

CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING CONTRIBUTIONS AND THE EVOLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

Following the end of the Cold War and significant changes in the international community, Chinese leaders moved from a reluctant stand in United Nations (UN) activities to a position of active cooperation in UN peacekeeping. In fact, China became the biggest contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping operations among the permanent members of the Security Council. Towards the mid-2000s, China was involved in all seven UN peacekeeping operations on the African continent. This dramatic surge in Chinese peacekeeping participation coincided with Beijing's efforts in the early 2000s to deliberately expand its economic and diplomatic influence globally through trade and diplomatic links, as well as through its participation in international organisations, including UN peacekeeping operations. However, there have always been limits to China's involvement in peacekeeping operations. Beijing's views on peacekeeping have consistently been based on a sound respect for state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention. In this context, this article points out that on the one hand, China is increasingly expected to concern itself with the global responsibilities of a great power, but as its strategic and material interests have become more integrated and entangled with the African continent, Beijing is more and more compelled to consider its national interest and to protect those interests

in Africa. Consequently, China's growing involvement in peacekeeping has become more difficult to reconcile with the country's commitment to non-interventionism, particularly as witnessed in the case of South Sudan.

1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China (hereafter China) as an emerging superpower has undoubtedly established itself as a most important actor on the African continent. This development has virtually brought an end to the post-Cold War period where the United States (US), France and Britain dominated foreign influence on the continent. Moreover, not only is China's increasing involvement on the African continent over the past 15 to 20 years indicative of the remarkable transformation of the country's growing international footprint, but so is the impressive scale and scope of its involvement. This also coincides with China currently being Africa's largest trading partner, having surpassed the US in 2009.

The Chinese have been offering their African partners a mix of political and economic incentives and they have successfully managed to drive home the message that increased Sino-African relations will result in a beneficial win-win situation for both entities. For many years observers debated the nature and scope of China's involvement on the African continent as the country has been seeking a more active role in the international system in general and on the African continent in particular. Generally, China pursued closer ties and stronger relations with non-Western countries, and African states played an important role in the Chinese stratagem. What also makes this of interest is that many African states — like China — have been under pressure from Western states to liberalise their political systems. These African states were often more than willing to go along with China's claims that Western demands for democracy and respect for human rights were thinly veiled imperialistic efforts for interfering in the domestic policies and practices of developing states, and thus for undermining their stability and progress. This became a powerful glue between China and Africa and served as common ground for identity building between China and Africa *vis-à-vis* the "paternalistic West" (Tull 2006: 459-461).

As China increased its footprint on the African continent, it continued to adhere to a strict policy of non-intervention (or non-interference) in the affairs of African states. (The only exception was the recognition of

one China (not Taiwan) as a conditionality imposed on its relations with African states.) China's non-interventionism relates to the inviolability of state sovereignty as a rhetorical backbone of Chinese foreign policy that dates from Western and Japanese intervention and imperialism in China (Richardson 2013). Its position on non-intervention has been a popular concern in Africa and is well received by African leaders, especially those who do not want to be subjected to criticism of the political skeletons in their closets. However, this policy has been under pressure where China has extensive interests. Nowhere is this clearer than in the field of UN peacekeeping. For many years, China has deployed engineers, logistical units, medical units and transport functionaries to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, but not combat forces. In so doing, China has tried to convince African states and the international community that its policy objectives are well-intentioned.

In view of the above, until 2013, Chinese peacekeepers have mainly assumed relatively safe roles, and conducted tasks such as designing infrastructure, guarding hospitals and administering medicine at clinics and hospitals. Their troops have never been put in a position or been allowed to use force in any offensive manner. The policy of non-intervention has, however, been put to the test in South Sudan, where China has extensive investments. Specifically, this relates to an announcement from Beijing in mid-2014 that it will be deploying a battalion of combat soldiers to assist the UN peacekeeping operation in South Sudan (Allison 2015; Richardson 2013).

Following developments in South Sudan, the pressing question among scholars and analysts is whether this implies the end of China's policy of non-interventionism? This article intends to assess developments with regard to the point that China has long been a major, but quiet contributor to UN peacekeeping, but which is now also a power that is taking on greater global responsibilities. Moreover, as China's interests on the African continent have been on the increase, China seems compelled to consider its national interest and protect those interests. In the words of Allison (2015): "Peace and security in Africa is suddenly in China's interests too". This has been particularly clear from China's increased contributions of non-combat personnel to UN peacekeeping operations, and even more evident in recent deployments of combat forces to Mali and thereafter South Sudan. In the latter case, China also found itself in the unusual role as mediator between the warring factions in South Sudan, as well as in the conflict between

Sudan and South Sudan. These matters will be under review in the sections below. The first part of this article reviews the historical context of China's gradual entry into the peacekeeping arena, while the second part is directed towards China's involvement on the African continent and the strategic elements of its peacekeeping actions.

2. The context of China's contributions to UN peacekeeping operations

Chong (2015: 233) states that the notions of smart power and military force are conceptually related and comprise two elements, namely "generating society and the unrelenting search for cleaner forms of global power projection". Smart power can be regarded as relevant to the work of Joseph Nye who referred to strategies that successfully combine hard and soft power resources in differing contexts. Nye, of course the progenitor of the notion and discourse of soft power, was the epitome of the scholar-turned-policy-maker who both witnessed and operated the instruments of hard and soft power through appointments in the US State Department, the US Department of Defense and the US National Intelligence Council. Nye argued that soft power is co-optive power; it is premised on the ability to shape the preferences of actors in the field of international relations by attraction rather than coercion. Soft power operates largely through culture, political ideals and foreign policies associated with moral authority, contrary to hard power, which largely draws on resources relating to force and sanctions (Haywood 2014: 221).

In this context, smart power is essentially a situation or context where hard and soft power reinforce one another (Haywood 2014). Smart power means more than just parading one's military might for the media. It relates to the possibilities of non-coercive military force and is increasingly intertwined with winning hearts and minds in a diplomatic context. Smart power is also matched to the increasing proliferation of "de-territorialized and rehabilitative security". It coincides with the contemporary phenomenon of legitimising international policing interventions and the frequency of "operations other than war" (Chong 2015: 234); usually or mostly exercised as UN peacekeeping operations, regional peacekeeping operations or related stabilisation operations. In these contexts, militaries are tasked to rebuild infrastructure in areas struck by natural disasters or policing operations in the aftermath of riot-

ing, fully fledged civil war, or conducting other forms of stabilising operations (Chong 2015: 234). In essence, smart power is substantially about whether the military and civilian role-players in a particular state or case can deploy soft power alongside the traditional hard power of coercion and "kinetic punishment" through armed force (Chong 2015: 237). From a theoretical point of view, this article extends the notion of smart power, as outlined by Chong (2015), to China's international peacekeeping role as it unfolded since the 1970s.

The Chinese position towards UN peacekeeping can be described as "from ardent opposition in the 1970s to avid support in the 2000s" (Wang 2013). For about four decades Beijing was highly sceptical of the UN's peacekeeping role, specifically because the Chinese leadership thought that the UN had been utilised for the Korean War (1950-1953) to legitimise and sanction actions that were viewed by China as aggressive military intervention (Ayenagbo *et al* 2012: 24) in a situation where Chinese forces fought UN forces under a US command. Another reason for China's reluctance was driven by its belief that the sovereignty of nations gave them an inherent right to control their own affairs without intervention from third parties. This issue has been vital to the political survival of China in the post-World War II period (Rogers 2007).

Following the end of the Cold War and the significant changes to the international community, Chinese leaders moved from a reluctant stand to a position of active cooperation in UN activities. In other words, China progressively opened itself to participation in UN peacekeeping operations. According to Wang (2013), the benefits of "demonstrating global responsibilities, extending economic and diplomatic influence and obtaining operational military experience" convinced Chinese leaders to make a "strategic change of heart".

Although China deployed peacekeepers to UN missions since the 1970s to the 1990s, there was a dramatic surge in Chinese peacekeeping participation in the 21st century, which reinforced Beijing's arrival as a major player on the world stage in general and UN peacekeeping in particular. China became a member of the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations in 1988 (Gill and Huang 2013: 140-141) and from January 2001 to January 2009, the number of Chinese Blue Berets deployed to UN missions increased from less than 100 in 2000 to close to 2 000 in 2008 (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2001: 1; UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2008: 1).

After joining the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations and setting a new tone for Chinese support for UN peacekeeping in 1988, China deployed 20 military observers to the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) to assist with the monitoring of elections in Namibia. This was followed by the deployment of five Chinese observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) in the Middle East. A significant break with the past came when China contributed 400 engineering troops and 49 military observers to the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992 (Gill and Huang 2013: 141).

The above-mentioned contributions paved the way for greater participation in peacekeeping activities and led to expanded and more diversified contributions. The majority of military personnel deployed to UN peacekeeping operations were in engineering, transport and medical support. In 1999 China also started to deploy civilian police to East Timor, followed by more police deployments to Haiti, Liberia, South Sudan and Timor Leste. China also deployed more military experts for peacekeeping operations worldwide. In accordance with its public diplomacy that Chinese peacekeepers were deployed (largely) as a result of factors beyond realist assumptions, the Chinese Ministry of Defence reported in 2011 that their peacekeepers have built and repaired over 8 700 km of roads and 270 bridges. They also cleared over 8 900 mines and various devices, and transported over 600 000 tons of cargo across a total distance of 9,3 million km. In the medical field 79 000 patients were treated (Gill and Huang 2013: 142).

In April 2013, China was ranked among the 15 top troop-contributing nations in the world and it contributed far more than any of the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council. In this regard, China contributed 32 civilian police, 38 military experts and 1 802 troops to UN missions worldwide; a total of 1 872 UN peacekeeping personnel. To put this in perspective: France was ranked second among the permanent members with 50 civilian police, 15 military experts, 883 troops; a total of 948 UN peacekeeping personnel (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2013a: 1-3). In December 2013, Chinese contributions increased to 2 078 UN peacekeeping personnel (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2013b: 1) across nine peacekeeping operations in North and sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Cyprus.

The dramatic surge in Chinese peacekeeping participation in the

21st century also coincided with Beijing's efforts in the early 2000s when it deliberately expanded its global economic and diplomatic influence through trade and diplomatic links. In this regard, China specifically considered participation in international organisations as a way of expanding its global influence (Wang 2013). As far as motivations for Chinese peacekeeping contributions are concerned, Gill and Huang (2013: 141) suggest that Chinese peacekeepers were indeed deployed largely as a result of factors beyond realist assumptions. Chinese leaders were more concerned with China's image and reputation, especially after the Tiananmen incident in 1989. Rogers (2007: 77) concurs with this view and argues that China and its People's Liberation Army (PLA) needed to restore a politically congenial relationship with the broader international community. Such a relationship could be restored through actions ranging from disaster relief to participation in UN peacekeeping. In addition, China also sought regional confirmation of its status as a peaceful neighbour (Gill and Huang 2013: 141), and thus projected an image of a peace-loving and responsible major power. This means that its involvement in peacekeeping operations presented an opportunity to place China in a favourable light internationally, as well as domestically, which was important to China and its armed forces (Rogers 2007: 79). Wang (2013) similarly states that through UN peacekeeping operations, China could demonstrate to the international community its progress toward "peaceful development" and project itself as a "responsible power" rather than a threat to the international community. In view of this, involvement in international peacekeeping provided a venue for China to progressively influence and shape global norms.

The extent to which China's involvement in the African peacekeeping arena expanded, especially since 2004, and was welcomed by many African leaders is perhaps one of the most striking elements of post-Cold War Sino-Africa relations. These and other related matters will be further explored in the section below.

3. Chinese contributions to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa and reflections on strategic considerations

It has been mentioned that China became the biggest contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping operations among the permanent mem-

bers of the UN Security Council. Towards the mid-2000s, China has been involved in all seven UN peacekeeping operations on the African continent, namely in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), Liberia (UNMIL), Sudan (UNMIS), Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL), and the Western Sahara (MINURSO) (Rogers 2007: 80). In 2006, during a visit to South Africa, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing pledged Beijing's support for increased Chinese involvement in UN peacekeeping operations and for strengthening the role of the UN Security Council in authorising, managing and terminating peacekeeping operations (Shelton 2008: 5).

Currently, Chinese 'Blue Helmets' are deployed to UN missions in several parts of the world, but mostly in Africa (European Parliamentary Research Service 2013). The rapid increase in China's contributions to UN peacekeeping operations speaks volumes of how China has positioned itself on the African continent. It also shows how China has progressively deployed its military as a diplomatic instrument in the post-Cold War period. This unfolded in a context where smart power had to be pursued in an increasingly interdependent world and an international landscape where military power was becoming increasingly costly to wield as states were amenable to subtler and less costly forms of influence, specifically soft power (Chong 2015: 236). China's peacekeeping experience shows how this emerging superpower has deliberately and systematically tried to steer clear from hard power (or 'command power'), which is based on the deployment of military and economic threats in order to manipulate the behaviour of others. Taylor (2008: 7) views this as follows: "Overall, involvement in peace operations in Africa gels with China's broader foreign policy goal on the continent, namely to be seen as an 'all-weather friend'". To their credit, it needs to be said that the Chinese soldiers performed well and their discipline and high level of efficiency earned them accolades in the peacekeeping arena (Rogers 2007: 88). Nevertheless, the question remains: what does China stand to gain from its contributions and are Chinese peacekeepers still operating in an international political context largely beyond realist considerations?

Chinese public diplomacy has always stressed that China has worked with African partners for the sake of common development, which has been actively promoted as the goal of China's foreign policy towards Africa. In this regard, China emphasised its "shared destiny" with Africa, which is marked by traditional friendship, mutual political

trust, practical cooperation in many areas and coordination and co-operation in international affairs. As far as mutual benefits are concerned, China's contemporary public diplomacy continues to stress the enormous development opportunities for Africa which stem from China's new development momentum, while an "emerging and rejuvenating Africa" in turn helps to enhance China's own development agenda. The Chinese Ambassador in South Africa, Tian Xuejun (2015), views Chinese-African relations as follows: "China and Africa enjoy natural affinity because of similar historical experience and our similar development goals have made us natural partners in the way forward. China and Africa are always good friends, good partners and good brothers sharing wealth and woe". In other words, China endeavours to be seen as a good partner in African development. A good example of the strong relations between China and African nations in recent years relates to the Chinese-financed construction of the impressive African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa (Gill and Huang 2013: 152).

Apart from public diplomacy, Beijing also saw an opportunity to enhance international peacekeeping in relation to the professionalisation of its armed forces, the PLA. Thus the PLA has been working hard to improve the calibre of its peacekeeping troops, and the PLA has also become more open to interfacing with foreign counterparts (Gill and Huang 2013: 146).

In the considerable array of views on China's international role, the same question keeps turning up: how can China's global positioning and involvement in peacekeeping be better understood? From a theoretical perspective, most theories of international relations consider the relevance of norms in our scholarly understanding of and accounting for state behaviour in international affairs (Van Kersbergen and Verbeek 2009: 220). Foreign policy scholars often search for answers to the questions of how and under what conditions norms guide foreign policy, and how norms intersect with material interest and power. Following the work of Yoichiro Sato and Keiko Hirata (2008), this article supports both the rationalist and constructivist views of the relations between norms and material interest and/or power. In accordance with the rationalist view, the article maintains that states tend to follow international norms supported by powerful states or domestic norms supported by the dominant political group at domestic level, which will, when doing so, serve their national interest. In accordance with the constructivist view, the article holds that even in the absence of material

interests and power relations, states may adopt norms as the process of socialisation develops; that is, where policy-makers are socialised according to a particular norm or within a specific normative orientation.

In view of the above, the constructivist view on the one hand (based on the insistence that the world is socially constructed and that identity is the agent's understanding of itself, its place in the world and its relationship with others) is helpful to explain Ambassador Xuejun's (2015) pronouncement that "China will never forget how our African brothers celebrated China's restoration of its lawful seat in the United Nations with dance and singing". It also brings a better understanding of Xuejun's statement that "African brothers and sisters, likewise, have not forgotten China's strong support for their efforts to fight imperialism and colonialism and seek national independence" and that China has therefore always been working with Africa towards a "common development".

On the other hand, Gill and Huang (2013: 145-146) argue from a more rationalist point of view (which underpins both realism and liberalism) that China's involvement in peacekeeping operations, like anti-piracy missions, rescue-and-relief operations, counter-terrorism exercises and post-conflict reconstruction and development actions, have all become aspects of China's dynamic international strategy. These all form part of the PLA's involvement in so-called military operations other than war, both at home and abroad. It helps to safeguard national interests as well as contribute to regional and global peace, security and development.

The deployment of Chinese troops in peacekeeping operations also carries inherent practical benefits for the PLA. Training and operational experience alongside other troop-contributing countries assist the Chinese military to improve their responsiveness, riot-control capabilities, the coordination of emergency command systems and the ability to be more effective in military operations other than war. It further helps to modernise and professionalise the PLA as well as to gain greater operational knowledge of different operating environments. In short, efforts to burnish the Chinese military's image abroad by displaying the professionalism of the PLA, and their involvement in peacekeeping, also demonstrate the capability of the Chinese military and offer operational benefits to the PLA. In this context, it needs to be noted that China's expanding participation and evolving role in the international community over the last two decades help to project a positive and

constructive side to its growing prominence and power on the global stage. Many countries, particularly in the Chinese region, are uncertain and wary about the PLA's military capabilities and China's overall strategic intentions. This is clearly understood in Beijing. Hence China's intention is to project itself as being responsive to international expectations and committed to making tangible contributions to international peace and security as well as to peaceful global development (Gill and Huang 2013: 144-147).

Rogers (2007: 88) clearly interprets China's foreign politics from a realist paradigm when he argues that the influence China gains from African nations is important to its energy needs, commerce, industrial complex and "one China" policy. This is a mutually beneficial relationship, but China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations and its disproportionately large contributions to African peacekeeping enhance Chinese influence in the AU as far as Africa's political and economic situation and future is concerned. After all, China has a vested interest in security and stability on the African continent. Agubamah (2014: 196) similarly argues that involvement in peacekeeping generally, and in Africa in particular, has benefits for China. It puts China in a position where it can respond to African requests and build confidence with both African governments and the AU as the preeminent African regional organisation.

Wang (2013) states that the media and military analysts have often taken a realist view by arguing that increased Chinese involvement in international peacekeeping has been aimed at protecting its existing economic interests. However, it can be pointed out that except for the Sudanese conflict, Chinese deployments have not taken place in countries where substantial trade relations were at stake, or where trade links followed rather than preceded peacekeeping deployments. A counter-argument to this is that deployments to UN missions progressively provide a medium for China to influence and shape global norms. Furthermore, although strict regulations apply to UN peacekeeping operations to prevent Chinese peacekeepers from independently pursuing China's national interests through peacekeeping engagement, peacekeeping *per se* facilitates economic relationships with host governments.

Generally, China's deeper footprint on the African continent in the field of peace and security did not go unnoticed. "Participation in UN missions is an unobjectionable way for China to fly its flag ... Participa-

tion in [peacekeeping] missions is an ideal way to be muscular, but without offending", remarked Professor Richard Betts, Adjunct Senior Fellow for Security Studies at the US Council on Foreign Relations. From an Indian perspective, Jayadeva Ranade, a member of the Indian National Security Advisory Board, contended that China observed how India had built up its influence through international peacekeeping operations and that China had learned from them the importance of exercising and increasing its soft power at the UN through peacekeeping (Richardson 2013).

Africa at large welcomes China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations since there is a shortage of troop-contributing nations and because Western nations, especially the US, are not keen to deploy their armed forces in African conflicts (Agubamah 2014: 196). Unlike most Western scholars, African scholars often tend to argue more along liberal or idealist lines that China is helping to bring international peace and stability to the African continent. For instance, Ayenagbo *et al* (2012: 24) state that China's contribution to UN peacekeeping operations for international peace and security is "wonderful" and that Beijing has actively and incisively responded to the threat of international conflict through mediation or conflict-resolution efforts and has taken a "responsible great power stand". The following is a clear illustration of their liberal/idealist interpretation of China's position:

China advocates peaceful negotiation and consultation so as to resolve its international disputes. China does not resort to force, or threat of force, in resolving international disputes. China maintains a reasonable national military buildup to defend its own sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is not made to expand, nor does it seek invasion or aggression. China is firmly opposed to terrorism and the proliferation of weapons or weapons of mass destruction. China is a responsible member of the international community, and as for international treaties, China abides by all of them in a faithful way. China never plays by a double standard, selecting and discarding treaties it does not need. China respects the diversity of civilisation and the whole world ... China's embrace of globalisation makes its interests interdependent with those of the rest of the world and its increasing active policy on UNPKO [UN peacekeeping operations] shows its willingness to join the international efforts in addressing peace and security-related issues (Ayenagbo *et al* 2012: 24).

In recent years leading African countries such as Nigeria, Angola, Egypt

and South Africa seemed to look to China as a partner, although a type of 'senior' partner. China provided them with a friendship that helped the African continent generally to broaden its global positioning and prospects, and assisted specific African countries in improving or strengthening their economic growth and development (Schoeman 2007: 93). This relationship appears to be unchanged and there seems to be no substance for any argument that China is starting to act as a hegemon on the African continent or that African states in general are not viewing their relations with China as mutually beneficial. Also, the observation made by Schoeman (2007: 86) that "China is welcomed with open arms by Africa's political élites" is still of contemporary relevance.

Concerning the future, Rogers (2007: 90) earlier predicted that China would most probably continue to send Chinese soldiers to UN peacekeeping operations worldwide, but would do so specifically with a keen eye on regions that "correspond to its strategic vision". This means that Beijing will continue to regard peacekeeping as a valuable security instrument in Africa and contribute according to the strategic, operational and tactical benefit and influence it can gain from such contributions. This will be further explored in the discussion below.

4. China's contemporary peacekeeping role: The end of China's non-intervention policy?

From the preceding discussion, there has clearly been a sea change in China's attitude towards international peacekeeping operations. China's foreign policies have evolved from outright rejection of UN peacekeeping operations (1970s), to reluctant participation (1980s) to prolonged involvement in peacekeeping operations. However, there have always been certain limits to China's involvement in peacekeeping operations (Taylor 2008: 6). Specifically, Beijing's views on international peacekeeping have been based on a strong respect for state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in the internal politics of countries (Shelton 2008: 5). Thus China remains opposed to actions perceived as interfering in the domestic affairs of states and will only become involved in peacekeeping if the host government concurs. Beijing also remains suspicious and sceptical that interventions carried out in the name of "humanitarianism" are motivated by interests rather than inter-

national solidarity or charity-related reasons (Taylor 2008: 6).

However, as China's presence on the African continent deepened, expectations also increased that it must engage politically in the field of peace and security (Davies 2008: 3). In other words, China's growing global power has taken Beijing to a position where it has to contend with expectations that it will play an ever greater role in international affairs, and at the same time deal with considerations of what sovereignty is and when it might be infringed in the framework and discourse relating to intervention and peacekeeping. This called for a pragmatic reorientation and reassessment of Beijing's political interests by Chinese decision-makers, who more and more have to fit their country into the role of a responsible great power and less of a developing country premised on a rigid policy stance of protection of state sovereignty at all costs (Taylor 2008: 7-8).

A first indication of change was Beijing's decision in mid-2013 to send an infantry detachment to serve in the UN Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) where UN deployment followed the collapse of the state in the north after radical Islamic armed groups initiated a series of attacks against government forces in the north of the country. This was the first foreign deployment of Chinese combat troops in an international peacekeeping role. China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, officially admitted that this marked a shift in Beijing's foreign policy. Chen Jian, head of the UN Association of China, a Chinese think tank, also stated that "[t]his is a major breakthrough in our participation in peacekeeping ... With this our contribution will be complete. We will have policemen, medical forces, engineering troops and combat troops" (as quoted by Hille 2013). The significance of this is that China's political and military leadership have gradually shown a more flexible foreign policy approach, while also acknowledging that China's need for resources and growing investments has expanded its interests beyond its immediate neighbourhood to the point where it could no longer avoid sending combat troops to Africa. At the same time, the Chinese government did not want to create the impression that it was radically changing its foreign policy while it was rising to global power status. In the case of Mali, Beijing was swift to point out that China's commitment to the principles of non-intervention and rejection of military force as a means of conflict resolution remains unchanged. Yet, foreign minister Wang also admitted that China had to align its foreign policy with its expanding global interests when it decided to commit combat troops to

the crisis in Mali (Hille 2013; Murray 2013: 2).

Although the responsibility of the PLA force in Mali was confined to a protection role for the MINUSMA headquarters and living areas of the peacekeeping forces, China's willingness to contribute to MINUSMA generally reflects Beijing's increasingly proactive approach to international peacekeeping. It coincided with the significance of the fact that in 2013, China had about 15 times as many peacekeepers as it had in 2000 (Murray 2013: 2).

As far as the mainspring of China's involvement in UN peacekeeping operations are concerned, the basic motivations seem to be the same as before. Murray (2013: 3) contends that militarily it provides important practical benefits for the PLA. By allowing the PLA to field-test equipment, it obtained first-hand experience in addressing unconventional threats in potentially hostile environments, and enabled China to integrate itself into multilateral international operations. Strategically, China could now safeguard its interests abroad, while rendering humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and assist in promoting world peace. Moreover, by helping to ensure a peaceful, stable international security environment, China could continue to promote its image and its growing international status, which simultaneously increased its ability to influence UN policy.

Coinciding with China's deployment of combat troops in Mali, elite Chinese combat troops were also spotted in South Sudan since 2011. South Sudan, of course, became independent from the rest of Sudan in 2011 and its strongest foreign partner is China. To this end, China has been working assiduously to get the clashing parties in South Sudan together to avoid a stop in the production and flow of oil. In contrast to Mali where Chinese interests are relatively limited, although not insignificant in the African context (see Esterhuysen and Kane 2014), the rationale for Chinese involvement in the crisis in South Sudan was much clearer. As Humphrey (2013) observes: "If China is going to play a large investment role in sub-Saharan Africa, it must be willing to play a security role, too".

In 2014 it was officially announced that China planned to send about 700 combat troops to South Sudan where Chinese peacekeepers were deployed as part of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS). Many analysts regarded this as a significant shift away from China's policy of non-intervention in conflicts on the African continent. Although it could be argued that China had already in 2006

exerted diplomatic pressure on the Sudanese government in Khartoum to permit UN peacekeepers into Darfur, and also became the first permanent member of the UN Security Council to commit and deploy troops there (Gill and Huang 2013: 154), the more recent case of Chinese combat troops in South Sudan seems to bring matters to a new level of Chinese engagement with the African continent. What should be clear is that China has made large investments in South Sudan and has therefore been unusually proactive in diplomatic efforts to pacify matters in South Sudan after the civil war slashed oil production by a third (Allison 2015). Significantly, in January 2015, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited South Sudan where he participated in discussions with the two warring parties in the South Sudanese conflict (led by President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar respectively) on how to speed up political reconciliation. Also under discussion was the lingering conflict between South Sudan and its northern neighbour, Sudan, which has its origin in the conflict before South Sudan moved to independence in 2011. In Khartoum, Wang also discussed matters with representatives from the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) on how to promote the peace process in South Sudan.

Against this background, China was forced to step into a mediation role as none of the other major powers had any reason or incentive to play such a role. Immediately, some observers criticised the Chinese government for selfishly protecting its own interests rather than acting from a position of good faith. China defended its position when Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked that China has acted not for its own interest, but was "acting on the responsibilities and obligations of a responsible world power". Significantly, he also acknowledged that "wars and conflict hurt the oil industry" which is where China has special interest, but added that damage to the oil industry would hit South Sudanese and Sudanese people hardest (Tiezzi 2015).

These developments prompted Richard Poplak, an author and journalist studying China's influence on the African continent to make the following observation: "It comes down to interest. The Chinese have poured billions and billions into South Sudan, so many resources that it's almost baffling. This is a shift in realpolitik: you can't just talk all the time and not carry a big stick. The Chinese realised that" (Smith 2014). As far as the principle of non-intervention is concerned, Allison (2015) rightly remarks that it was always difficult to maintain a stance of non-

interventionism and that in South Sudan, where China has extensive interests, new dynamics have been "testing the policy to breaking point".

To put matters in perspective: when China expanded into Africa over the last two decades, it justified its dealings with illegitimate and dictatorial African leaders on the basis of its strict adherence to a policy of non-intervention, and to relieve itself from any responsibility to work for positive change in African states. African leaders have also mostly welcomed Chinese investments which came without any prescriptive policies or conditionalities. They further considered the Chinese approach a welcome alternative to the American conception of 'world order' and the 'Washington consensus'. However, Chinese investments on the African continent have been growing and eventually China's non-intervention has become harder to maintain. Beijing has become more aware of its image and even more wary of being seen to support or facilitate pariah states. In addition, it had to look more carefully after the protection of its growing interests and in this context, peace and security is now of great concern to China. Tiezzi (2014) articulates this eloquently: "As China's interests abroad grow, its policy of non-intervention will face more and more challenges. China's vision for a 'New Silk road' [will] see increased Chinese investment and trade in some of the most unstable regions in the world".

At another level, Chinese citizens working in Africa have been targeted in attacks. The Nigerian Islamist group, Boko Haram, has allegedly been responsible for the abduction of Chinese workers from a construction site in Cameroon and increasingly Chinese workers became targets for disgruntled rebel groups. The Chinese government has also come under criticism from within China for not doing enough to protect its citizens in Africa. This forced China to reconsider its non-intervention policy stance, which became apparent in the deployment of combat soldiers in limited numbers, particularly in Mali, as well as in its commitment of a full battalion of combat soldiers to South Sudan. In the latter case, China was also pushed into the unusual role of mediator in the Sudanese conflict. From a peacekeeping point of view, this is a clear indication of the change in China's foreign policy, and tacit recognition from China that some kind of intervention is sometimes needed to protect its strategic interests. Although China's involvement in peacekeeping in Sudan should not be overestimated or overstated in terms of its scope, it does seem to signal the beginning of a far more assertive role for China in Africa's peace and security issues (Allison

2015). Differently put, even though the UN officially stated that the Chinese battalion serving in South Sudan would be based in Juba and would focus on protecting displaced civilians (VOA News 2015), it could safely be argued that a rethink of China's foreign policy had taken place. Moreover, China is now operating differently in Africa as it can no longer take an arms-length approach towards peace and security where its interests are at stake. At the same time, it also appears that China is beginning to assume the responsibility and duties associated with a global power.

In the final instance, it should be noted that China's post-Cold War engagement in international institutions in general, and peace-keeping operations in particular, has exposed Beijing to the normative values concerning human rights and conflict resolution. This is something new to Chinese foreign policy and according to Gill and Huang (2013: 155) it is still too early to determine whether China has accepted these norms. However, what is increasingly clear is that there is a realisation on the part of China to be cognisant of the norms advanced by the US and its allies and partners as it climbs upon the global stage. What the Chinese government seems to realise is that they cannot be obstructive to global normative trends and values pertaining to international human rights, specifically with regard to conflict resolution and peace building, but rather be supportive as far as possible.

5. Conclusion

At least four broad perspectives can be highlighted or deduced from the above analysis. Firstly, Beijing has emerged as a significant contributor to UN peacekeeping operations in general and in Africa in particular. This stands in direct relation to China's growing engagement and influence in the international arena as well as the fact that China is Africa's largest trading partner. While China's growing international role has been in accordance with its increasing peacekeeping contributions, it should also be clear that Beijing aspires to play a greater role in global politics and that it regards peacekeeping as an instrument to exert greater influence on international affairs at the level of UN involvement.

Secondly, international peacekeeping in general and peacekeeping in Africa in particular yield diplomatic benefits for China. China's expanding role in peacekeeping over the last two decades helped Beijing to project a positive and constructive image in the international arena.

China's participation in international peacekeeping is, in fact, an important arm or instrument of its public diplomacy which has increasingly been aimed at projecting China and its image as that of a responsible global power. It also allows China to respond to African requests or challenges and is a confidence-building measure with both African governments and the AU as the pre-eminent African regional organisation. Indeed, China's peacekeeping experience shows how this emerging superpower has deliberately and systematically applied smart power in its foreign policy and made an attempt to give primacy to soft power (within the paradigm of smart power), and specifically used peacekeeping as a diplomatic instrument to this effect.

Thirdly, China's emerging role on the African continent is part of a pragmatic reorientation and reassessment in Chinese policy-making circles, specifically where Beijing's political interests and related investments are at stake. On the one hand, Chinese decision-makers are expected to concern themselves with the global responsibilities of a great power, but as its strategic and material interests have become more integrated and entangled with African concerns, Beijing will be compelled to consider its national interest and protect its growing interests in Africa more closely. In this regard, peace and security become of greater concern to China. As a consequence, China's growing involvement in peacekeeping has become more difficult to reconcile with Beijing's historical and contemporary commitment to non-interventionism, particularly as witnessed in the case of South Sudan. In this case, China had to soften or forfeit its historical arm-length approach in view of the need to facilitate a political solution to the conflict in South Sudan and in order to secure its strategic interests. In other words, China was compelled to reconsider its stance on non-interventionism. China's predicament is strikingly contextualised by Tiezzi (2015):

...no matter how 'responsible' a country is, the government must still pick and choose where to invest its time and resources — a calculation that is naturally heavily influenced by where national interests are at stake. China has undeniable interest involved in both Sudan and South Sudan, and would benefit greatly if a long-elusive peace could be found in this region. In this regard, China is acting not only like a 'responsible world power' but like a practical great power.

Lastly, how this might turn out in the face of future international political developments is uncertain, but one can safely argue that China's presence on the African continent is highly unlikely to turn into a new form of colonialism in Africa. China is certainly acutely aware of the dangers associated with the politics of conditionalities and a related interventionist approach on the African continent. However, it needs oil and other mineral resources for its growing economy and this might require the application of a least some measure of hard power alongside soft power. If this is the case, African states will have to adapt to the presence of Chinese soldiers in combat roles on the African continent in crisis situations, similar to the deployment of French soldiers in Mali. After all, China's interests and economic footprint on the African continent are likely to increase even further and China has already stepped in where the US and European nations make limited troop and logistical contributions to peacekeeping operations on African soil. Moreover, if African leaders consider the Chinese approach a welcome alternative to the American conception of 'world order', and if Africa's future political and economic pathway gets even more entangled with that of China, it is to be expected that China will soften its historical stance on non-interventionism — diplomatically and even militarily — when and where its strategic and related economic interests face risk or are under threat.

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