

CHINA'S PEACEKEEPING DIPLOMACY

BY BONNY LING¹

While China's foreign aid and investment in developing nations has been well documented, less familiar is its key role in peacekeeping missions in troubled regions. However pragmatic the motivation, China's peacekeeping efforts may be opening it to international influence on human rights norms.

In early 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao embarked on his third trip to Africa since he took office in 2003. This visit came just three months after Beijing hosted the Sino-Africa Summit with nearly 50 African heads of state in November 2006, and is seen as an increasing affirmation of China's rise in economic and political influence on the resource-rich continent.

Media coverage following this visit has focused on the African prong of China's diplomacy, as China continues to court African leaders with promises of condition-free loans, trade and development aid. This has led many to question China's true agenda for Africa, and whether it amounts to just another round of the foreign plunder that has plagued much of Africa's history.

While high-profile visits from China's top leaders to Africa have increased within recent years, China's intense engagement with Africa's developing and least-developed countries, especially those in post-conflict transitions, is not new. Chinese peacekeepers have served under the United Nations flag in various peacekeeping missions across Africa: in Burundi from 2004; in Côte d'Ivoire from 2004; in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2001; in Ethiopia and Eritrea from 2000; in Mozambique from 1993 to 1994; in Liberia from 1993 to 1997 and again from 2003 to present; in Sierra Leone from 1998 to 1999 and again from 1999 to 2005; in Sudan from 2005, and in Western Sahara from 1991.

Despite China's use of its peacekeeping commitments as a lead-up to its public strategy for Africa, this aspect has garnered less media attention than fears over the emergence of China as another colonial power on the continent. The reality is that, in general, China's contributions to international peacekeeping operations worldwide are not very well examined. As

a result, there have been few assessments on the impact and strategic positioning, as well as the cultural exchange elements, of this peacekeeping diplomacy in China's multilateral relationships.

Brief history of China and peacekeeping

Today, China's international peacekeeping commitments span the globe. As of January 2007, China was contributing a total of 1,861 peacekeepers to twelve UN operations.² This is a marked departure from China's early history at the UN during the 1970s, when it shied away from supporting all peacekeeping missions on the grounds that they infringed upon national sovereignty. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the country's reform and opening process gradually embedded its economic and political interest in the international system, China's diplomatic outreach also became more global.

China's first group of peacekeepers was sent out in 1990, when Chinese military observers served in the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), which monitors and reports violations of cease-fire agreements in the Middle East. From 1992 to 1993, China sent a sizeable construction brigade of 800 military engineers to Cambodia to renovate highways and two airports. This single dispatch of 800 peacekeepers in 1992 is already more than the total number of peacekeepers sent by Great Britain and the United States, two permanent members of the Security Council, in 2006.

Today, China ranks twelfth in the total number of troop contributions by country to UN missions. China has its personnel on all four continents where there are UN missions. Apart from the missions in Africa, Chinese peacekeepers have served in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in Europe; Timor-Leste and Afghanistan in Asia; Haiti in the Americas; and Lebanon in the Middle East.

Responsible power to win hearts and minds

China's participation in UN-led peacekeeping is an important arm of its public diplomacy, which is increasingly focused on projecting the image of China as a responsible power. Much of this has to do with alleviating the fears of other countries about China's rapid economic and political ascent. In September 2006, in an interview with the official Xinhua News Agency, Major General Zhang Qinsheng, the Deputy Chief of General Staff for



The widow and honor guard for UN observer Du Zhaoyu accompany his body back to Beijing in August 2006. Photo: Reuters

China's People's Liberation Army, describes China's involvement in UN Peacekeeping in this way: "China is a peace-loving country. In addressing grave issues involving international peace and security, we are a responsible country. Peacekeeping is our mission, and it is also our fundamental principle."³

This projection of China as a responsible power is linked to the government's nationalist rhetoric aimed at defining a China where market reforms have been substituted for socialist ideology. In the same interview, Major General Zhang went on to say, "Chinese peacekeeping activities demonstrate our country's image as a responsible superpower. The quality of our troops is highly praised by international organizations and other countries, [and] in the course of our peacekeeping activities under the UN Charter, China sets a glorious example."⁴

During last summer's escalation of conflict between Israel and Lebanon, the domestic portrayal of China as a responsible power on the world stage took on a heightened pitch when one of its peacekeepers died in the line of fire. Chinese peacekeeper Du Zhaoyu, along with three other peacekeepers from Austria, Finland and Canada, was killed in a UN observatory post during an Israeli bombing raid. At Du's memorial service in Beijing, his death was eulogized by Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan as demonstrating Chinese people's love of peace, and the Chinese army's importance in safeguarding world peace.⁵

Two months after Du Zhaoyu's death, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao confirmed that China's peacekeeping force in Lebanon would be increased to 1,000 troops—its single

largest deployment since China began participating in peacekeeping operations.

The importance of being well-placed

For much of 2006, China's personnel contributions surpassed that of all four other members of the Permanent Five of the UN Security Council,⁶ with France a distant second.⁷ Through its contribution of personnel to peacekeeping missions, China is filling a conspicuous physical vacuum left by the Western members of the Permanent Five, who contribute financially to peacekeeping, but do not commit to significant troop deployment.⁸ This has undoubtedly enhanced China's strategic positioning at the UN, especially since peacekeeping is the single most high-profile element of any UN activities on the ground.

In the real workings of the UN, the strength of this strategic positioning is reflected in the appointment of China's candidates to top key posts. China's influence was recently demonstrated in the appointment of Dr. Margaret Chan as Director-General of the World Health Organization in November 2006, a candidacy to which the Chinese government "attached great importance and extended full support."⁹ A resident of Hong Kong, Dr. Chan became the first Chinese national to head a UN agency when she took up her post in Geneva in early January 2007.

Another prime example of China's increasing muscle and sophistication in the corridor lobbying that dominates international diplomacy is the appointment of the current UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon of South Korea, which China strongly backed.¹⁰ In fact, so great was China's support for Ban's nomination that many officials in the U.S. administration had expressed the concern that he might be too pro-China. In Ban's first official visit to China, the newly-elected Secretary-General expressed his thanks for "China's great support when he ran for his post" and vowed "to build a harmonious UN" with close cooperation with China during his tenure.¹¹

Citizen diplomacy, peacekeeping style

International diplomacy takes place at various levels. China's behavior at the international level is accompanied by the citizen diplomacy that naturally occurs in these settings. China's citizen diplomacy tends to be overlooked, because most observers view peacekeeping as monolithic and "hard security" military missions that are determined by the *realpolitik* and ambitions of powerful countries rather than by the individuals who comprise these operations.

The interpersonal aspect of international peacekeeping is most recognized in the form of technical training. For instance, participating in peacekeeping operation provides a good opportunity for countries to test their equipment in harsh settings. It also trains troops for rapid combat deployment, and provides key leadership experience to top military personnel while requiring them to work closely with top brass from other countries.

One Chinese military observer stationed with the UN peacekeeping mission in the Western Sahara recounted the experience of Chinese observers with the state-of-the-art Global Positioning System (GPS) developed by the U.S. Army:

“Chinese military observers had no practical experience on the [GPS, but] mastered every technical detail recorded on the system’s usage handbook, especially those about navigation in roadless terrain . . . [afterwards] some Chinese observers were able to teach other observers to use the system.”¹²

Peacekeeping, of course, consists of more than blue-helmet soldiers in protective armor, perched on a white tank; behind these soldiers are peacekeepers known as “blue-berets” responsible for nation-building. By serving as a bridge between “hard security” military elements and the “soft security” of social law and order, blue-beret peacekeepers carry on multifaceted roles that involve them in reforming political, judicial and penal processes, training police, providing electoral assistance, and disarming and rehabilitating former combatants.

Precisely because blue-beret missions allow for more civilian interaction outside the strict military chain-of-command, they bring about meaningful citizen exchanges on a regular and routine basis. This important aspect of diplomacy in an evolving international setting results in cross-cultural dialogues where men—now increasingly women, too—from different countries come and work together.

Against this background of citizen diplomacy are international norms on human rights and the importance placed on an inclusive participatory process. These two components, which are part and parcel of international operations for reconstruction and political reform, can have as profound an affect on participants as the sharing of technical knowledge. It is more than likely that citizen diplomacy often involves difficult personal reflections and changes in behavior among participants who gain international exposure on, for example, the use of torture or how to sensitively handle cases of gender-based violence.

The impacts of citizen diplomacy on Chinese peacekeeping operations are, however, difficult to assess without a comprehensive and anonymous round of personal interviews with former peacekeepers. The personal accounts of former Chinese peacekeepers currently available have all been issued through official media outlets that seek to reinforce the image of China as a responsible power that supports international peace and security, rather than exploring how serving in international missions has changed Chinese peacekeepers’ attitudes toward procedural protections, human rights and political inclusiveness.

Concluding notes

At the intergovernmental level, China’s peacekeeping involvement is another example of its growing engagement and influence in the international arena. Key questions remain on how much China’s participation is motivated by a sense of global responsibility, and how much by the strategic influence China stands to gain by filling the peacekeeping vacuum left by the other Permanent Five countries. The tension between the two is being played out today in China’s reluctance to use its influence to sway the Sudanese government to fully accept the mandate of a robust UN peacekeeping mission to the troubled region of Darfur. Sudan exemplifies the current dilemma of China’s peacekeeping strategy by putting its projected image as a responsible power directly at odds with its will and ability to deliver the Sudanese government’s concrete cooperation on Darfur.

The question of whether China’s actions are motivated more by the desire for access to Sudan’s oil resources or by a principled stance on national sovereignty—and how its behavior might change in the face of mounting international criticisms over Sudan—is beyond the present discussion. However, it is crucial to point out that, amidst growing calls for a large and well-muscled peacekeeping operation in Sudan, the question for Sudan and for all other peacekeeping missions will always remain, “Whose troops?” So long as China maintains the largest troop deployment among the Permanent Five for global peacekeeping operations, its influence on the ground over weak states and its bargaining positioning in the UN will also continue.

NOTES

1. The author is grateful to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft.
2. Updated figures are available from “United Nations Peacekeeping: Monthly Summary of Contributors of Military and Civilian Police Personnel,” United Nations Web portal, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/>.
3. *Zhongguo yuanxiang pai yizhi zhuangjitiabing canjia lianheguo zhuli weihe budui* [China Had First Planned to Send Military Troops to Participate in United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Lebanon], *people.com.cn*, September 28, 2006, <http://military.people.com.cn/BIG5/1076/52983/4870385.html#>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. “Du’s death loss for peacekeeping mission: DM,” Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal at *GOV.cn.*, August 7, 2006, http://www.gov.cn/misc/2006-08/07/content_356733.htm.
6. Out of the five permanent members of the Security Council, China contributes the most personnel to UN peacekeeping operations based on a monthly average of peacekeeper contributions in 2006. Last year, China maintained a peacekeeping deployment range of 1,000 to 1,700 personnel abroad, with an average of 1,462 personnel each month, underscoring the government’s commitment to regular deployments. 2006 figures are available from “United Nations Peacekeeping: Monthly Summary of Contributors of Military and Civilian Police Personnel,” United Nations Web portal, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/contributors/>.
7. France overtook China’s rank in September 2006 when it bolstered the Lebanon peacekeeping mission with a one-off increase of some 1,000 French peacekeepers after the summer hostilities. France’s total number of troops, however, will decrease after command of the Lebanon mission is transferred to the Italians in February 2007.
8. The U.S. and Great Britain contribute mainly through financial support by shouldering a major share of the peacekeeping assessed contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget. These assessments are based on a country’s GDP, with the Permanent Five assessed an additional amount based on their unique status in the Security Council.
9. “Chinese Candidate Margaret Chan is Elected as the Director-General of the WHO,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Web site, <http://margarechan.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/>.
10. Tradition dictates that, for the balance of power, the Secretary-General shall not hail from one of the Permanent Five countries, which precludes China from nominating one of its nationals.
11. “China Believes Ban Ki-Moon to Play Important Role in UN,” *PLA Daily*, October 28, 2006, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/site2/news-channels/2006-10/28/content_627701.htm.
12. “Keeping Peace,” *PLA Daily*, <http://english.chinamil.com.cn/special/e-peace/txt/20.htm> and previously at http://english.pladaily.com.cn/site2/special-reports/2004-09/13/content_12910.htm.