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#### **China's evolving role in African peacekeeping: Reflections on the main drivers**

China's has not always assumed a positive stance on UN peacekeeping operations. Looking back, the Chinese situation in relation to UN peacekeeping can be described as a shift from outright rejection and/or opposition in the 1970s to [active support](#) in the 2000s. For about four decades, Beijing was highly sceptical of the UN's peacekeeping role. The Chinese leadership thought that the UN had been utilised for the Korean War (1950–1953) to legitimise and sanction actions that were viewed by China as [aggressive military intervention](#) in a conflict where Chinese forces fought UN forces under US command. China's reluctance and scepticism were also driven by its belief that the sovereignty of nations gave them an inherent right to [control their own affairs without intervention](#) from third parties.

Following the end of the Cold War and the significant changes to the international community, Chinese leaders moved to a position of active cooperation in UN peacekeeping activities. One of the reasons was a realisation on the part of Beijing that by taking part in UN peacekeeping operations, Chinese soldiers would benefit in terms of [training and international experience](#). It would also facilitate the modernisation of the Chinese armed forces and further enable the testing of equipment and techniques in the field.

In this context, the limited number of Chinese peacekeepers deployed to UN peacekeeping operations from the 1970s to the 1990s turned into a dramatic surge in Chinese peacekeeping participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From January 2001 to January 2009, the number of Chinese 'Blue Helmets' deployed to UN peacekeeping operations increased from approximately [100 in 2000](#) to close to [2 000 in 2008](#). Moreover, a change – even watershed – in China's approach became evident when Beijing decided to send combat soldiers to two major UN peacekeeping operations on African soil: first in Mali (2013) and thereafter, South Sudan (2014). In this regard, it should be noted that until 2013, China has only deployed engineers, logistical units, medical units and transport functionaries to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, but not combat forces. As a notable troop contributing nation, China is now among the world's [12 largest troop contributing nations](#) to UN peacekeeping operations with more than 2 400 Chinese troops deployed in seven UN peacekeeping operations across the continent.

In recent years several observers indicated that China's decision to increase its post-Cold War role in international peace and security, specifically UN peacekeeping operations, is closely linked with how the Chinese government is shaping the country's [reputation and image](#) in the international community among both developed and developing nations. Chinese leaders were concerned with China's image and reputation, especially after the Tiananmen incident in 1989. Specifically, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) needed to restore a [politically congenial relationship](#) with the broader international community. China's involvement in peacekeeping operations presented an opportunity to place China in a [favourable light](#) internationally, as well as domestically, which was important to China and its armed forces. These arguments coincide with views that China has been seeking to utilise peacekeeping as an [instrument of soft power](#) with a view to gaining international goodwill in order to soften its provocative actions in the South China Sea.

Chinese leaders became convinced of the benefits of a more active role in peacekeeping and thus adjusted their strategic direction in the post-Cold War era. China's growing involvement in UN peacekeeping shows how this emerging superpower deliberately and systematically uses peacekeeping as a diplomatic instrument and how it is crafting its international public profile as that of a [responsible major power](#). Apart from building a more positive image globally and obtaining international operational military experience, Beijing also realised that its role in peacekeeping could be instrumental in extending China's economic influence.

Some observers explain the current Chinese strategy through two interlinking factors, namely that of acting as a responsible great power (as discussed above) and that of [leader of the developing world](#). Whereas the profile of a responsible great power forms part of China's policy to increase its involvement in global affairs, the factor of leadership of the developing world coincides with the pursuance of a profile of the Chinese nation as one of solidarity with other developing states as well as advancing South-South cooperation.

As China's presence on the African continent deepened in recent times, international expectations and China's growing global power status has taken Beijing to a position where it has to contend with expectations that it will play an ever greater role in global affairs, and at the same time deal with what [sovereignty](#) is and when it might be infringed upon in the framework of and discourse relating to intervention and peacekeeping. This necessitated a [pragmatic reorientation](#) and reassessment of Beijing's political interests by Chinese decision-makers, who increasingly have to fit their country into the role of an emerging super power and less of a developing country approaching world affairs from a rigid policy stance of protecting state sovereignty at all costs.

This brief offered three broad perspectives, specifically with regard to the African continent. Firstly, China is the only country in the global arena that significantly contributes both troops and financial means to UN peacekeeping operations. This stands in direct relation to China's growing engagement and influence in the international arena as well as the fact that China is Africa's largest trading partner. The latter is linked to the fact that most UN peacekeeping operations are conducted in African conflict theatres. Unlike the US, which operates hundreds of military bases throughout the world, China has come to exercise its [global military presence](#), including Africa, through peacekeeping operations.

Secondly, China's expanding role in UN peacekeeping operations over the last two decades became an important instrument of its public diplomacy and yielded diplomatic benefits for China. China's participation in peacekeeping especially allows China to respond diplomatically to African requests or challenges and is a confidence-building measure with both African governments and the AU as the pre-eminent African regional organisation. Indeed, China's peacekeeping experience shows how this emerging superpower has deliberately and systematically used peacekeeping to expand its [economic and diplomatic influence](#), especially in Africa.

Thirdly, as China's strategic and material interests have become more integrated and entangled with African concerns, Beijing has been compelled to consider its national interest and protect its growing interests in Africa more closely. As such, China's emerging peacekeeping role on the African continent is part of a pragmatic reorientation and reassessment in Chinese policy-making circles, specifically where Beijing's political and economic [interests abroad](#) need to be safeguarded. This is particularly notable in the case of China's peacekeeping role in South Sudan and the safeguarding of the Sudanese oil industry.

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**Additional reading:** Gill, B. & Huang, C-H. (2013). The People's Republic of China. In A. Bellamy, & P. Williams, (eds.). *Providing peacekeepers: The politics, challenges, and future of United Nations peacekeeping contributions* (pp.139-157). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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