

# China's Expanding Role in United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping

Colonel Shailender Arya®

## Abstract

*For much of the Cold War period, China was highly sceptical of the concept of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, viewing it as a thinly veiled disguise for imperialist interventions by the great powers. Further, Deng Xiaoping's 24 character strategy which stressed on keeping a low profile had guided China's foreign policy for over two decades. All this has changed under Xi Jinping, wherein UN peacekeeping was identified as a relatively low-risk vehicle to gain global prominence. Consequently, from total opposition to the role of UN itself, China has now transformed as a champion of UN peacekeeping. Today, China provides the 10<sup>th</sup> largest troop contribution and Beijing is the UN peacekeeping programme's second largest funder, providing 15 percent of the program's overall budget. In fact, China provides more personnel to peacekeeping operations than any other permanent member of the Security Council, and has almost twice as many as the other four permanent members combined. This has provided China with global acceptability, significant clout in Africa, and helps to foster China's image as the leader of the developing world. However, the Chinese intensions are anything but benign. A 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy is on the increase, the Chinese peacekeeping efforts are intertwined with Chinese economic interests, and the overall aim seems to expand Chinese influence across the world.*

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## Introduction

For long, the story of peacekeeping operations across the world was quite predictable. The flag was blue and multilateral – of the UN; the majority of the peacekeepers were from Africa and the Indian sub-continent, albeit with a smattering of European observers on short-rotations; the cost was shared by the US and European nations; and the conflict zones for deployment were mostly in Africa. Sometimes the deployment shifted to Haiti in the Caribbean or East Timor in Southeast Asia, but the dynamics remained the same. The US scarcely contributed any troops (even today, they have only 31 persons deployed) and nobody ever heard of the Chinese in the UN Peacekeeping Operations. In fact, for much of the Cold War period, China was highly sceptical of the concept of UN peacekeeping. In the 1960s, China opposed the UN itself as *“the docile special detachments of the international gendarmerie of US imperialism.”*<sup>1</sup> Later, when China became a member of the UN in 1971, it strictly opposed international peacekeeping because it saw it as a thinly veiled disguise for imperialist interventions by the great powers.<sup>2</sup>

Like on the LAC, on the status of Hong Kong or its position on UNCLOS, China has changed its stance, albeit slowly, and almost imperceptibly. In November 1989, it sent the first contingent of 20 civilian observers to assist in Namibia’s transition to independence. In April 1992, China sent 47 military observers and a unit of 400 military engineers to the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). In 1999, China deployed a contingent to East Timor in UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), a mission under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. From total opposition to the role of UN, China has now transformed as a champion of UN peacekeeping. By 2008, China had participated in 23 UN peacekeeping missions, involving 2,157 persons at any one time, for a cumulative total of 12,433 troops and civilian police.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, China deployed an infantry platoon to Sudan to protect its engineering troops, the first time that China had deployed combat troops overseas.<sup>4</sup>

Fast forward to mid-2020, wherein China provides the 10<sup>th</sup> largest troop contribution, and Beijing is the UN peacekeeping programme’s second largest funder, providing 15 percent of the program’s overall budget. In fact, China provides more personnel

to peacekeeping operations than any other permanent member of the Security Council, and has almost twice as many as the other four permanent members combined. This includes Chinese troops in the 'big five' – Mali, Sudan, Congo, Central African Republic, and Darfur. These personnel and monetary contributions enable China to exert significant diplomatic and political influence globally. Peacekeeping also helps China to portray itself as a peer of other great powers.

### The Larger Picture

Under President Xi Jinping, China finally abandoned Deng Xiaoping's 24 character strategy; *observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership*. This had guided the Chinese thoughts and actions for over two decades. In 1999, former Premier Zhu Rongji had coined the phrase "responsible power" to denote that China had not only become an economic superpower, but also intended to use its growing power to contribute to peace, security, and good global governance. The "responsible power" narrative was accompanied by the concept of "peaceful rise," introduced in the early 2000s. However, Xi decided that it was time for China to abandon the thought process of his predecessors and occupy the global centre stage. Chinese behaviour in South China Sea turned aggressive, attempts were (and are being) made to unilaterally change the status quo on the LAC with India, and Hong Kong lost its autonomy. While all these came under international spotlight, UN peacekeeping was identified as a relatively low-risk vehicle to gain global prominence. President Xi therefore expanded China's role in peacekeeping operations as part of a larger effort to strengthen China's global presence. In their perception, Chinese peacekeepers provide Beijing with opportunities to reassure the international community of China's commitment to global peace and stability.<sup>5</sup> However, the picture is granular. China's motivations for becoming a peacekeeper are multi-layered, changing over time, and consist of "soft" reputational interests and "hard" national interests. As in everything else with China, the 'soft' shall turn 'hard', and benign shall turn malignant, as the time progresses.

The Chinese and pro-China views first. According to the Chinese media, Beijing's deepening engagement with UN

peacekeeping is a building block for the development of China as an “internationally socialized country” that can operate effectively in a multilateral environment, as well as a “responsible great power.”<sup>6</sup> According to China scholar Courtney Fung, China’s involvement is based on a desire to be perceived both as a great power and as an ally to developing countries. Furthermore, attaching Chinese military and police forces to peacekeeping operations provides a low-risk, non-confrontational means for China to strengthen its command-and-control structure, test its crisis-management capabilities, explore the logistical challenges of supporting an overseas presence, and offer valuable training to its troops.<sup>7</sup> A foray into UN peacekeeping provides many other benefits. According to Logan Pauley, deploying peacekeeping troops affords the PLA an opportunity to improve its ‘Military operations other than war’ (MOOTW) and modernize its security forces.<sup>8</sup> Troops that participate in peacekeeping efforts receive valuable on-the-ground experience.<sup>9</sup> Japan’s National Institute for Defense Studies explains change in China’s approach as a sign that China felt concerned about the “global interventionism” based on the values of democracy, human rights, and humanitarianism, espoused mainly by Europe and US. Thus, it looked to strengthen its engagement in UN peacekeeping activities as a means of “constructive development.”<sup>10</sup>

However, for an aspirational China, UN peacekeeping is just the tip of the iceberg. Finally what China aspires is global leadership, with BRI is at the vanguard, representing more than USD one trillion in funding and partnerships with more than sixty countries inside and outside the Asia-Pacific region. Other Beijing-led institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, and the Silk Road Fund, have been established alongside existing Western economic organisations. For these initiatives to succeed Beijing requires security and stability. Participation in UN peacekeeping, including missions that involve war-to-peace transitions, may help Beijing achieve those desired outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

### **Assertiveness and Image Building**

China’s assertiveness in global affairs is increasing. In UNSC, China, as a permanent member has only employed its veto privilege 14 times. However, it may be noted that China has cast 13 of its

14 vetoes after 1997. Chinese interest in peacekeeping is linked to its image building, which often takes a hit due to incidents like Tiananmen Square massacre, propping dictators in Africa, or robbing Hong Kong of its precious autonomy. In Darfur, Sudan an estimated 300,000 people were killed in incidents of ethnic cleansing from 2003 to 2009. The Chinese government however continued its aid to the Sudanese government, even as other countries imposed sanctions and Khartoum became increasingly isolated. China was criticized for its involvement in the exploitation of oil in Sudan and for the fact that the majority of the weapons used in the massacres had a 'Made in China' stamp. There were even calls for a boycott of the Beijing Olympics. To counteract this, China appointed a Special Representative on African Affairs in May 2007 and took a decision to send 275 engineers to the African Union/United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).<sup>12</sup>

Increasing its profile as a peacekeeper had also served the purpose of breaking out of the international isolation in which China found itself in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square events of 1989.<sup>13</sup> UN peacekeeping provided a platform for China to gradually rehabilitate its international image and maintain a working relationship with Western countries, especially the US.<sup>14</sup> It is still working on the same premise, even after the current US-led pushback against China that was accentuated by China not disclosing facts about the origins of Coronavirus

### **Chinese Peacekeeping**

Ever since China began to reform the PLA in 2015, UN peacekeeping has been an integral part of the restructuring processes. In September 2015, Xi pledged to create a standby force of 8,000 peacekeepers and a permanent peacekeeping police squad. China followed through two years later with the registration of the peacekeeping force with the UN. Among this force are six infantry battalions, and enabling units such as three companies of engineers, two transport companies, four second-grade hospitals, four security companies, three fast-reaction companies, two medium-sized multipurpose helicopter units, two transport aircraft units, one drone unit, and one surface naval ship. The readiness and the level of equipment of these units are highly assessed by UN. In addition, the UN welcomes the fact that China places few caveats on the troops it pledges.<sup>15</sup>

Beijing complemented this push by committing to a 10-year, USD 1 billion China-UN Peace and Development Fund for peacekeeping operations. Xi's pledge was targeted at specific areas of interest, with USD 100 million being earmarked for military assistance to the African Union. This was earmarked for building of an African Standby Force, with Chinese assistance. In March 2019, China announced that the fund would support nearly double the number of peacekeeping training and capacity-building programs.<sup>16</sup>

China is augmenting all facets of its peacekeeping capabilities. PLA has commenced special-operations training for Chinese UN forces at a base in Hainan Province. By late 2017, the PLA had organized nineteen separate units for engineering, helicopter crewing, infantry, transport, security, and rapid-reaction forces that could be deployed for peacekeeping missions.<sup>17</sup> China has built up training centres for police and military peacekeepers, where it trains both Chinese and international peacekeepers. Around 500 foreign military peacekeepers from 69 countries have already been trained. China plans to increase that number to 2000 by end-2020. International observers report that the standards and content of the training are in line with UN expectations.<sup>18</sup> Since the early 1990s, China has deployed approximately 38,000 personnel for UN missions, with the current deployment around 2,600 troops in 14 missions. In 2000, China contributed a total of USD 12 million to the UN regular budget—accounting for just one percent of total contributions. By 2019, this number had surged to USD 367.9 million, making China the second-largest contributor after the US.

Scholars in China are already calling for China to shift from being a “participant” in UN peacekeeping to a “leader”.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, China is seeking greater role in various UN peacekeeping field and policy positions. In August 2007, Major General Zhao Jingmin became the first Chinese national to be appointed as the Force Commander for the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).<sup>20</sup> In 2016, Beijing sought the leadership of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, a position that has been dominated by France. If China is able to assume a top UNPKO post like Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, and Chinese peacekeepers continue to be the most prolific forces in peacekeeping missions, China stands to have much greater influence.<sup>21</sup> The increasing footprint



of China is already being recognised – both internationally and within China. In February 2018, the fifth cadre of the Chinese Peacekeeping Force to Mali was recognized with the Peace Medal of Honour, a preeminent award given by the UN for contributions to peace. In South Sudan, the completion of the Chinese-engineered Kuacjok-Wau-Tonj main-supply route, which will improve supply and aid transport to the country, was widely celebrated.

## Worldview and Foreign Policy

In China, everything is linked, and possibly planned. It views itself as a Middle Kingdom, and aims at restoration of an international order where the Middle Kingdom gains supremacy in the region and beyond. Chinese commentators refer in quite concrete terms to the benefits of participation in peacekeeping, including the contribution this makes to modernizing the PLA, to containing the US and Taiwan, securing economic interests abroad, particularly resources and markets in Africa, and expanding Chinese influence in the UN and in the region.<sup>22</sup>

China's commitments to peacekeeping have made its security policies more versatile - a better match for Beijing's growing global diplomacy toward states and regions beyond China's periphery, as well as making it better prepared to respond to non-traditional security concerns such as terrorism, insurgencies, and weak or collapsed states.<sup>23</sup> As one analyst concludes, *"China's decision to participate more vigorously in UN peacekeeping operations stems from its interest in building an identity as a 'peacebuilder' that understands the connections between underdevelopment and insecurity, which are inherent in many current civil conflicts."*<sup>24</sup>

Another motivation lies in China's interest in strengthening multilateralism and the UN system. Multilateralism has been a regular part of China's foreign policy lexicon since the mid-1990s. The UN is the only major international security institution in which China holds significant power, including veto power. In China's view, a marginalized UN would mean more unilateralism by the US and its allies. By increasing its contributions to UN peacekeeping, China hopes to help strengthen the UN as the only legitimate source of authority for international peace and security.<sup>25</sup> The NATO air campaign in Yugoslavia in 1999 was hard for China to accept, with the Western allies seeming to slight the UN and taking the decision to use military force based on humanitarian

justifications. A desire to curb the Western-led global interventionist movement was part of the background to China's policy shift.<sup>26</sup>

China is also the only permanent UN Security Council member that sees itself as both a great power and a member of the global South. A deepened engagement in peacekeeping - an activity that takes place predominantly in developing countries - helps to foster China's image as the leader of the developing world. Being perceived as a responsible, altruistic peacekeeper without an imperialist legacy garners support for China among developing countries, which in turn strengthens its influence within the UN.<sup>27</sup> This explains the Chinese volte-face on UN peacekeeping.

### **Dragon in Dark Continent**

Of late, the aggressive behaviour of Chinese diplomats, from Canberra to London, has also been termed as 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy'. The origins are in the 2017 Chinese blockbuster movie *Wolf Warrior 2*, which also offers an insight on how China sees its engagements in Africa. The movie tells the story of Leng Feng, a former special force soldier who has to protect Chinese medical aid workers, Chinese expatriates, and African employees in a Chinese-run factory from ruthless African militias. In his exploits, apart from some hand-to-hand combat, and saving a little African boy, he teams up with a female Western aid worker, of whom he asks, "*Where are the US Marines when you need them?*" hinting that the Chinese do not abandon their people, but the Americans do.<sup>28</sup> In short, China views itself as the dominant power-to-be in Africa.

Beijing's pivot to Africa is underway. Chinese peacekeepers are currently deployed in ten different operations in North and sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, with the largest number of personnel currently deployed for missions in South Sudan, Mali, the Darfur region of Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). English speaking officers from China are not a rarity anymore, and in Mali, Chinese troops are learning French. In its relations with Africa, China capitalizes on the fact that China has no history of colonialism in Africa and is carefully curating its image as a leader of the Third World, whose experiences with economic development can be valuable for other developing countries.<sup>29</sup>



The first Chinese overseas military base has been set up in Africa in Djibouti in mid-2017. It was initially termed as a logistics support base to act as a hub for peacekeeping and other strategic policies in Africa and the Indian Ocean region.<sup>30</sup> Though the Chinese government has asserted that its peacekeeping efforts stem from a desire to contribute to global stability, it is evident that the Chinese peacekeeping efforts are intertwined with Chinese economic interests, particularly in Africa wherein China has been expanding its economic footprint.

Notable cases of countries with both Chinese peacekeeping presence and substantial Chinese investment include the DRC and South Sudan. China has significant investments in the DRC, including an 80 percent stake in one of the world's largest copper and cobalt mines. In early 2018, China had signed a USD 248 million loan agreement for South Sudan. In May and July 2018, China abstained on two UNSC resolutions that extended sanctions on South Sudan. China has provided a full infantry battalion of 1,031 peacekeeping troops South Sudan while it has a stake in South Sudan's oil resources, and in April 2019 increased its imports of Sudanese oil from 10,000 barrels per day to 30,000 barrels per day. Data from the China Global Investments Tracker and the International Peace Institute indicates that between 2012 and 2018, China contributed peacekeeping personnel in thirteen countries. Of these thirteen countries, nine had significant Chinese investment either in the year or three years before Chinese peacekeepers arrived. This proportion notes a high correlation between peacekeeper presence and investment.<sup>31</sup>

## **The Future**

The US foreign policy fluctuates between isolationism and activism. The US commitments in terms of funding to the UN bodies had become uncertain under the then Trump administration. In April 2020, in middle of the Coronavirus pandemic, US announced stoppage of its USD 400 million funding to WHO. Predictably, the next week witnessed China announcing a USD 30 million increase in funding for WHO. The story of UN Peacekeeping is similar. Although the US remains the peacekeeping program's top funder at 28 percent of the program's budget, the Trump Administration had proposed a 27 percent decrease in US contributions for the 2020 fiscal year.<sup>32</sup> It remains to be seen whether this trend will

be continued by the Biden administration. Beijing sees Washington's waning presence in UN peacekeeping as a wide-open door to take a bigger role on the multilateral stage. China's role in peacekeeping shall continue to grow as the US scales back its contributions. Money speaks. The UN Secretary-General António Guterres has stated that China now stands to become an "honest broker" and "bridge-builder" in international conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Given China's significant investments in its peacebuilding capabilities, it is clear that China will increase its contribution to UN peacekeeping. China is also expected to play a prominent role in providing equipment and weapons systems. Every year the UN spends between USD 1 to 2 billion on renting and buying equipment and weapons systems for peacekeeping operations. China has offered the UN a wide range of equipment and technology, including UAVs, ground surveillance radar, infra-red cameras, anti-UAV systems, access control technologies for increased camp security, small-size weapon locating radar, communications networks, and light-armoured, transport, and medical vehicles. With an increased role for China, it is probable that UN peacekeeping will increasingly buy Chinese technology and equipment.<sup>34</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The US's unipolar honeymoon is over. Strategic competition between the major powers is back, and rising powers like China shall use all means and forums to increase their influence, from BRI to peacekeeping. Keen to change the status quo, China has an interest in engaging with the UN, as long as engagement turns out to be a net positive for Beijing. However, there are challenges as modern peacekeeping does not always fit into Chinese perceptions of impartiality, respect for sovereignty, the requirement for consent, and "win-win" situations.<sup>35</sup> As in the ancient Greek story, the Trojan horse contained soldiers; the Chinese peacekeepers are the seemingly benign pioneers, who shall be followed by Chinese investments, BRI projects, false maps, vague dashes called lines and finally an overwhelming Chinese influence.

Expect more of Chinese presence in peacekeeping in 2021 as a means to improve its battered image post the Coronavirus pandemic. The tensions between India and China are rising. Even otherwise, India, with its close ties with Africa, long traditions of UN peacekeeping, justifiable claims to an expanded UNSC, and

ongoing competition for global markets, should be wary of an increased Chinese footprint in form of peacekeeping. Increased Chinese military presence in Africa, particularly on the Eastern shores along the IOR, may become the next pearl in the Chinese strategy of 'String of Pearls'. To counter the same, India should create a standby force to match the Chinese force as well as an UN Peace and Development Trust Fund for joint India-UN peace initiatives. As the Latin phrase goes, *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*, we should be beware of those bearing gifts.

## Endnotes

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# Political Developments in Nepal and the Chinese Involvement

Prof Sangeeta Thapliyal®

## Abstract

*The dissolution of parliament in Nepal has brought the focus back on its fragile democracy. After years of political instability, a new constitution and one party with absolute majority in the general elections gave the impression and hope that the future looked promising for political stability. But that did not take place. Nepalese politics have remained volatile. The article makes an assessment and suggests the path for India keeping in view Chinese machinations.*

## Introduction

The political infighting within the ruling Nepal Communist Party has engulfed the political landscape and vitiated the atmosphere. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli dissolved the lower house of parliament on 20 December 2020. Even though the events were due to infighting within the ruling party but the active involvement of China in the party politics cannot be ignored more so because it was responsible for the newly formed left party. The present Chinese Ambassador Ms Hou Yangi was seen meeting the political leaders to stall friction and split in the ruling party. China had sent a four-member delegation led by the vice minister in the International Department of the Communist party of China, Guo Yezhou, to assess the political situation and stabilise unity within the NCP. It is in China's interest that a stable but pro-China Communist party government remains in power in Nepal.

## Nepal's Tryst with Communist Parties

Nepal Communist Party (NCP) was established with the merger of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) [CPN (UML)] and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) [CPN (MC)]

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