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INTO AFRICA: CHINA'S GLOBAL SECURITY SHIFT

**Mathieu Duchâtel, Richard Gowan
and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil**

SUMMARY

- China's presence in Africa is nothing new. But its role in African security has undergone a fundamental shift in size and nature, contributing more to peace operations, building its first overseas military base, and tackling terrorism.
- The most concrete sign of change is China's role in UN peacekeeping. It now deploys not just doctors and engineers but combat troops, sending them to dangerous and complex theatres such as Mali and South Sudan.
- This new security presence is a direct result of China's increasingly global stance, both in economics and security. It aims to establish itself as a great power that contributes to global security, and to protect its interests abroad.
- The new role comes with challenges for Beijing's core foreign policy tenets, such as non-interference. It also comes with opportunities, especially for contact between European and Chinese troops.
- Europe should seize the chance to strengthen cooperation with Beijing, but should push to use China's new role to its advantage, insisting on a greater financial contribution to the UN and adherence to humanitarian principles, and opposing behaviour that exacerbates conflict.

On 31 May 2016, Islamist insurgents attacked a United Nations base in Mali, killing one peacekeeper and wounding 12 others. Such hit-and-run raids are common, and have killed 65 UN personnel since 2013. But while most of the victims have been poorly equipped African troops, this time the dead soldier and five of the injured were Chinese.¹ In China, the dead sergeant was hailed as a hero and a martyr. Over 500 officials gathered at a ceremony to mark the return of his body, and his grief-stricken father told the press that he was proud of his son's efforts to keep the peace in foreign countries.² The mere fact that Chinese troops were in the line of fire in a remote corner of the Sahel, where Beijing has few direct interests, points to a fundamental change in China's attitude to Africa.

For a long time, Beijing was reluctant to play a security role on the continent. It sometimes transferred weapons to government and non-state actors during the Cold War, but since the 1970s its policy had been driven by trade and investment alone. Beijing hid behind rhetoric stressing the principles of non-interference and South–South economic cooperation, addressing security crises only through the UN. Once China's economic and human presence in Africa began to grow in the 1990s, it faced criticism from the West that it was fuelling conflicts and human rights abuses through arms transfers and its “no strings attached” approach to economic ties – such as in Darfur and Zimbabwe.

¹ “Chinese peacekeeper among four killed in Mali attacks”, BBC News, 1 June 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36424583>.

² “Chinese peacekeeper's body brought home from Mali”, Xinhua, 9 June 2016, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/photo/2016-06/09/c_135425056.htm; Zheng Jinran, “Peacekeeper's body returns for burial”, China Daily, 10 June 2016, available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-06/10/content_25663352_3.htm.

But now China is expanding its military ties across Africa, and even constructing a naval base in Djibouti. The shift began towards the end of the Hu Jintao era (2002–2012), when Beijing declared the protection of Chinese overseas interests to be a foreign policy priority, and, based on this, announced a China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security.³ Its direct involvement in African security has been taken to a new level under President Xi Jinping. Cooperation with Africa on peace and security is now an explicit part of Beijing’s foreign policy.⁴

The question now is how far China’s role in Africa will be restricted to a narrow definition of its national security interests, protecting its nationals and assets overseas, and how far it will go beyond this to boost its image as a great power that contributes to global stability. One of the most concrete demonstrations of China’s new interest in African security is its growing involvement in UN peace operations on the continent. In 2013, Beijing sent combat troops on blue-helmet missions to Mali. It had previously sent an infantry platoon to South Sudan in 2012 without much publicity, but has now added an entire battalion there – its most significant peacekeeping deployment to date. These steps are all the more significant given the fragile security environment in both countries, placing Chinese troops in danger. But China’s military presence in Africa is diverse, and includes maritime anti-piracy operations, bilateral military aid, support for arms sales, and humanitarian missions.

Does this shift represent a new challenge to the West, or an opportunity for security cooperation? The change in Beijing’s approach to Africa coincides with major developments in UN operations, and in European attitudes towards them. Peacekeepers are facing new threats, such as Islamist extremists in Mali, and have sustained significant casualties. From a European perspective, UN missions are increasingly seen as a tool to help address the twin threats of terrorism and massive migration flows.⁵ As a result, a growing number of EU members – including France, the Netherlands, Germany, the Nordic countries, and the UK – are deploying troops on or alongside UN missions in the region, which they had previously largely avoided. The increasing numbers of Chinese and European soldiers deploying to Africa could create opportunities for closer day-to-day cooperation between them.

This paper examines the paradigm shift in China’s security role in Africa, and the opportunities it presents to Europe. The first section gives an overview of the seven key policy areas China has taken on its new role, including military-to-military ties, confronting non-traditional threats, and the diplomatic response to crises in the region. The second section zooms in on China’s role in peacekeeping operations

³ “Fifth Ministerial Conference of FOCAC opens further China–Africa cooperation”, Xinhua, 23 July 2012, available at <http://www.focac.org/eng/dwjbzjyhys/t954274.htm>.

⁴ The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Johannesburg Action Plan (2016–2018), Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, 25 December 2015, available at http://www.focac.org/eng/lttda/dwjbzjyhys_1/t1327961.htm.

⁵ Richard Gowan and Nick Witney, “Why Europe must stop outsourcing its security”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 15 December 2014, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/why_europe_must_stop_outsourcing_its_security326.

– perhaps the most visible part of this change – analysing the motives behind it, the chequered performance of Chinese peacekeepers, and what China’s engagement means for Europe and the UN.

Section 3 looks at the causes of China’s new attitude, assessing how far it is due to a simple calculation of China’s strategic interests, and what it means for China’s traditional stance of non-interference. The paper ends with a discussion of the challenges that the new approach poses to Beijing, and sets out recommendations for how the EU and its member states can use peacekeeping as a channel for security cooperation with China.

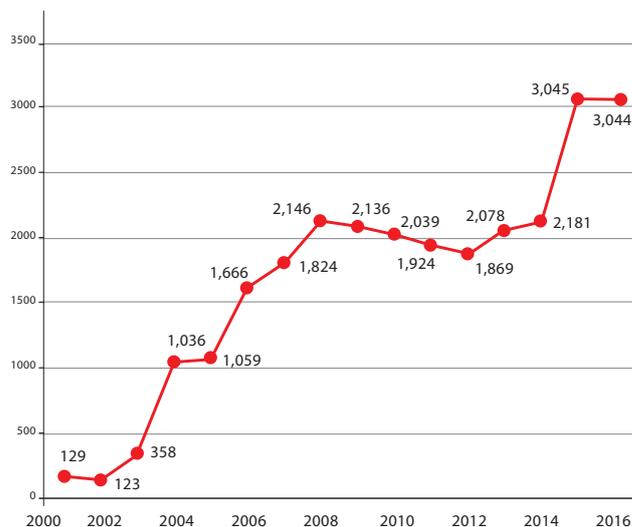
China’s security presence in Africa: An overview

China’s involvement in African security has grown in the past five years across seven main areas:

Peacekeeping

China’s involvement in UN peacekeeping operations has expanded both quantitatively and qualitatively, with greater numbers of personnel committed, and the first combat troops deployed in 2012. China is now the eighth-largest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping, and since 2007 has been the top among the five permanent members of the Security Council.⁶ The expansion is not over – according to Chinese officials, “what comes next will be on a much larger scale”.⁷ (See section 2 for a more in-depth discussion.)

China’s troop contribution to UN peacekeeping by year

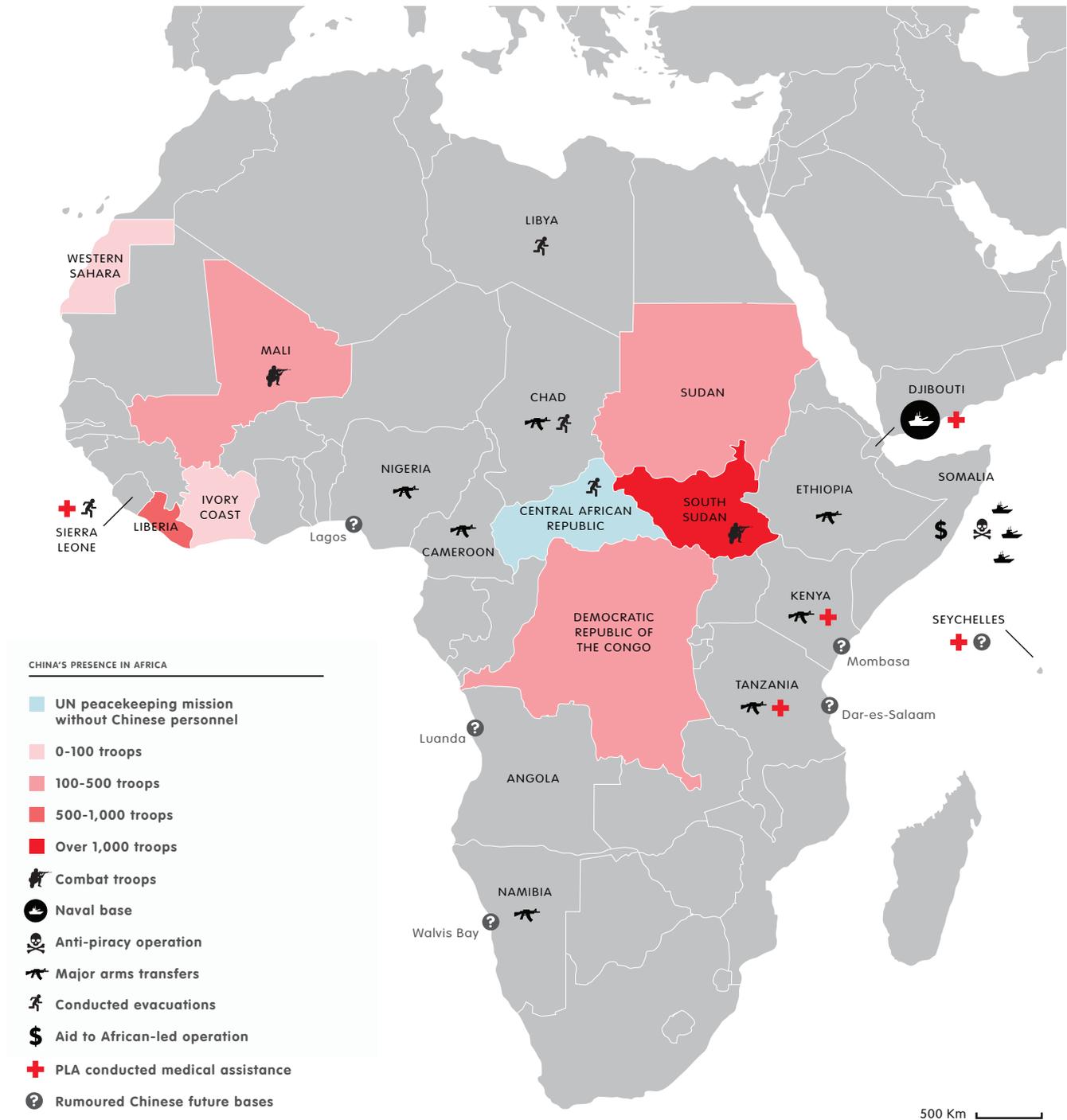


Non-traditional threats

The Chinese navy has patrolled the Gulf of Aden since December 2008 as part of a UN-sanctioned anti-piracy effort off the Somali coast. China has also expressed concern

⁶ UN peacekeeping statistics are available at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/>.

⁷ ECFR interview with a senior PLA officer, Beijing, April 2016.



regarding piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, but its action has mostly been at the bilateral level, including stepping up security cooperation with coastal states.⁸

The Chinese military – the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) – has also taken on a new role in attending to humanitarian crises. It took the lead in shaping China’s response to Ebola, particularly in Sierra Leone. The PLA sent three military medical teams, including doctors and staff from a military

8 Hang Zhou and Katharina Seibel, “Maritime Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea: A Greater Role for China?”, China Brief, volume 15, issue 1, 9 January 2015, available at http://www.jamestown.org/regions/africa/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43373&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=55&cHash=483fbf16901b97355cef6d1dccc362e91#.V1xDi-Z95QM.

hospital in Beijing, to set up an Ebola treatment centre.⁹ A mobile laboratory was also deployed. In recent years, the navy has also deployed the Peace Ark hospital ship, a vessel originally designed to support troops in wartime, which moves around the world providing free healthcare in developing countries. During its first “Harmonious Mission”, the Peace Ark visited Djibouti, Tanzania, Kenya, and the Seychelles.¹⁰

9 Lu Yingying et al., “Chinese military medical teams in the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone”, Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 7 January 2016, available at <http://jramc.bmj.com/content/early/2016/01/07/jramc-2015-000562.full>.

10 “Hospital ship Peace Ark successfully completes overseas mission”, People’s Daily Online, 15 November 2010, available at <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90882/7200011.html>

China is also starting to take on terrorist threats in Africa. Its nationals have already suffered several attacks on African soil. In Mali, it is not only Chinese blue helmets that are under threat. After three Chinese nationals were killed in an attack by militants on a Bamako hotel in 2015, Xi announced that China would “strengthen cooperation with the international community, resolutely crack down on violent terrorist operations that devastate innocent lives and safeguard world peace and security”.¹¹ China is already acting on its words, including transferring arms and providing training to the Nigerian and Cameroonian militaries for their operations against Boko Haram, and supporting the African Union mission against Al Shabaab in Somalia.

An overseas military base

In February 2016, the Chinese Defence Ministry confirmed that construction had begun on a “logistical support facility” in Djibouti. While most Chinese commentators decline to call the facility a “base”, it marks the end of China’s stated policy against permanent military facilities overseas – and more African bases are rumoured to be coming.

The base responds to a clear operational need: providing logistical support to the navy’s anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. But it will also help the PLA with other missions, such as evacuating non-combatants, providing logistical support for peacekeeping, and even collecting intelligence. US commentators have noted that, as Djibouti is a key US intelligence-collection hub in Africa, the base could be used to monitor its communications.¹² A PLA officer with peacekeeping experience in Liberia has stated that the base will make the movement of equipment for peacekeeping operations much faster and more efficient.¹³ Djibouti will also provide a hub for the PLA’s active naval diplomacy in Africa and in the Mediterranean, and may support future counter-terrorism operations. China passed a counter-terrorism law in December 2015 that for the first time authorises the PLA’s deployment on counter-terrorism missions overseas.

There had been rumours for years that China intended to establish a military base abroad, but the plans were accelerated by the difficulties resupplying the navy’s anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, and by the March 2015 evacuation of non-combatants from Yemen, which moved 629 Chinese nationals and 279 foreigners to Djibouti. There had been discussions about establishing the base in Oman, according to a senior official from the PLA Navy Research Institute, but Djibouti was chosen in part for diplomatic reasons, as it already hosts bases operated by France, Japan, and the US.¹⁴ Rumours abound regarding the location of possible future Chinese bases (see map). There have been

11 Michael Martina, “China condemns Mali attack with three Chinese among the dead”, Reuters, 21 November 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/mali-attacks-china-idUSL3N13Go4E20151121>.

12 Gregory Warner, quoted in “China Breaks Ground On Naval Base In Africa”, NPR, Morning Edition, 18 April 2016, transcript available at <http://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474639376/china-breaks-ground-on-military-base-in-africa>.

13 “中国在吉布提建保障设施具有里程碑意义, 中国青年报”, 6 December 2015, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2015-12/06/c_128502489.htm.

14 “专家：中国在吉布提建设远远算不上军事基地 – Expert: China’s construction in Djibouti is very far from a military base”, *Huanqiu Shibao*, 9 March 2016, available at <http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2016/03-09/7789525.shtml>.

persistent suggestions that China may construct another facility in Namibia, which would offer it a logistical base in the Atlantic.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi linked the Djibouti base to the growth of Chinese interests overseas, and stated: “We are trying to build some necessary infrastructure and logistical capacities in regions with a concentration of Chinese interests.”¹⁵ This suggests that Djibouti will not be the last Chinese military facility overseas but only a “first step”, as one military commentator put it.¹⁶

There are three lessons to learn from Djibouti. First, China has framed this initiative as a win-win approach, combining Chinese security interests with those of its African partners and even the broader international community, while keeping a low profile by refusing to call it a base. This could provide a model for future Chinese initiatives in Africa. Second, the project demonstrates that developments in Chinese doctrine, such as the new emphasis on “protection of overseas interests”, are not empty theoretical slogans, but translate into concrete policy changes. Finally, it should not come as a surprise that the first base is a naval facility, as the PLA Navy is taking the lead in the “protection of overseas interests”.

The Chinese press is already describing overseas maritime bases as a “necessity”.¹⁷ The Maritime Silk Road – part of China’s Eurasia-wide infrastructure initiative “One Belt, One Road”¹⁸ – has changed the terms of the debate on this issue. Since the 2012 Party Congress, China has officially been working to establish itself as a “maritime great power”.¹⁹ This requires further changes in the country’s approach to security abroad, and the ability to conduct “blue water” operations on the open ocean, using such bases.

Military-to-military ties

The PLA is among the most active partners of African militaries. These bilateral military-to-military ties are based on arms sales, equipment donations, and training and education programmes. China was the second-largest supplier of weapons to sub-Saharan Africa after Russia in 2015, accounting for 22 percent of arms transfers to the region.²⁰ In recent years, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Namibia, Nigeria, and Tanzania have emerged as key customers of

15 “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, press release, 9 March 2016, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1346238.shtml (hereafter, “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press”).

16 “PLA’s first overseas base in Djibouti”, China Military Online, 12 April 2016, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-04/12/content_7002833.htm.

17 “中国海外基地的梦想与现实”, 国际先驱导报, 17 July 2015, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/herald/2015-06/17/c_134335194.htm.

18 François Godement and Agatha Kratz (eds), “‘One Belt, One Road’: China’s great leap outward”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 June 2015, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/one_belt_one_road_chinas_great_leap_outward3055.

19 “习近平：进一步关心海洋认识海洋经略海洋，推动海洋强国建设不断取得新成就”, *Xinhua*, 31 July 2013. (Xi Jinping: “Let us continue focusing on maritime affairs and spare no efforts to secure more achievements in the construction of a maritime great power.”)

20 Aude Fleurant, Sam Perlo-Freeman, Pieter D. Wezeman, and Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2015”, SIPRI Fact Sheet, February 2016, available at <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1602.pdf>.

the Chinese arms industry.²¹ Several states in Africa are also major recipients of Chinese small arms and light weapons, though the volume of these transfers is absent from public statistics. China has opposed the inclusion of these weapons in the UN Register of Conventional Arms.

China's military aid to Africa has developed over the years, both directly to individual countries, and, increasingly, through support to AU-led peace and security efforts. As well as financial aid, this includes training missions in Africa, courses in China for senior military officers, and specialised training on issues including landmines or the use of Chinese equipment. The beneficiaries include countries that have a longstanding relationship with China, such as Angola and Zimbabwe, and countries in crisis, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Diplomatic involvement

In March 2015, Foreign Minister Wang expressed China's ambition to "play a constructive role in the political settlement of international and regional issues, so as to create a more secure and stable environment for China's development overseas".²²

In Africa, Sudan and South Sudan in particular have been a laboratory for China's diplomatic involvement in security crises. The Chinese Foreign Ministry created the position of "special representative on African affairs" in 2007, as part of efforts to convince Khartoum to agree to the deployment of UN and AU peacekeepers. Ambassador Liu Guijin served for five years before the current incumbent, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, took over in 2012. Since then, the position has proved particularly important in addressing the civil war in South Sudan, where Chinese diplomacy has been active in facilitating peace talks and helping broker a ceasefire.²³

After the country's collapse, regional leaders took the lead in mediation, but China and the US were both active behind the scenes, pushing the government and its foes to make concessions. Chinese officials put aside their traditional reservations about talking to non-state actors for this cause, although only after securing the approval of regional leaders and the government.²⁴ They also agreed to place UN sanctions on generals believed to be fuelling the crisis, in spite of Beijing's reluctance to sanction officials from a friendly government. In addition, China demonstrated an ability to engage with the nitty-gritty of the deal that emerged last year, resolving practical obstacles to a plan to house rebel troops in new camps by offering generators, blankets, and other equipment.²⁵

21 See the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, available at <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

22 "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press".

23 Hang Zhou, "Testing the Limits: China's Expanding Role in the South Sudanese Civil War", *China Brief*, volume 14, issue 19, 10 October 2014, available at <https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/beijings-peace-making-efforts-in-south-sudan>.

24 Peter Fabricius, "Beijing's peacemaking efforts in South Sudan", *JSS Today*, Institute for Security Studies, 6 November 2014, available at <https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/beijings-peace-making-efforts-in-south-sudan>.

25 Casie Copeland, "South Sudan's Peace Needs More than Tents and Generators", *In Pursuit of Peace*, International Crisis Group, 23 February 2016, available at <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/africa/south-sudan/2016/02/23/south-sudans-peace-needs-more-than-tents-and-generators/>.

If the South Sudanese case has inspired China to up its mediation game, it remains, so far, an exception rather than a precedent. Beijing does not engage consistently in diplomatic efforts in other crisis zones, even where it has a peacekeeping presence. And it remains ill at ease with a direct mediation role, if only because it still prefers governments as interlocutors and does not want to appear to interfere in domestic affairs. For example, Beijing has played no part in Algerian-led peace efforts in Mali, although these are backed by the UN. And while China has significant economic interests in the DRC, it only sent a representative to join the international contact group dealing with the DRC and the Great Lakes region in 2014, after diplomatic prodding by the US.

China's aim is clearly more to be part of the diplomatic formats where coordination of international efforts to resolve conflicts takes place, rather than to play a direct role in the resolution itself. It is not clear that Beijing will be willing to accept the diplomatic risks – and constraints – involved in high-profile direct mediation roles.

Evacuation of non-combatants

The protection of nationals is a major factor shaping China's changing approach to external security, and the Djibouti base should also be understood in this context. Estimates put the number of Chinese nationals in Africa at between one and two million.

Since 2004, China has conducted 16 non-combatant evacuation operations, including one with the involvement of the PLA Air Force and Navy (Libya in 2011) and one by the PLA Navy alone (Yemen in 2015).²⁶ In both cases, it was the anti-piracy flotilla deployed off the coast of Somalia that was rerouted, proving its value as a major tactical asset. China has also carried out two evacuations from sub-Saharan Africa (Chad in 2008, and the Central African Republic in 2012).

Supporting the African Union

China offers strong rhetorical support to the African Union, and generally stands behind its positions in debates over security issues at the UN. China even built the organisation's new headquarters in Addis Ababa (allowing it, Western officials grumble, ample opportunities to bug the place).

It has made a series of financial donations to the AU's counter-terrorism and stabilisation mission in Somalia, although these have generally been only between \$1 million and \$2 million at a time – vastly less than the \$1 billion the EU has already given.²⁷ But at the UN in September 2015, Xi offered military aid of up to \$100 million to the AU's rapid response mechanisms – the African Standby

26 For more details, see Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, *China's Strong Arm: Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad* (IISS/Routledge, 2015).

27 See, for example, "China Donates to AMISOM Mission", African Defense, 9 September 2015, available at <http://www.african-defense.com/defense-news/china-donates-to-amisom-mission/>. For the EU figure, see "EU Relations with Somalia", available at http://ceas.europa.eu/somalia/index_en.htm.

Force (ASF) and its blueprint, the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC) – representing a major increase in China's investment in the organisation. As part of this effort to strengthen the AU-led African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), China also directs a significant part of its military assistance – funds, transfer of equipment, training missions – towards sub-regional organisations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa.

Chinese peacekeeping in Africa – a major shift?

One of the most significant parts of China's new role in Africa is its growing involvement in UN peacekeeping operations. Blue-helmet deployments give the PLA a chance to build up field experience abroad – and to help secure Chinese economic interests in places such as South Sudan. Politically, Beijing is using these missions as a mechanism not only to increase its role in Africa but also to cast itself as a *global* security provider and boost its influence at the UN. This may also create fresh opportunities for cooperation with European militaries, which are tentatively expanding their role in UN missions.

There are currently over 2,500 Chinese troops and police officers deployed in blue-helmet missions across the continent, with the largest deployments in South Sudan (1,051), Liberia (666), and Mali (402). Beijing has been gradually building up its presence in UN missions since the end of the Cold War, but its engagement has been cautious. Before 2012, China had only sent non-combat troops, such as medics and engineers, and mostly to low-risk theatres such as Liberia. China had reportedly previously offered to deploy combat troops to Lebanon or the DRC.²⁸ But it is only in the last four years that China crossed the threshold of sending combat troops, and that of sending them to hostile theatres, with an infantry company in northern Mali, where terrorist groups are targeting the UN, and an infantry battalion to South Sudan, which is in the midst of a violent civil war.

What it means for Europe

While the UN has over 100,000 troops and police deployed worldwide, it has relatively little difficulty locating additional infantry for its missions. What it needs, and what China could offer, is high-end units with advanced equipment (such as helicopters and field hospitals) to operate in rough environments. Beijing's willingness to commit these sorts of forces to the UN is of particular interest to European militaries, many of which are also considering deploying more troops to UN missions. While NATO countries have long avoided blue-helmet missions, there is growing recognition that the UN may be a useful mechanism for

containing security threats in Africa and addressing the push factors driving migrants towards the Mediterranean.

The Netherlands, the Nordic countries, and Germany have sent soldiers to Mali under UN command, while the UK is deploying a contingent to South Sudan. France, although not a major troop contributor to these missions, is also present on the ground to provide military support in Mali. This proximity creates openings for unprecedented interactions. In Gao, north-eastern Mali, a Chinese medical unit is based near Dutch UN troops and elements of France's parallel Barkhane counter-terrorist operation. If both China and European nations continue to expand their contributions to UN missions, the opportunities for day-to-day cooperation will multiply. This makes UN missions a useful framework for building relationships with the PLA.

Timeline: China and UN peacekeeping

1971: China joins the UN Security Council, abstaining on peacekeeping resolutions and not paying its budget dues

1981: First positive vote at the Security Council on a peacekeeping operation (Cyprus)

1982: First disbursement to the UN peacekeeping budget

1989: First deployment of civilian observers (Namibia)

1990: First deployment of PLA military personnel, for an unarmed monitoring mission (Middle East)

1991: First deployment of armed PLA military personnel (Cambodia)

1992: First vote in favour of a Chapter VII peacekeeping operation at the Security Council (Somalia)

2000: First deployment of a civilian police force (East Timor)

2007: Becomes top troop-contributing country among the Security Council's permanent members

2012: First deployment of an infantry platoon (South Sudan)

2013: First deployment of an infantry company (Mali)

2015: First deployment of an infantry battalion (South Sudan)

2016: Becomes second-largest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget (10.5%)

²⁸ Bates Gill and Chin Hao-Huang "China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping – Prospects and Policy Implications", SIPRI Policy Paper, number 25, November 2009, available at <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI25.pdf>.

An uneven peacekeeping performance

Mali and South Sudan represent two turning points in China's approach to peacekeeping. China has energy interests to defend in South Sudan, where its National Petroleum Corporation has important operations. Chinese business interests are much less significant in Mali, though the country's stability could affect China's supply of uranium from neighbouring Niger. Trade with Mali stood at only \$392 million in 2014, while trade with South Sudan was \$4.395 billion in 2015.²⁹

This appears to have an effect on the behaviour of its troops. The Chinese contingent in Mali is reportedly impressively equipped: its camp in Gao is monitored by high-tech surveillance cameras, and its field hospital has state-of-the-art kit. But appearances can be deceptive. Concerned by the terrorist threat, Chinese personnel rarely venture outside their base. 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.³⁰ Nonetheless, the Chinese evidently recognise that the facility has limitations: two of the soldiers most severely wounded in the May attack were evacuated to Dakar for treatment.³¹

By contrast, the Chinese battalion in South Sudan generally receives good reviews from UN officials and from observers, as touted by Chinese government outlets.³² Its troops engage with the local population and patrol regularly and professionally. They are markedly more open to taking risks in fulfilling their mission to protect civilians than some other UN contingents – such as the Indians – who barely leave their bases. This may in part be because their

29 See MOFCOM country reports, 2014 and 2015, available at <http://fec.mofcom.gov.cn/article/gbdqzn/>

30 These details, confirmed in private interviews, correspond closely with Frans Paul van der Putten, "China's Evolving Role in Peacekeeping and African Security: The Deployment of Chinese Troops for UN Force Protection in Mali", Clingendael Report, September 2015, especially pp. 11–12 (hereafter, Van der Putten, "China's Evolving Role in Peacekeeping and African Security").

31 "Injured Chinese peacekeepers receive medical treatment in Senegal", *Xinhua*, 2 June 2016, available at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0602/c90777-9067170.html>.

32 "US Military observers visit Chinese peacekeeping infantry battalion in South Sudan", China Military Online, 22 March 2016, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-03/22/content_6972191.htm.

base (nicknamed the "Forbidden City" by locals and UN officials) is in the capital, Juba, which is less risky than other parts of the country, but it also implies that Chinese troops can perform credibly when Beijing sees a strategic interest at stake.

Disparities between the behaviour of units in different locations is not unusual: South African troops perform well in places that Pretoria cares about, such as the DRC, but are passive in others, such as Darfur. Virtually all nations that deploy troops under UN command place open or secret caveats on their use. The UN can only expect soldiers from nations with a direct strategic interest in a given mission to take serious risks on the ground. From a UN and a European perspective, therefore, it is important to consider which Chinese deployments in Africa will take a proactive posture – and where they will send units with orders to stay safe at all costs.

China's current peacekeeping deployments

UN peacekeeping operations	Experts	Contingent	Individual police	Police units	Total
Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI)	6	-	-	-	6
Cyprus (UNFICYP)	-	-	6	-	6
Darfur (UNAMID)	-	234	-	-	234
DR Congo (MONUSCO)	13	221	-	-	234
Lebanon (UNIFIL)	-	418	-	-	418
Liberia (UNMIL)	2	512	12	140	666
Mali (MINUSMA)	-	402	-	-	402
Middle East (UNTSO)	4	-	-	-	4
South Sudan (UNMISS)	3	1,051	13	-	1,067
Western Sahara (MINURSO)	7	-	-	-	7
Total	35	2,838	31	140	3,044

New pledges – and new clout?

Given the mixed track record of recent Chinese peacekeeping deployments, and Beijing's limited willingness to take a prominent political role, there are reasons to be sceptical about how far its new engagement in UN operations can go.

Turning China into a true global security provider cannot boil down only to contributing troops to UN peacekeeping and giving military aid. There is currently a fierce debate within the UN about the future of blue-helmet operations: should peacekeepers largely stick to maintaining order in cases where there is some sort of local political settlement

to support (as in Liberia) or should they focus on more proactive steps to quash violence? This could include countries like South Sudan, where the peace process has broken down, and Mali, where spoilers continue to carry out terrorist or asymmetric warfare against the UN despite the peace agreement.

Western governments – not least France, the UK, and the US in the Security Council – have pushed for UN missions to become more assertive and robust. Rhetorically at least, China is generally in favour of a far more limited interpretation of the peacekeeper's role, insisting on development and peace-building tasks rather than combat operations. This has not stopped it from backing multiple mandates for robust operations under Chapter VII of the UN Charter – which authorises use of force – since the early 2000s. And now, as we have seen, it is putting its own personnel in harm's way in Gao and Juba. China's preference for a limited role also has not prevented it from pledging to deploy significantly more peacekeepers under UN command, potentially taking even higher risks.

While China's commitments in Mali and South Sudan were determined on a case-by-case basis, UN officials have long wanted more reliable access to high-quality forces. The Obama administration, disturbed by the difficulties faced by blue helmets in deployments such as South Sudan, has also made this a priority for the UN in recent years. In September 2015, President Barack Obama convened a summit of fellow leaders on the margins of the UN General Assembly to make pledges of new troops. This exercise was in large part intended to coax greater commitments from European nations,³³ and a number came forward, including the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries.

But the man of the moment was Xi, as one of the present authors noted at the time.³⁴ The Chinese president pledged a standby force of 8,000 troops for UN missions, along with further financial and operational support (see box). This stunned the other leaders present, who were generally offering no more than a few hundred personnel.

There are strong indications that Xi's pledge was a last-minute improvisation, devised in the days leading up to the summit to underline China's contribution to multilateral security. Since then, however, Beijing has started to make good on parts of its promise, committing direly needed helicopters to the UN mission in Darfur and committing \$20 million a year for ten years to a new "UN Peace and Development Trust Fund". The proposed 8,000-strong standby force is currently being adapted into a proposal for Beijing to keep one brigade of troops (roughly 2,500 personnel) with engineering and medical capabilities available to the UN at all times.

Although this may not sound as impressive as Xi's original pledge, it would give the UN an extremely useful tool to deal with future crises. The organisation is notoriously bad at getting forces on the ground fast. At the beginning of the South Sudanese crisis, in December 2013, for example, the Security Council authorised the UN to send 5,000 new troops to the mission with all haste, taking them from elsewhere in Africa if necessary. It took the UN over a year to get these reinforcements on the ground. Similar lags badly held up the deployment to Mali. If Beijing is genuinely willing and able to have a fully equipped brigade ready to handle such crises, it would give the UN greater credibility – and China greater leverage at the UN.

President Xi's announcements at the 2015 UN General Assembly

Adherence to the new Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System, establishment of a permanent police squad and a peacekeeping standby force of 8,000 troops.

Training of 2,000 third-country peacekeepers and delivery of 10 demining assistance programmes (including training and equipment) by 2020.

\$100 million in military aid to the African Union, to support the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises.

Contribution of a helicopter squad to a UN peacekeeping operation.

Establishment of a ten-year \$200 million Peace and Development Fund for the UN, to be used partly to support peacekeeping operations.

Once again, a little scepticism is warranted. A group of largely European nations used to keep a Standby High-Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) to assist the UN, but this was only used properly once, and was wound up in 2009. Meanwhile, the EU's Battlegroups – rapidly deployable forces put on standby on a six-month rotation – were expected to assist the UN, but have never been put into action. The new Chinese brigade will only be of use to the UN if Beijing wants it to be. Over the last six months, for example, peacekeeping officials have been wondering how quickly they could get troops into Burundi if the crisis spirals out of control. The Chinese brigade would have been the perfect resource for this – except that Beijing is firmly opposed to outside intervention in a crisis it considers as a domestic affair.

So China will not automatically leap to the UN's aid in future crises – but the mere fact that it is at the forefront of efforts to bolster peacekeeping has already boosted its status in New York. Despite its growing commitment to UN operations,

³³ Spain, France, and Italy have been the leading European troop contributors for several years now. Italy currently ranks first among EU member states with over 1,300 troops deployed, positioning itself at 22nd globally (April 2016). See the UN website at http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2016/apr16_2.pdf.

³⁴ Richard Gowan, "Red China's new blue helmets", *Order From Chaos*, Brookings Institution, 30 September 2015, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/09/30-un-peacekeeping-commitments-gowan>.

Beijing has not yet pushed for senior peacekeeping posts either at UN headquarters or in the field. In line with Beijing's low diplomatic profile, no Chinese national has ever headed a peacekeeping operation. Chinese generals have commanded forces in Cyprus and Western Sahara, but these are low-profile missions. And China's highest position at headquarters so far is a recent appointment to the deputy police adviser post. With a shake-up of senior UN posts on the horizon under the new Secretary-General in 2017, however, there are credible rumours that Beijing will look to fill an influential post at headquarters – possibly that of military adviser, a key position within the UN department for peacekeeping operations.

What's behind China's support for peacekeeping?

The expansion of Chinese peacekeeping in Africa could have important strategic and operational implications for European operations and UN missions on the continent. But many Western analysts and UN officials express caution about the nature of China's commitment. US security experts are particularly sceptical about how far Beijing prioritises its contribution to international peace and security. A 2016 Pentagon report to Congress on the Chinese military characterises Beijing's objectives in UN deployments as "improving China's international image, obtaining operational experience for the PLA, and providing opportunities for gathering intelligence".³⁵

As for other major contributors, there is some truth to this cynical analysis, including the intelligence dimension. Members of Chinese UN contingents have been known to gather information on other units, and those now based in Gao seem keen to get a look at the French personnel and equipment stationed for counter-terrorism operations nearby. And not all intelligence-gathering is focused on political and military targets. Chinese engineering units in the DRC have reportedly included mineralogists interested in its natural resources. The contingent in South Sudan has test-planted non-native crops, ostensibly to educate locals on agricultural techniques, but perhaps also to assess the soil's viability for Chinese agricultural projects.

But if Beijing uses the UN as a cover for intelligence work, it is hardly alone in doing so – and it is safe to assume that many other countries are trying to gather data on the Chinese blue helmets. European officials argue that while China's intelligence interests are a factor in its peacekeeping, they are not enough to explain its increasing commitments in places like South Sudan.

In the past, China was also often accused of using its votes on peace operations to gain leverage in its battle against the international recognition of Taiwan's independence. Beijing used (or threatened to use) its Security Council veto to impede past UN missions in countries including Guatemala,

Macedonia, and Haiti over their ties with Taiwan. UN officials refer to tetchy negotiations with Chinese diplomats over these cases as "eating rice", and this deal-making has also been necessary in Africa. In 2003, China agreed to send troops to Liberia after the country cut ties with Taiwan, and has maintained a significant presence in the mission ever since. However, the issue of international recognition has diminished as a factor in Chinese decision-making, for the simple reason that a truce was negotiated between the two sides in 2008, and Beijing has effectively won the diplomatic battle – Taiwan only has full diplomatic relations with three states in Africa (Swaziland, Sao Tome and Principe, and Burkina Faso).

Competition with Japan may be a factor shaping Chinese involvement in Africa. This was the case as long ago as the early 1990s, when China's contribution to the peace operation in Cambodia was linked to Japan's first military deployment overseas. More recently, Japan has also contributed military personnel to the UN mission in South Sudan, and its base in Djibouti, established in 2009, was clearly a factor in Beijing's decision to set up its first permanent overseas base.

However, China's core reasons for engaging in African peacekeeping appear to be (i) to buttress its reputation as a rising global security provider, not least in the eyes of African leaders, and (ii) to secure its economic and political investments in countries of concern. Its recent decisions to send troops to Mali and South Sudan provide illustrations of these contrasting motivations.

Mali

Beijing's decision to send personnel to Mali was not driven by any overriding national interest. China had some political links with Mali during the Cold War and has 3,000 nationals in the country, but it does not have any major economic stake there. In addition, it was initially sceptical about the 2013 French intervention to fight off Islamists threatening the capital, Bamako. But after West African countries hurried to back the French, and Paris turned to the UN for additional support, Beijing changed its position. It sent engineers, followed by a field hospital, to northern Mali along with a 200-strong force protection unit in 2013. Yet Chinese diplomats in New York and Bamako have mostly remained passive over this mission, limiting their interventions in backroom Security Council discussions to statements of support for African positions. Beijing seems to view its role in the mission largely as proof that it is a good global citizen and a reliable partner for Africa.

South Sudan

By contrast, Beijing was exceptionally active over South Sudan, where it has significant energy investments, both before and after the country's collapse into civil war in 2013. Prior to South Sudan's vote for independence from Sudan in 2011, Beijing generally positioned itself as a defender of Khartoum at the UN, usually in tandem with Russia. In

35 Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016, US Department of Defense, p. 21, available at <http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016%20China%20Military%20Power%20Report.pdf>.

2006, it deterred a vote to authorise UN deployment in Darfur because of the regime's refusal to allow it, before taking a leading role in rallying Khartoum to a hybrid option, with the deployment of a joint UN–AU operation in 2007.

After the independence vote in 2011, China changed tack – cooperating closely with the US to manage some crises and letting Moscow do the hard work of defending (northern) Sudan over border conflicts between the recently divided states, so as not to alienate South Sudan.³⁶ When divisions within South Sudan itself led to its implosion in December 2013, China – which already had troops under UN command there – became a strong advocate of strengthening the UN mission.

Beijing's diplomats were frank about its interests in doing so, asking whether it would be possible to send Chinese units operating under the UN flag to guard its energy installations and Chinese personnel working there. UN officials pushed back against this proposal, on the grounds that even powerful governments should not pick and choose the tactical roles of their troops in multilateral missions.

China still decided to pledge its first full-scale combat battalion in a UN peacekeeping operation, and this deployed in 2015. The battalion is based near Juba, the capital, rather than China's energy installations further north, as Beijing had initially requested. Chinese diplomats at the UN Security Council had managed to ensure that the mission's mandate includes special attention to the security of those oil fields on the basis of its task to protect civilians.³⁷ UN officials report that the best way to persuade the often recalcitrant South Sudanese government to take difficult steps is to ask the Chinese to pass on the message.

Explaining China's new security approach in Africa

In part, the Chinese military is now more involved in African security affairs because it can be – China has been the world's second-largest military spender since 2009, with a military budget of \$146 billion in 2016. Its changing capacities are themselves a driver of change in its foreign policy.

In addition to the PLA's expanding ability to project force abroad, two main interests shape China's evolving approach. First, its stated interest in contributing to international peace and security, and second, its new commitment to protecting China's overseas interests. The interaction between the two will be the decisive factor shaping China's future role in African security.

The strategic rationale

The PLA sees a strategic gain from “non-war military activities” such as aid, counter-terrorism, and peacekeeping, for which Africa provides a key theatre. In immediate terms, for an army whose last ground operations date back

³⁶ Heiko Nitzschke, “Sudan”, in Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone, and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century* (Boulder: Rienner, 2015), pp. 627–631

³⁷ See UN Security Council Resolution 2155 (2014), operative paragraph 4, section (a) (ii).

to Vietnam in 1979, peacekeeping provides much-needed operational experience. In an important 2013 study, the Chinese Academy of Military Science argued that those operations also serve the country's political interests by portraying the PLA as a “force for peace”. These operations are also understood in China in terms of more direct security gains, as they eliminate foreign threats and support the global expansion of Chinese interests.³⁸

Foreign policy more broadly, beyond the interests of the military, is an important determinant of China's increasing role in African security. A recent article in a Communist Party journal lists the three main interests at stake for China in Africa. First, securing an environment conducive to economic growth in order to deepen its trade and investment ties with African countries. Second, consolidating its international image as a “responsible developing great power”. Third, deepening the “democratisation of international relations” and “south–south cooperation” – code words for helping developing nations to reduce the power gap with the developed world and fostering a multipolar world, a goal perceived as strategic in Beijing.³⁹

Foreign policy interests are also driven by external demand. China has responded to requests from partners in Africa, for example when states in the Gulf of Guinea have requested assistance in the fight against piracy. It is also upon the request of Nigeria and Cameroon that China has helped fight Boko Haram, mostly through arms transfers.

Direct threats to China's interests

China's involvement in African security is a product of a wider transformation of China's national defence policy. It is taking on a global outlook, developing the ability to project force abroad, and incorporating new concepts such as the protection of overseas interests and “open seas protection” – i.e. the ability to protect Chinese ships and secure sea lines of communication further from its shores. The 2013 White Paper on national defence characterised “vessel protection at sea, evacuation of Chinese nationals overseas, and emergency rescue” as “important ways and means for the PLA to safeguard national interests and fulfil China's international obligations”.⁴⁰

Africa is the source of various security threats to Chinese nationals, from petty crime to terrorist attacks. As a result, the continent is central in the ongoing transformation of China's protection of its nationals overseas. On a May 2014 trip to Angola, Prime Minister Li Keqiang declared that protecting Chinese nationals overseas was a “priority matter for the state”.⁴¹ The link between overseas interests and greater involvement in Africa is clear in many Chinese

³⁸ *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学), Strategy Studies Department, Academy of Military Science, 2013, pp. 157–161.

³⁹ Yuan Wu, “中国在非洲冲突后国家重建中发挥重要作用”, *Dangdai Shijie*, no. 3, March 2016, pp. 58–61.

⁴⁰ *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, Information Office of the State Council, Defense White Paper, chapter 3.

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “李克强在安哥拉召开海外民生座谈会”, 9 May 2014, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zl_674979/ywzt_675099/2014zt_675101/lkqzlfwss_675135/zxxx_675137/t1154180.shtml.

experts' publications. Scholar He Wenping argues that the "lessons of blood" learned in Libya and Sudan in 2011, where Chinese nationals and companies were caught off guard by murderous armed conflicts they had no part in, were a direct cause of the shift in China's Africa policy.⁴²

The new non-interference

Chinese security involvement in Africa is part of a shift towards a more flexible and pragmatic understanding of its traditional support for non-interference, which allows China the space to play a more active role. A piece by He Wenping reflects Beijing's strategic thinking on this topic, and the increasingly clear distinction between two types of security challenge. In countries where Chinese presence is relatively weak, and where domestic political conflicts are linked to election results or to a struggle between various groups, a strict version of non-interference should apply, under this approach. But where domestic conflicts are already internationalised – with other countries stepping in or insecurity spilling over the borders – or where they impact China's presence in that country, deeper involvement is in China's interest.⁴³

Number of Chinese nationals in selected African countries

Angola	260,000
Nigeria	65,000
DR Congo	13,000
Sudan	6,000
Liberia	4,100
Namibia	4,000
Mali	3,000

Source: MOFCOM country reports available in Chinese at 走出去公共服务平台: <http://fec.mofcom.gov.cn/article/gbdqzn/>

In spite of this pragmatic evolution of China's concept of non-interference, it remains a tricky issue for Beijing. Its implications for the use of force are still to be determined, given China's traditional reservations – both for ideological reasons, and out of risk aversion. Chinese officials argue that its deployment of combat troops tasked with the protection of civilians does not compromise the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, so long as it remains within the framework of UN peacekeeping.⁴⁴ But the level of violence in these crises, including direct targeting of UN blue helmets, and the fact that they often involve government forces or proxies, suggests this is a much more perilous endeavour than the official position claims.

Under China's new approach, the various dimensions of its security presence can more easily clash. China's support for the militaries of Sudan or Zimbabwe has often been

42 He Wenping, "非洲安全形势特点及中非安全合作新视角", *Feizhou Zongheng*, number 2, 2015, pp. 1–14.

43 He Wenping.

44 Cedric de Coning and Lt. Gen. Chander Prakash, "Peace Capacities Network Synthesis Report – Rising Powers and Peace Operations", Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, NUOI Report number 3, 2016, p. 27, available at <http://www.un.org/pga/70/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2016/01/160316-PeaceCap-Peace-Operation-report.pdf>.

criticised, but in the past Beijing was able to brush off these complaints. But in South Sudan it was forced to halt weapons sales in 2014 after an arms shipment was discovered, leading to criticism in the international media that China had undermined the peace process.⁴⁵

International cooperation

China's increasing presence in Africa can boost international cooperation more broadly. For instance, Beijing's commitment to training its own peacekeeping troops – including by opening ad hoc training centres in China – has created opportunities for further collaboration with Western countries. In 2015, the UK and China discussed an agreement on peacekeeping cooperation⁴⁶ after the British military assisted China with pre-deployment training.⁴⁷

This enhanced relationship goes beyond merely technical cooperation, and could have major political consequences. In Mali, the Chinese infantry company is, for the first time in the PLA's history, responsible for the security of other countries' forces. Working within the same peacekeeping mission tasked with protecting civilians implies a shared understanding of how to implement this mandate, militarily and politically. Meanwhile, when Europeans and Chinese deliver military assistance to the same country – as is currently the case in the DRC, where both are supporting military reform – it is a challenge to coordinate their aid, and their messages on issues such as operational performance and respect for international humanitarian law.

China's increasing cooperation with African regional and sub-regional organisations also creates a number of specific challenges for Beijing. For example, China has encountered situations when an international organisation it was working with clashed with its traditional approach. When regional conflict resolution forum International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) supported a robust and even offensive mandate for UN peacekeepers in the DRC,⁴⁸ it was difficult for China to oppose this at the Security Council, despite its concerns about the security of its troops, and the fact that it clashes with its traditional understanding of non-interference.

And while China usually finds it more convenient to stick to the African organisations on the diplomatic front, these organisations often disagree among themselves. For example, the AU and the West African organisation ECOWAS clashed over the settlement of the post-electoral conflict in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, as did the AU and the Arab League over military intervention in Libya in 2011 – forcing China to make difficult choices.

45 Ilya Gridneff, "China Halts Arms Sales to South Sudan After Norinco Shipment", *Bloomberg*, 30 September 2014, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-09-29/china-halts-weapons-sales-to-south-sudan-after-norinco-shipment>.

46 "Outcomes Reached by China and the UK During Xi Jinping's Visit to the UK", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, press release, 22 October 2015, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpdygyxgsfw/t1309374.shtml.

47 "China's growing role in African peace and security", *Saferworld*, January 2011, p. 75, available at <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/500-chinas-growing-role-in-african-peace-and-security>.

48 UN Security Council Resolution 2098 (2013) has authorised the UN mission in the DRC to carry out targeted offensive operations against armed groups, an unusual task for UN forces. China voted in favour of this resolution.

Conclusion and recommendations

China's growing security presence in Africa is new in both nature and scale. The deployment of combat troops on blue-helmet missions and the construction of the country's first permanent base abroad are important turning points. They complicate China's interests in the region, and create new challenges for the country's military policy and diplomacy. One of these challenges is getting to grips with its diplomatic role. Beijing's contribution to stabilising countries such as Mali and South Sudan does not boil down to troop deployments alone. In countries where China has political weight, its diplomatic efforts may be more significant than its military ones – when it decides to step in. This presents Beijing with new challenges. It has relatively little experience of mediation, and is only gradually learning to handle negotiating processes (at present, Afghanistan offers an example of a greater Chinese role in supporting negotiations). Chinese diplomats are cautious about talking with rebel leaders or non-state armed groups, even with the agreement of the local government, due to their commitment to defending state sovereignty, and their sense that outsiders rarely have much chance of resolving internal conflicts.⁴⁹ Even in diplomatic coordination settings, they often remain quiet.

A second challenge is how future casualties will affect China's peacekeeping. So far, the PLA has minimised the risks to personnel. The attack in Mali in May was the sixteenth death of a Chinese peacekeeper since the first contingent was deployed in 1990.⁵⁰ It is an open question how the Chinese public might react to future casualties – a greater number of deaths in UN operations could lead to domestic pressure to increase China's role abroad, but could also have the opposite effect. If affairs involving the death of Chinese nationals overseas offer any indication, domestic opinion tends to support forceful intervention, with retaliation and the use of special forces to free hostages.

However it chooses to play its hand over these issues, China is well placed to take a bigger role in shaping UN operations in future. Western diplomats note that the military representation in the Chinese mission in New York is growing more professional. For European policymakers, with their twin interests in strengthening blue-helmet missions and courting Beijing, it is tempting to strengthen peacekeeping collaboration with the PLA – as the UK did. But there are obstacles.

Some of these arise from difficulties on the ground. European officers have been dismissive of the quality of Chinese medical facilities in Mali. A recent study of the Dutch and Chinese roles in the mission concludes that “it appears easier for the PLA to interact with UN troops from developing countries than with those from developed countries such as European Union member states”.⁵¹ At a

⁴⁹ Interview with an expert on Central Africa who asked to remain anonymous.

⁵⁰ UN Peacekeeping, Fatalities by Nationality and Mission up to 31 May 2016, available at http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/fatalities/documents/stats_2.pdf

⁵¹ Van der Putten, “China's Evolving Role in Peacekeeping and African Security”, p. 12.

minimum, therefore, European policymakers who want to use peacekeeping operations in Africa as a platform to develop closer relations with China need to take steps to overcome the operational difficulties of mixing and matching European and Chinese personnel on the ground, potentially in high-risk situations.

There are differences and possible conflicts of interests between China and Europe in Africa beyond the question of peacekeeping. Despite shifts in China's interpretation of the non-interference principle, its “no strings attached” approach to arms sales and military cooperation remains, and can go against European interests. There is a risk that this could undermine the defence of European values in Africa, namely human rights and liberal political systems.

This discussion points to three sets of recommendations for how the EU and its member states can take advantage of recent developments while reducing the risks of competing visions of peace and security.

1. Cooperate more closely with China on peacekeeping

European policymakers should broadly welcome China's growing peacekeeping role as an opportunity for greater diplomatic and security cooperation with Beijing, while remaining alert to the potential downsides – such as its use as a cover for intelligence-gathering. Cooperation should involve initiatives by different sets of European actors across different forums:

At the UN: Britain and France should use their positions in the Security Council to deepen discussions with Beijing on the future of peacekeeping, and how to improve UN mandates and forces. One promising forum for such discussions is the Security Council's Military Staff Committee (MSC), which has long been dormant but recently began to review blue-helmet missions. In light of Beijing's plans for a standby brigade, one potential area for cooperation would be policy work to speed up the UN's notoriously inefficient systems for mounting urgent deployments.⁵² Given events in Mali, increasing UN missions' capacities to deal with terrorist attacks could be another. European diplomats should also encourage the UN Secretariat to recruit Chinese civilian and military officials to more posts in its peacekeeping political divisions.

At the EU level: Member states should coordinate their approach to peacekeeping interactions with China. Many member states run bilateral exchanges through their defence attachés in Beijing. The EU should use the EU–China Dialogue on Security and Defence, which is at present its only channel for engaging with the PLA, to carry out coordinated military diplomacy on peacekeeping on behalf of member states.

⁵² The UN's mechanisms are so slow that it took over a year to deploy 5,000 reinforcements that the Security Council had mandated to deploy urgently to South Sudan in December 2013. See Richard Gowan, “10 Trends in Peace Operations”, *Global Peace Operations Review*, 17 June 2015, available at <http://peaceoperationsreview.org/thematic-essays/10-trends-in-peace-operations/>.

In Beijing and European capitals: Governments should hold joint “lessons learned” exercises with Chinese counterparts to draw lessons from the operational interactions between European and Chinese peacekeeping units in Mali and South Sudan.

2. Explore how China’s engagement in African security can fit more closely with Europe’s interests in the region

Coordination: The EU and key member states should push for China’s support for African organisations and individual countries to be coordinated with Europe’s.

Values: Member states should pursue trilateral coordination between Europe, China, and Africa on key principles of military cooperation and assistance, such as civilian oversight and respect for human rights, especially in the context of security sector reform.

The EU should build upon China’s de facto adherence to UN humanitarian principles such as protection of civilians and humanitarian access, and insist that these are implemented in Beijing’s bilateral actions in Africa.

Financial contribution: The EU should use bilateral military channels, and the Dialogue on Security and Defence, to insist that China increase its voluntary financial commitment to African-led peace operations and peace-building efforts in line with its military presence and its increased UN budget assessed contribution.

Operations: Member states should monitor the construction of the Djibouti base. Interested member states should also explore synergies in the area of non-combatant evacuation operations, and eventually carry out exchanges on terrorism in countries where China is supporting national efforts against terrorist groups.

3. Oppose problem behaviour

Member states, in particular those involved on the ground or at the UN Security Council, should work with African partners to encourage China towards stronger support for sanctions as a crisis management tool, focusing on countries that are more open to the use of sanctions against those committing war crimes and undermining peace processes.

The EU and member states should call on China to provide more transparency on arms transfers, including small arms and light weapons, and donations that are not included in the UN Register of Conventional Arms.

The EU and member states should also push China to sign the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), and mobilise African partners to raise the issue with China.

In relevant multilateral arenas and donor forums, the EU and member states should hold China accountable for actions that exacerbate the drivers of conflict (arms trafficking,

corruption, natural resources, and competition for land or water) and oppose China’s “no strings attached” approach to bilateral military cooperation with several African states.

Overall, China’s expanding security presence in Africa is a good thing for Africa and for collective security, and therefore for Europe. Though this expansion is rooted in China’s new doctrine on protecting its interests overseas, this does not explain all recent developments in China’s foreign policy. China is also building its international image as global security provider, with Africa as its main showcase, and working to balance the international perception that China’s assertive actions in East Asia are fuelling tensions in the region.

To sum up, China’s involvement in African security is driven by a mixture of the wish to protect its interests overseas, the ambition to take on a broader role in global diplomacy, and a genuine intention to contribute to a more stable international security environment – one that would be conducive to Chinese business interests.

About the authors

Mathieu Duchâtel is deputy director of the Asia and China Programme and a senior policy fellow at ECFR, where he works on China's foreign and security policy. Before joining ECFR in 2015, he was based in Beijing as head China representative for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Richard Gowan is a senior policy fellow at ECFR based in New York, where he works on the UN and conflict resolution. He teaches at Columbia University and was previously research director at New York University's Center on International Cooperation.

Manuel Lafont Rapnouil is the head of the Paris office and a senior policy fellow at ECFR. Before joining ECFR in 2015, Manuel worked extensively on UN affairs and international peace and security issues as a French career diplomat. Between 2008 and 2010, he was a visiting fellow with the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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london@ecfr.eu