

CHINA'S EXPANDING PEACEKEEPING ROLE: ITS SIGNIFICANCE AND THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS

BATES GILL AND CHIN-HAO HUANG*

Since the beginning of China's reform period in the early 1980s, and especially since the mid-1990s, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has increased its participation in a broadening array of multilateral security arrangements. One of the most high-profile aspects of this trend has been the dramatic expansion in deployments of Chinese peacekeepers (civilian police, military observers, engineering battalions and medical units) to United Nations operations: since 2000, when China deployed fewer than 100 peacekeepers, there has been a 20-fold increase. As of December 2008, China was the fourteenth largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, providing more troops, police and observers to UN operations than three other permanent members of the UN Security Council: Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Nearly three-quarters of China's contributions are concentrated in Africa, reflecting the current focus of UN peacekeeping operations. (See figure 1 for details of all of China's current deployments.)

Despite these developments, deeper thinking and analysis about the motivations and broader implications of China's engagement in peacekeeping initiatives remain at an early stage in the Western debate.

To better understand China's evolving approach towards peacekeeping activities, this Policy Brief provides a broad overview of some of the highlights and main recent developments in Chinese peacekeeping activities. It also summarizes the key factors behind China's expanding engagement in UN peacekeeping activities. The conclusions address the key policy implications and recommendations to emerge from the analysis.

CHINA'S EXPANDING ENGAGEMENT IN UN PEACEKEEPING ACTIVITIES

Following the 1950–53 Korean War, during which Chinese forces encountered and fought the United States-led UN Command, China maintained an antagonistic stance towards UN operations, viewing them with scepticism and often questioning their legitimacy. This cautious view continued even after the admission of the People's Republic of China to the UN in 1971. Since then, China has by and large refrained from playing a role in the UN Security

* This study was supported in part by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The authors are grateful to SIPRI Intern Kristofer Bergh for his help in preparing this Policy Brief.

SUMMARY

● China's participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations has dramatically expanded. China initially viewed UN operations with scepticism and often questioning their legitimacy. This cautious view changed from the late 1980s. Over the 20 years since the People's Liberation Army (PLA) made its first peacekeeping contribution in 1989, China has steadily increased its deployments. It is now the fourteenth largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, ahead of three other permanent members of the UN Security Council—Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Despite these developments, deeper thinking and analysis about the motivations, limitations and broader implications of China's engagement in peacekeeping remain at an early stage in the Western debate. This Policy Brief provides an overview of some of the highlights and recent developments in Chinese peacekeeping activities. It also summarizes the key factors behind China's expanding engagement.

It recommends that the international community engages with China on peacekeeping-related issues in order to strengthen China's commitment to regional stability, ensure greater convergence between Chinese and other international interests on questions of regional security, and encourage more effective international peacekeeping operations.

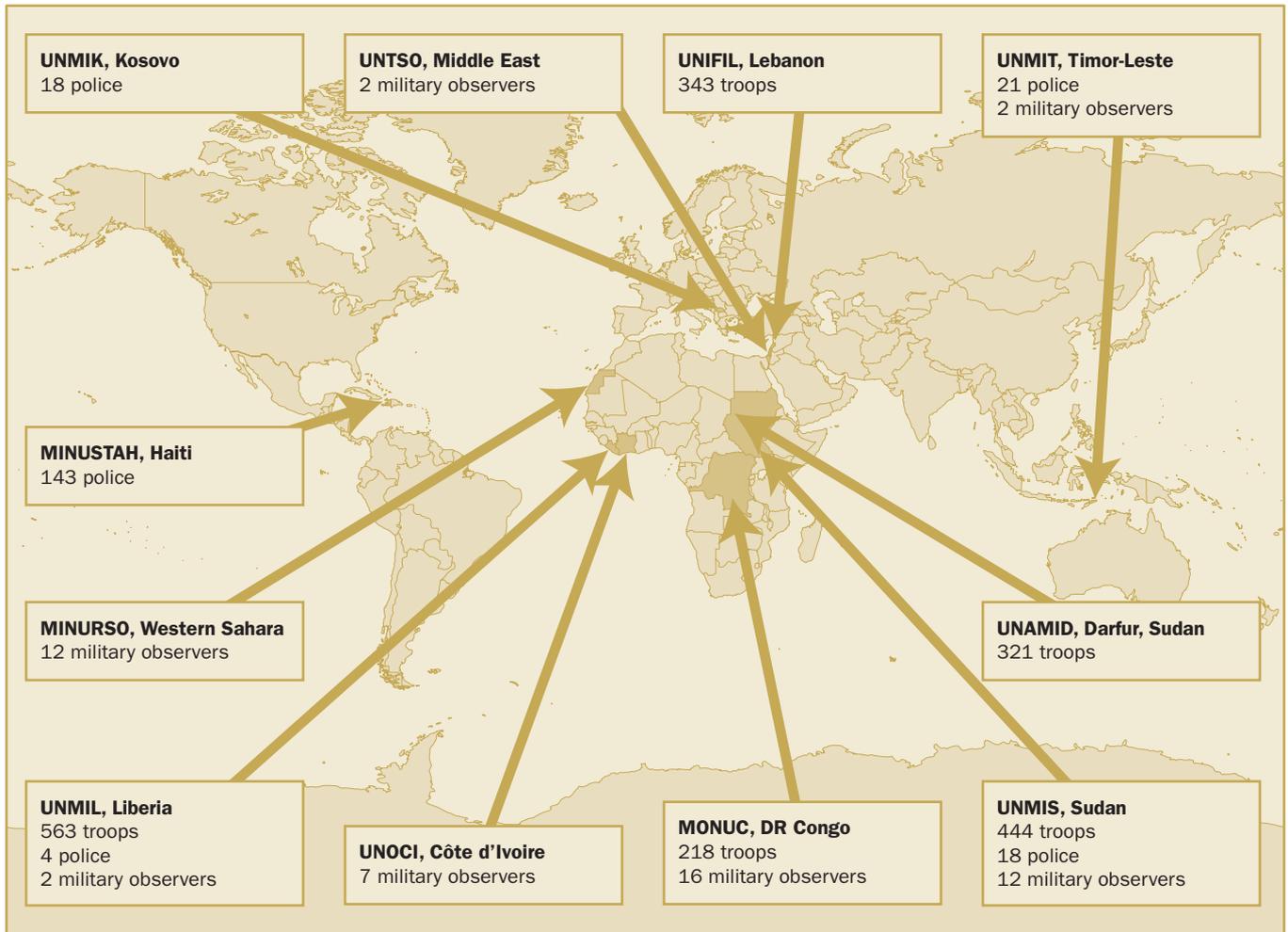


Figure 1. Type, number and location of Chinese personnel contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, December 2008

Source: UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 'UN mission's summary detailed by country', 31 Dec. 2008, <<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/>>.

Council's debates on peacekeeping. China cast its first vote on peacekeeping in 1981, when it voted to authorize the extension of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). The following year China made its first payment towards UN peacekeeping operations. Subsequently, it successfully applied for membership of the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations.

China first participated in a UN peacekeeping operation in 1989, when 20 Chinese military personnel took part in the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) to help monitor elections in Namibia. This was followed by the deployment of five Chinese military observers to support the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East. Shortly after these small contributions, China sent its first military units—two separate deployments of 400 engineering troops each, accompanied by 49 military observers—to Cambodia over an 18-month period from 1992 to 1993.

Since the mid-1990s, China's contributions to UN peacekeeping activities have steadily increased and diversified (see figure 2). More significantly, as of



December 2008, China was the thirteenth biggest contributor of civilian police to UN peacekeeping operations. China first sent police in 1999 to serve in the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). In 2004, notwithstanding the absence of formal diplomatic relations with Haiti, China dispatched formed police units (i.e. complete units that have trained and serve together) to support the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), helping to maintain law and order and train local police. Senior officials in the Chinese Ministry of Public Security have even publicly called for UN peacekeeping police to shoulder greater responsibilities. Suggested additional tasks include rebuilding the judicial system, law enforcement and humanitarian relief efforts.

Recent discussions that the present authors have had with foreign policy elites in Beijing and a closer reading of Chinese actions, statements and writings suggest that there is an intensifying debate in China on this more active approach to peacekeeping activities. In June 2007 the PLA convened the first major internal meeting on peacekeeping, where senior representatives of the PLA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Public Security gathered to discuss ways to further streamline and improve the selection, organization, training and rotation of Chinese peacekeepers. At a separate international security seminar organized by the PLA National Defence University in 2007, senior military officers also called for greater Chinese participation in peacekeeping operations, rescue and relief tasks, counterterrorism exercises, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The PLA's expanding presence abroad has in turn prompted some Chinese academics to call for a clearer legislative basis to govern such activities.

China is also gradually building its overall peacekeeping capacity. The Civilian Peacekeeping Police Training Centre in Langfang was established in 2000, joining the International Relations Academy in Nanjing. In addition, Chinese officials expect that a new peacekeeping training centre in Huairou will become operational during 2009 to help the PLA's Peacekeeping Affairs Office centralize and better coordinate Chinese peacekeeping activities.

Broadly speaking, beyond simple 'boots on the ground', China has also exhibited greater commitment to peacekeeping activities by increasing the number of Chinese administrative and leadership personnel involved in UN peacekeeping and by placing its troops in increasingly challenging environments. In August 2007, General Zhao Jingmin was appointed as the force commander of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the first time that a Chinese national had held such a position. More recently China has adopted a more active approach on sensitive issues. In the case of Darfur, it has recognized the need for political reconciliation and a hybrid African Union–United Nations peacekeeping force to address the humanitarian crisis. In July 2008 China deployed an additional 172-member engineering battalion to Darfur, bringing its contributions to a total of 321 troops in order to help prepare the way for the larger UN force envisioned by the international community.

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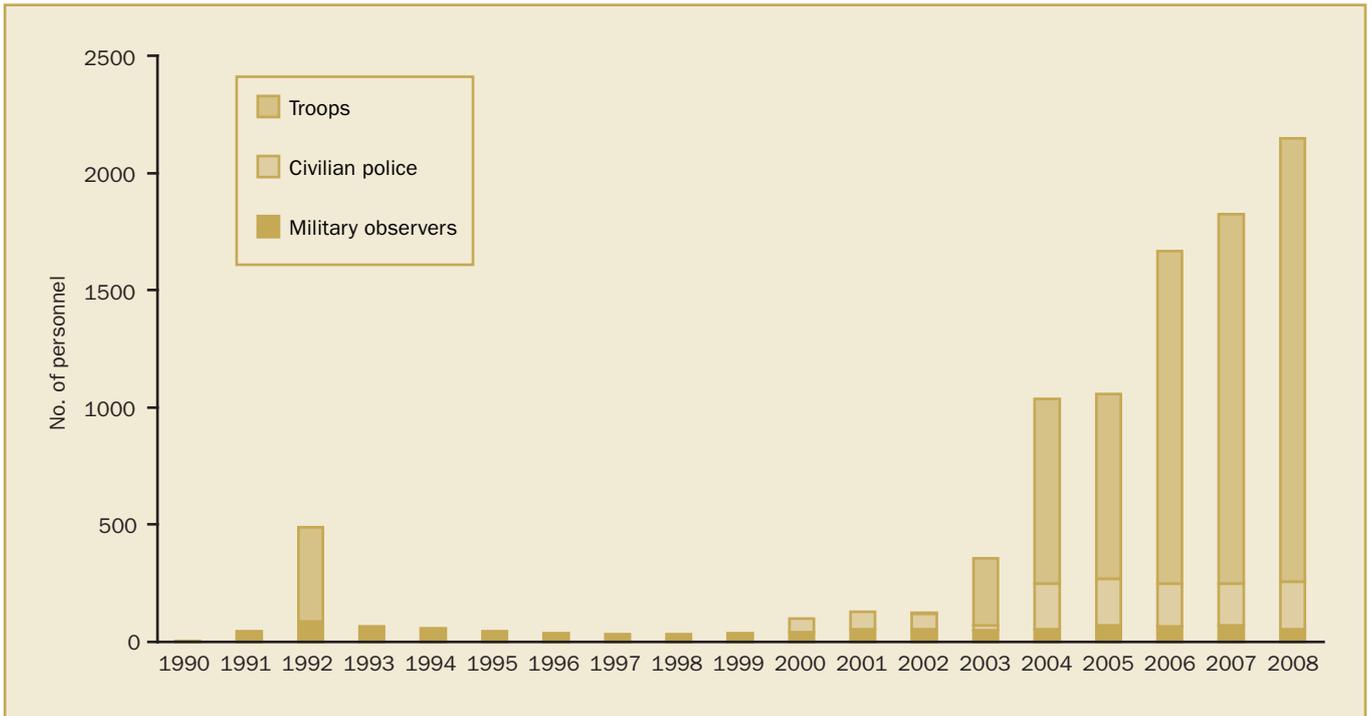


Figure 2. Chinese troop contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, 1990–2008

Sources: SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, <<http://conflict.sipri.org/>>; and UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, ‘UN mission’s summary detailed by country’, <<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/>>.

KEY FACTORS SHAPING CHINA’S EVOLVING APPROACH

A number of interrelated factors appear to motivate the new, proactive approach of the PLA and the Chinese leadership to peacekeeping.

First, the trend in peacekeeping contributions reflects China’s overall effort, especially since the late 1990s, to become more responsive to international expectations while making positive and tangible contributions to global peace and security. Positive engagement with the outside world helps China to project a more benign and ‘harmonious’ image beyond its borders, to reassure neighbours about its peaceful intentions, and to softly balance US and Western influence while gradually but more firmly establishing China’s acceptance as a great power.

Second, China’s stepped-up peacekeeping activity puts into action calls by Chinese President Hu Jintao for the PLA to perform ‘new historic missions’ in the 21st century. It also parallels the PLA’s growing interest in expanding its non-combat missions or ‘military operations other than war’ (MOOTW)—such as counter-piracy, disaster response and humanitarian relief—both in China and abroad. The deployment in December 2008 of three Chinese naval vessels to help protect Chinese merchant shipping off the coast of Somalia is just the most recent step along this decade-long path.

Third, it also appears that participation in peacekeeping activities abroad carries important military applications and lessons for the PLA, a concept embedded in the 2008 Chinese Defence White Paper. According to the White Paper, more than 11 000 Chinese individual peacekeepers have been deployed to 18 UN operations. These contributions, including repeated deployments



of engineering battalions and formed police units, have provided practical experience for Chinese security forces and have helped improve their responsiveness, riot-control capabilities, coordination of military emergency command systems and ability to conduct MOOTW at home. These benefits will be reinforced if, as expected, Chinese forces increasingly take on missions with more robust mandates as part of their expanded peacekeeping activities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief analysis of the activities and motivations of Chinese peacekeeping points to a number of important implications and recommendations for the international community. China's expanding engagement in peacekeeping activities offers new opportunities to strengthen its commitment to regional stability and security building and to improve international peacekeeping capacity. It also opens potentially beneficial areas of closer military cooperation between China and its major security partners.

Participation within limits

While China is keen to sharply increase its peacekeeping activities, it will do so on a case-by-case basis and subject to certain persistent limitations. On the one hand, China's increasing commitment to UN peacekeeping activities opens a new avenue for engagement with the international community and offers an opportunity to deepen China's commitment to global norms of confidence- and security-building measures, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction. The continued deployment and redeployment of Chinese units throughout Africa, for example, suggests a gradual accrual of operational knowledge and a better understanding of the political and security dynamics and complexities on the ground. At the same time, China's increasing interaction with other militaries in UN peace operations has, to a certain degree, opened the window for a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of China's peacekeeping capabilities. Generally speaking, it appears that China is prepared to shoulder greater responsibilities and to play a more significant role in supporting the UN peacekeeping system. This would be welcomed within the UN system as the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) continues to rely on contributions and support from such developing countries as China.

China's willingness to fully engage in UN peacekeeping operations will face a number of constraints

On the other hand, China's willingness to fully engage in UN peacekeeping operations will face a number of constraints. Expectations within the international community should thus be modest but cautiously optimistic. The traditional view of state sovereignty and non-interference will continue to be the most important concern for Chinese policymakers. China's responsiveness in peacekeeping affairs will also be slowed by practical matters of political, military and bureaucratic will and capacity. For example, China has not yet provided its planning data sheet to the UN Standby Arrangements System (UNSAS), which would list, among other things, major equipment, unit organization and movement data. In addition, China has yet to provide a



formal commitment to contribute standby troops to the UN under the standard response time frame. In private, Chinese experts explain that there is a perennial shortage of well-trained peacekeeping officers with the necessary language and technical skills in the PLA. Insufficient air- and sealift capacity has also inhibited China's ability to commit to the rapid deployment of significant numbers of troops over long distances. Moreover, China's financial contribution to UN peacekeeping operations hovers at around 2 per cent of the overall DPKO budget. This contribution would need to increase if China wants to play a larger role commensurate with its status as a permanent member of the Security Council and a rising global power.

China remains generally cautious towards the use of peacekeepers and on the broader issue of intervention by the international community. In such cases as Zimbabwe and Myanmar, China has thus far resisted calls from human rights advocacy groups and some Western governments to pursue intervention based on humanitarian justifications. It should be noted, however, that in 1999 China accepted a UN-sanctioned humanitarian justification for using force in East Timor. It also subsequently dispatched a civilian police contingent to support the mission there. Likewise, in 2003, in response to growing instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN, Zhang Yishan, argued that the UN should intervene in conflict areas earlier, faster and more forcefully.

In short, China will continue to review interventions on a case-by-case basis. There will be limits to its participation, and it is unlikely that China will offer active support to international intervention when the international community is divided and the intended host government is opposed.

Growing influence and engagement

Over time, it is possible that China will aim to gradually counterbalance Western influence and more actively shape—in ways consistent with Chinese foreign policy principles and national interests—the norms guiding UN peacekeeping operations. To be sure, such influence could accrue over time,

but it would first require greater Chinese commitment in several key areas, including better-trained troops and a more capable military that can deploy effective rapid-response teams. While Chinese troop contributions have increased rapidly since the mid-1990s (see figure 2), Chinese peacekeepers operate mainly on the margins. The Chinese Government should focus on improving the quality of its peacekeeping

troops and expanding its contributions beyond maintenance, engineering and medical units. It also needs to demonstrate leadership capabilities at the DPKO and in peacekeeping operations around the world and to provide a greater financial contribution.

At this relatively early stage in Chinese participation in UN peacekeeping, the international community should implement policies aimed at reinforcing some of the encouraging trends related to China's expanding involvement in multilateral peace operations. China's deployment of naval vessels off the coast of Somalia was closely coordinated with African and Western partners and has been warmly received by the USA and the European Union. In that light, the international community should sustain closer dialogue and policy

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coordination with China on other mutual security concerns—such as a more robust level of assistance for forces in Afghanistan—and at a higher diplomatic level, in order to enlist greater support from the Chinese. In recent years, China's support for and interest in taking part in peacekeeping operations in East Timor, Haiti and Darfur all point to a more flexible view of intervention. When there is broad international consensus around a specific intervention, China has tended to lend its support.

Moreover, Western countries with substantial interests in peacekeeping affairs should also seek to increase cooperation with China in peacekeeping seminars, training courses and other capacity-building programmes. They should also explore concrete ways in which China could play a more active part in planning, coordination and leadership roles at the DPKO and to increase its financial contributions. In the long run, collaboration on peacekeeping and other related forms of military-to-military exchange would also contribute to building greater openness and transparency within the PLA.

The expansion in Chinese engagement in peacekeeping provides an important and widening window of opportunity for the international community to engage with China more closely on global security issues, to help enlarge China's commitment to regional stability and to contribute to more effective international peacekeeping operations.

Collaboration on peacekeeping would contribute to building greater openness and transparency within the PLA

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STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Signalistgatan 9
SE-169 70 Solna, Sweden
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00
Fax: +46 8 655 97 33
Email: sipri@sipri.org
Internet: www.sipri.org

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Bates Gill (United States) has been Director of SIPRI since October 2007. He previously held the Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, and had senior positions at the Brookings Institution and the Center for Nonproliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute of International Studies. He received his PhD in Foreign Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson Department of Government and Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia. His recent books include *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy* (Brookings Press, 2007) and *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community* (Columbia University Press, 2009, co-editor).

Chin-hao Huang (Thailand) is a Researcher with the SIPRI China and Global Security Programme. Until 2007 he worked at the Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS. He has authored and co-authored several book chapters on China–Africa–USA relations, the latest of which includes 'China's renewed partnership with Africa: implications for the United States', *China into Africa: Trade, Aid and Influence* (Brookings Press, 2008). He has also published other works on Chinese foreign and security policy. He is a graduate of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University.

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