

UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING AND THE RISE OF A CHINESE MILITARY  
POWER

by  
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## **Abstract**

This study answers the question, *how does China's participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations affect its military capability?* To focus the research, this study examines the UN missions in Mali (MINUSMA) and South Sudan (UNMISS) to analyze the effects of China's watershed decision to deploy infantry troops to these two countries. The impact of Chinese participation was assessed with 12 measures of military capability. China's strategic military resources ( $H_1$ ) and its ability to convert such resources into operational capability ( $H_2$ ) were found to be moderately affected by its peacekeeping participation. The study concludes that peacekeeping primarily affects five aspects of Chinese military capability: manpower, infrastructure, logistics, foreign military-to-military relationships, and intelligence collection.

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## **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, the People's Republic of China (hereafter "China" or "PRC") has steadily increased the size and scope of its participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKOs). Of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States), China is the largest contributor of troops at 2,545 soldiers— a contribution approximately double in number compared to the other members.<sup>1</sup> In addition to personnel, China is also the second-largest funder of UN PKOs, contributing 15.2% of the total budget.<sup>2</sup> Once a staunch non-interventionist that rebuked the liberal world order, China is showing considerable eagerness to join and expand the multinational organization leading many scholars to question, why the about-face?

The following study will address the question, how does China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations affect its military capability? The research will focus on the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to analyze China's first infantry deployments. PRC military advancement will be evaluated using mixed methods content analysis and will be tested using 12 measures of military capability.

## **Literature Review**

In its first decade of UN membership (1971-1981), China abstained from all votes regarding peacekeeping operations. At the time, China perceived PKOs as a "thinly

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020* (Washington, DC: Office of the Security of Defense, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Louisa Blanchfield, "United Nations Issues: U.S. Funding of U.N. Peacekeeping," *Congressional Research Service*, 2020.

veiled disguise for imperialist interventions by great powers.”<sup>3</sup> Beijing largely maintained this attitude throughout the 1990s as it continued its foreign policy guided by the Principals of Coexistence.<sup>4</sup> There was only one exception to its noninterference policy in 1992 when it sent 400 peacekeeping engineers to Cambodia. In the same year, a Chinese representative warned UN delegates that a vote to use “all necessary means” for military operations was “tantamount to writing a blank cheque...once military activities are in operation, the nature of the United Nations involvement will change.”<sup>5</sup> The representative was largely correct in his prediction of UN missions, yet he did not foretell Beijing’s own rise within UN peacekeeping.

From 1999 to 2019, the number of UN peacekeeping operations with Chapter VII authority for military action rose from 4 to 12.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, China’s involvement in military-oriented missions also increased from 2 to 10 in the same time period. This revolution of behavior demonstrates Beijing’s now apparent multilateral focus in world affairs. The fundamental shift in policy, from “keeping a low profile” as to not upset the great powers, to a new “striving for achievement” model, is in large part due to President Xi Jinping’s vision for a “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.”<sup>7</sup> Also termed the Chinese Dream, the Great Rejuvenation is China’s quest to become a great power itself.

One of the most notable devolutions of “keeping a low profile” was China’s announcement in 2013 to deploy combat troops for the first time since the 1979 Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> Christoph Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping* (Ottawa: China Policy Centre, University of Ottawa, 2019), 19.

<sup>4</sup> China’s five pillars of foreign policy became known as the Principals of Coexistence. The pillars were 1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, 2) mutual nonaggression, 3) noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, 4) equality and mutual benefit, and 5) peaceful coexistence.

<sup>5</sup> Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping*, 24-28.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Bayes, *China’s Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe* (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2020), 19.



incursion in Vietnam. Although China had deployed military medics and engineers to PKOs in the past, this was the first time it would send combat equipped and trained People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers to the front lines. Its first 170 infantry soldiers arrived at MINUSMA in 2013.<sup>8</sup> This was soon followed by a 700-manned battalion to UNMISS in 2014.<sup>9</sup> China's expanding UN presence has long interested scholars but its recent uptick in overall military engagement has brought new focus to Beijing's grand strategy. In an effort to explain their behavior, scholars have attempted to pinpoint Chinese intentions for deploying peacekeeping units.

### **Why Sponsoring Countries Join PKOs**

There are several reasons why nations contribute to the UN, not all of which apply to a developed country like China.<sup>10</sup> The literature in this field largely relies on a realist interpretation of international relations, where states seek to gain material or social benefit from peacekeeping operations rather than an altruistic desire for peace and humanity. Scholarship identifies four major reasons why developed countries sponsor PKOs: 1) economic gain, 2) soft power accumulation, 3) identity management, and 4) military advancement.

**UN peacekeeping for economic purposes.** Sponsoring countries may participate in PKOs to protect their economic interests from spoil. UN missions aim to stabilize conflict-ridden countries and regions, which bolsters economic production and the ability to transport goods. Passmore, Shannon, and Hart studied the economic benefits of

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<sup>8</sup> China-Hai Huang, "Peacekeeping Contributor Profile: The People's Republic of China," Providing for Peacekeeping, April 2017, <http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/2014/04/03/contributor-profile-china/>.

<sup>9</sup> Huang, "Peacekeeping Contributor Profile: The People's Republic of China."

<sup>10</sup> Xenia Avezov, "Why Contribute? Understanding Asian Motivations for Troop Contribution to Peace Operations," *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 18, (2014): 263.

peacekeeping and found that a sponsoring country's market investment in a recipient peacekeeping country is a statically significant factor for determining the sponsoring country's level of troop contribution.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the larger a country's market investment, the higher number of troops they will contribute. When the sponsoring country has sunk costs in physical assets, it is more determined to resolve peace, even if it is by force. Thus, PKO participation can be driven by the sponsoring country's domestic economic gain more so than peacekeeping itself.

**UN peacekeeping for soft power accumulation.** Another theory why nations join peacekeeping is the accumulation of soft power. Soft power, originally described by Nye as a state's ability to co-opt rather than coerce another nation's behavior, can be amassed through participation in multilateral humanitarian missions.<sup>12</sup> By participating in UN PKOs, nations demonstrate a dedication to conflict resolution and an ability to participate responsibly in the liberal world order. Datta's quantitative study on soft power reveals that votes and collective decisions made within the UN can "bestow legitimacy" for the participating country.<sup>13</sup> Particularly, she found that the United States' foreign policy was perceived more legitimate when it coincided with UN decisions. The study shows that the United States co-opted nations to agree with their foreign policy by participating in the UN, rather than having to resort to coercion by other means. Thus, just by participating in PKOs, countries can accumulate legitimacy for their overall

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<sup>11</sup> Timothy Passmore, Megan Shannon, and Andrew Hart, "Rallying the Troops: Collective Action and Self-Interest in UN Peacekeeping Contributions," *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Monti Narayan Datta, "The Decline of American Soft Power in the United Nations," *International Studies Perspectives* 10, (2009): 281.

foreign policy in the region, whether or not their intentions are directly related to peacebuilding.<sup>14</sup>

**UN peacekeeping for identity management.** In conjunction with legitimizing their soft power through UN PKOs, nations are also able to use peacekeeping missions to posture and indicate their international identity.<sup>15</sup> Avezov writes that involvement in peacekeeping is a method of “singling political-military intentions, demonstrating international responsibility, or projecting military capabilities.”<sup>16</sup> He finds this to be especially true of smaller participating countries that need a platform for their voice to be heard. Nevertheless, larger countries also find the UN a useful tool for identity projection.

Through an examination of themes discussed at UN meetings, Avezov found that Japan uses UN peacekeeping as a way to identify as “a benign civilian power” dedicated to regional stability. In this case, Japan was found to be signaling to its Asian neighbors that it is a force for peace rather than conflict. South Korea also postured through UN peacekeeping by demonstrating its closeness with Western UN members as a countermeasure for the “potential of regime collapse in North Korea.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, PKOs act as a mechanism to both posture with and against great powers, as well as indicate to the international community what they stand for.

**UN peacekeeping for military advancement.** The final theory for why nations join peacekeeping is the desire to develop military capabilities. PKO missions offer

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<sup>15</sup> China has notably postured its identity through the UN Human Rights Council. It pushed for the inclusion of infrastructure development in “the contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights” resolution, demonstrating that it defines human rights as economic and social rights, rather than the Western-oriented political and civil rights.

<sup>16</sup> Avezov, “Why Contribute? Understanding Asian Motivations for Troop Contribution to Peace Operations,” 263.

<sup>17</sup> Avezov, “Why Contribute? Understanding Asian Motivations for Troop Contribution to Peace Operations,” 276.

sponsoring nations the opportunity to experience combat in “inhospitable, remote and dangerous environments,” at least according to the UN.<sup>18</sup> PKOs can offer sponsoring nations an opportunity to field soldiers and test equipment without going to war.<sup>19</sup> They also offer the opportunity, as Harig finds, to drum up domestic politics for military development.

Harig’s study on the Brazilian army’s participation in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) found three concrete outcomes for the sponsoring country.<sup>20</sup> First, Brazilian soldiers practiced and become comfortable with use of force missions, thus gaining a form of combat experience. Second, politicians were able to leverage PKO success as a reason to use Brazilian forces for domestic security issues, and third, military doctrine and training were developed to institutionalize the army’s new domestic role. For Brazil, MINUSTAH provided combat training to officers and helped form the political clout needed to develop their military apparatus without ever naming a foreign advisory.

Analysts have speculated that China seeks similar military advancement from PKOs but there is little research to demonstrate this assumption. For example, Fung writes that “each peacekeeping mission presents unique potential training scenarios” for China but fails to demonstrate what they actually glean from the training.<sup>21</sup> Cho’s study on multiple motivations for peacekeeping considers military advancement as one motivation for UN participation but stops short of actually studying China’s military.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations, “Military,” *United Nations Peacekeeping*, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/military>

<sup>19</sup> Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Harig, “Learning to Fight in UN Peacekeeping,” *Defense Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 39-60.

<sup>21</sup> Fung, “What Explains China’s Deployment to UN Peacekeeping Operations?”

<sup>22</sup> Cho, “China’s Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations Since the 2000s.”

Others like Cabestan write off any military learning with the belief that China's PKO involvement is purely "symbolic."<sup>23</sup> Missing from all the scholars' claims is a clear explanation for how they define military learning and advancement, as well as data to prove that it is or is not happening.

According to the 2020 U.S. Department of Defense assessment on the Chinese military, the PLA has gained "the most experience conducting PKO[s]."<sup>24</sup> This indicates that they are indeed gaining experience, but academic research has yet to determine what kind of experience. Beijing also signals the importance of peacekeeping for military advancement through the structure of its defense strategy.

Beginning in 2006, the PRC began dividing its defense strategy into two categories, war operations and military operations other than war (MOOTW).<sup>25</sup> According to China's Academy of Military Science, MOOTW includes seven missions, one of which is international peacekeeping.<sup>26</sup> Peacekeeping, therefore, is a codified strategy for Chinese defense and receives national defense resources to carry it out. However, past scholarship failed to contextualize China's UN-related activities in the greater scheme of Chinese military power and thus dismissed the importance of military advancement even if it was minimal.

Military advancement may not be the first or second reason why China joins PKOs but any advantage that Beijing garners from the missions is important to

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<sup>23</sup> Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Involvement in Africa's Security: The Case of China's Participation in the UN Mission to Stabilize Mali," *The China Quarterly* 235, (2018): 725.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020*.

<sup>25</sup> Fan Gaoyue and James Char, *Introduction to China's Military Operations Other than War* (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> The other six MOOTW missions are 1) counterterrorism/anti-piracy, 2) stability maintenance, 3) disaster rescue and relief, 4) operations to safeguard sovereignty and national interests, 5) safety and security operations, and 6) overseas rescue and relief.

understanding China's overall military capability. This study will add to this knowledge by clearly defining measures of military capability and focus on a single UN motivator, military advancement. The study will also add commentary on Beijing's increasingly expeditionary foreign policy and how it relates to UN participation.

### **Hypotheses**

The study will use content analysis to examine what, if any, military advancement is effected by UN peacekeeping deployments. If China intends to use PKO's to advance their military capability, an increase in PKO contributions should correspond to an increase in the strategic resources amassed for its defense apparatus:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Increases in Chinese PKO participation will increase the PLA's strategic resources.*

Additionally, if China intends to use PKO's to advance their overall military readiness, there should be a corresponding increase in their ability to convert strategic resources into effective military operations:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Increases in Chinese PKO participation will increase the PLA's conversion capability.*

The terms "strategic resources" and "conversion capability" are defined in the following section.

### **Methodology**

Data was assessed using mixed methods content analysis. The data collection for this study was limited to the UN missions in Mali (MINUSMA) and South Sudan (UNMISS) for three reasons. First, China's infantry deployments to Mali and South Sudan represent a fundamental shift in Chinese peacekeeping policy, which historically

has avoided activity that could be perceived as military intervention. Second, MINUSMA and UNMISS have challenging and complex operational environments that offer opportunities for military advancement. Third, the richness of the literature on these two peacekeeping missions offers sufficient data for the scope of this study on military advancement.

Data was gathered from query searches on MINUSMA and UNMISS and was prescreened for information about Chinese contribution or efforts. Data that did not contain a reference to Chinese UN participation, or did not contain novel information, was discarded from the dataset. After data collection was exhausted, meaning new information was undiscoverable, the content was inputted into the research software, Dedoose, to code for themes of military capability. The base code tree was based on RAND Corporations measurement system for military capability.<sup>27</sup>

Military capability was operationalized using RAND's measurement system because of its broad and applicable categories that allowed for a nuanced examination into a subset of military capability such as peacekeeping. Military capability is split into two umbrella categories, strategic resources (H<sub>1</sub>) and conversion capability (H<sub>2</sub>). *Strategic resources* are defined as “the resources— financial, human, physical, and technological—that the national leadership makes available to its military organizations,” and contains six subcategories for analysis:<sup>28</sup>

1. *Defense Budget*: The size of the budget and the changes over time.

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<sup>27</sup> Ashley Tellis, Janice Bially, Christopher Layne, and Melissa McPherson, “Measuring Military Capability” in *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (Santa Monica: RAND Cooperation, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Tellis, Bially, Layne, and McPherson, “Measuring Military Capability,” 136.

2. *Manpower*: The number of military personnel and the education or technical capability of the soldiers.
3. *Military Infrastructure*: The number and range of physical infrastructure (i.e. bases and installations).
4. *Combat Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation (CRDT&E)*: The number and quality of facilities that research, develop, or test technology or military capability, to include academic institutions, research organizations, and technical centers.
5. *Defense Industrial Base*: The number and quality of private firms and corporations that depend on defense spending and manufacture defense goods.
6. *Warfighting Inventory and Support*: The number of arms, armament, vehicles, planes, ships, and other military holdings.

*Conversion capability* is defined as the ability of a nation to convert strategic resources into effective combat operations (i.e. operational effectiveness). RAND enumerates five subcategories for analysis but due to the richness of data for the “Doctrine, Training, and Organization” category, this study splits the category into two, as described below:

1. *Threats and Strategy*: Analysis of whether a nation’s means match its ends, or its strategy meets the operational demands of its perceived threats.
2. *Doctrine and Training*: The principals for how a nation plans to fight and their training preparedness to use those required assets.
3. *Command and Control (Organization)*: The level of centralization or decentralization of command structures, the adaptability of command and control, and the internal connectivity of the organization.



4. *Civil-Military Relations*: The level of access that the military has to national leadership, and established hierarchy or norms for who will make decisions regarding force design, level of procurement, and level of employment.
5. *Foreign Military-to-Military Relations*: Quantity and quality of foreign military relations, overseas training, military education exchanges, and combined exercises.
6. *Capacity for Innovation*: An organization's ability to cope with changing environments and threats, including adapting to warfighting concepts and technology advancement.

After conducting content analysis and coding the data for themes of military capability as stated above, each subcategory was weighed for quantitative importance – the number of references in each bucket – and qualitative importance – the quality of the content. Based on this analysis, each subcategory was assigned a weighted rating for its effect on Chinese military capability – minimal/no effect (1 point), moderate (2 points), or significant (3 points). Minimal/no effect was defined as no effect or minimal data to determine that peacekeeping changed military capability. Moderate was defined as possible or some evidence that peacekeeping attributed to military capability, and significant was defined as absolute or near certainty that peacekeeping contributed to China's military capability. The average point rating and accumulation of data was then analyzed per each umbrella category (H<sub>1</sub>: Strategic Resources and H<sub>2</sub>: Conversion Capability) and final significance was assigned for each hypothesis.

## **Data**

Data for this study included official data from the UN, Chinese government publications, U.S. government publications, academic journals and reports, and videos and reports by Chinese media (see Table 1). Select excerpts that demonstrate the findings of each subcategory of military capability follow.

*Table 1. Data Summary*

Data Sources	Total
Official UN Publications	7
Official Government Publications <sup>29</sup>	10
Academic Reports <sup>30</sup>	17
Media Reports <sup>31</sup>	11
Videos	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>

## Strategic Resources

**Defense budget.** The relationship between China's defense budget and PKO missions is largely unknown. The PRC defense budget is notoriously opaque, making it

<sup>29</sup> Sources for "Official Government Publications" unless cited elsewhere in Data: "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Remarks on Death of Three Chinese Citizens in Malian Hostage-taking Incident," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, November 21, 2015, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/t1317097.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1317097.shtml); The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Sources for "Academic Reports" unless cited elsewhere in Data: Marc Lanteigne, *The Role of UN Peacekeeping in China's Expanding Strategic Interests* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018); Frans Paul van der Putten, *China's evolving role in Peacekeeping and African Security* (The Hague: Clingendael Report, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2015); Helena Legarda, "Chinese Mercenaries are Tightening Security on the Belt and Road," *Merics*, October 19, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Sources for "Media Reports" unless cited elsewhere in Data: Li Jiayao, "Chinese peacekeepers to Mali join in multinational rescue drill," *China Military Online*, January 3, 2020, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-01/03/content\\_9709297.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-01/03/content_9709297.htm); Chen Zhuo, "Chinese Peacekeeper: For Peace, I'm Ready to Fight," *China Military Online*, November 22, 2019; Huang Panyue, "Chinese Peacekeepers Return from South Sudan," *Xinhuanet*, March, 1, 2018, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-03/01/content\\_7955797.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-03/01/content_7955797.htm); Huang Paynue, "Malian Defense Minister meets with Chinese Military Delegation," *China Military Online*, August 16, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-08/16/content\\_7210210.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-08/16/content_7210210.htm); "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress," *Xinhua*, November 3, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c\\_136725942.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm).

difficult to assess changes in peacekeeping funding over time.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, China reports large categories of defense expenditures. For example, in 2017 the PRC reported that of their total \$1.4 billion defense budget, 41.1% went to equipment, 30.8% to personnel, and 28.1% to training and maintenance.<sup>33</sup> This reporting style makes it impossible to assess how China spends its defense funding per branch, much less how it spends its budget per unit within the PLA.

China does report how much it contributes to the UN, but it is unknown if these contributions are part of China's overall defense budget. China contributed a total of \$336 million to the UN in 2020 and its contributions made up 15.21% of UN peacekeeping missions.<sup>34</sup> China also announced a \$10.38 million donation for peacekeeping as part of its China-UN Peace and Development Fund, but it is unclear if this was part of their overall UN contribution or an additional donation.<sup>35</sup> Thus the effect of peacekeeping on China's military budget is largely indeterminable.

**Manpower.** As of August 2020, China was the tenth largest contributor to MINUSMA and the seventh largest contributor to UNMISS (See Table 2). China's MINUSMA contingent is reportedly comprised of infantry from China's northeastern Shenyang region, which borders North Korea and Russia.<sup>36</sup> The UNMISS contingent,

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<sup>32</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: DIA Military Power Publications, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Li Jiayao, "China's National Defense in the New Era," *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*, July 24, 2019, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content\\_4846452.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content_4846452.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Committee on Contributions, "Contributions Received for 2020 for the United Nations Regular Budget," *General Assembly of the United Nations*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/ga/contributions/honourroll.shtml>; United Nations, "How Are We Funded," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, accessed on October 3, 2020, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/how-we-are-funded>

<sup>35</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Lloyd Thrall, *China's Expanding African Relations: Implications for U.S. National Security* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2015).

*Table 2. 2020 Chinese Troop Contributions by Mission*<sup>37</sup>

	MINUSMA	UNMISS
Protection Unit Troops/Infantry	170	700
Engineering Troops	155	268
Medical Troops	70	63
<b>Total Chinese Troops</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>1,031</b>

at least in 2012, was comprised of soldiers from PLA's elite 162nd Motorized Infantry Division.<sup>38</sup> Chinese peacekeeping troops go through three months of "basic, professional, tactical and comprehensive exercises" before their 12-month deployment.<sup>39</sup> However, despite China's personnel contributions, the UN reports unfilled troop requirements in each mission. MINUSMA and UNMISS have been understaffed by at least 500 troops since 2015, with some years yielding a delta of over 4,500 troops (see Figure 1).

China appears to have the intention of filling some of the delta with its 2015 pledge to raise 8,000 peacekeeping troops for a rapid response standby force.<sup>40</sup> As of September 2020, seven of the 28 units in the rapid response force have passed the UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System (PCRS) Level 2, and six have passed PCRS Level 3. China's State Council Information Office reports the PRC has the largest and most diverse standby peacekeeping force in the world.<sup>41</sup> The 28 units consist of infantry, engineer, transport, medical, force protection, rapid response, helicopter, transport

<sup>37</sup> "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, June 30, 2019, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>; United Nations Peacekeeping, "Mandate," MINUSMA, accessed on October 3, 2020, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/mandate-0>; United Nations Peacekeeping, "Mandate," UNMISS, accessed on October 3, 2020, <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/mandate>.

<sup>38</sup> Thrall, *China's Expanding African Relations: Implications for U.S. National Security*.

<sup>39</sup> Li Wei, "6th Chinese Peacekeeping Infantry Battalion to South Sudan (Juba) Sets Out," *China Military Online*, November 20, 2019, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-11/20/content\\_9679499.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-11/20/content_9679499.htm)

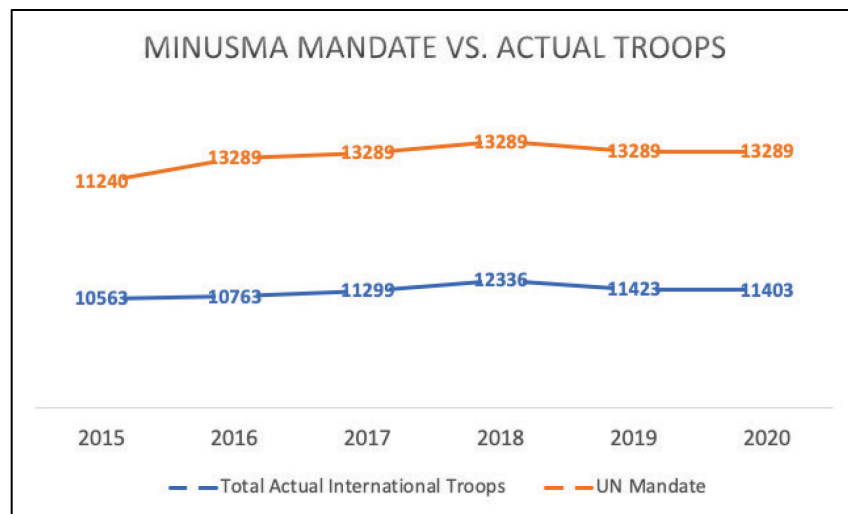
<sup>40</sup> "China Is Here for Peace. Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China at the United Nations Peacekeeping Summit," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, September 28, 2015, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1305410.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1305410.shtml).

<sup>41</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

aircraft, UAV, and surface ship units. At the time of writing, there is no evidence that the rapid response force has been deployed to a UN mission.

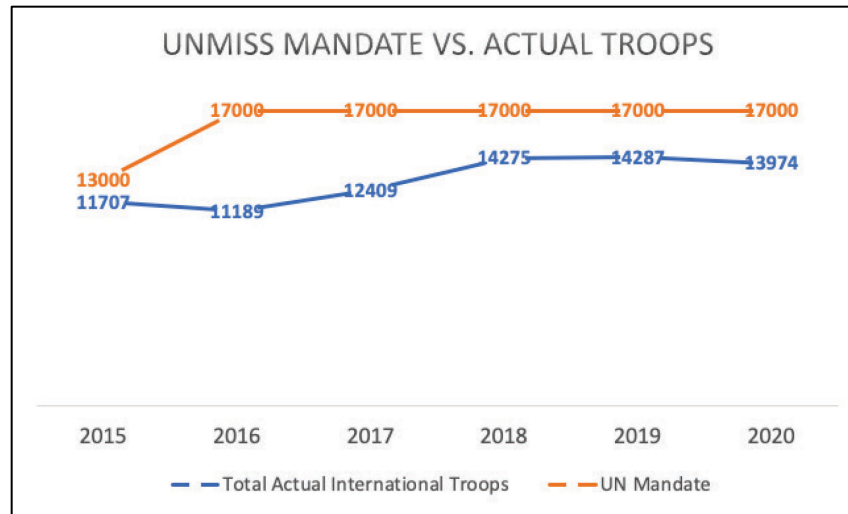
Interestingly, the announcement to raise 8,000 rapid response troops for peacekeeping came in the same year Xi Jinping called for an overall force reduction. In 2015, President Xi Jinping announced a plan to cut the military by 300,000 personnel in order to modernize and develop strategic capabilities.<sup>42</sup> The PLA would reorganize and focus efforts on special operations units that had multifunctionality. The difference

*Figure 1. UN Mandate Compared to Actual Troop Contribution<sup>43</sup>*



<sup>42</sup> John Chen, "Choosing the 'Least Bad Option'" in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, ed. Phillip Saunders, Arthur Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew Yang, and Joel Wuthnow (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, June 30, 2019, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>; United Nations Peacekeeping, "Mandate," *MINUSMA*, accessed on October 3, 2020, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/mandate-0>; United Nations Peacekeeping, "Mandate," *UNMISS*, accessed on October 3, 2020, <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/mandate>.



between PLA’s rapid response peacekeeping units and regular units “has mostly been dissolved,” according to the National Defense University, indicating that Chinese peacekeepers are the same critical special operations units that survived the force reduction.<sup>44</sup>

**Military infrastructure.** Although only one foreign base is in operation, the opening of the 2017 Djibouti logistics base is a significant data point because it is China’s first overseas military base. One of the three reasons provided for the Djibouti base was peacekeeping operations: “The logistics center supports anti-piracy, UN peacekeeping, and humanitarian relief missions in both Africa and Western Asia.”<sup>45</sup> There is speculation of other naval bases underway, to include locations in the Gulf of Guinea and Walvis Bay, Namibia.<sup>46</sup> Although an official announcement of these bases has not been made, the secretiveness of the negotiations in Djibouti and the surprise

<sup>44</sup> Chen, “Choosing the ‘Least Bad Option,’” 91.

<sup>45</sup> “Djibouti: Chinese Military’s First Overseas Support Base,” *Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China*, April 23, 2019, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-04/23/content\\_4840097.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-04/23/content_4840097.htm).

<sup>46</sup> Tom Bayes, *China’s Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe* (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2020).

among academics that it was a “complete military and naval base” rather than the downplayed “logistics facility,” warrants mention of these speculated installations.<sup>47</sup>

**Combat research, development, test, and evaluation.** In 2009, the PRC created the Peacekeeping Affairs Center of the Ministry of National Defense located in Huairou, China. The center is built similarly to a UN base camp and includes a shooting range and driving track.<sup>48</sup> Students simulate real-life scenarios on the installation, from planning to live-fire drills. From 2015 to 2020, China trained 1,500 peacekeepers from 60 countries.<sup>49</sup> They are in the process of expanding the Center to accept more international students.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, China funded the AU African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism and works in close collaboration to develop AU military forces.

The multilateral nature of peacekeeping provides China with the opportunity to also attend international peacekeeping institutions. Beijing celebrates the 100 PLA officers who have attended peacekeeping training in countries such as Argentina, Finland, and Germany.<sup>51</sup> Notably, however, China does not help fund the international peacekeeping training centers in Mali or Ghana, preferring to make capital investments at its own facilities.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 125 (2020): 731-747.

<sup>48</sup> Mamata Kumari, "China's Peacekeeping Operations in Africa," *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 22, no. 2 (2018): 106-119.

<sup>49</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Nantulya, "Chinese Hard Power Supports Its Growing Strategic Interests in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, January 17, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chinese-hard-power-supports-its-growing-strategic-interests-in-africa/>.

<sup>51</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

<sup>52</sup> Bayes, *China's Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe*.

**Defense industrial base.** Beijing supports its industrial base with foreign sales, but it is also wary of international consternation. For example, Beijing used its status in the UN Security Council to veto or abstain from voting on the resolutions for a South Sudanese arms embargo.<sup>53</sup> Their lack of support was later explained when a Chinese corporation, Norinco, was caught selling arms to South Sudan People's Defense Force (SPLA) in 2014. After a damaging UN report stating Chinese arms sales were "instrumental in prolonging and escalating the war," Beijing stated it would be "inappropriate" to continue with the deal.<sup>54</sup> It should be noted that one academic study found that "arms exporting companies may be operating beyond the control of government" since the number of them "overwhelmed" Chinese regulating bodies.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it is possible the Chinese government was not directly linked to this sale in 2014.

However, Beijing appears to have learned a lesson and has been cautious since the event in South Sudan. It has refrained from selling arms to Mali, instead choosing to donate non-lethal equipment like logistics trucks.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, although China now makes up a quarter of all small arms sales to Africa, its sales do not heavily overlap with UN peacekeeping countries.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, China's 2019 National Intelligence Law mandates all Chinese organizations and citizens "support, assist, and cooperate with state

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<sup>53</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Renews Sanctions against South Sudan, Adopting Resolution 2471 (2019) by 10 Votes in Favour, with 5 Abstentions," *United Nations Meeting Coverage and Press Releases, May 30, 2019*, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13827.doc.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Interim report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2206 (2015)," *United Nations Reports*, August 21, 2015, [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/656](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/656).

<sup>55</sup> James McDonnell, *Cooperation, Competition, or Both? Options for U.S. Land Forces vis-à-vis Chinese Interests in Africa* (Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Lina Benabdallah and Daniel Large, *Development, Security, and China's Evolving Role in Mali* (Working Paper No. 2020/40. Washington, DC: China Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins University: 2020).

<sup>57</sup> Bayes, *China's Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe*.



intelligence work,” indicating that the defense industry is likely now in tune with PRC strategy.<sup>58</sup> Thus, PKOs may very well have helped the government organize and enforce regulation for their defense industrial base.

**Warfighting inventory and support.** Chinese troops are generally regarded as “well equipped” and routinely pass UN inventory inspection checks.<sup>59</sup> The first troops sent to Mali in 2013 were adorned with “full body armor, night vision equipment, and newly released rifles.”<sup>60</sup> A 2019 video displays soldiers performing a drill in Mali, handling heavy machine guns mounted to armored vehicles, and conducting target practice with standard-issue QBZ-95 rifles.<sup>61</sup> In 2019, Chinese troops in South Sudan were praised as role models for their “first-class equipment management skills.”<sup>62</sup> In addition to soldiers being well-equipped, there are reports that Chinese camps have high-tech surveillance technology and their hospitals have state-of-the-art medical supplies.<sup>63</sup>

The PRC also supports further technological advancement in UN PKOs. Beijing’s 2020 white paper on peacekeeping calls for the “employment of advanced technology with a view to improving the effectiveness of the UNPKOs and fulfilling the role they are

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<sup>58</sup> William Evanina, “Keynote Remarks As Prepared For Delivery NCSC Director William Evanina, International Legal Technology Association (ILTA),” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, June 4, 2019, [https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/news/20190606-NCSC-Remarks-ILTA-Summit\\_2019.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/news/20190606-NCSC-Remarks-ILTA-Summit_2019.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China’s Involvement in Africa’s Security: The Case of China’s Participation in the UN Mission to Stabilize Mali,” *The China Quarterly* 235, (2018): 713-734.

<sup>60</sup> Courtney J. Fung, “Providing for Global Security: Implications of China’s Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping,” *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 25, no. 4 (2019): 509-534.

<sup>61</sup> CCTV Video News Agency, “Chinese Peacekeepers Conduct Live-ammunition Firing Drill in Mali,” YouTube, August 24, 2019, video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrZbF\\_VP0nc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrZbF_VP0nc).

<sup>62</sup> Li Jiayao, “Chinese Peacekeeping Force to South Sudan passes UN Equipment Inspection,” *China Military Online*, May 21, 2019, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/21/content\\_9511004.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/21/content_9511004.htm).

<sup>63</sup> Cabestan, “China’s Involvement in Africa’s Security: The Case of China’s Participation in the UN Mission to Stabilize Mali.”

expected to play.”<sup>64</sup> The technology could mean transport aircraft, UAV, and surface ship units, which are part of China’s 8,000 rapid response force but are not yet readily used by UN missions. China has experience chartering its own emergency medical aircraft to evacuate two wounded soldiers from South Sudan in July 2016, which could be one factor driving the diversification and betterment of UN assets.<sup>65</sup>

### **Conversion Capability**

**Threats and strategy.** There are multiple ways to examine China’s perceived threats and implemented strategies. One way is to look at the existential threat that China’s lack of operational experience poses to its military readiness. It appears that China’s participation in MINUSMA and UNMISS permits moderate logistics learning and some combat experience.

In South Sudan, China increased the number of infantry troops from 341 to 1051 from 2014 to 2015. This allowed China to deploy whole battalions to the combat environment, the first real battalion-sized deployment to a UN PKO.<sup>66</sup> These deployments to UNMISS provide an opportunity for Chinese troops to work together in real operations and offset some of their experience deficit.

UNMISS has provided soldiers with some combat opportunities as well. Beijing reports that Chinese peacekeepers faced a “raging storm of gunfire and artillery bombardment” to save the lives of 9,000 civilians in Juba in July 2016.<sup>67</sup> In March 2017,

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<sup>64</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

<sup>65</sup> Dong Zhaohui, "Injured Peacekeeping Soldiers Return Home from South Sudan," *Xinhua*, July 17, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-07/17/content\\_7159169.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-07/17/content_7159169.htm).

<sup>66</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

<sup>67</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

the PRC deployed 12 officers to Yei, South Sudan to serve as backup for UN troops caught in crossfire. Overall, however, the effectiveness of China's strategy to gain combat experience through PKOs is limited due to their overwhelming precaution (see Doctrine and Training section for more information).

China has a greater opportunity to gain logistics experience, which is a critical skill for military operations far from home. While moving thousands of soldiers through PKOs each year, China acquires knowledge of "ports of debarkation, lines of communication, lines of operations, operational intelligence, local 'atmospherics' and modus operandi, and means of sustaining forces in Africa over prolonged periods."<sup>68</sup> In order to manage the Chinese UN camp in Mali, a Chinese cook describes the importance of shipping in Chinese ingredients to feed troops "a taste of home."<sup>69</sup> Logistics is also the reason cited for their base in Djibouti.<sup>70</sup> Thus, PKOs give the PLA practice using logistical and supply lines for deploying soldiers to faraway lands, and gain some combat experience.

Another major threat to China is the endangerment of Chinese citizens living abroad. The threat was perceived so great in Mali and South Sudan that China sent not only enabler troops but also infantry troops. Their first infantry deployments to MINUSMA and UNMISS only carried out "guard duties" to protect Chinese enabler

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<sup>68</sup> Philippe Rogers, "China and United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Africa," *Naval War College Review* 60, no. 2 (2007): 1-21.

<sup>69</sup> CCTV, "Chinese Peacekeeping Troops Conduct Defense Drill in Mali," South China Morning Post, August 25, 2020, video, <https://www.scmp.com/video/china/3098734/chinese-peacekeeping-troops-conduct-defence-drill-mali>

<sup>70</sup> "Djibouti: Chinese Military's First Overseas Support Base," *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*, April 23, 2019, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-04/23/content\\_4840097.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-04/23/content_4840097.htm).

troops and citizens.<sup>71</sup> Their strategy to protect citizens with peacekeepers has not always been successful.

In the 2015 terrorist attack in the Mali Radisson Blu Hotel, three PRC citizens were killed, and four PRC citizens had to be rescued. The Chinese peacekeepers, located in Gao, were too far away to respond to the capital city and so the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to coordinate the rescue rather than the peacekeepers.<sup>72</sup> In this particular example, China's strategy to localize peacekeepers in Gao meant they were unable to respond to the threat posed against their citizens.

China altered its tactics in Mali after this attack by connecting peacekeepers with the local embassy. This allowed peacekeepers to connect daily with Chinese citizens, provide them basic emergency training, and better support evacuation efforts if necessary.<sup>73</sup> However, as of 2020, Chinese troops are still primarily located in Gao and their overall personnel numbers remain the same.<sup>74</sup>

**Doctrine and training.** As revealed by China's 2008 National Defense white paper, peacekeeping operations have become a military doctrine in and of itself.<sup>75</sup> PKOs are one of seven pillars in Beijing's military operations other than war (MOOTW). In the context of MINUSMA and UNMISS, the PLA has displayed three aspects of their peacekeeping doctrine and their ability to meet it.

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<sup>71</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

<sup>72</sup> Fung, "Providing for Global Security: Implications of China's Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping."

<sup>73</sup> Fung, "Providing for Global Security: Implications of China's Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping."

<sup>74</sup> "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, June 30, 2019, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

<sup>75</sup> Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping*.

*Counterinsurgency doctrine.* Interviews of Mali officials indicate that China is applying counterinsurgency doctrine by attempting to win hearts and minds. Mali Prime Minister Moussa Mara stated: “[The Chinese] understand that maintaining peace not only means weaponry and sending troops, but also means improving the livelihoods of locals. Chinese peacekeepers have won the hearts of the Malian people.”<sup>76</sup> However, despite the public praise from officials, MINUSMA staff report Chinese peacekeepers lack knowledge in “the region’s background and in Mali’s various local languages,” which makes interaction with locals difficult.<sup>77</sup>

China’s COIN operations are further defeated by the perception that they lack experience. An African diplomat stated: “China offers nothing better than France, [or] the US.”<sup>78</sup> A Ghanaian peacekeeper adds, “China is good at presenting its role in UNPKOs to win hearts and minds,” but may not do it in practice.<sup>79</sup> These statements suggest that Chinese peacekeepers lack the skills and/or experience to effectively carry out COIN operations.

*Restrained infantry.* Despite Beijing’s strategy for protecting civilians with infantry troops, their driving principle of caution prevents Chinese troops from truly fulfilling their role or gain true combat experience. China is firm on self-determinism and does its best to refrain from meddling in other states’ affairs: “Soldiers are allowed to open fire only for self-defense purposes, and never take positions to help either party during a civil war.”<sup>80</sup> Chinese infantry in Mali are particularly limited and only tasked

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<sup>76</sup> Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*, 79.

<sup>77</sup> Benabdallah and Large, *Development, Security, and China’s Evolving Role in Mali*.

<sup>78</sup> Bayes, *China’s Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe*.

<sup>79</sup> Bayes, *China’s Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe*.

<sup>80</sup> Fung, “Providing for Global Security: Implications of China’s Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping.”

with force protection of the UN super camp in Gao. They are “not engaged in major combat operations.”<sup>81</sup>

As others note, Beijing’s caution for entangling in the affairs of other nations is exacerbated by their fear of domestic pushback. The death of two peacekeepers in South Sudan and one peacekeeper in Mali in 2016 restricted their involvement: “Dutch peacekeepers assessed that the Chinese were more cautious than proactive, especially after sustaining a casualty in 2016. In response to the fatality, the Chinese limited their patrols to the immediate Gao area.”<sup>82</sup> The deaths apparently “re-opened” discussion in the Ministry of National Defense of whether peacekeeping was worth the cost.<sup>83</sup> Although Beijing has not substantially decreased troops after 2016, it also has not increased its footprint since 2015 (see Figure 2).

*Force Protection and Stabilization Patrols.* The PRC’s mission in MINUSMA and UNMISS is to protect UN camps and citizens, as well as provide stabilization patrols in the local community. China proudly reports the statistics of its infantry troops in its 2020 whitepaper, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*: “As of August 2020, [UNMISS] battalions had completed 51 long-range and 93 short-distance patrols, 314 armed escorts, and over 30,000 hours of patrols in weapons-free zones.”<sup>84</sup> China notes this has improved their “responsiveness, riot-control capabilities, coordination of military emergency command systems and ability to conduct military

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<sup>81</sup> Bayes, *China's Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe*.

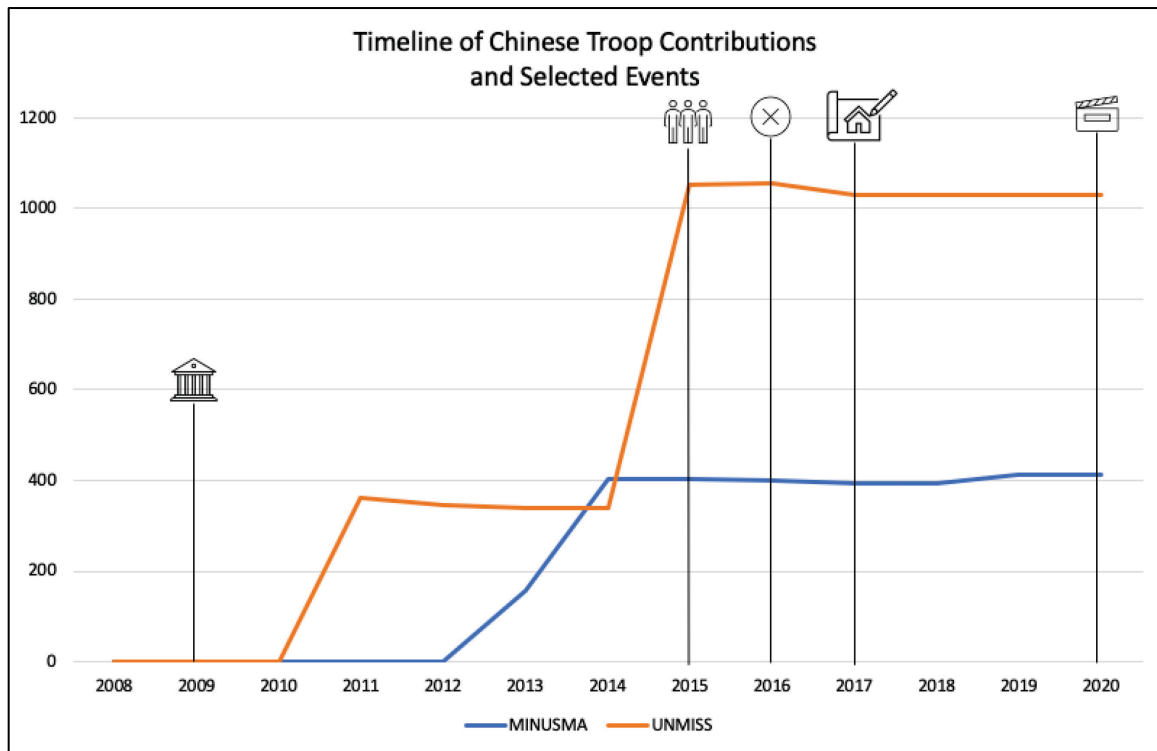
<sup>82</sup> McDonnell, *Cooperation, Competition, or Both? Options for U.S. Land Forces vis-à-vis Chinese Interests in Africa*.






<sup>83</sup> Fung, “Providing for Global Security: Implications of China’s Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping.”

<sup>84</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

operations other than war at home.”<sup>85</sup> Despite what the PRC has reported, others note that lack of training and experience has hindered their ability to carry out effective force protection and stabilization patrols.

*Figure 2. Timeline of Chinese Troop Contributions and Selected Events*



-  = Creation of the Peacekeeping Affairs Office of the Ministry of National Defense
-  = Xi Jinping's announcement to form the 8,000 Rapid Response Force
-  = Two Chinese peacekeepers killed in South Sudan and one killed in Mali
-  = Opening of the Djibouti Logistics base
-  = Trailer released for the state-sponsored "Blue Defensive Line" film

One report indicates that “several non-Chinese MINUSMA staff viewed the Chinese contingent as not combat-ready.”<sup>86</sup> This was put on display when fighting broke

<sup>85</sup> Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping*.

<sup>86</sup> Benabdallah and Large, *Development, Security, and China's Evolving Role in Mali*.

out in Juba, South Sudan in 2016. Chinese peacekeepers abandoned their defensive posts, retreating to interior UN facilities.<sup>87</sup> It was reported that “PRC troops showed a general unwillingness to provide protection.”<sup>88</sup> “An eyewitness later described the Chinese reaction to the chaos within the UN House as slow, timid, and inexperienced.”<sup>89</sup> “They left their tanks, they left their guns, they left their ammunition—they were just running.”<sup>90</sup> The UN incident report concluded that Chinese peacekeepers underperformed in their mission to protect civilians and guard the UN base.

**Command and Control.** Accounts document an inflexible command chain that hinders operational effectiveness. For China, “exercising caution and paying attention to chain of command is very important.”<sup>91</sup> However, “slow processing times from the Chinese contingent” not only prevented successful reaction to emergencies, but they were also unable to improvise when required.<sup>92</sup> Despite their risk-averse decision making, their deference to command and control is also admired.

Chinese peacekeepers are “praised by many” for their discipline.<sup>93</sup> “To date, there have been no allegations of misconduct by PRC peacekeepers, which puts China in a small segment of contributing states with untarnished national reputations.”<sup>94</sup> Overall, the

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<sup>87</sup> Fung, “Providing for Global Security: Implications of China’s Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping.”

<sup>88</sup> Fung, “Providing for Global Security: Implications of China’s Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping.”

<sup>89</sup> Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping*.

<sup>90</sup> Center for Civilians in Conflict, *Under Fire: The July 2016 Violence in Juba and UN Response* (USA: Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2016).

<sup>91</sup> Benabdallah and Large, *Development, Security, and China’s Evolving Role in Mali*.

<sup>92</sup> Benabdallah and Large, *Development, Security, and China’s Evolving Role in Mali*.

<sup>93</sup> Fung, “Providing for Global Security: Implications of China’s Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping.”

<sup>94</sup> Fung, “Providing for Global Security: Implications of China’s Combat Troop Deployment to UN Peacekeeping.”



accounts of Chinese command and control paints troops as hardworking and disciplined but lacking the necessary ingenuity and discretion to carry out the mission.

**Civil-military relations.** The authoritarian nature of the PRC regime means that civil and military entities are effectively the same, and so the level of access to one another is great. Civil bodies decide military decisions, and in the case of peacekeeping, it works to the military's advantage. President Xi Jinping, the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, offers tremendous support to the Ministry of National Defense Peacekeeping Affairs Center (the title was upgraded from the Peacekeeping Affairs Office in 2018).<sup>95</sup> He announced six resolutions to bolster Chinese peacekeeping in 2015:

1. China will build a peacekeeping standby force of 8,000 troops and join the new UN peacekeeping Capability Readiness System;
2. China will give favorable consideration to UN requests for additional Chinese infantry, engineering, transportation, and medical staff;
3. China will train 2,000 peacekeepers from other countries at their UN training facilities;
4. China will provide \$100 million in military aid to the AU to support the building of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis;
5. China will send the first peacekeeping helicopter squad to UN PKOs in Africa;

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<sup>95</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

6. China will establish a 10-year, \$1 billion China-UN Peace and Development Fund, part of which will be used to support UN PKOs.<sup>96</sup>

Xi Jinping's level of support for peacekeeping demonstrates a positive relationship between civil and military affairs.

**Foreign military-to-military relations.** The Chinese have cultivated robust partnerships with African militaries. This is exemplified by the 50 African countries that attended their 2018 China-Africa Defense and Security Forum, and a similar showing at their 2019 Peace and Security Forum. The content of the conferences was similar, but the title of the forum was slightly altered in 2019.<sup>97</sup>

Both Malian and South Sudanese officials attended the forums with positive remarks. Mali Major General Idrahima Dahirou Demebele said, "This forum has significantly changed our perspective on China. We are close to China, both culturally and historically, and in facing of the challenges."<sup>98</sup> The South Sudanese Chief of Staff commented: "China helped South Sudan to build a road that runs across the country, which largely improves the traffic conditions in South Sudan."<sup>99</sup> The level of attendees and their consistent participation over the years demonstrates strong African partners.

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<sup>96</sup> "China Is Here for Peace. Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China at the United Nations Peacekeeping Summit," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*.

<sup>97</sup> AT Editor, "China-Africa security forum concludes in Beijing," *Africa Times*, July 11, 2018, <https://africatimes.com/2018/07/11/china-africa-security-forum-concludes-in-beijing/>; "Feature: Overview of 1st China-Africa Peace and Security Forum," *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*, July 17, 2019, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-07/17/content\\_4846012.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-07/17/content_4846012.htm).

<sup>98</sup> Zheng Yibing, "First China-Africa Defense & Security Forum Concludes," *CGTV*, July 11, 2018, [https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514f31457a4e78457a6333566d54/share\\_p.html](https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514f31457a4e78457a6333566d54/share_p.html).

<sup>99</sup> "Feature: Overview of 1st China-Africa Peace and Security Forum," *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*.

Additionally, Mali, like many other African countries, has requested bilateral training initiatives from China.<sup>100</sup> China boasts of its 20 training programs delivered to over 1,500 peacekeepers, as well as its education exchanges at China's National Defense University.<sup>101</sup> RAND reports that every African army "has at least one colonel or brigadier general who graduated from this university."<sup>102</sup> However, RAND also reports that the perception of the quality of education is still inferior to Western military universities: "The personnel with the highest promotion potential are still sent to Western academies."<sup>103</sup>

Although peacekeeping operations have greatly assisted China-Africa relationships, they have not assisted partnerships with the West. This is due to prejudice on both sides, as neither China nor the West integrates well in PKOs. Western delegates are skeptical of Chinese "independence and secrecy" while Chinese peacekeepers are observed interacting with developing countries more than Western nations because of "political reasons."<sup>104</sup> For further information, see Intelligence Collection subsection below.

**Capacity for innovation.** Evidence that China is using peacekeeping to innovate its technology and warfighting capability is mixed. One source indicates China may use PKOs to test UAV and surveillance radar, however, this claim is not corroborated.<sup>105</sup> No other data indicates that China is using PKOs to test and develop defense equipment.

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<sup>100</sup> Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*, 76.

<sup>101</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

<sup>102</sup> Thrall, *China's Expanding African Relations: Implications for U.S. National Security*, 56.

<sup>103</sup> Thrall, *China's Expanding African Relations: Implications for U.S. National Security*, 56.

<sup>104</sup> Cabestan, "China's Involvement in Africa's Security: The Case of China's Participation in the UN Mission to Stabilize Mali."

<sup>105</sup> Zürcher, *30 Years of Chinese Peacekeeping*.

China does appear to use PKOs to collect intelligence, and they could be aiding technology development by exploiting collected intelligence.

*Intelligence Collection and Foreign Partners.* The data suggests that China is using peacekeeping operations to both collect intelligence and develop relationships with African intelligence entities. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reports that Chinese peacekeeping has opened “avenues for intelligence collection.”<sup>106</sup> The Swedish Defense Research Agency writes of peacekeeping: “US military observers have categorically assumed their Chinese counterparts to be either political or intelligence officers.”<sup>107</sup> It thus seems plausible that China is using PKOs to advance its technology and warfighting capability through intelligence collection.

China also appears to be developing intelligence systems with PKO partners. PRC representatives to the UN helped draft the Military Peacekeeping-Intelligence Handbook and call for “comprehensive UN solutions to strengthen information collection and sharing.”<sup>108</sup> China is also working to strengthen bilateral intelligence exchange with the members of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOFAC), and assist African security officials in their sharing and exchange with INTERPOL.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, collection and information sharing indicates a capability for innovation, even if it is unknown whether or not they have indeed innovated using the information collected.

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<sup>106</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: DIA Military Power Publications, 2018).

<sup>107</sup> Jerker Hellström, *Blue Berets Under the Red Flag: China in the UN Peacekeeping System* (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2009).

<sup>108</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

<sup>109</sup> Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*, 72.; Chris Alden, “Beijing’s Security Plans beyond Djibouti and the Horn,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, September 27, 2018.

*Domestic Propaganda Machine.* One factor holding China back from increasing its warfighting capability and gaining combat experience is its fear of domestic anguish over peacekeeping fatalities. As mentioned previously, Chinese peacekeepers are hamstrung by risk-averse leaders and little combat experience. It appears that China is ramping up its domestic-facing propaganda to herald the strength of its soldiers and the importance of the mission they are upholding. A few examples of propaganda include the PLA-produced “Chinese Blue Helmet in Operation” (2017), the Ministry of Defense Peacekeeping Affairs Office-produced television series, “Chinese Peacekeepers” (2012), and the state-sponsored film “Blue Defensive Line” (2020). The trailer of the latter film sports dramatic music and gunfire as Chinese peacekeepers run to aid a vehicle hit by a shell. A soldier clad in his uniform and the UN blue helmet says: “No one would abandon their posts.”<sup>110</sup> “Blue Defensive Line” happened to be released on the same day the PRC published their September 2020 white paper on peacekeeping entitled, “China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping.”<sup>111</sup> It thus appears that China is attempting to win domestic support, alter the narrative of Chinese soldiers fleeing their posts, and potentially, set the stage for future PKO involvement.

### **Discussion**

China’s participation in UN peacekeeping positively correlates with its advancement in military capability. As participation in MINUSMA and UNMISS have increased or diversified, particularly in regard to the addition of infantry troops, the Chinese military has increased its strategic resources and conversion capability. Although

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<sup>110</sup> CCTV6 China Movie Official Channel, "Trailer: The Blue Defensive Line," YouTube, August 2, 2020, Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t26joVcaxbE>.

<sup>111</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*.

this study demonstrated that there is an overall increase, it did not support commonly cited reasons for Chinese involvement in peacekeeping such as technology testing and gaining combat experience. Instead, PKOs provide China with justification to raise troops and develop infrastructure, thus increasing their strategic resources. PKOs also provide logistical experience, military-to-military relationships, and benign cover for intelligence collection that increase China's ability to convert resources into actual military operations (conversion capability). This study concludes that Chinese participation in MINUSMA and UNMISS moderately effects China's overall military capability (See Figure 3).

*Hypothesis 1: Strategic resources.* Chinese participation in MINUSMA and UNMISS has moderately increased China's strategic military resources, thus confirming Hypothesis 1. Peacekeeping operations have created the opportunity for the PLA to

*Figure 3. Findings- How UN peacekeeping effects China's military capability.*

		Minimal (1 Point)	Moderate (2 Points)	Significant (3 Points)	Average Point Rating
Strategic Resources	Defense Budget	X			2
	Manpower			X	
	Military Infrastructure			X	
	CRDT&E		X		
	Defense Industrial Base		X		
	Warfighting Inventory	X			
Conversion Capability	Threats & Strategy			X	2
	Doctrine & Training	X			
	Command & Control	X			
	Civil-Military Relations	X			
	Foreign Mil-to-Mil Relations			X	
	Capacity for Innovation			X	

expand and grow their personnel and infrastructure. Despite Xi Jinping's call to reduce the Chinese military by 300,000 personnel in 2015, he promised the UN a rapid response unit of 8,000 PLA peacekeepers in the same year. Raising the rapid response force despite the overall cuts indicates the peacekeepers are the same personnel deemed critical

to the PLA, and demonstrates China is using peacekeeping as an excuse to train and equip their regular ground forces. Furthermore, by way of comparison to the approximately 2,548 troops China has deployed to UN missions around the world in 2020, the 8,000-manned force would triple their peacekeeping manpower.<sup>112</sup>

Peacekeeping was also determined to significantly affect China's military infrastructure capability. The MOOTW mission provided Beijing a valid excuse to build its first overseas base in Djibouti. As representatives have stated, China required a regional logistics base to stage its counterpiracy, peacekeeping, and humanitarian relief efforts. The Djibouti base represents China's intention to divorce their "keeping a low profile" policy and embrace their responsibilities of a world power. The base is a staging point into Africa and the Middle East and demonstrates China's growing logistical requirements derived from their overseas operations. Furthermore, a Chinese naval commander stated that Djibouti is "just the first step," indicating that increased requirements for peacekeeping may warrant further building of installations.<sup>113</sup>

Increased participation in UN peacekeeping provided China a basis to upgrade its peacekeeping training center and fund the AU's African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism. They prefer to support peacekeeping training in Chinese facilities or with bilateral donations, indicating that they prefer to put their own brand on peacekeeping. This is also evidenced by their lack of funding for major international peacekeeping training centers in Mali and Ghana. Peacekeeping is assessed to have a

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<sup>112</sup> "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, October 31, 2020, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

<sup>113</sup> Bayes, *China's Growing Security Role in Africa: Views from West Africa, Implications for Europe*, 62.

moderate effect on China's CRDT&E infrastructure due to limited evidence that the upgrades and increased funding significantly changed China's military capability.

Experience in PKOs may be a source of learning for China in regard to its defense industrial base. There was limited data on China's private corporations, but a UN assessment did reveal Beijing's 2014 involvement in arms sales in South Sudan. The backlash from this incident is likely to have prompted caution in China's equipment donations to Mali, which only consisted of transport vehicles. China further tightened its grip over the private sector with the 2019 National Security law, which mandated private corporations to assist the government in national security matters. Although it is unlikely peacekeeping is the only factor driving this learning, it is one instance where peacekeeping may have helped shape military advancement. Without being able to determine a direct effect from peacekeeping, China's defense industrial base was rated as moderate.

Finally, peacekeeping was found to have minimal effect on China's warfighting inventory and budget. Beijing equips its peacekeepers well, but they likely would have invested in standard issue equipment regardless of PKOs. Due to lack of data, it is also unknown how peacekeeping effects China's overall defense budget. Peacekeeping is, therefore, deemed to have minimal effect on both categories.

*Hypothesis 2: Conversion capability.* MINUSMA and UNMISS were found to have a moderate effect on Chinese conversion capability, thus confirming Hypothesis 2. This study found that despite combat experience being a commonly cited reason for Chinese participation in PKOs, logistics experience is a better description for what the PLA learns through peacekeeping. The Threats and Strategy measure illuminated that



China receives little real combat experience over the course of their PKO participation due to their risk-adverse strategy. Additionally, out of the 915,000 active duty PLA officers, China only deployed 10,597 troops to MINUSMA and UNMISS from 2010 to 2020.<sup>114</sup> Assuming that all troops deployed to the two missions experienced combat in their deployment, this would mean that at most one percent of PLA officers gained combat experience. The Threats and Strategy measure is deemed to have significant effect on China's conversion capability, however, because of the logistics experience China receives from PKOs.

Their decision to open a logistics base in Djibouti shortly after they increased troops in MINUSMA and UNMISS demonstrates learning and an ability to convert resources into effective operations. In order to deploy battalions year after year, the PLA must fine tune its transportation routes, port debarkation, lines of communication, means for sustaining forces long term, and more.<sup>115</sup> The PLA could easily scale up and apply the logistics lessons to other conflicts, especially if the conflict was in reach of the already established camp in Djibouti. As an old military proverb says, "amateurs study tactics...but professionals study logistics," and thus, logistics learning is weighted significantly for the Threats and Strategy measure.<sup>116</sup>

Doctrine and Training was assessed to have minimal effect on Chinese conversion capability because of the lack of advancement seen in MINUSMA or UNMISS. Both PKOs have demonstrated faults in Chinese doctrine and training, from COIN operations

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<sup>114</sup> "Troop and Police Contributors," *United Nations Peacekeeping*, June 30, 2019, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>; U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*.

<sup>115</sup> Rogers, "China and United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Africa."

<sup>116</sup> "West Point in The Making of American," *Smithsonian National Museum of American History*, accessed on October 4, 2020, [https://americanhistory.si.edu/westpoint/history\\_5b.html](https://americanhistory.si.edu/westpoint/history_5b.html).

to officers' ability to stand post. This research did not find evidence that China was attempting to modify their doctrine or training despite these lessons learned, and thus peacekeeping was deemed to have limited effect on this capability.

Similarly, Command and Control is assessed to have minimal effect on Chinese conversion capability. Activities in MINUSMA and UNMISS demonstrated China's slow and ineffective response times to emergency situations. With no data indicating China will or has innovated its command and control, peacekeeping is deemed to have minimal effect on their command and control.

The same assessment is made for Civil-Military Relations. PRC officials mandate the activities of PKOs as they would with any defense decision. Peacekeeping does not affect this relationship, rather maintains the status quo. Thus, peacekeeping was deemed to have minimal effect on civil-military relations.

Foreign military-to-military relations, on the other hand, were significantly affected by peacekeeping because PKOs provided China a legitimate reason to cross-train with other nations, meet and educate African military officers, and collaborate with the AU to resolve regional conflict. China could conduct these activities without participating in UN PKOs, but as seen with the name change in their defense forum— from the 2018 Defense and Security Forum to the 2019 Peace and Security Forum— peacekeeping allows China to present itself as a responsible world power and one that invests in more than the economy. Comments from the Major General in Mali demonstrate that China successfully sells this message of peace through its forums.

Capacity for Innovation was assessed to have significant effect on conversion capability due to China's increased access to intelligence collection and foreign partner

building. A known Chinese strategy for military advancement is intellectual property theft.<sup>117</sup> In Mali, China has the potential to collect on Western technology such as British heavy lift helicopters and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Additionally, China has the ability to observe France's Operation Barkhane and Dutch and Swedish long-range patrols.<sup>118</sup> The opportunity for China to benignly be in proximity to Western operations in MINUSMA is something it can find in few other places in the world. Furthermore, the need for information sharing with participating PKO nations gives China an opportunity to expand its foreign intelligence partners. These two factors of peacekeeping significantly effect China's capacity to innovate its technology and warfighting abilities.

*Limitations of the current study.* Transparent and abundant data was lacking in certain categories of military capability. Particularly, data was less commonly reported for day-to-day operations where peacekeepers did their job compared to reporting on poor performance. Additionally, conflicting accounts between peacekeepers and official Chinese reports exhibited potential credibility problems in the data. All data was included and weighted for credibility.

Another limitation of the findings is the unknown direction of causality. An equally valid conclusion is that Beijing's commitment to military development leads to PKO development as much or more than the reserve statement. President Xi Jinping committed to becoming a "world-class" military by 2049.<sup>119</sup> The strength of this study,

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<sup>117</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*.

<sup>118</sup> Michael Shurkin, "Why the UK may be Sending Troops to Mali," *RAND Corporation*. March 16, 2020. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/03/why-the-uk-may-be-sending-troops-to-mali.html>.

<sup>119</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020*.

however, is that it illuminates which specific capabilities will be further advanced by China's continued or increased investment in PKOs. For example, increased Chinese PKO participation will likely result in increased infrastructure in the region. Peacekeeping operations were also found to increase their capacity to collect intelligence. The opportunity for robust collection on Western operations and technology may direct where future Chinese peacekeeping investments go.

### **Conclusions**

This study finds evidence that Chinese participation in UN PKOs increases its military capability in five ways. Peacekeeping gives China an excuse to develop strategic resources by providing the circumstances to invest in manpower and overseas infrastructure. Additionally, PKO's allow the PLA to improve its conversion capability by honing its logistics processes, improving and expanding foreign military-to-military relationships, and providing means for intelligence collection. Moreover, peacekeeping provides an opportunity for China to conduct activities that fall below the threshold of international alarm.

Readily defined by China as a MOOTW capability, peacekeeping is the perfect opportunity to advance military capability without naming an adversary or entering a conflict. PKO deployments fall in line with DIA's assessment that China seeks to "pursue development without a major military conflict," or in Xi Jinping's words, "making progress while maintaining stability."<sup>120</sup> This study corroborates that peacekeeping

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<sup>120</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win.*; "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress," *Xinhua*, November 03, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c\\_136725942.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm).

moderately advances China's goal of becoming a "world-class" military power by 2049 without the requirement of an actual military conflict.

By comparison, however, China is still far from outpacing American military capabilities. Purely in terms of infrastructure, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) oversees 29 outposts, compared to China's one installation in Djibouti.<sup>121</sup> Although the PLA dwarfs U.S. Army active duty officers by approximately 430,000 personnel, the United States' two decades of combat and logistical experience in the Global War on Terror is far superior.<sup>122</sup> Due to the rarity and nature of peacekeeping missions, Chinese participation in PKOs will not be enough to outpace a military power like the United States. PKOs should be acknowledged as one factor advancing the Chinese military, specifically the PLA, but much greater efforts are needed to make a substantial capability difference.

Lastly, this study revealed that China is also attempting to innovate the military capabilities of UN PKOs. This is evidenced by their commitment to deploy the first full infantry battalion and to create the rapid response force consisting of UAV, helicopter, and surface ship operators. China's novel approach to PKOs warrants further research into what the PRC gains from advancing UN peacekeeping capabilities. If they lead the charge on new technology and operations, will other nations follow to become interoperable? Does an increase in Chinese troop presence effectively transfer military operations with Chinese characteristics? With China's recent separation from non-

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<sup>121</sup> Nick Turse, "Pentagon's Own Map of U.S. Bases in Africa Contradicts its Claim of 'Light' Footprint," *The Intercept*, February 27, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/27/africa-us-military-bases-africom/>.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win.*; U.S. Department of Defense, "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications," *Defense Manpower Data Center*, August 2020, [https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp\\_reports.jsp](https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp).

interference policies and their rapid quest for military power, continued research in this area is needed to keep pace with their military achievements around the world.

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## **Curriculum Vita**

Emily Leival was born in Boston, Massachusetts on October 7, 1994. She graduated summa cum laude from The George Washington University with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Criminal Justice. She developed an interest in global security studies from her work at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP). As a Program Analyst for DOJ, she managed capacity development programs for civil security forces around the world and had the great fortune of traveling to Ukraine, Kosovo, Macedonia, Philippines, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. Her love for international affairs has impassioned her academic and career goals. Emily expects to graduate with her Masters in Arts degree in December 2020.