

# **China's Contribution to the United Nations Peacekeeping Missions in the Middle East and North Africa: Security Balancing Signals**

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Received: 2018/04/30

Accepted: 2018/11/15

## **Abstract**

China's participation in the United Nations peacekeeping missions has been very striking in recent years, notably since 2000. In accounting for China's such operations in the Middle East and North Africa, this article focuses on security perspective. The aim of the paper is to address China's peacekeeping policies in relation to the country's strategic preferences and utilities. The findings show that the calculus behind China's ascendancy in the peacekeeping engagement, and perhaps its foreign policy, has shifted with its improved international image not only in economic and diplomatic arenas but also security enhancement and balancing against the United States. In other words, China is surpassing the U.S. as the leader in UN peacekeeping and crafting an image for itself within the international community which will be evaluated in three sections; firstly, shedding lights on China's level of participation in the peacekeeping missions in the Middle East and North Africa, secondly, assessing its military strategy and, finally, noticing China's balancing responses to the United States.

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**Keywords:** China's Military Strategy, Security Signaling, U.N. Peacekeeping Operations.

## **I. Introduction**

China has significantly upped its financial and personnel contributions to UN peacekeeping initiatives to rebrand the Chinese position in the international balance of power, notably since 2000. In fact, China is the third largest contributor to the UN budget, the second largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping among the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) and, the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations. From providing roughly 3% percent of total financial contributions in 2013, China currently contributes 10.25% of the UN peacekeeping budget. With regard to UN operations, the country has deployed peacekeepers to nine out of 15 missions as of 31 January 2018<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, this amount of Chinese participation is critical and needs greater attention. Additionally, the body of literature on peace operations is generally concentrated on analyzing mission's effectiveness and policymaking rather than drawing connections to its international relations aspect. The existing limited literature that touches upon China's role in the UN focuses largely on assessing its peacekeeping operations based on China's acceptance of international norms and the mandate of a mission, rather than on strategic considerations that may influence Beijing's participation to peacekeeping operations. Therefore, the aim of

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (2018), contributions by country, online: UNPKO [China].

this article is to address China's peacekeeping policies in relation to its strategic preferences and utilities. This article attempts to address China's participation in the UN peacekeeping missions taking its security consideration into account.

There are two competing arguments which attempt to explain states participation in peacekeeping operations. The first suggests that such participation is not to secure the goals of national interests rather for the sake of the international community. This idealist view argues that states will participate in UN peacekeeping missions out of an obligation to preserve peace and international norms, even when it is incompatible with national interests. The realist argument, on the other hand, assumes that states participate in the UN peacekeeping regime for the sake of their self-interest. Participation in UN peace operations allows a state to protect or achieve its current or desired position in the international system or to benefit from access to a set of private goods such as access to natural resources, diplomatic influence, and markets for produced goods<sup>2</sup>.

China's peacekeeping policy in the Middle East and North Africa is driven by realist motivations, not purely by altruistic ones, regarding geostrategic and economic importance of the region and its intrinsic and extrinsic values and interests. According to Miller<sup>3</sup> intrinsic interests including the geostrategic importance of the region, the economic resources located there, and the importance of the region for trade and

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2 Laura NEACK, "UN Peacekeeping: In the Interest of Community or Self," (May 1995) *Journal of Peace Research* 32, 181-196.

3 Benjamin MILLER, "The Logic of US Military Intervention in the Post-Cold War Era", (December 1998), *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 19, No. 3, at 81.

investments as factors that drive a state to intervene. Extrinsic interests are based on the geographical proximity of the potential intervention host state and the intervening power. Miller argues that although extrinsic interests are important, they are the most vital form of interests to the potential intervener as they have the potential to affect the global balance of power. While a state may intervene in regions that lack intrinsic or extrinsic value to defend its international reputation, the intervention is likely to be limited at most. Norms and idealist interests, however, can be used to legitimize more realist interventions that are designed to secure and protect intrinsic and extrinsic interests.

China, as a great power, implements power politics; its self-interests include balancing against the power of the United States, improving its power projection, building its international influence, and securing access to critical private goods such as energy resources. According to Lin-Greenburg<sup>4</sup>, China's participation in peace operations after 2000 is guided by a realist motivation that seeks to maximize access to commercial and diplomatic interests, with higher levels of participation in states with high strategic values. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been fifty-seven UN peace operations, of which China has participated in twenty-four. Chinese peacekeeping practitioners suggest that China's policy toward participation in the UN peacekeeping regime is guided by its grand strategy or national interests and comprehensive national capabilities. China's participation in UN peace operations increases its

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4 Eric LIN- GREENBURG, *Blue Helmeted Dragons: Explaining China's Participation in United Nations Peace Operations*, (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), at 21.

influence both at the United Nations and in weak regions of the world, where China's presence in peacekeeping missions may persuade Taiwan against using financial incentives to gain diplomatic recognition. Active participation in peace operations also diminishes the fear of a potential China threat by projecting its image as a responsible actor to the governments of both developing and developed nations. Participation also balances against the United States by promoting multilateralism in international security efforts. Deploying peacekeeping personnel also allows China's military and police forces to gain first-hand experience at a very low cost<sup>5</sup>.

In this article security balancing signaling by great powers is the most important reason for participating in the U.N. peacekeeping missions which in the following sections this will be evaluated for China after shedding lights on its level of participation in the U.N. peacekeeping missions in the Middle East in the first section and assessing its military strategy in the Middle East consecutively.

## **II. China's UN Peacekeeping Missions Contribution To The Middle East And North Africa**

The People's Republic of China joined the United Nations in 1971 but then avoided voting for, or participating in peace operations, which it viewed as an infringement on the sovereignty of states. This position was largely fueled by China's "victim mentality" complex in which it viewed

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, at 19-20.

itself as being the target of great power aggression and exploitation<sup>6</sup>. China argued that its position was consistent with the UN Charter, which states: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state"<sup>7</sup>. China also feared that UN peace operations would set the stage for further intervention by world powers. Huang Hua, China's first delegate to the United Nations after Beijing regained its seat in 1971 believed that peace operations such as the United Nations Emergency Force would bring "infinite evil consequences in its wake and pave the way for further international intervention in the Middle East with superpowers as behind the scene bosses." Additionally, resource constraints limited China's potential participation in peace operations during that time. Throughout the 1970s, China's resources were allocated to providing defensive capabilities against a possible attack from the Soviet Union as well as delivering aid to the Third World. However, China shifted its position on peace operations from non-voting and principled opposition to voting with principled opposition through abstention. Vetoing missions could have compromised China's relations with Third World countries by obstructing missions that could potentially help them, while voting in favor of missions could compromise China's positions on state sovereignty and non-intervention. In 1981, China voted for the first time to support a peacekeeping force when it supported the extension of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus. China

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6 HE YIN, *China's Changing Policy on UN Peacekeeping Operations*, (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2007), at 17.

7 Charter of the United Nations, 1945, online: [UN Charter, Chapter 1, art. 2(4)].

justified this decision by arguing that a strengthened United Nations was critical as the international situation became more disorderly and unstable. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh National Conference of the Communist Party of China in 1978 adopted a policy of opening up and reform, which led to greater engagement in international issues and multilateral diplomacy"<sup>8</sup>.

Despite its growing support of UN peace operations, China did not deploy its forces on peace operations until 1990. As with earlier periods, China's actions were constrained by resource limitations. Throughout the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping focused China's development on economic reforms, allocating most resources for economic development, leaving little funding for contributions to peace operations. By 1990, China had been admitted to the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping and had deployed its first military observers to the United Nations Truce Supervision in the Middle East. China's first deployment of military units on a peace operation occurred between April 1992 and September 1993 when China sent a total of 800 engineering troops to the United Nations Transitional Administration in Cambodia<sup>9</sup>. Table 1 shows UN missions in the Middle East and North Africa which China chose to participate from 1990 onward.

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<sup>8</sup> Lin-Greenburg, *supra* note 4, at 14.

<sup>9</sup> YIN, *supra* note 6, at 21-22.

**Table 1: China's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions in the Middle East and North Africa from 1990 onward <sup>10</sup>**

UN Missions	Year of Establishment	Chinese Participation	Host Country
UNTSO	1948	1990-now	Israel
UNFICYP	1964	1990-now	Cyprus
UNIFIL	1978	2006-now	Lebanon
MINURSO	1991	1991-now	Western Sahara
UNIKOM	1991-2003	1991-2003	Iraq/Kuwait
UNAMA	2002-now	2002-8 March 2018	Afghanistan
UNSMISS	2005-now	2005-now	South Sudan
UNAMID	2007-now	2007-now	Darfur
MINUSMA	2013-now	2013-now	Mali
UNSMIS	12 April-19 August 2012	12 April-19 August 2012	Syria

The expansion of UN peace operations has increased the world body's demand for trained troops, civilian police, and military observers. However, since the UN does not maintain a standing army, it must solicit contributions of personnel and equipment from member states. To do this, the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations considers factors such as geographic balance, political neutrality and past peacekeeping record of various member states, and drafts a list of potential

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<sup>10</sup> Information of the table has been derived from United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, online: [UNPKO], and Lin-Greenburg, supra note 4, at 15.

contributors<sup>11</sup>. Member states then make the decision on whether to participate. As Table 1 shows, China's participation in the Middle East and North Africa is considerable. Since China has currently 2200 contingent troops in the peacekeeping missions- which comprises its largest personnel type- in the Middle East, examining the Chinese military strategy in the Middle East is important.

### **III. China's Military Strategy In The Middle East And North Africa**

"Chinese leaders have tended to follow Deng Xiaoping's motto of keeping a low profile and not taking the lead in world affairs. This adherence to the principle of "non- intervention" stems from a belief that an over-engaged foreign policy would complicate China's trade relations and economic interests in other countries, as well as raise fears of foreign intervention in its own domestic affairs. Recently, however, expanding global interests have led to increased awareness in Beijing that instability abroad could spell instability at home, and that crises in the developing world might directly threaten China's resource import and export markets"<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, in the Middle East, the Chinese military strategy is soft and includes peacekeeping troops among other forms of military presence in the region and beyond.

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11 Shimura HISAKO, "The Role of the UN Secretariat in Organizing Peacekeeping," in *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Ad Hoc Missions, Permanent Engagement*, (Tokyo: United Nations Press, 2001), at 50-51.

12 Bernard Yudkin GEOXAVIER, "China as Peacekeeper: An Updated Perspective on Humanitarian Interventions", (2012) *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, (September), at 99.

The soft approach to overseas military activity which is mission-oriented characterized by temporary deployment of armed forces and seeks to resolve problems through short-term tasks and temporary deployment for overseas military exercises, as well as the deployment of military patrols, peacekeeping forces, military trainers, and consultants abroad. It can also entail building overseas munitions warehouses, joint intelligence facilities, aerospace tracking facilities, earthquake monitoring stations, technical service and military replenishment stops, maintenance bases, and military training institutions. In soft military presence, the foreign country does not have extraterritorial privileges, does not seek to institutionalize its military arrangements within the host country and the foreign forces conduct both military and civilian missions such as peacekeeping and conflict prevention besides humanitarian relief, search and rescue, protecting, evacuating, and escorting nationals- "all of which fall under the category of soft use of hard power"<sup>13</sup>.

Projecting a soft military presence and establishing logistical supporting sites are currently important parts of the Chinese military diplomacy. Chinese peacekeeping forces in the Middle East and North Africa currently consist of 2,271 personnel: 1- UNTSO: United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (4 Experts on Mission); 2- UNFICYP: United Nations Peacekeeping Force In Cyprus (5 police) 3- UNIFIL: United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (410 contingent troops and 8 Staff Officers); 4- MINURSO: United Nations Mission For The

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13 Degang SUN, China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East, (2015), online: [Middle East Studies Institute].

Referendum In Western Sahara (12 Experts on Mission), 5- UNMISS: United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (1,030 contingent troops, 7 police, and 19 Staff Officers); 6- UNAMID: United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (365contingent troops and 6 Staff Officers); and 7-MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (395 Contingent Troops and 8 Staff Officers)<sup>14</sup>. Besides peacekeeping forces, there are another forms of China's soft military presence in the Middle East such as Chinese escort fleet in the Gulf of Aden from 2009 to 2015, in they visited Djibouti, Kenya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, as well as Chinese Navy technical service stops in the Middle East<sup>15</sup>.

China uses its military in the service of its geo-economics strategy. In other words, Beijing which intends to strengthen its economic and trade exchanges with the Middle East, complementing them with a soft military presence that is located around the relatively concentrated areas of China's overseas interests and by continuing to protect and develop its economic interests in the Middle East, increases its wealth and achieve a peaceful, gradual transfer of global power. Therefore, the soft military presence in the Middle East will continue to follow traditional Chinese diplomatic principles that reject overseas military deployments, hegemony, and power politics. While the United States relying primarily on military bases to protect its geopolitical interests in the Middle East, China, relies on temporary military exchanges to protect geo-economics

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14 United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, supra note 1.

15 Franz-Stefan GADDY, China's Naval Diplomacy: Plan Ships Visit German Port of Hamburg (January 2015), online: [the diplomat].

interests<sup>16</sup>. In the next section, the security balancing signaling would add weight to this analysis as China rises as an effective great power to participate in regional influence and governance versus the United States in the Middle East.

#### **IV. China's Balancing Responses Versus The United States**

According to Bobrow and Boyer <sup>17</sup>(1997:725-727), peacekeeping is an "impure public good" that provides States with additional benefits. Peace operations meet the traditional definition of a public good where peacekeeping is non-excludable; all nations can participate and benefit from peacekeeping. However, unlike traditional public goods as defined by Mancur Olson<sup>18</sup>, peacekeeping is impure because certain States receive a higher level of benefit, and are, therefore, more likely to participate when there is a higher level of benefit associated with participation than with non-participation. Accordingly, big powers with greater interests in a peace operation in host nations have greater potential to earn a higher pay-off with their attempt to decrease unstableness in that country and in the case of China's participation in UN peacekeeping missions; unstableness serves an opportunity to send signals based on security balancing to other powers as well.

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16 Sun, supra note 13.

17 Davis B. BOBROW, and Mark A., BOYER "Maintaining System Stability: Contributions to Peacekeeping Operations", (1997) *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41(December), at 725-727.

18 Mancur OLSON, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1965), at 9-15.

China's participation in UN peace operations not only increases its influence both at the United Nations and in weak regions of the world where China's presence may discourage Taiwan from using financial incentives to gain diplomatic recognition, but also lessens the fear of a potential Chinese threat by projecting its image as a responsible actor to the governments of both developing and developed nations, and allows China's military and police forces to gain first-hand experience at a very low cost<sup>19</sup>. But most importantly, by participation in UN peacekeeping operations, China also sends security balancing signals against the United States by promoting multilateralism in international security.

As major powers and small powers had been urging China to play a more active role in the regional institutions in the early 1990s and interpreted their unwillingness to do so as a sign of hostility and revisionism, China's shift to embrace multilateralism and regional institutions helped signal benign intent<sup>20</sup>.

As China grows, there are expectations from other powers that it will assume a greater role in managing international crises and conflicts. Constructive engagement with civilian protection issues through increased Chinese contributions to UN peacekeeping missions is a key aspect of China's attempts to promote its image as a responsible great power. Although, a peacekeeping action carried out with the consent of a host state must be distinguished from non-consensual military intervention under Responsibility to Protect (R2P). China's increasing

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<sup>19</sup> Yin, *supra* note 6, at 14-18.

<sup>20</sup> Michael A GLOSNY, *The Grand Strategies of Rising Powers: Reassurance, Coercion, and Balancing Responses* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012), at 280.

involvement in the former is evidence of its growing voice on civilian protection issues. Cautious Chinese support for R2P was based on a narrow interpretation of the concept which prioritized prevention and state capacity building carried out with host state's consent. R2P's potential to give rise to non-consensual military intervention remained a significant source of concern for China. Prior to the Libyan crisis, it was assumed that China would not admit military intervention for humanitarian purposes unless host state consent could be obtained<sup>21</sup>.

For China specifically, the Libyan experience may signal the beginning of a third phase in Beijing's relationship with R2P, following its initial strong criticism, and then subsequent cautious endorsement of a conservative interpretation of the concept. Judging by China's stance on Syria, this third stage is characterized by strong resistance to attempts at further implementation of R2P. China has already shown its willingness to exercise its veto by blocking proposals for civilian protection measures against the rule of Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. Beijing's renewed concerns about R2P since the Libyan intervention are shared by a number of non-Western states, meaning Chinese efforts to constrain R2P's future implementation are likely to be firmly backed by those other states. This support may allow China to pursue such a strategy without the risk of being isolated, and at a lower cost to its international reputation<sup>22</sup>. China's vote against intervention in Syria was intended to convey its displeasure over how the intervention in Libya revealed, it did not expect the adverse

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21 Andrew GARWOOD-GOWER, "China and the "Responsibility to Protect: the implications of the Libyan intervention.", (2012), *Asian Journal of International Law*, 2(2), at 379-381.

22 *Ibid*, at 392.

side effects of the situation. Yet China's evolving approach to peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention is attached to a realist understanding of the geopolitical needs of the time. To "keep an ordinary mentality as a great power should do instead of swinging between low self-esteem and confidence" would require an even and consistent application of humanitarian intervention<sup>23</sup>. Peacekeeping operations in Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Congo have directly benefited China's economic and geo-political priorities as long as it has had security balance signaling function.

China, with probabilities that other great powers would assume based on the fact that a rising power's increased material capability allows it to threaten the interest and survival of other great powers, attempts to create an alliance and respond by sending balancing signals while being cautious about military humanitarian intervention in the Middle East and North Africa. According to Mearsheimer, "most of China's neighbors, to include India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam- and Australia- will join the United States to contain China's power"<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, China intends to counterbalance while implementing reassurance and a soft military strategy in the Middle East and Africa.

Therefore, China's approach to military intervention in the Middle East and North Africa has shown that it is attempting not only to reassure the United States and its allies about probable threat, but also projecting balancing signals countenancing states interests there versus the United

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23 Geoxavier supra note 12, at 100.

24 John MEARSHEIMER, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S Power in Asia", (2010), Chinese Journal of International Politics, Vol. 3, at 382.

States. Although for China "as countries increase their interdependency and common ground on security, it has become difficult for any single country to realize its security objective by itself. As a matter of fact, only by strengthening international cooperation, the security challenge could be effectively dealt with worldwide and realize universal and sustained security"<sup>25</sup>. In fact, security balancing along with power balancing in the Middle East and North Africa plays critical role in China's military presence and UN peacekeeping operations there as well.

#### **V. Conclusion**

Since 1999, China deliberately formulated its policy on UN peacekeeping operations with the aim to serve its strategic interests. In other words, these strategic interests are powerful motivating factors accounting for China's commitment towards UN peacekeeping operations. Besides being a responsible power, strengthening the UN and sharing common concerns for peace and security worldwide, China plans to influence on power equations and participate in regional governance and security balances regarding the essential role of the United States in security crises in the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, China's peacekeeping policy in these regions is largely driven by realist motivations, not purely by altruistic ones, regarding geostrategic and economic importance of the region and its intrinsic and extrinsic values and interests. China's preferences as a great power in implementing power politics are

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25 Jiang ZEMING, Together Create a New Century of Peace and Prosperity, Xinhua News Agency, (10 April 2002), online: [Xinhua].

comprised of balancing against the power of the United States, with improving its power projection, building international influence, and securing access to critical private goods such as energy resources in these regions. Projecting a soft military presence and establishing logistical supporting sites are currently important parts of the Chinese military diplomacy. China's peacekeeping forces in the Middle East and North Africa currently consist of 2,271 personnel; military strategy of China in the region is soft and deploying peacekeeping contingent troops is a form of its military presence there.

Beijing's presence and investment in UN peacekeeping has drastically increased. However, the expansion of China's overseas business interests has necessitated a more outward-looking foreign policy that is prepared to consider intervening in other states' internal affairs in order to safeguard or promote Chinese interests.

However, China is cautious on military interference in weak states because of its strategic interests and creating security balances and alliances against the United States. As China grows, there are expectations from other powers that it will assume a greater role in managing international crises and conflicts. Constructive engagement with civilian protection issues through increased Chinese contributions to UN peacekeeping missions is a key aspect of China's attempts to promote its image as a responsible big power. Peacekeeping forces in Libya, Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere have directly benefited China's economic and geo-political priorities since its security balance is signaling as a rising Eastern great power versus the West since China intends to counterbalance while implementing reassurance and soft military strategy in the Middle East and North Africa. It can be said that China is pushing for international acknowledgement of its role in high-risk peacekeeping

missions at the time the United States is exiting the spotlight.

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