the 2005 World Summit, it has continued to consider this innovation with great suspicion, adopting a restrictive interpretation of both its meaning and implications.³ And it has remained more than lukewarm towards the efforts of Western countries – and also UN efforts – to give priority to the “protection of civilians” (POC).⁴

China’s Growing Participation in PKOs

In this context and with the precautions mentioned above, China sees its participation in UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) as a rather easy and acceptable way to more actively contribute to the world’s security. The priority China gives to UN PKOs also underscores its consensual or inclusive approach to security as well as its steady opposition to alliance systems and unilateral interventions by Western alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), into other countries’ internal affairs. China was highly critical of NATO’s intervention in Yugoslavia around the Kosovo crisis in 1999 and also in Afghanistan

2 Kim 1993, 19; Barma, Ratner and Weber 2007, 25.

3 Alden and Large 2015, 134–35; Mariani 2015, 258–59; Chen 2016.

4 Teitt 2012.

in 2001, although in the latter case, the UNSC, with China's support, quickly authorized the establishment of a NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Kabul (Resolution 1386, December 2001). It was also fiercely opposed to the US intervention in Iraq in 2003, in spite of the fact that in this particular crisis, China had earlier endorsed a UNSC resolution (1441, November 2002), which had given precedence to non-proliferation over non-interference (and was later used by the US to justify its invasion of Iraq).

China's recognition of the positive role played by PKOs in peace and stability maintenance goes back to the 1980s and its own initial participation in PKOs at the end of the Cold War.⁵ China's first meaningful involvement in a UN-sponsored operation occurred in Cambodia in 1992–1993.⁶ Since the late 1990s, China has gradually become involved in more PKOs, particularly in Africa (Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Darfur and South Sudan).⁷ In 2006, in the wake of the Israel–Lebanon conflict, Beijing offered for the first time to deploy combat troops to Lebanon at the request of the UN, but the offer was not accepted and eventually China sent engineers and medical units to the country.⁸

Around the same time, China began to more willingly embrace the need to coordinate peacekeeping and peacebuilding, as well as to consider the POC principle in a more positive light.⁹ The UN's growing emphasis since 2009 on the smooth transition from peacekeeping to peacemaking and peacebuilding has played an important role in this gradual change. The deterioration of the situation in the DRC in 2010 led China for the first time to consider that “the responsibility to protect civilians supersedes the host country's consent” (which was then withdrawn) and endorse an extension of the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) mandate, and later, its transformation into the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO).¹⁰ However, China has generally been reluctant to become too involved in peacemaking and POC actions, often opting for a “cautiously conservative” attitude “in supporting peace enforcement missions where Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows the UNSC to take military and non-military actions ‘to restore international peace and security’, is invoked.”¹¹ Furthermore, China's approach to peacebuilding has been based on giving priority to economic development and poverty alleviation rather than to democratization and the introduction of good governance practices.¹²

5 Kim 1993.

6 Hirono 2012.

7 Alden 2014, 5.

8 Mariani 2015, 260.

9 Zhao 2012.

10 Mariani 2015, 258–59.

11 Ibid., 265.

12 Zhao 2012, 108–113.

Nonetheless, China's recent contribution to PKOs in terms of both personnel and budget has steadily increased: since 2010, it has rapidly become the biggest contributor of personnel among the P5 (the five permanent members of the UNSC), deploying 3,042 blue helmets in April 2016 (and 2,500 in April 2018, out of a total of 104,043) against just 1,271 in April 2006.¹³ Similarly, its contribution to the UN's PKO budget has increased sharply. In 2016, China became the second-largest contributor to this budget (10.25 per cent of US\$7.87 billion in 2016–2017, against 6.64 per cent of US\$8.27 billion the previous year and only 3.93 per cent in 2011–2012), behind the United States (28.47 per cent against 28.36 per cent and 27.14 per cent), but ahead of Japan (9.68 per cent against 10.83 per cent and 12.53 per cent), which had occupied this place for many years.¹⁴ While still the sixth-largest contributor in 2015, China clearly decided to overtake Japan in order to position itself as a leading actor in UN PKOs.

This objective was clearly spelled out by Chinese president Xi Jinping 习近平 in his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2015. Then, Xi promised to intensify China's participation in PKOs both in terms of human resources and funding. He announced that China would join the UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System and contribute 8,000 Chinese military personnel to the UN peacekeeping standby force. He also pledged US\$100 million in military assistance to the African Union in the following five years to support the establishment of an African standby force and to boost its capacity in crisis response. He also announced that part of a new ten-year \$1 billion China–UN peace and development fund set up by China would be used for peacekeeping operations.¹⁵ Less than three months later, in December 2015 at the Second Summit of the Forum of China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Johannesburg, the Chinese head of state reiterated his promises to the African continent, announcing that Beijing would provide a total of US\$60 million in “free aid” to the African Union to support the building and operation of the above-mentioned African standby force and would “continue to participate in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and support African countries' capacity building in areas such as defence, counter-terrorism, riot prevention, customs and immigration control.”¹⁶ At the same time, the Chinese government issued a second “Africa policy paper,” which devoted more attention in its Part 6 to peace and security.¹⁷

China has widely publicized the fact that it has deployed more peacekeepers than the other permanent members of the UNSC combined; clearly, it wants to play not only a more important but also a leading role in PKOs. In late

13 United Nations 2017a.

14 United Nations 2017b.

15 Xi 2015; Martina and Brunnstorm 2015.

16 “Spotlight: Xi charts course for upgrading China–Africa ties at landmark summit,” *Xinhuanet*, 4 December 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/05/c_134886595.htm.

17 “China's second Africa policy paper,” *Xinhua*, 4 December 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/04/c_134886545.htm. Accessed 21 January 2017. The first Africa policy paper was issued on the eve of the first FOCAC summit held in Beijing in 2006.

2016, reports indicated that China wanted to run the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), which had up until that time been headed by French nationals for more than 20 years.¹⁸ Even though another French diplomat, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, eventually replaced Hervé Ladsous as director of the DPKO in 2017, China has clearly positioned itself to take on this role in the future.

China's Growing Presence and Security Interests in Africa

Why Africa? It should first be understood that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has always been active in Africa, particularly since the beginning of the decolonization process in the late 1950s and also, until recently, among other priorities, in order to marginalize the presence of Taiwan (or the Republic of China) on the continent. However, since the late 1990s, the deepening of Sino-African economic relations has convinced Beijing first to enhance and better structure its political relationship with African nation-states, illustrated by the creation in 2000 of the FOCAC, which meets every three years alternately in China and in Africa, and second to contribute more to the security and stability of the continent.¹⁹

The Chinese government still thinks that economic development and assistance are the best instruments of security and stability in Africa, as elsewhere. And, in many respects, China has been a strong factor in its development, importing (at least until 2014) an increasing amount of oil and other raw materials, exporting more and more cheap consumer goods and equipment, and building 30–50 per cent of all infrastructure projects realized on the continent, often with the support of large contingents of Chinese workers.

By and large, according to various opinion surveys, China enjoys a very positive image in Africa, although so do Africa's other major partners, for instance the United States.²⁰ However, China's public image varies from one country to another and has also been tarnished by widely publicized complaints, voiced by certain segments of African societies and elites, concerning the poor quality of Chinese products and infrastructure works; the large-scale reliance on Chinese contractual workers to implement projects; the growing and uncontrollable influx of Chinese migrants, including traders who compete against local companies and shopkeepers, adventurers and prostitutes; and Beijing's disregard of local political and security tensions.²¹

The latter criticism has also come from beyond the African continent. In this respect, the Darfur genocide, and the growing mobilization around the world to denounce China's cosy relationship with the Sudanese president Al-Bashir and its

18 Lynch 2016.

19 Kuo 2012; Hanauer and Morris 2014, 44; Sun 2014, 23–24; Alden and Large 2015.

20 Afrobarometer 2016a; 2016b; Wike 2015.

21 Cabestan 2013; French 2014.

lack of interest in providing solutions to the crisis as the preparations for the Beijing Olympics were in full swing, was probably a turning point.²² The Chinese government realized that accepting and supporting the establishment of a joint African Union–UN peacekeeping mission could serve its broader interests. However, China endorsed this decision only after the Sudanese authorities, most likely under strong pressure from Beijing, had approved it, showing the limits of its acceptance of R2P. In any event, it was around this time that Beijing became aware that its relations with Africa should include a much more visible and robust security dimension. The fact that, today, 75 per cent of PKOs are concentrated in Africa and that 60 per cent of all issues presented at the UNSC relate to Africa has made this move even more crucial.²³

At the end of the same decade, another development worth mentioning took place. In late 2008, the Chinese navy decided to participate in joint anti-piracy operations conducted by various countries (the US, members of the European Union, Japan and India) in the Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Somalia. Although only loosely related to African security, the exercise allowed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to become more familiar with the east coast of Africa and to increase its port calls in Djibouti, a former French colony strategically located just outside the Bab-el-Mandeb, a strait that controls navigation to and from the Red Sea.²⁴

Although the French, the US and the Japanese military (among others) already had facilities in Djibouti, this did not dissuade China from choosing this small but rather safe state to establish a logistic dual-use naval base in late 2015 (the base opened on 1 August 2017). Beijing has not yet fully made clear the various missions of this base, the first it has ever established overseas, but one can assume that it will contribute to facilitating the evacuation of nationals at risk and conducting counter-terrorist operations in Africa or even the Middle East.²⁵ It can also directly help the PLA to deploy and repatriate its peacekeepers.

Since then, China has been involved in an increasing number of UN PKOs in Africa. However, until recently its involvement has been modest, mainly attaching small police, logistics, construction or medical contingents to these operations rather than committing combat troops. It was only in January 2012, six years after it made its first proposal, that Beijing committed combat forces to a PKO for the first time when it dispatched an infantry platoon to the newly created but failed state of South Sudan, where China has large oil interests, to guard its engineering and medical staff operating there.²⁶ In this context, the Chinese government's decision in April 2013 to participate in the United Nation's

22 Kuo 2012, 34; Verhoeven 2014, 63–64.

23 Alden 2014, 5.

24 Erickson and Strange 2015.

25 Duchâtel, Bräuner and Zhou 2014; Duchâtel 2016, 7–8; Ghiselli 2016; Downs, Becker and de Gategno 2017.

26 Hartnett 2012; Lanteigne 2014, 10.

Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), by sending in its combat forces to help protect the local authorities in Mali against insurgents from the north, constitutes in many respects a step further both in terms of China's involvement in PKOs and its (partial) endorsement of R2P.²⁷

In this article, I first present the context in which China's decision to participate in the MINUSMA was taken. Then I look at the debates that took place in China after the January 2013 French intervention to stop insurgents from moving closer to Bamako and toppling Mali's central authorities. In the section following that, I examine the specificities and the limits of the role played by the Chinese peacekeepers in Gao, the Malian city where they are based. Finally, I will try to assess the implications of China's participation in the MINUSMA. My conclusion is that the Chinese government will continue to deepen its participation in UN PKOs but will remain risk adverse and, as before, use this participation as a tool to learn from other militaries and enhance its own diplomatic influence in Africa, and elsewhere.

The Context

In 2012, the international scene was dominated by the failure and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the general expansion of Islamic terrorism in the Middle East and Africa, and the unintended consequences of the NATO intervention in Libya.

In March 2011, as the Libyan opposition to Muammar Gaddafi in the east of the country looked likely to be crushed, France and Britain, with the support of the US, attempted to convince the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone over Libya (UNSC Resolution No. 1973). This resolution, which clearly suggested a regime change, was not supported by China and Russia. Instead, the two countries, both of which had endorsed an earlier UNSC resolution in February 2011 (No. 1970) denouncing Gaddafi's human rights violations and freezing top Libyan leaders' overseas wealth, abstained from the vote rather than veto it. Later, China declared that it had been misled by the West and NATO, whose bombing operations had directly precipitated Gaddafi's death and the fall of his regime. But this argument was, in my view, far from credible.

In any event, the Libyan crisis had two consequences for China. The first was a growing awareness that it needed to better protect its nationals and interests abroad following the ill-prepared but successful evacuation of some 36,000 Chinese from Libya and the loss of 50 Chinese projects, the total contractual value of which amounted to around US\$18.8 billion.²⁸ The second was the growing risk of radical Islam's dissemination in the Sahel region, where Chinese companies are increasingly present: after Gaddafi's fall, Libya's southern borders became more porous, facilitating the movement of terrorist organizations

²⁷ Verhoeven 2014, 60.

²⁸ Alden 2014, 4.

to Niger, Mali, Mauritania and even Burkina Faso. In other words, the Malian crisis was a direct consequence of the Gaddafi regime's collapse.

The Malian crisis erupted in March 2012 when Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré, accused of not doing enough to combat the Tuareg rebellion in the north of the country, was deposed by a military coup. The coup was strongly condemned by the international community, including the UNSC and China.²⁹ A month later, following strong pressure and sanctions imposed both by the West (France, Mali's former colonial power, the EU and the US in particular) and regional organizations such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Malian junta was forced to hand over power to a civilian government. But this failed to resolve the political divisions and instability in Bamako, and in May, the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and Islamist Ansar Dine rebels established an independent Islamic state in north Mali with the support of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This spurred the ECOWAS into action.

In November 2012, with the backing of the African Union, the ECOWAS established the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) to recapture the north of Mali. Endorsed by the UNSC in December 2012 (Resolution No. 2085), the AFISMA was due to be deployed in September 2013. However, in early January 2013, Islamic rebels moved dangerously close to Bamako, triggering a military intervention by France, codenamed "Opération Serval," which saved the interim Malian government and repelled the rebels to the extreme north of the country.³⁰

In the same period, China's domestic environment also changed: it was characterized by Xi Jinping's accession to power in November 2012 and the introduction by the new Chinese president of a more active and more assertive foreign and security policy. China's decision to participate in the MINUSMA is an illustration, among many others (for instance, the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the "one belt one road" initiative), of Xi's enhanced diplomatic activism.³¹

Mali does not hold the same economic importance for China as, say, South Sudan or Angola. Nevertheless, Mali has been an ally of the Chinese communist regime since its independence from France in 1960, and the two countries have cooperated closely in political, economic, medical, military and cultural fields. China is Mali's fourth largest trading partner behind Senegal, France and Côte d'Ivoire. Mali's main export items to China are cotton and shea butter. There are around 5,000 to 10,000 Chinese nationals in Mali.³² Although tensions arose in 2005 between Malians and Chinese migrants, generally the public

29 "UN Security Council strongly condemns coup in Mali," *Global Times*, 23 March 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/702278.shtml>. Accessed 16 October 2017.

30 Haysom 2014, 4–8; Barrera 2015.

31 Ross and Bekkevold 2016.

32 Diplomatic sources, Bamako, author's fieldwork, February 2016. Most reports indicate a lower figure in

image of China in Mali has remained positive.³³ Chinese president Hu Jintao visited Bamako in 2009 and China has been involved in a growing number of projects in Mali, including the construction of roads, bridges and railways, aimed at improving the country's infrastructure and its connections with its neighbours, particularly Senegal and Guinea Conakry.³⁴ In view of this long relationship and its geostrategic location in the heart of West Africa, Mali is a significant partner to China in the region.

Having said that, China did not decide to take part in the MINUSMA to protect its own economic interest but rather to play a bigger role in Africa's security.

The Debates

The Chinese government never openly objected to France's Serval Operation, which, in January 2013, saved the Malian regime and interim government,³⁵ although it was sceptical about it.³⁶ Initially, several Chinese military and civilian experts criticized France's "neo-colonial" ambitions and its "neo-interventionism," particularly its willingness to remain the "gendarme of Africa" and keep its "sphere of influence." Among these critics were Li Jian 李剑 and Jin Jing 金晶, both researchers at China's Naval Military Research Institute (Haijun junshi xueshu yanjiusuo 海军军事学术研究所), He Wenping 贺文萍, director of African Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Western Asian and African Studies, and Li Wentao 黎文涛, research fellow at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations. These scholars also objected to France's so-called "responsibility to protect" and saw in it a smokescreen to defend French economic interests in Mali and keep control of gold mines and oil reserves there.³⁷

Yet, very quickly the Chinese government assessed that the terrorist threat was its major concern, as the main danger was the establishment of a strategic and power vacuum in Africa, which non-governmental actors such as AQIM and other groups could take advantage of. The growing threat of terrorism in and around China and, more importantly, the increasing perception of this type of security threat's importance among Chinese leaders contribute to explaining this new order of priorities.³⁸ Although China strongly supported the

footnote continued

2013, of around 3,000, a drop partly owing to the domestic uncertainties of the moment. See Esterhuysen and Kane 2014.

33 Kernen 2010, 266.

34 Esterhuysen and Kane 2014.

35 Lanteigne 2014, 15.

36 Duchâtel, Gowan and Lafont Rapnouil 2016.

37 Shinn 2013; Stanzel and Vasselier 2014; "Zhongguo zai Mali bu chubing ye bu chu qian – junfang cheng zhan hou keyi weihe" (China does not send troops or money to Mali: the army to maintain peace after the war), *Global Times*, 22 January 2013, <http://mil.sohu.com/20130122/n364250702.shtml>.

38 Kam 2017.

establishment of the AFISMA, which was endorsed by the UNSC in December 2012 (Resolution No. 2085), the rebels' advance towards Bamako soon demonstrated the inability of the African-led mission to stabilize the situation in Mali. At that point, there was no other option but to either let the rebels occupy southern Mali (the most populated part of the territory) or allow the French military to intervene swiftly. As a result, China had to clarify its position: giving priority to stability and the fight against terrorism, the Chinese government then became more open to a stronger European security role in Africa if and when regional organizations showed themselves to be too weak to cope with the situation.³⁹ This change of stance laid the ground for Beijing and its representative at the UN to endorse all the UN resolutions that approved France's intervention and that would lead to the establishment of the MINUSMA.

Consequently, as early as April 2013, Chinese scholars started to modify their viewpoint by emphasizing the terrorist threat, toning down their criticism of the French intervention and acclaiming their government's decision to dispatch some troops there.

It was in fact another debate, one that had been developing for some time in the PLA and among Chinese PKO experts, which facilitated this evolution. Although China was still very suspicious of the "responsibility to protect" principle, the multiplication of state collapse and cross-border intervention cases forced it to adapt. In as early as 2009, some Chinese scholars, such as Pang Zhongying 庞中英 from Renmin University in Beijing, pushed for a more robust participation, including Chinese combat forces in UN PKOs.⁴⁰

Since then, Chinese experts have included Mali in the list of countries belonging to an "arc of instability caused by terrorism" (*kongbu dongdang hu* 恐怖动荡弧), along with countries such as Libya, Somalia, Tunisia, Nigeria and Egypt.⁴¹

Having said that, similar to the Libyan crisis when the position of the Arab League played a key role in convincing the Chinese government to be more cooperative with (or not an obstacle to) the West, it was the ECOWAS and the African Union support of the French intervention that persuaded Beijing to change its view and support a UN involvement. Thereafter, China's participation in MINUSMA was presented by Chinese media as a "gesture aimed at improving China's image as a 'responsible big power'" (*zeren daguo* 责任大国).⁴² However, China was still cautiously following the international community. According to some reports, Chinese diplomats in New York and Bamako remained rather passive, "limiting their interventions in backroom Security Council discussions to

39 van der Putten 2015, 18.

40 Pang 2009; 2012, 54–55; Teitt 2012; Lanteigne 2014, 8.

41 Stanzel and Vasselier 2014, 9.

42 "Zhu Mali dashi Cao Zhongming jieshou renmin ribaoshe Feizhou zhongxin fenshe jizhe caifang" (*People's Daily* African centre correspondent interview with Chinese ambassador to Mali Cao Zhongming), *Renmin ribao*, 15 January 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/fz_677316/1206_678140/1206x2_678160/t1119396.shtml; Stanzel and Vasselier 2014.

statements of support for African positions.”⁴³ In other words, China was ready to cooperate and take part but was far from adopting an active, let alone leading role in the whole process.

The Decision

China's decision to participate in the MINUSMA was taken in as early as March 2013 when Xi Jinping was in Russia and about to embark on his first trip as president to Africa (Tanzania, South Africa and Congo-Brazzaville) to attend, among other activities, the BRICS summit in Durban. The timing is important because Xi's own plan to visit Africa at the time probably facilitated and accelerated China's decision to get more actively and more meaningfully involved in Africa's security.

On 24 March, the *South China Morning Post* reported that China had decided to send between 500 and 600 troops to Mali in July 2013 as part as the UN effort to replace (and expand) the AFISMA, the 6,500-strong peacekeeping force dispatched to Mali by the African Union, and take over security following the French intervention. Chinese diplomats in New York at that time could not confirm whether combat troops would be included in the contingent. But Beijing's rapid decision clearly highlighted a policy shift. As the Chinese ambassador to the UN, Li Baodong 李保东, declared: “The fight against terrorism in Africa should in no way have to be fought by African countries alone.”⁴⁴

A month later, on 25 April 2013, China, along with the other members of the UNSC, endorsed UN Resolution No. 2100, which approved the deployment of 11,200 military personnel and 1,440 police personnel to Mali in as early as 1 July 2013.⁴⁵ By then, the MINUSMA was to take over the functions of the AFISMA. This resolution not only “*welcome(d) the swift action of the French forces, at the request of the transitional authorities of Mali*” and authorized French troops to stay in Mali and work hand-in-hand with the MINUSMA, but it also supported, in the MINUSMA mandate, “*active steps to prevent the return of armed elements*” to northern Mali.⁴⁶

This was also an important shift because, for the first time, China agreed to support the interim but official authorities of a country against both local and foreign insurgents occupying part of its territory. Moreover, it also offered to contribute troops to a UN PKO with a very strong mandate, a mandate that was aimed more at *restoring* and *making* peace than just *keeping* peace. On 13 May, at the UN Security Council, Li Baodong confirmed this evolution, indicating that “while the international community should respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries under threat, it should help African countries

43 Duchâtel, Gowan and Lafont Rapnouil 2016, 9.

44 “China offers 500 troops to UN Mali force,” *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2013.

45 United Nations Security Council 2013.

46 Italics added by the author.

build their capacity in the fight against terrorism.”⁴⁷ He also confirmed that “combat troops” would be included among the Chinese peacekeepers and deployed in July 2013.

China’s active participation in the MINUSMA was perceived as a positive change by both the international community and the Chinese government itself. The-then DPKO director Ladsous indicated that it was a “major evolution that needs to be recognized and saluted.”⁴⁸ At an official NGO gathering of many retired ambassadors and experts, Chen Jian 陈建, a former president of the United Nations Association of China, described this evolution as “a major breakthrough in our participation in peacekeeping.”⁴⁹

Deployment and Mission

It was in June 2013 that the Chinese government finally announced that its peacekeeping force would consist of 395 personnel, including a 170-person police unit, a 155-person engineering unit and a 70-person medical unit.⁵⁰

China set up its peacekeeping force for Mali on 12 July 2013. The personnel for this mission came from the Shenyang Military Area Command and 211 Military Hospital.⁵¹ The first protection company consisted of 170 soldiers from the People’s Armed Police (PAP), a branch of the PLA that operates under the Ministry of Public Security but also directly reports to the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Military Commission.

However, the mission taken on by the Chinese peacekeepers has been more low-key and passive than active. The assignment has been to guard and protect a UN military camp in Gao, a city located on the Niger river some 1,200 kilometres east of Bamako and 320 kilometres east of Timbuktu.⁵² The mission has in part developed along the lines of past practices and experience, with the Chinese peacekeepers opening a medical unit in Gao, based near Dutch UN troops and elements of France’s parallel “Barkhane” counter-terrorist operation (4,500 troops), which took over from the Serval Operation in August 2014 but since then has operated over a much bigger space, encompassing the whole Sahara–Sahel region, with US logistical support.⁵³ The Chinese contingent also includes sappers.

In addition, the Chinese peacekeepers have been deployed gradually. In December 2013, they were only 135, while another 245 Chinese soldiers arrived

47 Quoted in Shinn 2013.

48 Quoted in Mariani 2015, 260.

49 Wong 2013.

50 See Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying’s regular press conference on 26 June 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1169049.shtml. Accessed 16 October 2017.

51 van der Putten 2015, 9.

52 *Ibid.*, 17.

53 Namely, in five countries with the support of local troops: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, also called the “G5 Sahel.” Ministère des Armées 2018.

in January 2014.⁵⁴ In June 2016, there were 402 Chinese peacekeepers in Mali, out of a total of 3,044 Chinese peacekeepers distributed across ten missions, including seven (and 2,616 personnel) in Africa.⁵⁵ By August 2017, there were 403, including 14 women, out of total of 2,654 Chinese peacekeepers distributed across ten missions, six of which (with 2,235 personnel) are in Africa.⁵⁶ At the end of May 2018, the Chinese contingent in Mali had remained unchanged.⁵⁷

Although the MINUSMA's initial mandate was for one year, it has been extended every year since 2013 and the number of personnel increased slightly. On 29 June 2016, as in past years, the MINUSMA mandate was extended for another year (UNSC Resolution No. 2295) until 30 June 2017, and the number of personnel increased to 13,289 military personnel (from 11,240 in 2015 and 11,200 in 2014) and 1,920 police personnel (from 1,440 in 2015 and 2014). In December 2016, there were all together 13,456 peacekeepers deployed (2 per cent of which were women). On 29 June 2017, the MINUSMA's mandate was renewed again for one year but, in view of the fact that the "security situation in northern and central Mali remained volatile," its mission was strengthened.⁵⁸ Although the UNSC did not increase the number of MINUSMA personnel, it asked the mission to focus on protecting civilians and supporting the Malian armed forces; it also instructed the UN peacekeepers to deepen their cooperation with the Group of 5 (G-5) Sahel's anti-Jihadist force and the French Barkhane Operation forces.⁵⁹ At the end of May 2018, the MINUSMA included 12,169 military personnel and 1,741 police personnel, and looked likely to stay in Mali for a long period of time in view of the lack of improvement of the security situation.⁶⁰

In other words, representing just 3 per cent of the whole of MINUSMA, the Chinese peacekeepers play a rather modest and, above all, symbolic role in this mission. Yet, their participation represents a clear evolution that China's government, experts and media have all emphasized, and to some extent exaggerated, in order to demonstrate China's contribution to international peace and security, particularly in Africa.

Chinese Peacekeepers' Behaviour in Mali

The security situation in Mali has been difficult since 2013. Although there was some improvement in 2014–2015, it deteriorated again in 2016–2017. While attacks perpetrated by local and external terrorist groups have never stopped,

54 Esterhuysen and Kane 2014.

55 Duchâtel, Gowan and Lafont Rapnouil 2016, 6.

56 United Nations 2017c.

57 United Nations Security Council 2018.

58 United Nations Security Council 2017.

59 United Nations 2017d; "Mali: La Minusma reconduite pour un an avec un mandat renforcé," *Radio France International*, 30 May 2017, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170630-mali-minusma-reconduite-an-competences-elargies>. Accessed 3 July 2017.

60 United Nations Security Council 2018.

they have become more frequent since June 2016. The suicide bomb attack on a military camp in Gao on 18 January 2017 (resulting in at least 77 deaths) illustrates how fragile the situation has remained in northern and central Mali and explains the rather high number of fatalities: 133 by 31 August 2017, including one Chinese peacekeeper killed in May 2016.⁶¹

How have China's peacekeepers behaved in this difficult environment? On the whole, UN reports have been very positive. They have highlighted in particular the service provided to the local population by the hospital built and run by the Chinese. There have also been reports on the Chinese peacekeepers' efforts to better interact with the other peacekeeping forces as well as with Malian society. However, other reports are more critical, underscoring the fact that Chinese peacekeepers have remained largely risk adverse, rarely venture beyond their base, and, similar to most other UN peacekeepers, have little contact with the local population.

In summer 2013, the UN's special representative to Mali praised the "professionalism" of Chinese peacekeepers and the role they played in providing the security environment required to conduct legislative and presidential elections in July 2013, adding that "China's important work has exceeded expectations."⁶² It is clear that the Chinese are very well equipped: their camp in Gao is monitored by high-tech surveillance cameras and its field hospital (level II) is equipped with state-of-the-art kit and receives regular visits from the local people.⁶³ Moreover, the infantry company, which protects other UN personnel and humanitarian workers, seems to have more interaction with other PKOs.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, other reports have reached more reserved conclusions. First of all, there has been a basic language problem that has not really been overcome: too few Chinese peacekeepers speak French, the official language of Mali, and only a handful can speak English, so contingents must rely on interpreters to interact with other peacekeepers or the local population. Although the language barrier does not directly affect Chinese troops' ability to carry out assignments, it feeds suspicion and misunderstanding.⁶⁵ Moreover, for political reasons, Chinese peacekeepers interact more frequently and easily with peacekeepers from other developing countries rather than with contingents from the West and NATO.⁶⁶ Although interactions among various peacekeeping contingents and with the local population appear to be an ongoing and general concern that is mentioned every year in the UN resolution extending the MINUSMA mission,⁶⁷ the

61 United Nations Peacekeeping 2017a.

62 Wong 2013.

63 Cf. the following article, "UN medical officer visits Chinese peacekeeping hospital in Mali," *China Military*, 8 November, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-11/08/content_7348970.htm.

64 This is suggested in a *New China* TV video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIFx42McTJY>. Accessed 17 October 2017.

65 Huang 2013; Leimbach 2014. This was confirmed by French military sources, Bamako, February 2017.

66 van der Putten 2015, 11.

67 As with the 2014, 2015 and 2016 UNSC resolutions, UNSC Resolution No. 2364 (29 June 2017) (point

24), "Requests MINUSMA to further enhance its interaction with the civilian population, as well as its

Chinese troops continue to appear particularly aloof. The Chinese contingent has tried to build bridges, and has partly succeeded by providing medical services to the local population or by participating in football matches with other PKO contingents. However, these efforts have been limited.⁶⁸

In addition, the Chinese peacekeepers' attitude appears somewhat contradictory: while they do not show any apparent interest in establishing "working relations with Europe-based or local non-governmental organizations in Mali," they are, however, willing to send personnel to Europe for PKO training.⁶⁹

There are other problems, as the following report suggests:

Whereas Chinese medical contingents deployed in other theatres make a point of winning hearts and minds by treating local people, that in Gao reportedly has little or no interaction with the population. It must be acknowledged that this caution is widespread within different countries involved in the UN mission to Mali: public demonstrations and attacks against UN forces are common. Rwandan troops stationed with the Chinese unit fired into a crowd during one protest in 2015, killing civilians and inflaming tensions with the population. China, apparently to its surprise, was tainted by association, and armed groups had already carried out dozens of mortar attacks on the Chinese base before the deadly 31 May attack.

UN officials also question the skills and professionalism of the Chinese medical staff in Mali, and European officers insist that their personnel are evacuated hundreds or even thousands of miles if they are wounded rather than use the Chinese facilities. However, some claim that this is a matter of prejudice, and that African personnel are happy with the hospital. Nonetheless, the Chinese evidently recognize that the facility has limitations: two of the soldiers most severely wounded in the May attack were evacuated to Dakar for treatment.⁷⁰

Having said that, the Chinese peacekeepers have also faced risks. First Sergeant Shen Liangliang 申亮亮, aged 29, was killed in the above-mentioned attack on 31 May 2016 against the Chinese-guarded MINUSMA camp in Gao. His death was caused by a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. Four other Chinese nationals were injured in the same attack. Shen was the 16th Chinese peacekeeper to die since 1990.

Shortly after this attack, the PLA sent an investigation team to Gao. Headed by Major General Su Guanghui 苏广辉, acting director of the Peacekeeping Affairs Office of the Chinese Ministry of National Defence (MND), the team promised to enhance security measures.⁷¹

This incident became big news in China and the repatriation of Shen's body provided an occasion for the authorities to highlight their country's contribution to PKOs as well as the sacrifices made by its soldiers. Following a memorial

footnote continued

cooperation with the Malian Defence and Security Forces, including through the development of an effective communication strategy and MINUSMA radio, in order to raise awareness and understanding about its mandate and activities." See United Nations 2017c.

68 Interviews with diplomatic sources, Mali, February 2016.

69 van der Putten 2015, 12.

70 Duchâtel, Gowan and Lafont Rapnouil 2016, 7.

71 "Chinese military team starts working in Gao of Mali," *China Military News*, 6 June 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-06/06/content_7089022.htm.

service held by the MINUSMA in Bamako on 8 June,⁷² another and much larger ceremony, which was broadcast by most Chinese TV stations, took place at Changchun airport in Jilin, where Shen's unit was based.⁷³ By 31 August 2017, China had lost a total of 18 peacekeepers in ten missions.⁷⁴

The Significance and Limitations of China's Participation in MINUSMA

China's participation in MINUSMA has been significant both from a military and a diplomatic point of view. In addition, in spite of obvious limitations, China has enhanced its endorsement of R2P.

At a military level, China's participation in the MINUSMA has been a clear turning point. Even more than in preceding or other ongoing UN missions, this participation has been an important test case for the PLA and particularly its combat force unit. It has allowed Chinese soldiers to experiment, although "at a small scale, with providing force protection to a regional UN camp in Africa."⁷⁵ Moreover, by watching and interacting with other peacekeepers as well as the French soldiers involved in the Barkhane Operation, it has learnt to operate in a hostile and terror-ridden environment. In other words, this mission has provided an opportunity for the PLA's elite forces to improve their operational capabilities.

At a diplomatic level, it has been a step forward in China's readiness not only to be a more robust contributor to UN PKOs but also to side with an official government against a mixture of domestic and foreign insurgents. Frans Paul van der Putten's report summarizes the first evolution:

Although this unit guards the UN camp in Gao and does not "take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements", it is remarkable that China chose Mali rather than a UN mission in another country to deploy a protection company. After all, the members of the protection unit are PLA infantry and special forces, who are capable of acting as combat troops should they come under attack. This strengthens the notion that China has no difficulties in Mali with the fact that the UN is not an impartial actor that safeguards an existing peace agreement, but that it is on the side of the government, which is engaged in a struggle against various armed groups.⁷⁶

China's participation in the MINUSMA therefore constitutes an evolution conducive to a better acceptance of R2P principles. Of course, for Beijing, the need to get the endorsement of official authorities and/or the UN Security Council usually remains a prerequisite. In this respect, as Marc Lanteigne, among others, suggests, China remains a neo-Westphalian power.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Beijing has

72 "MINUSMA holds memorial service for Chinese peacekeeper Shen Liangliang," *China Military Online*, 8 June 2016, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-06/08/content_4672171.htm. Accessed on 4 July 2017.

73 "Chinese military holds ceremony for returning body of Chinese peacekeeper," CCTV, 9 June 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhDKZ2eEyTE>. Accessed on 4 July 2017.

74 United Nations Peacekeeping 2017b.

75 van der Putten 2015, 23.

76 *Ibid.*, 17.

77 Lanteigne 2014, 6.

also realized that since the end of the Cold War, the number of states failing and collapsing and the accompanying risk of power vacuums have increased, and thus the international community, represented by the UN, must more often step in when security problems cannot be resolved at the domestic or even the regional level. In other words, China also recognizes that the need to preserve or restore regional security and stability can sometimes trump the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs.

Actually, China has followed similar principles in South Sudan. It not only sent peacekeepers, including combat troops (in 2015, a 700-soldier infantry battalion), but also tried to mediate between the disputing factions. It even went a step further in this new nation-state by tasking its soldiers with protecting “the local people and other countries’ personnel engaged in such peaceful activities as humanitarian assistance and economic development,” according to a spokesman of the Chinese Ministry of National Defence.⁷⁸ This means that Chinese peacekeepers in this particular case are empowered to protect Chinese companies and nationals in South Sudan.

Yet, according to Chinese experts themselves, there is still much room for progress as far as PLA peacekeepers’ tasks are concerned. According to Zhang Huiyu 张慧玉, professor at the department of management of the Chinese People’s Armed Police Force Academy, the quality of their contribution, and not just the quantity, should be improved. He advocates that China should not only participate in PKOs but also start shaping the nature and the objectives of UN peacekeeping missions.⁷⁹

Conclusion

China’s participation in the MINUSMA constitutes a clear illustration of this country’s deepening involvement not only in UN PKOs but also more generally in peace and stability around the world, particularly in Africa. In Mali as in elsewhere, for instance South Sudan, China wants to be part of the equation as well as a voice and force to be reckoned with. It is willing to show that it not only contributes to Africa’s economic and human development but also to its security and stability. To achieve this goal, the Chinese government has been ready to bend, up to a point, its traditional foreign policy principles and to adapt to the new security necessities of the current times by being prepared to intervene in other nation-states’ internal affairs under certain circumstances and embracing, albeit only partially, R2P.

Of course, China’s participation in the MINUSMA has remained rather modest, if not merely symbolic. Countries such as France, via its Barkhane Operation and its network of military bases, and the US, through its Africa

78 Quoted in van der Putten 2015, 20. Two Chinese peacekeepers were killed in South Sudan in July 2016, out of a total of 51 UN PKOs fatalities. United Nations Peacekeeping 2017a; 2017b.

79 Wong 2013.

Command, various training programmes and expanding drone bases,⁸⁰ will continue to contribute much more decisively to Africa's security, and particularly to the security of the Sahara-Sahel region. But while China has no intention of matching these deployments, it has stopped criticizing them: the fight against terrorism and instability overrides any other consideration. And, in view of China's vast economic interests in Africa, there is little chance that it will challenge French or even American military involvement in Africa's security.

More generally, China's participation in the MINUSMA and in subsequent UN PKOs has helped China to demonstrate that it is a "responsible stakeholder" in the international community and not a revisionist great power, giving credence to constructivist – as opposed to realist – IR theories and weakening the "China threat" argument.⁸¹ In other words, China's participation in UN PKOs is both a security and a propaganda tool. And Xi Jinping has made this tool bigger and more powerful.

However, these "integrationist" intentions constitute only one facet of China's foreign and security policy posture, the one most conducive to turning China into a full member of the international community. The other facet, which is much more abrasive, especially in China's own regional environment, will continue to manifest itself, feeding frictions and tensions, if not armed conflicts, with its neighbours and, more importantly, the United States and its allies such as Japan.

The recent decision to establish a naval base in Djibouti can also be viewed, on the surface, as a demonstration of the cooperative side of China's international behaviour, as it is aimed at better protecting its nationals and interests in Africa. However, one needs to bear in mind the Janus-faced nature of China's foreign and security policy. China's Djibouti naval base is also an attribute of power, demonstrating that the world's second-largest economy is on the path to acquiring world superpower status. Likewise, China's more active role and multifaceted participation in UN PKOs can be understood as a strategy to elevate itself to the same status. The path it has chosen is different from that chosen by the US – which seldom participates in peacekeeping operations (119 personnel in August 2017) although finances a good part of them – or by any other great power before. The pace Beijing has opted for is also slower, more cautious and more incremental. However, by participating in and contributing more actively to PKOs, China also wishes to enhance its own international influence, not only in the United Nations and wherever its peacekeepers are deployed, but also on a global level.

Acknowledgement

This research has been funded by the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (GRF No. HKBU 12400103). I would like to thank the two anonymous external reviewers for their useful comments.

80 Turse 2017.

81 Lanteigne 2014, 5.

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摘要: 中国一直保持同非洲紧密经贸关系, 人们却较少提到该国如何介入安全问题。然而, 近十年以来, 中国越来越热衷于特别在非洲进行的联合国维持和平行动, 同时开始关注保护国民以及于吉布提建立海军基地。本文探讨自 2013 年以来, 中国人民解放军参与联合国马里多层面综合稳定特派团 (马里稳定团) 的经验, 并回顾当年导致中国介入马里问题的外交过程, 以及分析介入的具体方式。马里是中国继于 2012 年出兵南苏丹后, 第二次派遣作战部队参与联合国维和任务, 凸显该国重视维和工作, 并越来越愿意面对风险。本文最后探讨中国参与马里稳定团在其整体外交和安全政策上的影响。中国往往被分析家认为是一个现实的新兴大国, 通过参与联合国维和行动, 北京力图表明, 它负责任而且「愿意融入国际社会」, 依照一般认可的规范活动: 且看事实是否如此?

关键词: 中非关系; 非洲安全; 中国与联合国; 马里; 中国人民解放军; 联合国维和部队。

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