

Box 3.6.1 China's Growing Involvement in Global Peacekeeping

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The People's Republic of China is an increasingly active contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations. As of 31 October 2009, China had 2,148 military and police personnel participating in ten of the nineteen missions under the supervision of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. Chinese participation is found across a variety of peacekeeping missions, including classical, multidimensional, and robust operations, with the Chinese ranking 15th out of the 116 troop-contributing countries. For much of 2008, China was the largest contributor among the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, with the majority of its peacekeepers sent to Africa-based missions.

These developments look more interesting when one understands that Chinese participation in the UN peacekeeping regime was minimal through the early 1990s, but has increased twentyfold since 2000 at a time when the overall UN peacekeeping system is severely overstretched.

To some extent, Chinese participation in UN peacekeeping has remained consistent over the past decade. For example, the Chinese contribute military observers, police, and mission support units—specialists in medical care, transportation, and engineering. The Chinese have yet to send

“blue-helmeted” peacekeepers. These contributions are indicative of China's commitment to a traditional rather than a robust peacekeeping agenda and its focus on more development-oriented activities of paving roads, removing landmines, and treating patients. Moreover, Beijing will only participate in UN peacekeeping missions, and not in peacekeeping missions led by regional organizations or coalitions of the willing. For example, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs previously dismissed questions of Beijing's interest in participating in a coalition with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan as “groundless.”

However, there have been qualitative changes in Chinese engagement in UN peacekeeping missions. Beijing is increasingly willing to send its peacekeepers to missions that have more interventionist mandates—perhaps indicating more flexibility on China's long-standing opposition to external interference in the internal affairs of states, especially on the grounds of human rights or humanitarian concerns. For example, the deployment of formed police units to the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) perhaps signals a willingness to execute more robust

mandates. Moreover, Beijing also contributes peacekeepers to states that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan—a significant shift from Beijing's prior vetoing of such “Taiwan-related” missions. Furthermore, China is seeking more leadership positions within UN peacekeeping. Major-General Zhao Jingmin of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was appointed force commander of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in 2007; he is the first Chinese military official to serve in such a high-ranked capacity. China also remains active in offering candidates for openings at the UN Secretariat. At home, there is now a dedicated office for peacekeeping affairs within the PLA; and between the Ministry of Public Security and the PLA, China now maintains three regional peacekeeping training centers, having opened its third in June 2009.

These developments in Chinese participation in UN peacekeeping are indeed significant. Beijing's growing interest in understanding and shaping UN peacekeeping indicates the possibility of increased engagement in the near future. However, whether Beijing will continue to pursue a more conservative peacekeeping agenda remains to be seen.

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