

China and the United Nations peace missions

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Since the late 1980s, China has participated in various United Nations peacekeeping operations, providing military personnel, police officers and civil servants. In September 1988, Beijing formally applied to join the UN's *Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations*.¹ In April 1990, it sent five military observers to the *Truce Supervision Organisation* in the Middle East, which is the oldest mission of the United Nations. What is more, during the period 1992-93, corps of engineers were twice sent to the *United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia*. This was the first time that China moved its military personnel. On 12 January 2000, the first body of Chinese police officers arrived in East Timor. Currently, they are also present in different countries and regions. In 2002, coinciding with the start of the mandate of President Hu Jintao, China formally acceded to the availability mechanism for these operations. In 2003, it sent a contingent of engineers and doctors to the mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For the first time, China took over the training of troops in an operation in Africa. That same year, Beijing sent the largest of its units, consisting of more than 500 staff, to the mission in Liberia. In 2004, it began its participation in UN operations in the western hemisphere by sending police officers to Haiti. Currently, China is present in 11 of the 17 active peacekeeping missions.²

China's decision to be increasingly involved in these operations is not a fortuitous event. Quite on the contrary, it bears witness to a significant change in relation to China's perception of the outside world as the country overcomes not only the isolation ('with our own means', *zi ji dong shou*) of the Maoist period (1949-1978), but also that of the China of the millennium which, taking pride in itself, turned its back on the rest of the world. Moreover, China's involvement is inseparable from the same strategy that led it to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) and aroused its interest in hosting the 2008 Olympic Games or the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai.

China, with the constraints arising from its level of development, wants to participate in global affairs and be accepted as a stakeholder in the management of global issues. It is also gradually assuming its responsibilities in the international arena. This Asian country is aware that its current uniqueness allows it to behave as a developing country which, like many such countries, can contribute troops to these missions but, unlike them, also has a voice in the debates and decisions that the UN Security Council should address in this regard, where China has a permanent seat and the power of veto. This increases the level of confidence in its own capacities.³

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¹ www.un.org/spanish/Depts/dpko/dpko/

² Centre on International Cooperation, *Annual Review of Global Peace Operations 2008*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Colorado, 2008.

³ Li Jie, "The transition of the International System: From the Perspective of the Theory of Responsibility", *China International Studies*, Winter 2007; Ma Zhengang, "China's Responsibility and the 'China Responsibility' Theory", *China International Studies*, Summer 2007.

This strategy, favoured by the spectacular growth of China's economy in recent decades, is coherent with its vision of international relations, which is also in the process of transition and adaptation, and its aim to contribute to strengthening the role of the United Nations. China's support for multilateralism is increasingly less rhetorical and its determining factors are progressively being reduced, hence there is reason to believe that China's participation in peacekeeping operations will be increased in the future. At the same time, it is foreseeable that its unquestionable attachment to the intangible principle of national sovereignty, still associated to a clearly maximalist conception, will evolve. Such renewed political will in favour of China's insertion into the world has replaced the reluctance shown in the past, but without totally elucidating the nature of China's commitment. Furthermore, China's participation in these missions helps to facilitate its universal recognition, reduce hostility or distrust from the outside and improve its image as a country committed to peace, the search for solutions to conflicts and adherence to an international community that faces threats and challenges for which it has still not found effective solutions.

The requirements demanded by China to adhere to these missions include the following: firstly, the operations must have the consent of the countries or parties involved; secondly, the operations must maintain a neutral stance; and thirdly, force can only be used in cases of self defence. All of these principles are universally recognised and theoretically observed in the different missions in which China participates.

Africa

At present, around 1500 Chinese troops participate in Africa in peacekeeping missions. The general framework of this presence takes account of three main factors. The first of these is the promotion of cooperation with the African Union and other regional organisations in the continent within a framework for dialogue and permanent consultation that not only deals with the conflicts themselves, but also economic integration and social development. Beijing considers these elements indispensable in order to assert the viability and success of the peace processes. The second factor is the development of forms of military cooperation or assistance for training along with the other powers involved in the region. The final factor relates to consolidating the impression of China's influence on this continent rich in natural resources and raw materials, supporting complementary ways that contribute to weaving an important network of interests including the public and private sectors, and areas such as education, basic infrastructures or health.⁴ This also encompasses factors of a strategic nature that can be detected in China's presence in the Horn of Africa or in countries that have access to the Red Sea.

Currently, China is participating in peacekeeping missions in Sudan, the Ivory Coast, Liberia, the Western Sahara, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia-Eritrea. Altogether, more than 3,000 troops participate in the different mechanisms at work, making Africa the main reference point for China's external presence at this level.⁵

China's relations with Sudan go back to the end of the 1970s, when geopolitical changes in the area reinforced its position as provider of armaments for Khartoum's regime.⁶ The long Sudanese conflict between the Arabic populations of the north and the government of the south ended in 2005. Resolution 1547, approved the previous year, created the UNAMIS (*United Nations Advance*

⁴ Garth Shelton, "China, África y Sudáfrica. Avanzando hacia la cooperación Sur-Sur", in Atilio A. Borón y Gladis Lechini, *Política y movimientos sociales en un mundo hegemónico. Lecciones desde África, Asia y América Latina*, Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO), Buenos Aires, July 2006.

⁵ Chris Alden, *China in Africa*, Zed Books, Londres y Nueva York, 2007.

⁶ Ali Askouri, "Pueblos desplazados, comunidades destruidas... Algunas inversiones de China en Sudán", in Firoze Manji y Stephen Marks (Eds.), *China en África ¿Ayuda o arrasa?*, Oozebap, Barcelona, 2007, pp. 100-104.

Mission in Sudan),⁷ the purpose of which was to facilitate contacts between the affected parties, support the mediation of the IGAD (*Intergovernmental Authority on Development*), prepare the deployment of military and civil personnel and provide support for the population, assuring the application of the *Comprehensive Peace Agreement (General Peace Agreement)*. China contributes by providing military troops and police officers.⁸

On the other hand, UNAMID (*United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur*), created on July 31, 2007 through resolution 1769, is a hybrid operation between the African Union and the United Nations destined to make the application of the peace agreements in Darfur (region located in the western part of Sudan) viable. A total of 319 Chinese troops participate in this mission, all of which are soldiers except for one military observer.¹⁰

China's participation in these peacekeeping missions is subject to questioning given that China provides armaments to the Sudanese government which have been widely used in the internal conflict. What is more, China has important oil concessions in Sudan, part of which are located in the region of Darfur. In addition, it is the main beneficiary of Sudanese crude oil and has a 40% share in state oil in Sudan and an effective presence in four of the six major oil deposits.

In West Africa, the mission in Sierra Leone - to which China contributed military personnel - has come to an end, but two other missions remain in force: the ONUCI, based in the Ivory Coast, and the UNMIL in Liberia. Until 2006, Beijing contributed six military observers to the first of these missions, which deals with a country rich in cacao and also in diamonds and oil. In neighbouring Liberia, and in close collaboration with the Ivory Coast mission, the UNMIL welcomes a total of 566 Chinese military troops, as well as four military observers and ten police officers. In this region, an emphasis is also placed on the importance of fishing resources and an increasing Chinese presence in these operations.¹⁴

The MINURSO is especially important. The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara was created in 1991 by resolution 690, and since August 2007, Chinese commander Zhao Jingmin has been in control of the military forces.¹⁵ A total of 13 Chinese military observers of the contingent's 224 troops are participating in the mission.¹⁶ Aside from natural resources, including those related to fishing, the main interest of China in this region is its relationship with Morocco (one of its main priorities in Africa). The declarations of its main leaders alluding to the similarities between the Saharai and the Taiwanese disputes severely question their neutrality, abounding in China's extreme dependence on its conception of multilateralism with regard to satisfying its immediate interests.

In relation to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Observation Mission MONUC, initiated in 1999, now involves the participation of 218 Chinese soldiers and 16 military observers.¹⁷ The economic implications of China's presence in the Congo have undergone an important leap in recent years. Its contribution to the construction of different educational, health and communication infrastructures is increasing, which also facilitates the expansion of its companies

⁷ www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmis/background.html

⁸ On 9 January 2005, the Government of Sudan, represented by Vice President Ali Osman Taha and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLM/A, in English), represented by John Garang, signed the General Peace Agreement in Nairobi (Kenya), which includes provisions related to security, power-sharing in the capital (Khartoum), autonomy for the south, and a more equitable distribution of economic resources, including oil.

⁹ <http://unamid.unmissions.org/Default.aspx#>

¹⁰ www.operationspaix.net/-MINUAD-

¹¹ Rosa Meneses and Mariano Aguirre, "The Present and Future of Peace Operations", Conference Report 02, FRIDE, June 2007. www.fride.org

¹² www.onuci.org y www.unmil.org. respectivamente.

¹³ www.operationspaix.net/-ONUCL-

¹⁴ www.operationspaix.net/-MINUL-

¹⁵ www.minurso.unlb.org

¹⁶ www.operationspaix.net/-MINURSO-

¹⁷ www.operationspaix.net/-MONUC-

in the most attractive sectors, such as the exploitation of gold, diamonds, petroleum, copper, cobalt and coltan. In 2003, the Congo became the first mission of this kind that involved the participation of Chinese women.

Border conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea justified the creation of the UNMEE in 2000, which involves approximately one hundred military observers and civil personnel. China's participation, which has recently come to an end, was closely linked to the strategic importance of the area, on account of the Eritrean enclaves in the Arab Sea, near Yemen and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ In recent years, China has multiplied its donations to Ethiopia.

The presence of Chinese blue helmets in Africa is thus increasingly significant and reveals China's interest in the continent. Its relationship is based on the links established during the height of the third-world speech of the maoist period, currently reinforced by the promotion of south-south cooperation and the increase of its economic capacities. The Chinese projection increases exponentially, offering a complementary variable that, according to African countries, extends its commitment to the continent's stability and facilitates the furthering of its influence to the detriment of traditional powers.

Middle East

Even if China's greatest presence is in Africa, it also has a presence in the Middle East in the FPNUL, in Lebanon, and in the Middle East Peace Mission, the ONUVT.¹⁹ China participates with 4 observers in the ONUVT and with 343 military troops in the FPNUL.²⁰ This participation serves as a stimulus for influence in this area rich in power resources and, at the same time, sends a positive message to the other Arab countries in the region by demonstrating its will to be involved in the achievement of peace. In the rest of the region, China maintains important energy agreements with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Haiti and East Timor

China also participates in MINUSTAH (UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti)²¹, created in 2004, with a total of 125 police officers.²² As an extremely poor country, the main interest of Haiti is in maintaining links between Port Prince and the Republic of China or Taiwan that Beijing would like to see definitively broken.

Furthermore, in East Timor, the UNMIT was created in 2006 through resolution 1704. China has promoted its presence (2 observers and 21 police officers),²⁴ emphasising its interest in stability and peace in its near surroundings - an interest which is nonetheless inseparable from economic and strategic interests such as the energy reserves of the sea of Timor (valued at more than 20 billion dollars) or the need to face up to Australia's increasing influence.

¹⁸ www.unmee.unmissions.org/

¹⁹ www.un.org/spanish/Depts/dpko/unifil y www.un.org/spanish/Depts/dpko/untso, respectively.

²⁰ www.operationspaix.net/-FINUL-

²¹ Megan Burke, "The United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti: Analysis and Recommendations for Future Mandates", Conference Report 04, FRIDE, January 2008. www.fride.org

²² <http://ar.china-embassy.org/esp/xwdt/t169209.htm>

²³ www.unmit.org/

²⁴ www.operationspaix.net/-MINUT-

Conclusions

China's participation in peace missions demonstrates its capacity to adapt to the international system and is yet a further consequence of the long process of transition it has undergone. The implications of its involvement have gone beyond the merely economic to include other dimensions, including diplomacy. The goal of such participation, besides contributing to collective security and reinforcing multilateralism as a proposal for the future, is to gain influence and protect and develop its own interests, which are ever more interdependent.

What is more, the Chinese contribution is especially positive when these operations are practically at the limit of their possibilities within the present framework. The main contributing countries of blue helmets (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc.) are increasingly reluctant to assume major risks and the scale of these operations entails an increase in the number of missions and troops that exceeds the capacity to contribute of states and the services of the United Nations that manage the operations.²⁵

China's involvement in the peace missions is a way of demonstrating that the country's development does not constitute a threat to the world, but rather allows it to contribute in a better way to peace and international security, promoting relations of a diverse nature. It also contributes to modernising the practices and ideology of its armed forces through contact with troops from other countries. Also, when serious offences on the part of blue helmets have been denounced in various missions, demonstrating high quality morals constitutes one of the basic requirements of the Chinese troops.

China pays special attention to commitments to local development. Their contingents include engineers who rehabilitate highways or build bridges, or medical teams that take care of the needs of civil populations totally marginalised from access to health care. The Chinese vision of peacekeeping operations includes attention to areas such as assistance for economic reconstruction, in acknowledgement of the fact that the origin of conflicts is usually intimately linked to under-development.

Factors of a political nature are ever present in China's decisions: firstly, in its bid to strengthen the role of regional organisations and promote cooperation as an essential mechanism to confront threats to security; and secondly, in its use of these missions as an instrument to gain influence, improve its global image and pave the way for the management of other complementary interests or reinforce its presence at this level in those sectors of greater strategic interest. Finally, continual attempts to isolate the Republic of China (Taiwan) and reduce its level of diplomatic recognition to a minimum, explains some of its activities. In this sense, in addition to its capacity to attract on account of its economic power, China also has a very important presence in situ, be it to prevent retrograde steps or to extend its portfolio of diplomatic allies.

The participation in these missions of the People's Liberation Army, which is very ideology-based, currently has very limited consequences for China's internal order due to the number of its total troops and the tendency to organise - and isolate - specific units at this level. Nevertheless, contact with groupings from other countries can be an enriching experience, projecting beyond a strictly military scope.

²⁵ Harvey Morris, "UN Peacekeeping in line of fire", *Financial Times*, 17 de mayo de 2008.

Peacekeeping missions generally have geopolitical and economic interests, and China is no exception. Also, Beijing aims to achieve a balance and to offer aid to countries in weak situations. Without another presence abroad, but with increasing ambitions towards various parts of the world, China's presence in peace operations can become a form of indirect protection of its interests and pave the way for other methods which are currently officially discarded.

The neutrality of China's participation is questioned, not only on account of the above-mentioned interests, but also in light of the fact that it maintains solid political alliances with some of the parties in conflict, thus casting into doubt its capacity to avoid selective and tendentious practices.

China's involvement in United Nations peacekeeping missions has a positive impact globally. Nevertheless, it does not constitute proof in itself of a well-meaning and disinterested disposition to contribute to worldwide peace, but rather it is also conditioned by China's need to access certain strategic resources, gain political influence or improve its global image.

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