



## Chinese Combat Troops Join UN Peacekeeping Operations in South Sudan: A New Beginning?

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The People's Republic of China (PRC) will be sending a 700-strong peacekeepers infantry battalion to South Sudan for a United Nations peacekeeping mission in January 2015 (*China Military Online* 2015). The decision, first announced on 25 September 2014 (*Reuters* 2014), marks the first time that the PRC is dispatching a *combat force* to assume the task of protecting civilians, UN and humanitarian staff, patrolling and guarding missions. The PRC has been participating in the UN peacekeeping missions since 1989 but merely as a provider of 'force enablers'. It is normal for all troop-contributing countries of the United Nations, including India, to send combat troops.

Till now, however, the Chinese have never sent combat troops in any of the UN operation. This recent decision to make a

contribution of combat troops may be taken as an indication of China gaining more confidence and experience. However, there is no definitive or publicly available and documented Chinese policy on deployment of combat troops under UN auspices.

It is factually correct to state that among the permanent members (P-5) of the UN Security Council, China is the largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs). This is reflected in the Table 1 below.

China participated in a UN peacekeeping operation for the first time 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 UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO)

in the Middle East. It endorsed and participated in the most ‘intrusive’ peacekeeping operation until then – United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). China not only underwrote the operation politically and financially, it also for the first time sent a sizable military unit (an engineering battalion) to Cambodia (Wang 2005:165). Since 2004, China invariably ranks among the top 20 troop contributing countries to the UN peacekeeping operations (United Nations Peacekeeping 2014).

**Table 1: Troops Contributed by the Five Permanent Members to UN Peacekeeping 2000-2014**

Year	China	France	Russia	UK	US
2014	2192	939	92	285	113
2013	1769	963	104	347	111
2012	1922	990	88	276	146
2011	943	1540	232	281	123
2010	1995	1771	362	281	82
2009	2147	2021	366	268	84
2008	2164	2520	282	326	309
2007	1811	1950	291	365	307
2006	1648	1900	294	347	335
2005	871	594	219	362	356
2004	942	584	332	553	365
2003	139	442	374	700	643
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2001	111	673	334	688	732
2000	95	490	302	561	901

Source: United Nations Peacekeeping 2014.

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## Typology of PKOs

It may be useful to briefly refer to the typology of peacekeeping operations that are conducted in different parts of the world. In the post-Cold War period, the United Nations has naturally undertaken the majority of PKO. However, even among those authorized by the United Nations, not all of them operate under the UN command. Due to resource constraints, many of them are subcontracted to other agencies - such as ‘coalition of states’, individual country-led operations, operations under the regional organizations such as NATO, African Union, European Union and Economic Cooperation of Western African States (ECOWAS) and so on – which carry out operations on behalf of the United Nations. There are other kinds of PKOs which are PKOs not authorized by the United Nations nor are they under the command of the United Nations such as the UK in Sierra Leone (2000), France in Cote d’Ivoire (2002), ECOWAS in Cote d’Ivoire (2003), coalition-of-the-willing operation in

Solomon Islands (2003), and NATO in Kosovo (1999).

## Changes in China's Stand on PKOs

Before 1981, China had an extremely negative attitude towards PKOs because of its experience of UN operations in the Korean crisis immediately after its liberation, the Cold War and its exclusion from the UN, as also due to its socialist orientation. Initially, China regarded UN PKOs as a tool of imperialism and opposed it even after the thaw in its relations with the United States and after it had gained the seat at United Nations in 1971. However, largely in deference to developing countries, who highly valued these operations, China's opposition did not take the form of veto at the Security Council. Instead, China opted for the 'not participating' device in the voting. Thus, China did not obstruct either the establishment of new peacekeeping operations or the extension of the existing ones. China registered its opposition by dissociating from peacekeeping, by not participating in Security Council voting, not paying its annual peacekeeping contributions and not contributing personnel to the on-going operations.

China's stand on the UN PKOs underwent a sea change from late 1981 when China not only started to vote in favour of PKOs, but also paid its apportionment towards the expenditure on this count. The reasons for this change in its 'principled stand' was linked to its changed foreign policy objective of convincing the international community that it had become a normal state, and to woo international technological and investment support for its Four Modernization programmes, as it embarked on its market reforms. However, its

supportive attitude did not matter much as no new PKO was established until 1988.

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China initially opposed a number of PKOs that authorized the use of force in 1990s on the grounds that they violated the principle of state sovereignty or that the use of force was not called for in a specific conflict situation. For instance, with regard to the first Gulf War, although China agreed that Iraq should withdraw from Kuwait, China abstained during the vote on Resolution 678 (1990) to register its opposition to the use of force. Although China voted in favour of establishing UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the former Yugoslavia in 1992, it had opposed alteration to UNPROFOR's mandate invoking Chapter VII of the UN Charter. China also abstained from resolutions that authorized peace enforcement tasks in Rwanda, Haiti and Bosnia.

At the same time, there are instances where China also voted in favour of robust peacekeeping operations. For example, China voted in favour of the resolutions that mandated the US-led United Task Force (UNITAF) under Chapter VII to use 'all necessary means' to secure a stable environment in Somalia in 1993. The Chinese representative insisted that these 'exceptional measures' could only be justified in view of the 'long-term chaotic situation resulting from the present lack of a government in Somalia' (UN Doc. 1992). Similarly, in mid-1993, when the fight

between ethnic groups in Bosnia intensified, Beijing voted in favour of the resolution that authorized use of force to shield civilians from attacks in so-called 'safe areas', to protect the freedom of movement of the peacekeepers and to defend themselves (UN Doc. 1993). While stating its reservations against the use of force, China pointed out that it would support these resolutions out of humanitarian considerations and because of the consent of the host countries.

## China and PKOs since the Turn of the Century

At the turn of the century, China's opposition to use of force and the Western states' practice of bypassing of the United Nations surfaced clearly during the Kosovo crisis, which China considered as 'an internal affair' and urged the United Nations to proceed with 'caution' (UN Doc. 1998).

Once aerial war started in Kosovo in 1999, China's opposition became stronger and turned into indignant outrage when its embassy in Belgrade was bombed by NATO. The Western powers succeeded in sidelining China in the decision-making process, and humiliated it. These developments compelled Chinese strategists to seek new ways to ensure Chinese influence over the methods and processes of international intervention efforts.

This impetus led to a more activist Chinese position and extensive participation in subsequent UN PKOs, starting with the East Timor crisis. In the two decades of its participation, China has deployed over 15,600 personnel to 18 UN PKOs (Hirono and Lanteigne 2011: 245).

## China vis-à-vis the other P-5 Members

While all the P-5 members of the UN Security Council are heavily involved in managing conflicts and humanitarian crises in the post-Cold War, they differ from China in the kinds of personnel deployed and the tasks they are involved in the operational field.

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So far, China has been engaged as a provider of 'force enablers' such as engineers, doctors and military observers for some UN PKOs. Through these 'force enablers' China tries to win the hearts and minds of the host populations. It has not yet deployed combat force as Beijing does not want to promote its image as a 'fire-breathing dragon' or to be seen as a strategic competitor to the United States and other Western powers. Other permanent members involved in peacekeeping operations or peace enforcement operations, by contrast have deployed military force mainly for combat operation.

The involvement of other permanent members, including Russia, in managing the conflicts and humanitarian crises is not minor. Although many of these operations are authorized by the United Nations, they are not under UN command. They deliberately opted out of the UN PKOs because they do not want to place their soldiers under UN commanders. They are

apprehensive of the capability and effectiveness of the UN military commanders, who can be mostly from the developing countries and do not wish to risk their soldiers' lives by placing them under such commanders. These operations are not regarded as UN PKOs. Therefore, the troops in these operations are not counted as contribution to UN PKOs. That is the reason for the low contribution of other permanent members reflected in the table.

If China's combat force participation in UN operation gains currency, it could open up the possibility of China competing with other troop contributing countries for positions of power in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. Further, China may also act like other permanent members, engineering resolutions at UN Security Council to get authorization for PKOs wherever it desires to service its own national interest. It may also open up the possibility of UN-mandated but China-led UN PKO in Asia. In such an eventuality, China may no longer project itself as benign power and may not hesitate to act as a regional hegemon. ■

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