

China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping

by Bates Gill and Chin-Hao Huang

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The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has increased its participation in a broadening array of multilateral security arrangements in recent years. One of the most high-profile aspects of this trend is the dramatic expansion in Chinese peacekeeping deployments (of civilian police, military observers, engineering battalions, and medical units) to UN operations: since 2000, when China deployed fewer than 100 peacekeepers, there has been a remarkable 20-fold increase in its contributions. As of December 2008, China was the 14th largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, providing more troops, police, and observers to UN operations than three other permanent members of the UN Security Council – Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Nearly three-quarters of China's contributions are concentrated in Africa, and the Chinese government plans new and even more significant increases to its contributions in such strife-torn regions as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Liberia, and Sudan.

What is behind this more proactive approach?

First, this trend reflects China's overall effort, especially since the late 1990s, to become more responsive to international expectations while making positive and tangible contributions to global peace and security. Positive engagement with the outside world helps China project a more benign and "harmonious" image beyond its borders, reassure neighbors about its peaceful intentions, and softly balance the influence of other major players – such as the United States – while gradually but more firmly establishing China's acceptance as a great power.

Second, China's stepped-up peacekeeping activity parallels the PLA's growing interest to expand its noncombat missions or 'military operations other than war' (MOOTW) – disaster response, humanitarian relief, and counter-piracy, for example – both in China and abroad, and put into action calls by Chinese President Hu Jintao for the PLA to perform 'new historic missions' in the 21st century. The deployment in December 2008 of three Chinese naval vessels to help protect Chinese merchant shipping in the Gulf of Aden is just the most recent step along this decade-long path.

Third, it also appears that participation in peacekeeping activities abroad carries important military applications and lessons for the PLA. According to the recently released Chinese defense white paper, more than 11,000 Chinese

peacekeepers have been deployed to 18 UN operations since the late-1980s. These contributions, including repeated deployments of engineering battalions and police units, provide useful and practical experiences for Chinese security forces, and help improve their responsiveness, riot-control capabilities, coordination of military emergency command systems, and ability to conduct MOOTW at home, a concept much touted in China's recently released defense white paper. These benefits will be reinforced if, as expected, Chinese forces increasingly take on more dangerous and possibly combat missions as part of their expanded peacekeeping activities.

Recent discussions with foreign policy elites in Beijing and a closer reading of Chinese actions, statements, and writings suggest that there is an intensifying debate within China on this more active approach to peacekeeping activities. In June 2007, the PLA convened the first major internal meeting on peacekeeping where senior representatives from the PLA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Public Security gathered to discuss ways to further streamline and improve the selection, organization, training, and rotation of Chinese peacekeepers. At a separate international security seminar organized by the PLA National Defense University in 2007, senior military officers also called for greater Chinese activism in peacekeeping operations, rescue and relief tasks, counterterrorism exercises, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The PLA's expanding presence abroad has in turn prompted some Chinese academics to call for a clearer legislative basis to govern such activities.

China looks to expand its peacekeeping capacity over time: in addition to the Civilian Peacekeeping Police Training Center in Langfang and the International Relations Academy in Nanjing, Chinese officials confirm that a new peacekeeping training centre will be operational in Huairou in mid-2009 to help centralize and better coordinate Chinese peacekeeping activities.

To be sure, China's expanding role as a peacekeeper will face a number of constraints. China's traditional view of state sovereignty and noninterference will continue to be an important limiting factor for Chinese action. In addition, practical matters of political, military, bureaucratic will and capacity will slow Chinese responsiveness in peacekeeping affairs. For example, China's capability to conduct rapid deployments over long distances and to make financial contributions to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations would both need to be augmented if it wants to play a larger role commensurate with its growing influence globally and within the UN system. Nevertheless, expectations within the international community should be modest but cautiously optimistic.

As such, at this relatively early stage, the Obama administration should implement policies aimed at reinforcing some of the encouraging trends related to China's expanding involvement in multilateral security operations. China's decision to deploy naval vessels off the coast of Somalia has been closely coordinated with African and Western partners and has been warmly received by the US, NATO, and European Union. In that light, Washington should lead the effort to sustain closer dialogue and policy coordination with China on other mutual security concerns – such as assistance for forces in Afghanistan – at a higher diplomatic level to enlist greater support from Beijing.

In addition, the Obama administration should encourage and work with other Western countries with substantial interests in peacekeeping affairs to increase cooperation in peacekeeping seminars, training courses, and other capacity-building programs with China. Collaboration on peacekeeping and other related forms of military-to-military exchange would also usefully contribute to building greater openness and transparency within the PLA.

More important, China's expansive engagement in peacekeeping provides an important and widening window of opportunity to engage with China more closely on global security issues, deflect Chinese activities contrary to U.S. interests, and help enlarge China's commitment to regional stability and contribute to more effective international peacekeeping operations.