

China's Strategic Manoeuvring in United Nations Peacekeeping Dynamics

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Abstract

China's strategic role in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping reflects its ambition to reshape global security governance while advancing its geopolitical and technological interests. As a major financial contributor and provider of peacekeepers, China leverages its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, with veto power, to enhance its soft power and shape international norms. By supplying technologies such as communication systems, drones, and surveillance tools, China integrates its tech industry into peacekeeping operations, fostering reliance on Chinese technology standards. Its peacekeeping mandates prioritise state sovereignty, economic reconstruction, and minimal use of force, opposing interventionist measures such as sanctions. This development-oriented model, emphasising civilian protection, demining, and infrastructure rebuilding, aligns with China's philosophy that poverty and underdevelopment drive instability. While initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative expand China's influence and promote its vision of a 'Shared future for mankind', critics argue that these efforts may prioritise Chinese interests over multilateral transparency. As global governance evolves, China's growing influence signals a potential shift in international dynamics.

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC; herein referred to as China) has emerged as one of the most influential United Nations (UN) members after the United States (US), despite joining relatively late in 1971, when it replaced Taiwan as the representative of 'China'. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), China wields significant power, including the veto, which it uses strategically to shape mandates, align peacekeeping operations with its principles, and protect its geopolitical interests. China's growing financial contributions in UN and active involvement in UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) have surged, further consolidating its position as a key player in global governance.

China and the United Nations

Beijing views the UN as a strategic platform to advance its 'Middle Kingdom Dream' by reshaping global governance and aligning it with its vision of a 'Shared future for mankind'. China emphasises state sovereignty, security, and economic growth while downplaying human rights and transparency, contrasting with the UN's holistic approach that integrates development, human rights, and peace for human protection.¹ Leveraging its veto power and existing structures, China seeks to reform the UN from within to shape the organisation into a platform reflecting its state-centric governance model in a multipolar world.² China presents itself as a key 'Builder of world peace, contributor to global development, defender of international order, and provider of public goods' while shaping global organisations and governance through its 'Shared Future' rhetoric into UN documentation.³ China's Shared Future concept is deliberately kept broad, promoting its authoritarian model as superior to democratic systems. It frames global governance around flexible partnerships, with Beijing as the central leader in areas like development, security, and culture. Advocating 'Dialogue, non-confrontation, and non-alliance', China seeks 'Win-win Cooperation' across diverse regimes. Its vision of 'New Multilateralism' emphasises 'Democracy in international relations', calling for equal participation in shaping global rules and affairs, aiming to counter western-led hegemony, by granting all states, regardless of ideology or resources, a voice in global governance.⁴

As China rises as a dominant economic and military power, the UN is increasingly depending on its contributions. Despite joining the organisation later, China has effectively penetrated the key UN departments at both strategic and operational levels, leveraging its economic and political clout to align global norms with its long-term ambitions. Through strategic placement of nationals and proxies in influential positions, significant financial contributions, and the launch of aligned programs, China has reshaped agendas and built coalitions to counter western dominance. Its assertiveness is evident in its ability to influence policies, block unfavourable proposals, and use the UN bodies to advance its interests. This growing influence raises concerns about transparency, weakened human rights norms, and the future balance of global governance.⁵ A recent report by the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Majority Staff dated 24 Oct 2024 reveals that China has co-opted for international institutions like the UN and World Health Organization, often neglecting its commitments. This influence is bolstered by Communist Party of China (CCP) leaders, prioritising CCP loyalty over organisational responsibilities. Erik Bethel, former US Executive Director, World Bank, highlighted in his testimony that China's substantial impact on global standards, particularly through support for telecom companies Huawei and Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment Corporation (ZTE), is viewed by the US as national security threats.⁶ Evidence also suggests China's imposition of conditions on its donations, including restrictions on funds for states with ties to Taiwan.⁷ Moreover, Chinese diplomats have held the position of Under-Secretary-General of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs since 2007, enabling China to shape UN development programs.⁸

China and United Nations Peacekeeping Operations

UNPKO are a key symbol of the UN's role in maintaining global peace and security. However, recent criticisms have highlighted their failure to achieve lasting peace and effectively implement civilian protection mandates in high-profile missions. This has led to a legitimacy crisis, exemplified by mass protests in Mali, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where local populations have called for the expulsion of UN peacekeepers from these conflict-ridden nations.⁹ Initially wary of the UN peacekeeping system after joining in 1971, China gradually

became involved in the late 1980s and has since become a key player in UNPKO.¹⁰ In the year 2000, China provided fewer than 100 personnel to all UNPKO. Now, Beijing is the 10th largest troop and police contributor (2,274 personnel) of any country and the second largest financial supporter, providing nearly 19 per cent of UN peacekeeping programme funding. China also provides more peacekeepers to UNPKO than all the other UNSC permanent members combined.¹¹ To commemorate the 50th anniversary of China's UN membership, Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted China's UNPKO contribution in 2021, emphasising that the country had honoured its commitment to establish an 8,000-member standby peacekeeping force, participated in 29 UNPKO (both past and ongoing), and contributed over 50,000 personnel.¹² In 2018, China established its Peacekeeping Affairs Centre to oversee international cooperation and manage its UNPKO deployments. Alongside its increasing troop and financial contributions, China actively leads peace training workshops and seminars. Through these initiatives, China is steadily advocating for normative changes in UNPKO, promoting a more technocratic and state-focused approach.¹³ Following Xi's 2015 pledge, UN officials collaborated with their Chinese counterparts to develop a broader range of rapid reaction capabilities, including helicopters. China has also established a logistics base in Djibouti, partly to support its peacekeepers in Africa.¹⁴

In Sep 2020, China's State Council released its first 'White Paper' on UNPKO, highlighting the People Liberation Army's contributions and outlining China's approach to peacekeeping. While acknowledging China's role in humanitarian aid and proposing improvements to relief efforts, the paper notably omits any mention of 'Human Rights'. It strongly advocates for UNPKO reforms, emphasising on the sovereignty of host states to independently choose their social systems and development paths. The paper also stresses that the needs of host states should be prioritised in the design and renewal of mission mandates.¹⁵

China seeks to occupy key UN executive leadership positions to enhance its influence and shape policy direction, with peacekeeping being a particularly high-priority area. Given its growing involvement in peacekeeping, China's push to lead the UN Department of Peace Operations is well-documented, supported by a decade-long campaign. Chinese leaders have

expressed frustration that their contributions have not yet resulted in greater status or decision-making power within peace operations, viewing the top appointment as a crucial step toward asserting China's global security leadership.¹⁶ In 2019, Ambassador Huang Xia was appointed special envoy for hotspot regions in the African Great Lakes, marking the highest-ranking position held by a Chinese national in UN security and political affairs.¹⁷ The UN's adoption of 'Political Accompaniments' as a key peacebuilding concept, applied in tandem with peacekeeping operations under its sustaining peace agenda, appears to share some innate characteristics with China's 'Political Settlements' concept.¹⁸ China's political settlements concept in peacekeeping mirrors aspects of the UN's political accompaniments, but with a strong emphasis on state sovereignty and non-interference.

China's experiences with troop fatalities in Mali and South Sudan have driven its focus on peacekeeper safety, shaping its policy leadership in this area. China focuses on low-hanging fruit such as better training, equipment, and medical care, while eschewing thorny issues regarding the use of force.¹⁹ Leveraging the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDTF), it financed the Cruz Report on peacekeeper security and, during its Mar 2020 UNSC presidency, secured the adoption of Resolution 2518, the first thematic resolution on peacekeeper safety. In 2021, China founded the Group of Friends on the Safety and Security of UN Peacekeepers and made safety a key agenda during its May 2021 presidency. Its approach emphasises state-led support and host-state cooperation but offers little on adapting peacekeeping to address civilian protection or human rights challenges.²⁰

China wields considerable influence in shaping peacekeeping operations through its veto power over mandate (approvals or renewals), financial contribution (influence resource allocation and prioritise missions), and troops contribution. China has strategically increased its influence in UN by placing its nationals or pro-China figures in key/steering roles, allowing it to shape global discourse and promote policies aligned with its strategic objectives.²¹ This placement is generally undertaken using diplomatic channels, political leverage, and monetary support. These carefully positioned representatives then help advance Chinese interests by influencing how organisations make decisions, respond to issues, and set policies. China also promotes its interests by embedding a network

of supporters at lower levels within the UN and its specialised agencies. Beside coordination, these lower-level officials immensely contribute towards agenda-setting, monitoring sensitive discussions, and influencing bureaucratic processes from within with reduced accountability.²²

China views UNPDTF as a demonstration of its commitment to provide a global public goods and fulfilling its responsibilities as a major power. Nearly a third of the fund's projects focus on peace operations, including peacekeeper safety, integrated planning training, and certification for UN police units, making peacekeeping its primary area of support. The fund also prioritises African initiatives, such as those related to conflict prevention in the Great Lakes, the Sahel, and Sudan/South Sudan, as well as supporting the Southern African Development Community. By strategically disbursing funds, China aims to strengthen its influence within the UN, advance its foreign policy goals, and promote South-South cooperation and African capacity-building.²³ China's peacekeeping efforts appear to match its resource investments and economic interests, particularly in Africa, where more than three quarters of Chinese nationals on UN missions are deployed. Beijing has progressively linked these deployments to protecting its interests and citizens on the African continent.²⁴

By increasing its contributions to troops, police, and equipment, China bolsters its soft power while reaffirming its commitment to international stability and cooperation.²⁵ Leveraging its technological capabilities, China supports UNPKO with affordable, reliable, and cheap solutions across various domains. Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE provide digital/information technology infrastructure for field communication, while Chinese-made vehicles, drones, solar panels, and energy-efficient systems enhance logistics, reconnaissance, and sustainable energy in peacekeeping camps. Surveillance technologies, such as facial recognition and camera networks, are deployed in conflict zones to aid peacekeeping and promote their adoption by host nations, creating dependencies on Chinese standards. As a major exporter of surveillance equipment, China uses these initiatives to build security ties, expand its firms' market reach, and potentially gather intelligence, solidifying its influence in global security governance.²⁶ The setup, operation, training, and maintenance of Chinese equipment forge strong security connections, often at subsidised

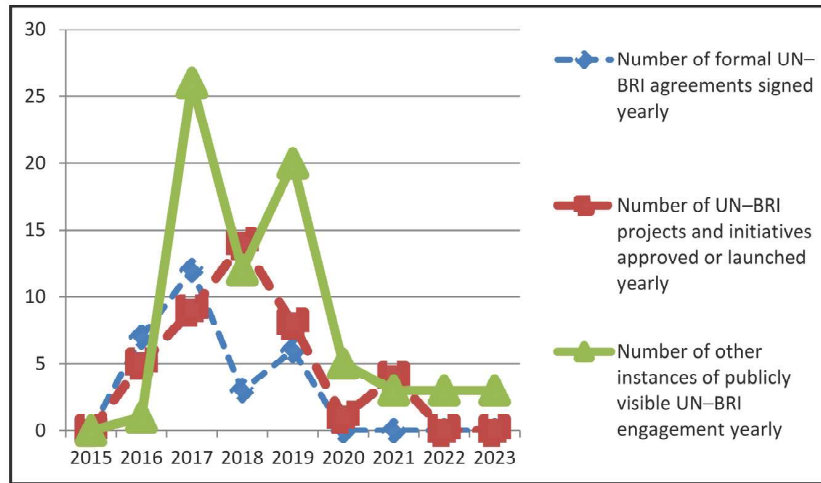
rates or as part of broader aid packages. This strategy cultivates goodwill with host countries and establishes long-term trade relationships for post-conflict reconstruction. In 2022, a study revealed that China provided substantial security assistance to nearly all African nations, strengthening ties with local governments and security agencies.²⁷

Chinese forces, once isolated, are now also actively engaged in medical aid, infrastructure projects, school support, and community activities, fostering trust among local African populations as a basis for future economic and political engagement. This cooperation not only strengthens ties with African governments but also builds support from citizens and enhances protections for the Chinese diaspora.²⁸ By introducing low-cost medical and engineering solutions, Chinese peacekeeping contingents not only utilise Chinese products but also demonstrate them to potential buyers.

United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Major Chinese Initiatives

China leverages the UN platform for peacekeeping to complement its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, integrating security and development as mutually reinforcing goals. The BRI initially gained momentum within the UN as a potential catalyst for advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. With endorsements from key bodies such as the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the UNSC, and support from over two-thirds of UN member states, China appeared well-positioned to influence global development. UN entities actively engaged with the BRI to safeguard their legitimacy amid China's growing clout, while China sought to bolster its international stature by integrating the BRI into UN frameworks. These mutually beneficial dynamic thrived temporarily but soon faced mounting resistances, primarily from western nations wary of China's expanding geopolitical reach. Sustained criticism prompted a retreat by many UN entities, exposing a widening rift between the western bloc and a coalition of developing countries more receptive to China's agenda.²⁹ The number of formal UN-BRI agreements signed (per year), number of UN-BRI projects and initiatives (per year) approved or launched, and number of other instances of publicly visible UN-BRI engagement (per year), between 2015 and 2023, are given in graph below. With phasing out of BRI, China has adapted its

approach by launching three new global initiatives between 2021 and 2023 to reshape multilateral engagement on its terms.



Graph: Formal UN-BRI agreements signed, projects and initiatives approved or launched, and other instances of publicly visible engagement between 2015 and 2023³⁰

Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Security Civilization (GCI) form a trio of interrelated yet vaguely defined pillars within the 'Community of common destiny for mankind'. This framework represents Beijing's proposed alternative to the western-led 'Rules-based international order', championed by CCP under the stewardship of Xi Jinping.³¹ Internally, the three initiatives were given top priority over the BRI in Xi's key work report at 2023 Party Congress, sending a clear signal to China's highly responsive policy system to focus on developing them further.³² Externally, China has advocated countries to work together on the trio initiative mentioned above to build a world of lasting peace, universal security, shared prosperity, openness, inclusiveness, and environmental beauty. Within the triumvirate, the new major global initiatives also complement each other, with security as a pre-requisite for development, development as a guarantee of security, and both security and development embodying civilisation.³³ The new major initiatives represent a comprehensive vision for global governance that seeks to reshape international norms and practices. These evolving initiatives increasingly influence China's participation in

UNPKO, reflecting its growing role in international security and development.

The GDI, introduced by Xi Jinping on 21 Sep 2021, during his speech at the 76th Session of the UNGA, emphasises poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, and sustainable growth principles that align with the developmental needs of post-conflict regions where UN peacekeeping missions operate. Within three years, the GDI has garnered widespread support from over 100 countries and international organisations, including the UN, with more than 80 nations joining the GDI's 'Group of Friends'.³⁴ China has skilfully leveraged an obscure UN mechanism to quickly establish the Group of Friends for the GDI. Through GDI, Beijing seeks to boost policy dialogue, strategically coordinate with UN development agencies, create new platforms like the Global Development Promotion Centre Network, and elevate China's image as a global leader in development, capacity-building, and knowledge sharing.³⁵ UN Secretary-General António Guterres has also endorsed the GDI in 2022, recognising its potential to advance the UN's 2030 SDGs.³⁶

The GSI, introduced by Xi Jinping on 21 Apr 2022 during his keynote speech at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, highlights the principles of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, emphasising conflict resolution through dialogue and respect for national sovereignty. China's involvement in UNPKO aligns with these principles, supporting multilateral efforts to stabilise conflict areas without enforcing external political agendas. As China considers the UN to be fundamental to this proposed security order, it sees its peacekeeping contributions as part of what makes this 'Shared Future' possible, with troop deployments and funding underscoring China's support of world peace, global development, and a multilateral world order.³⁷ The 20 priority areas outlined in the GSI concept paper, spanning traditional, regional, and non-traditional security, emphasise China's holistic approach to security and development. They align with Xi's 'Comprehensive national security' framework, showcasing opportunities for China to assert leadership in shaping the future of global governance.³⁸ China ultimately aims to use the GSI framework as catapult to establish mechanisms or agreements that would legally enable Beijing to offer military or security assistance overseas.³⁹

The GCI, introduced by Xi Jinping on 15 Mar 2023 during a virtual keynote speech at the High-Level Dialogue on Global Civilization, promotes dialogue among civilisations and mutual respect as a foundation for global peace. The GCI complements UN peacekeeping's emphasis on fostering understanding and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. By placing nationals or proxies in key UN roles⁴⁰ and lower level⁴¹, China gains access to sensitive information, including diplomatic strategies and decision-making processes. This influence allows China to subtly legitimise its policies, counter criticism, and promote narratives that align with its interests. In Jun 2024, the 78th session of the UNGA unanimously adopted a resolution proposed by China to designate 10 Jun as the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations. This resolution emphasises respecting civilisational diversity and promoting equal dialogue and mutual respect among different cultures, reflecting the core principles of the GCI proposed by Jinping. The unanimous support highlights the GCI's alignment with global trends and its relevance in an interconnected world. It addresses critical questions about the coexistence of civilisations and the future of humanity, offering Chinese perspectives and solutions to foster mutual learning and advance human progress.⁴²

Conclusion

China has strategically leveraged the UN to advance its 'Middle Kingdom Dream' and vision of a 'Shared future for mankind'. As a permanent member of the UNSC, China advocates for peacekeeping mandates that prioritise state sovereignty, non-interference, and development-focused peacebuilding. It avoids mandates involving extensive human rights monitoring or coercive measures, safeguarding its global and domestic interests. China's evolving peacekeeping efforts, such as protecting civilians, reconstruction, supporting local governance, and demining, align with its belief that poverty and underdevelopment are root causes of instability. By providing medical aid, infrastructure development, and community support, China enhances its soft power through the UN framework. With the BRI being phased out and replaced by the vaguely defined GDI, GSI, and GCI, China is expanding its influence under new global cooperation models, with initial successes evident in shaping UN agendas and garnering support for its development, security, and cultural initiatives. As China's role in the UN grows, its influence on global decision-making is

expected to further challenge the traditional rules-based international order, signaling a shift in global governance dynamics. As the UN implements the 'UN 2.0' initiative, China's active engagement in peacekeeping operations positions it to influence the modernisation process, particularly in areas that intersect with its strategic interests. These evolving strategies merit close observation to understand how China's new initiatives reshape peacekeeping and international norms, consolidating its position as a dominant global power.

Endnotes

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