



The Expanding Role of Chinese Peacekeeping in Africa

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China's increased involvement in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping in Africa reflects a broader trend of the country taking a more proactive approach to foreign policy.

In December 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that “[China] will proactively push forward the construction of a global network of partners and will proactively push for political solutions for international hot issues and difficult problems”. While this policy began under the presidency of Hu Jintao, the level of Chinese involvement has grown rapidly under the Xi administration. China’s increased involvement in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping is one clear example of this proactive policy. In 2015, President Xi promised to make 8,000 troops available to the UN, and he also offered to help train 2,000 peacekeepers from other countries.

China is now among the world’s top 12 largest contributors of troops, and of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, China is now the biggest contributor of peacekeepers. Most of China’s increased activity in peacekeeping in 2017 took place in Africa. China had more than 2,400 Chinese troops take part in seven UN peacekeeping missions across the continent – most notably in Mali and South Sudan. China has a long history of providing military assistance to Africa, and the continent remains the destination for much of China’s military assistance today. A notable development has been the training and support of African peacekeepers. For example, China provided military assistance to Burundian and Ugandan

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peacekeepers in Somalia in 2008. China has also made offers to equip African peacekeepers.

The drivers behind China's increased peacekeeping involvement

There are many commonly suggested reasons for China's increased involvement in peacekeeping in Africa which include: protecting China's assets and diaspora across the continent, giving Chinese troops combat experience and increasing Chinese soft power in the region. While there may be an element of truth to each, most of these possible drivers fail to apply to all cases of Chinese involvement in peacekeeping in Africa. For example, in Mali, where Chinese peacekeepers were part of a UN mission which started in 2013, China has a relatively small economic footprint and there is only a small Chinese community in the west African country. What is clear is that China's involvement in peacekeeping in Africa is part of a national branding strategy which is aimed at both global and domestic audiences. This strategy is deployed through two interlinking national narratives – that of the responsible great power and the leader of the developing world.

The expanding role of Chinese peacekeeping in Africa aligns with China's foreign policy goal to project itself as a responsible great power. Becoming a responsible great power is part of China's stated policy of a "peaceful development," which is China's attempt to reduce fears that China will challenge Western dominance of the current system of global governance. Playing a greater role in peacekeeping is part of this role and is a clear example of China's attempts to increase its involvement in global affairs within the current system and often in partnership with established actors.

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In Africa, China's attempts to project itself as a responsible great power meets another of China's national narratives – that of China as the leader of the developing world, a nation that stands in brotherhood with other developing states. Within this narrative, China's actions in Africa are undertaken in the spirit of South-South cooperation whereby African states are equal partners within the process and are encouraged to find their own paths to solving issues. In terms of Chinese peacekeeping in Africa, this narrative has affected how China shapes its overall security approach in three ways.

First, as a developing state itself, China is aware that due to a lack of capacity in their economic systems, developing states are more open to structural shocks, which affects the production of food and water. In Africa, China has adopted a comprehensive, integrated security approach to its peacekeeping missions that moves beyond just traditional security. This has meant that China's peacekeeping missions also focus on non-traditional security threats, such as water and food insecurity, to build peace in an area of conflict. China often sends technicians and engineers to help rebuild water and agricultural infrastructures, as water and food insecurity plays a part in the overall development of a conflict.

Second, China also focuses on the long-term economic development of African states in conflict, as poverty is seen as another major driver of conflict. China has increased investment and development aid in African states, which brings much needed jobs and infrastructure projects to the continent. In particular, the One Belt One Road initiative attempts to improve African transport infrastructures by integrating markets across the continent and with the rest of the world. This could lead to greater economic development by reducing poverty and, therefore, conflict.

Finally, the spirit of South-South cooperation requires China to support other states in finding solutions to their problems. For this reason, China supports African-led responses to conflict in the region, including African Union-led peacekeeping missions, which tend to be undermanned, under-trained, and under-resourced. China offers training, equipment and financial aid to the African Union (AU), as well as to other regional bodies. China has also worked with other actors to support their efforts in building capacity among African states to send peacekeepers. For instance, China supported the EU training program for Malian troops. Beyond providing material support for African regional bodies in peacekeeping, China has also looked to these bodies to be the final decision makers in determining military interventions on the continent. This has given African regional bodies greater ownership of these missions, which should, in theory, increase the possibility of these missions succeeding in their objectives.

Conclusion

While there may be more material drivers behind China's increased involvement in peacekeeping in Africa, these two national narratives – that of the responsible great power and the leader of the developing world – have shaped how China develops its role within peacekeeping, creating limitations to China's actions. These narratives will therefore shape China's role in peacekeeping in Africa in the future.

Image credit: UNMISS/Flickr.

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