

China's Evolving Role in Peacekeeping and African Security

The Deployment of Chinese Troops for UN Force Protection in Mali

Clingendael Report

Frans Paul van der Putten



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September 2015

The Sahel
Programme is
supported by



September 2015

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Summary

China is in the process of expanding its military role under UN command in Africa, at a time when Chinese commercial interests and civilian presence in the African continent is growing fast. This Clingendael Report focuses on China's dispatch of a force protection unit to Mali with the UN's peacekeeping force MINUSMA and the insights that can be derived from this deployment with regard to: a) its operational aspects, including possibilities for Sino-European cooperation at the local level; b) China's stance towards UN peacekeeping operations; and c) the relevance of peacekeeping operations for the protection of Chinese civilians and economic assets in Africa. Compared with its relatively large economic role throughout Africa, China's involvement in crisis management in conflict areas remains modest. The deployment of a force protection unit to Mali does not constitute a significant change in this regard. However, this deployment does highlight China's aim to strengthen its position within the UN and in UN peacekeeping. It also suggests that the build-up of a military presence under UN command, which may eventually open up new possibilities for protecting citizens and economic assets in Africa, could be another long-term aim.

Abbreviations

AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission in Mali
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
EU	European Union
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDB	New Development Bank
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PLA	(Chinese) People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
UN	United Nations
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan

Map of Mali



Introduction¹

As part of China's involvement in the peacekeeping mission of the United Nations in Mali, Chinese troops are providing protection to United Nations (UN) personnel of other nationalities. For this purpose, in late 2013, the Chinese military began to deploy an infantry company in the African country. This is only the second time that China has sent an infantry unit to Africa. The first time was in 2012, when China sent an infantry platoon to protect Chinese engineers and medical staff in the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan.² A third and even larger troop deployment subsequently followed in 2015, when China sent an infantry battalion to South Sudan, again as part of a UN mission. While the Mali deployment is neither China's first nor its largest, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at it. China's first infantry deployment in 2012 was very small and therefore little information is available on it; meanwhile, the most recent deployment in South Sudan is still very new, with the result that there is not yet much information on it either. The consecutive deployments of force protection units indicate that China is in the process of expanding its military role under UN command in Africa, at a time when Chinese commercial interests and civilian presence in the African continent is growing fast. This report focuses on China's dispatch of a force protection unit to Mali, namely the insights that can be derived from this deployment with regard to: a) its operational aspects including possibilities for Sino-European cooperation at the local level; b) China's stance towards UN peacekeeping operations; and c) the relevance of peacekeeping operations for the protection of Chinese civilians and economic assets in Africa. This report is based mainly on data from open sources, with additional information derived from interviews with officials and experts in China and the Netherlands.

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- 1 The study on which this report is based was carried out as part of the NPL Sahel programme, which is coordinated by the Conflict Research Unit (CRU) of the Clingendael Institute and financed by the Dutch Postcode Lottery (NPL). The study's preliminary findings were presented and discussed at a seminar on China's role in peacekeeping and counter-terrorism in Mali that was co-organized by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) and Clingendael on 30 April 2015. Sander des Tombe and Anne Bakker provided valuable research assistance for this report. I am very grateful to them and to Elsabé Willeboorse, Jeroen Franken, Xue Lei, Chu Shulong, Grégory Chauzal, Chen Zhimin, Peter van Tuijl, Shi Yinhong, Luc van de Goor, the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China and the Netherlands Ministry of Defence for their help with and input for this project.
 - 2 Daniel M. Hartnett, 'China's First Deployment of Combat Forces to a UN Peacekeeping Mission – South Sudan', 13 March 2012, available at http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/MEMO-PLA-PKO_final.pdf (accessed 23 July 2015).

1. China as a Provider of Force Protection for UN Troops in Mali

China's contribution to the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA),³ the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali that became operational on 1 July 2013, includes a force protection company of 170 soldiers, who began arriving in Mali from November 2013.⁴ The deployment of this unit, which comprises both regular infantry and special forces from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA),⁵ marks a significant instance of China contributing 'security forces'⁶ to a UN mission. Chinese contributions to previous UN missions consisted of non-combat troops such as medical staff, engineers, or logistical troops. The 2012 deployment of Chinese infantry to South Sudan was smaller in size and did not involve force protection for non-Chinese troops.⁷ What is new about MINUSMA, which is the 30th UN peacekeeping mission in which China has participated, is that Chinese armed troops are being deployed to a foreign country as a separate unit that provides protection to a multinational UN presence. While China also sent 70 medical staff and 155 engineers take part in MINUSMA,⁸ the Chinese protection company is not attached specifically to these other Chinese units, but rather to the regional UN headquarters in Gao in northern Mali. Chinese special forces have been present on the Chinese warships that – under a UN mandate – have been protecting commercial shipping against Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden since the

3 The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, established on 25 April 2013 by UN Security Council resolution 2100. MINUSMA has a mandated maximum size of 12,640 military and police personnel. See http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/documents/mali%20_2100_E_.pdf (accessed 24 April 2015).

4 China established its peacekeeping force for Mali on 12 July 2013. The personnel for this mission were provided by the Shenyang Military Area Command and 211 Military Hospital.

5 Interview with officials of the Peacekeeping Office of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, Beijing, 11 March 2015.

6 See http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-12/04/c_132940300.htm (accessed 23 April 2015). The Chinese government uses the term 'security forces' rather than 'combat troops' to refer to this deployment.

7 See <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/chinas-plan-for-africa-send-in-the-combat-troops-58e40b3c7a09> (accessed 23 April 2015); and Hartnett, 'China's First Deployment of Combat Forces to a UN Peacekeeping Mission – South Sudan'.

8 The first rotation of this 395-strong Chinese deployment in Mali ended in mid-September 2014, when the first batch was replaced by a second one of equal size and composition.

beginning of 2009.⁹ However, these troops have been tasked only with counter-piracy activities at sea and have never been deployed on land.

China's contribution to MINUSMA is small in relation to the overall size of the mission (395 Chinese personnel of a total of 10,098 UN personnel in Mali under MINUSMA),¹⁰ but the operational challenges for China have nonetheless been substantial.¹¹ Many of the challenges for Chinese troops in northern Mali – relating to language barriers, heat, sandstorms, housing and fever¹² – are not specific to the protection unit, but are relevant to all Chinese (and most foreign) troops in Mali.¹³ However, by dispatching a protection unit, the Chinese military has had to deal more directly with a highly dangerous and deteriorating security environment,¹⁴ with frequent attacks by extremist organizations on UN personnel. In 2012, rebel groups from various backgrounds had driven government forces out of the north of Mali, and by early 2013 they threatened even the capital, Bamako, in the south. By the time that MINUSMA was initiated in April 2013, a French-led intervention had led to the recapture of the main northern cities from the rebels. However, the rebel groups continue to be active. By early July 2015, 42 UN peacekeepers in Mali had been killed by hostile acts (although no Chinese were among these casualties).¹⁵ In addition, on 27 January 2015, a demonstration by local residents in front of the MINUSMA headquarters in Gao turned violent and resulted in UN police officers shooting and killing three civilians.¹⁶ A subsequent investigation launched by the UN concluded that, although the protesters had thrown Molotov cocktails and were trying to enter the UN camp, some UN police officers had used excessive violence against the protesters.¹⁷ Although no Chinese troops appear to have been directly involved in the incident, it illustrates that protecting the UN camp involves not just threats from attacks by extremists, but also the possibility of violent demonstrations by local residents.

9 Frans Paul van der Putten, 'Harmonious Ocean: China's Response to Somali Piracy as a Contribution to Maritime Security Governance', paper presented at the annual convention of the International Studies Association, Montreal, 17 March 2011, available at http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/5/0/0/7/2/pages500724/p500724-1.php (accessed 23 July 2015).

10 See <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml> (accessed 12 July 2015).

11 Interview with officials of the Peacekeeping Office of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, Beijing, 11 March 2015.

12 See http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/14/content_18913442.htm (accessed 13 April 2015).

13 Preparations made by the PLA for this mission included several months of prior training in China and the sending by sea of some 1,700 tonnes of equipment to Mali.

14 Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, *The Roots of Mali's Conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis*, CRU Report (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, March 2015), available at http://www.clingendael.nl/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/.

15 See <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/07/02/uk-mali-un-idUKKCNC0PC1AE20150702> (accessed 18 July 2015).

16 See <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/db150402.doc.htm> (accessed 18 July 2015).

17 See <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sqsm16640.doc.htm> (accessed 19 July 2015).

Perhaps reflecting the novelty of the situation and the difficult environment, the Chinese protection unit in Mali initially appears to have been taking a cautious – rather than a proactive – approach.¹⁸

Interaction between the PLA and other parties at the local level in Mali has been restricted in several regards. Since Mali, as a former French colony, is a francophone country, the ability to speak French is a precondition for communicating with the local population. However, the availability of Chinese military personnel who can speak French is limited – a problem with which other militaries from non-francophone countries are also faced. What further restricts the interaction between Chinese troops and their local environment is the fact that the PLA tends not to communicate with civil society in the host countries of UN missions, regardless of whether these are organizations from local communities or representatives from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).¹⁹

A further restriction at the operational level results from the gap between Western and Chinese militaries. While China in some ways takes up a middle position with regard to UN peacekeeping between developed and developing countries (with a larger financial contribution than developing countries, and a larger contribution of troops than developed countries), at the operational level it appears easier for the PLA to interact with UN troops from developing countries than with those from developed countries such as European Union (EU) member states.²⁰ For example, the Chinese contribution to MINUSMA comprises a field hospital in Gao for use by UN personnel. However, in practice the hospital appears to be used mainly by personnel from non-Western countries. At least during 2014, the Dutch military regarded the Chinese field hospital as not meeting Dutch standards for the medical treatment of military personnel.²¹ According to Dutch sources, the initial performance of the Chinese force protection unit also did not meet Dutch expectations, as certain guard duties were performed by Chinese troops during only parts of the day rather than around the clock.²² Moreover,

18 Interview with officials of the Netherlands Ministry of Defence, The Hague, 2 April 2015.

19 Interviews with various officials and experts, March-April 2015.

20 Apart from China, the following 37 countries are contributing troops to MINUSMA: Bangladesh; Benin; Burkina Faso; Cambodia; Cameroon; Canada; Chad; Denmark; Egypt; El Salvador; Estonia; Finland; France; Germany; Ghana; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Italy; Ivory Coast; Jordan; Liberia; Mauritania; Nepal; the Netherlands; Niger; Nigeria; Norway; Portugal; Rwanda; Senegal; Sierra Leone; Sweden; Switzerland; Togo; United Kingdom; United States of America; and Yemen. See <http://minusma.unmissions.org/en/military> (accessed 18 July 2015).

21 Interview with officials of the Netherlands Ministry of Defence, The Hague, 2 April 2015; remarks made by Dutch government officials during a closed seminar on Sino-Dutch security cooperation in Mali, Clingendael, 30 April 2015.

22 Interview with officials of the Netherlands Ministry of Defence, The Hague, 2 April 2015.

at a general level, for troops from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, it is easier to interact with each other than with non-NATO counterparts, since they are accustomed to international cooperation within a NATO framework. Operational interaction between NATO troops and the PLA is also hampered by mutual distrust relating to the geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States.²³

As a consequence of these conditions, the fact that China has diversified its contribution to UN peacekeeping by sending a protection unit to Mali has not yet resulted in new opportunities for cooperation between China and European actors at the operational level. The PLA seems to have no interest in establishing working relations with Europe-based or local non-governmental organizations in Mali. There is more interaction between Chinese and European military personnel within MINUSMA, but – at least in the Dutch case – this so far also seems to remain very limited. The greatest opportunities for more cooperation seem to exist at the level of bilateral military-to-military relations between China and individual European countries, not at the local level in Mali itself. The PLA is interested in sending personnel to Europe for training programmes aimed at UN peacekeeping missions, and to learn from European experiences with overseas deployments. This interest is likely to increase as the PLA takes on new peacekeeping roles.

23 This sense of distrust is illustrated by unverified reports that appeared in August 2014 in the Dutch media, stating that Chinese troops in Mali had presented as gifts to members of the Dutch military USB sticks for data storage that contained spyware: http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/23005804/___Marechaussee___doelwit_China___html (accessed 15 July 2015).

2. China's Interest in UN Peacekeeping

By the middle of 2015, China had deployed a total of 3,082 personnel to UN peacekeeping missions (including 2,883 troops, 176 police officers and 23 military experts).²⁴ China is currently the ninth largest contributor of troops, with the great majority of Chinese peacekeeping personnel being deployed in Africa, where most UN missions are located. The current number of Chinese UN peacekeeping personnel is up from a total contribution of 2,078 at the start of 2014.²⁵ China's involvement in UN peace missions is growing fast, with an increase of 50 per cent in just 18 months. The evolving Chinese participation in UN missions – both the increase in numbers and the assumption of new tasks – should be seen in the context of China's changing foreign policy. Under Xi Jinping, who became China's top leader in November 2012, the style of Chinese foreign policy has become more self-assured. China has to some extent abandoned its former tendency to keep a low profile in global affairs. Instead, according to Xi, 'China should develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of a major country'.²⁶ As a result, China is seeking a more influential role in international affairs, while also accepting greater responsibilities. China's heavy involvement in newly established multilateral financial institutions for development cooperation, such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), illustrates this approach.

The United Nations organization is a major focal point in Chinese foreign policy. According to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China wants the UN to maintain the central role that it has played in the international order since 1945.²⁷ Wang also stated that the UN should be more representative of the interests of developing countries. The implication is that China would like to see some adjustments with regard to the division of power within the UN system, but that it also prefers to keep the UN in place as the main pillar of the international order. The UN is a suitable vehicle for China to shape its role as a rising global power, just as the United States had envisaged the

24 See <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml> (accessed 12 July 2015).

25 Frans Paul van der Putten, 'The BRICS and the Future of Peacekeeping Operations', in Jaïr van der Lijn *et al. Peacekeeping Operations in a Changing World* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, January 2015), p.31, available at <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/peacekeeping-operations-changing-world> (accessed 12 July 2015).

26 See http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1215680.shtml (accessed 12 July 2015).

27 See <http://www.chinesemission-vienna.at/eng/zqbd/t1243906.htm> (accessed 12 July 2015).

organization to suit its needs when it emerged as a leading global power during the Second World War.²⁸ While China is already a permanent member of the UN Security Council (and therefore has veto power), China also has an interest in making the UN more relevant in today's world, as well as strengthening its own position within the UN system. A major way of doing this is by becoming more involved in UN peacekeeping.

China first participated in UN peacekeeping missions in the early 1990s, and has since then become a significant contributor of troops. Moreover, China pays for 6.64 per cent of the budget of UN peacekeeping operations – a substantial increase from the less than 1 per cent that it financed in 1994.²⁹ Today, China is the sixth largest funding country, after the United States, Japan, France, Germany and the United Kingdom.³⁰ While the main funding countries are all developed economies, all of the top troop-contributing countries are developing economies (with Bangladesh, Pakistan and India being the largest). China is the only country that plays a significant role as a contributor of both troops and money. Among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, China is the largest troop-contributing country and the fourth largest financial contributor. It is also the largest contributor of medical staff, engineers and transportation units of any country.³¹ With the ongoing increase in Chinese troops and police deployed under UN command, and given China's financial reserves, it seems very possible that China's financial contribution will increase further in the future.

Although China would like to limit the influence of the West within the UN, and three out of five permanent UN Security Council members are Western countries (the United States, the United Kingdom and France), China is not in a hurry to reform the Security Council. For China, being one of only five countries with a permanent seat in the Security Council is highly advantageous. China is the only developing country in such a position and can thus – to some degree – claim to represent the interests of all developing countries at the highest level of multilateral decision-making on security issues. Moreover, any reform of the Security Council would likely result in China's regional

28 During the Second World War, the United States strongly pushed for the establishment of the UN Security Council as a way to prevent another major war, and to secure US leadership in international affairs. The Security Council as proposed by the US would consist of four great powers (also Britain, the USSR and China), one of which (China) being widely regarded as an American proxy. The result would be that the United States would be the most influential actor within the Security Council, which would be the leading body in world politics. See David L. Bosco, *Five to Rule Them All: The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.14–15 and 28.

29 See <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2013/11/who-pays-for-peace/> (accessed 12 July 2015).

30 See <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/operations/financing.shtml> (accessed 12 July 2015).

31 Xue Lei, *China as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council*, FES Publication Series (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Global Policy and Development, April 2014), p.10, available as a pdf at http://www.fes.de/gpol/inhalt/publikationen_unsc.php.

rivals in Asia – India and Japan – gaining permanent seats. China favours reform of the Council if this leads to a greater representation for developing countries and if this can be done on the basis of a broad consensus among member states.³² Until this can be achieved, however, the Chinese government is content to keep the Security Council as it is.³³

China is also not aiming for major reforms with regard to UN peacekeeping operations.³⁴ At the same time, the Chinese government is worried about what it regards as a Western tendency to go too far in pushing resolutions through the Security Council that introduce sanctions or armed intervention on the basis of the principle of 'responsibility to protect' (the notion that the international community has an obligation to protect civilians from serious harm if their own government neglects to do so).³⁵ For China, there are two potential problems with regard to (some) Western calls for intervention based on the responsibility to protect. The first is that the United States and its Western allies could use their military might to achieve regime change in non-Western countries. This could weaken Chinese influence and/or lead to greater instability in the developing world. The second problem is that, if such calls are linked to the perception that the host governments involved violate their citizens' political human rights, they could strengthen the notion that such states have less legitimacy in international relations and are less entitled to sovereign rights than democratic states with a better political human rights record. This notion harms the standing of China as one of the world's two major powers.

Since China distrusts some (but not all) Western proposals for peace operations,³⁶ its approach is to defend formally in the Security Council a number of principles that restrict the number and scope of peace operations. Perhaps most importantly for China, coercive action at the international level should always have authorization from the Security Council.³⁷ China also emphasizes the fundamental value of sovereignty in international relations. Interference in the domestic affairs of the host state should be restricted, and peacekeeping missions cannot substitute for the responsibilities of the host government.³⁸ The Chinese government insists that peacekeepers should always

32 Xue Lei, *China as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council*, p. 14–15.

33 Interview with a Chinese security expert, Beijing, March 2015.

34 Jaïr van der Lijn and Xenia Avezov, *The Future Peace Operations Landscape: Voices from Stakeholders Around the Globe* (Stockholm: SIPRI, January 2015), p. 69–71.

35 Xue Lei, *China as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council*, p. 18.

36 Ibid.

37 See <http://www.china-un.org/eng/zt/t1195734.htm> (accessed 19 July 2015).

38 See <http://www.china-un.org/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/t1168830.htm> (accessed 19 July 2015). Unless the circumstances are such that China believes the principle of responsibility to protect is an appropriate basis for a peacekeeping mission.

be neutral and that the United Nations should never be a party to conflict.³⁹ The use of force by UN troops must therefore be limited to instances of self-defence. However, in practice, the Chinese government often takes a pragmatic and flexible approach to peacekeeping. If it wants, it can fall back on the restrictive principles that it refers to consistently. For example, China did so when it vetoed two draft resolutions in the UN Security Council that threatened to use non-military means to apply pressure on the Syrian government.⁴⁰ Yet if China's view is that a proposed intervention is not aimed at expanding Western geopolitical influence and liberal values (that is, democracy and human rights) to the detriment of China's international position, China tends to be supportive of proposals for UN peacekeeping operations.

The case of Mali illustrates this flexibility. In January 2013, France launched Operation Serval in response to the rapid advance of rebel groups in northern Mali that were part of, or affiliated to, Islamist extremist organizations. Under Operation Serval, several thousand French and other foreign troops entered Mali and pushed the extremist groups back. China did not officially criticize the French-led military intervention that preceded the establishment of MINUSMA.⁴¹ Although some Chinese scholars initially did voice criticism against the French operation, after several weeks they changed their view; at least one of these experts then stated that the French intervention had been necessary.⁴² The UN Security Council eventually formally welcomed Operation Serval, which was invited by the interim government of Mali (which had come to power in 2012 after a military coup), but did not provide it with an explicit mandate.⁴³ Then, on 25 April 2013, the Security Council decided to establish MINUSMA, which was to replace AFISMA (the African-led International Support Mission in Mali, a UN-mandated mission by regional states that was initiated in late 2012), in order to stabilize the country and to assist the government of Mali in restoring its authority. The UN Security Council did not state that MINUSMA should take over the role of French troops. Instead, for the duration of MINUSMA, it authorized French troops to provide military support should UN peacekeepers in Mali be in imminent danger.⁴⁴ Consequently, France continues to

39 Xue Lei, *China as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council*, p. 11.

40 UN Security Council draft resolutions S/2011/612 and S/2012/538; see <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>. China also vetoed two other draft resolutions that were aimed at applying pressure on the Syrian government.

41 Marc Lanteigne, *China's Peacekeeping Policies in Mali: New Security Thinking or Balancing Europe?*, NFG Working Paper Series 11 (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, August 2014), p. 15.

42 See <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/chinas-response-to-the-islamist-threat-in-mali/>. See also Angela Stanzel and Abigaël Vasselier, 'China, France, and Germany: Models of Engagement in Mali', in *China Analysis – China and Global Crises: the "Culture of Reluctance"* (London: ECFR and Paris: Asia Centre, October 2014), p. 7–9.

43 Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis, 'Under the UN Security Council's Watchful Eyes: Military Intervention by Invitation in the Malian Conflict', *Leiden Journal of International Law* 4/26 (2013), p. 14.

44 UNSC resolution 2100, paragraph 18.

have a military presence in Mali that remains outside the UN peacekeeping mission, while having obtained an exit strategy because of the existence of MINUSMA.⁴⁵

It is also notable that the UN Security Council gave MINUSMA a mandate to use 'all necessary means, within the limits of its capacities and areas of deployment' to 'stabilize' population centres in northern Mali and to 'deter threats and to take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements in those areas'.⁴⁶ This mandate, which is extensive when compared to China's traditional stance on mandates, allows MINUSMA to play a significant military role in the ongoing struggle between government forces and various armed groups, and was initiated at a time when there was no active peace agreement between the government and its main opponents. Still, China voted in favour of the Security Council resolution on which MINUSMA and its mandate are based.⁴⁷ This resolution was adopted just a few weeks after the Security Council – also with China's support – had established 'on an exceptional basis' an 'intervention brigade' (consisting of three infantry battalions, one artillery company and one special forces company) to provide the UN peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with an enhanced ability for 'neutralizing armed groups'.⁴⁸

It is against this background that, in June 2013, the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced that China would contribute a protection unit to MINUSMA.⁴⁹ Although this unit guards the UN camp in Gao and does not 'take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements', it is remarkable that China chose Mali rather than a UN mission in another country to deploy a protection company. After all, the members of the protection unit are PLA infantry and special forces, who are capable of acting as combat troops should they come under attack. This strengthens the notion that China has no difficulties in Mali with the fact that the UN is not an impartial actor that safeguards an existing peace agreement, but that it is on the side of the government, which is engaged in a struggle against various armed groups.

The Chinese government increasingly acknowledges that armed groups such as extremists and armed criminal organizations can have a destabilizing effect at the international level, and that UN peacekeeping missions can contribute to addressing

45 In August 2014, Operation Serval was followed up by France's Operation Barkhane, which is aimed at fighting terrorism in the Sahel region.

46 UNSC resolution 2100, paragraphs 16 (a)(i) and 17.

47 See <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/meetings/2013> (accessed 20 July 2015).

48 UNSC resolution 2098. After the resolution was adopted, the Chinese ambassador to the UN stressed that deployment of the intervention brigade should not constitute a precedent; see S/PV.6943, at <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/meetings/2013> (accessed 21 July 2015). After the resolution regarding the establishment of MINUSMA was adopted, the Chinese ambassador made no statement.

49 See <http://en.people.cn/90786/8303006.html> (accessed 20 July 2015).

this threat.⁵⁰ China seems to have considered the French-led Operation Serval to be a welcome development, since it was effective in countering the offensive of Islamist extremists.⁵¹ This suggests that in sub-Saharan Africa, China may be more concerned about a power vacuum than about a former colonial power such as France playing the role of regional 'policeman'. If this is indeed the case, it would mean that China would not object to a greater European security role in Africa in instances when regional African security organizations are not effective, if this was to lead to greater regional stability and was not directed at countering Chinese diplomatic and economic influence.

It seems likely that China, because of the low intensity of great power rivalry in sub-Saharan Africa, will continue to take a flexible approach to UN peace operations in that part of the world. In this context, it should be noted that China sees economic development and regional security organizations as the primary tools for addressing regional instability.⁵² UN peacekeeping missions or any other form of involvement from outside the region should be only complementary and apply only under specific circumstances. China therefore points to its economic cooperation with African countries and to its support for the African Union and regional African organizations as its main contribution to African security. However, China's apparent support for replacing AFISMA with MINUSMA – a process that led to tensions between the African Union and the UN – suggests that the stated preference for regional actors may not always apply in practice.⁵³

While the Chinese government shows flexibility with regard to UN missions such as in Mali, it is faced with the difficulty that once the mandate has been given, the conflict might evolve in an undesirable direction. This is how China interprets what happened in Libya in 2011, when it abstained from voting on UN Security Council resolution 1973. The resolution was subsequently used by NATO as a basis for giving military support to rebel groups in their fight against Libyan government forces in a way that China regarded as going beyond the Security Council's mandate. China has since been highly critical of the NATO operation, which contributed to the end of the regime of the Libyan leader Gaddafi. To avoid similar situations in the future, China favours an enhanced capacity of the Security Council to monitor possible interventions. China therefore supports a Russian proposal to transform the (largely inactive) Military Staff Committee of the UN into a command-and-control organ for peacekeeping operations.⁵⁴

50 Xue Lei, *China as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council*, p. 11.

51 Conversations with various Chinese security experts, March 2015.

52 Ibid.

53 See <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2013/05/disagreements-over-mali-could-sour-more-than-the-upcoming-african-union-celebration/> (accessed 1 September 2015). According to Yun Sun, a visiting fellow at Brookings, after the launch of Operation Serval, China initially wanted the French (after pulling back) to hand over military responsibility to AFISMA; see <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/01/23-china-france-intervention-mali-sun> (accessed 1 September 2015).

54 Xue Lei, *China as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council*, p. 7.

3. The Protection of Chinese Civilians and Commercial Assets in Africa

China's security and economic interests in Mali are not extensive, and China does not currently regard instability in Mali as a significant threat to Chinese national security.⁵⁵ The notion that Mali could become a source of terrorist activity directed against China does not seem to have played a major role in China's assessment of the situation in Mali. Still, it is likely that China wants to avoid being perceived as directly fighting Islamist extremists in Mali, in order not to become a target of Islamist terrorists at the international level.⁵⁶ From this perspective, it is desirable for China to keep a low profile in Mali and to restrict the use of Chinese infantry and special forces for guard duties only. In accordance with China's threat assessment and the limited means that it has to address security issues in Africa, the Chinese government wants to contribute to Mali's stability, but does not aim to take a leading role in this.

China and Mali have had bilateral diplomatic and economic relations since the 1960s. The two countries established diplomatic relations shortly after Mali became independent from France in 1960, and the bilateral diplomatic relationship has been close ever since.⁵⁷ In 2009, China's previous president, Hu Jintao, made a state visit to Mali. In the economic domain, China is Mali's largest export destination by far (mainly for agricultural products such as cotton and shea butter), and in 2012 it was its fourth largest source of imports (after France, Senegal and Ivory Coast).⁵⁸ The number of Chinese citizens in Mali is estimated at 3,000, and the local population holds very positive views of this Chinese presence compared with other African countries.⁵⁹ In late 2014, the media reported that Mali had signed a memorandum of understanding with China for two major railway projects: US\$ 1.5 billion for the upgrade of the existing railway between Bamako (Mali) and Dakar (Senegal); and US\$ 8 billion for

55 Conversations with several Chinese security experts, Beijing, March 2015.

56 Harrie Esterhuysen and Moctar Kane, *China–Mali Relationship: Finding Mutual Benefit between Unequal Partners* (Stellenbosch: CCS, 2014), p. 3.

57 Esterhuysen and Kane, *China–Mali Relationship*, p. 2.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., p. 3.

the construction of a railway between Bamako and the port of Conakry (Guinea).⁶⁰ Whether these investments will actually be made is still unclear, but increasing Chinese investment in infrastructure is likely in Mali, since this fits within the 'One Belt One Road' (or Silk Road) initiative of the Chinese government. Under this initiative, China is financing and building railways, ports and other infrastructure throughout Asia, Africa and parts of Europe. In Africa, China is particularly interested in improving transportation between ports and inland regions via railways.⁶¹

For China, Mali is a long-standing and stable diplomatic partner, but its limited interests in the African country are not directly served by the deployment of a protection company in Gao. Rather, this deployment should be seen as a further step in the gradual build-up of a modest Chinese military presence in and around Africa. Already with non-combat troops under UN command in various African countries and a naval presence off the Somali coast, China is now increasing the deployment of armed security forces.

The dispatch of Chinese troops to Mali was followed in February–April 2015 by the arrival of a Chinese infantry battalion of 700 soldiers in South Sudan as part of the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS), the UN peacekeeping mission in that country.⁶² Like in Mali, the Chinese troops in South Sudan are equipped with light weapons and armoured personnel carriers, as part of a UN peacekeeping mission and providing protection to UN personnel. As in Mali, the troops in South Sudan are a combination of infantry and special forces. However, unlike in Mali,⁶³ the Chinese soldiers in South Sudan are also tasked with – in the words of a spokesman of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense – protecting 'the local people and other countries' personnel engaged in such peaceful activities as humanitarian assistance and economic development'.⁶⁴ Indeed, UN Security Council resolution 2155 states that the mandate includes: 'To deter violence against civilians, including foreign nationals, especially through proactive deployment, [...] and identification of threats and attacks against the civilian population, [...] in areas at high risk of conflict,

60 Nusa Tukic, 'Mali–China US\$ 9.5 Billion Railway Deal: Will it Come to Life?', *CCS Commentary* (24 November 2014), at <http://www.ccs.org.za/?cat=56&paged=6> (accessed 23 July 2014).

61 Frans Paul van der Putten and Minke Meijnders, *China, Europe and the Maritime Silk Road* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2015), p. 27–28, available at <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/china-europe-and-maritime-silk-road?lang=nl>.

62 See http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/04/09/content_281475085765568.htm (accessed 24 April 2015). The total size of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is over 11,000. Apart from an infantry battalion, China also has around 350 non-combat troops deployed under UNMISS.

63 See http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/17/c_133053773.htm (accessed 24 April 2015).

64 See Shannon Tiezzi, 'China Triples Peacekeeping Presence in South Sudan'. In: *The Diplomat*, 26 September 2014, available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/china-triples-peacekeeping-presence-in-south-sudan/> and http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2014-09/25/content_4539896.htm (accessed 24 April 2015).

including [...] oil installations'.⁶⁵ In other words, the South Sudan mandate is broader and allows the PLA to provide protection to local and foreign civilians. While the mandate covers a wide range of focal points with regard to the protection that the UN mission should provide, Chinese citizens and the assets of Chinese oil companies in South Sudan are among them.

According to the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, China is prepared to dispatch protection units also to other UN missions and it intends to send a helicopter unit to be part of the joint (or 'hybrid') mission of the UN and the African Union in Darfur, Sudan.⁶⁶ China has never before sent helicopters to Africa. The sending of protection units to Mali and South Sudan thus represents a significant move towards a more diverse Chinese military role under UN command in Africa. For example, China has no military bases in Africa,⁶⁷ but, according to some observers, China and Djibouti are preparing an agreement that would allow the Chinese navy to make regular use of a port in the African country. Such an agreement might include arrangements for China to construct new port and airport facilities in Djibouti for exclusive use by the PLA.⁶⁸ Whether or not the latter will occur, it is likely that China will continue its naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and that it will make increasing use of ports in the region for supplies, rest and perhaps small repairs. The steady presence of Chinese warships in the Gulf of Aden has allowed the Chinese navy to operate not only in the Indian Ocean, but also in the Mediterranean Sea, and to make occasional visits to ports in the Black Sea and the North Sea. In 2011, China dispatched a frigate from the Gulf of Aden (and four military transport aircraft from China) to Libya to assist in the evacuation of some 35,000 Chinese citizens during the Libyan civil war.⁶⁹ And in April 2015, a warship from the counter-piracy operation entered the port of Aden to evacuate 800 Chinese and foreign nationals who were fleeing the crisis in Yemen.⁷⁰

65 Security Council resolution 2155, 4 (a)(ii).

66 Interview with officials of the Peacekeeping Office of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, Beijing, 11 March 2015; see http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-04/08/content_6434515.htm.

67 See <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jcca/article/view/482>.

68 Gabe Collins and Andrew Erickson, 'Djibouti Likely to Become China's First Indian Ocean Outpost', *China SignPost* (11 July 2015), available at <http://www.chinasignpost.com/2015/07/11/djibouti-likely-to-become-chinas-first-indian-ocean-outpost/> (accessed 12 July 2015).

69 Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräuner and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interests: The Slow Shift Away from Non-Interference*, SIPRI Policy Paper 41 (Stockholm: SIPRI, June 2014), p. 48–51.

70 See Kevin Wang, 'Yemen Evacuation a Strategic Step Forward for China: the Skillful Act of Diplomacy also Raises an Important Question for the U.S'. In: *The Diplomat*, 10 April 2015, available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/yemen-evacuation-a-strategic-step-forward-for-china/> (accessed 23 July 2015).

Clearly, the Chinese government has a need to maintain and improve its capacity to extract its citizens from crisis situations in Africa and the Middle East.⁷¹ In the past, China used chartered commercial ships and aeroplanes to do this job; in the future, the participation of the Chinese navy and air force will probably increase. The deployment of infantry (and special forces) on the ground under UN command can provide an additional tool for crisis response. This is particularly relevant in the phase that precedes the actual evacuation from a crisis situation. Moreover, in many African countries, Chinese companies have substantial local assets, such as oil installations, mining operations, or construction equipment that would need to be left behind during an evacuation. The mandate for the peacekeeping operation in South Sudan allows Chinese troops to protect Chinese civilians and commercial assets in a country where Chinese oil companies have considerable interests. Although Chinese troops in UN peacekeeping missions are under UN command and their main purpose is not the protection of local Chinese interests, they can potentially provide additional protection that would otherwise not be available.

71 Chris Alden, *Seeking Security in Africa: China's Evolving Approach to the African Peace and Security Architecture*, NOREF Report (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, March 2014).

Conclusion

This Clingendael Report has discussed China's sending of a force protection company as part of the UN's MINUSMA mission in Mali from three perspectives: the operational level; China's role in UN peacekeeping; and the protection of Chinese citizens and assets in Africa.

At the operational level, the force protection company in Mali has been an important test case for the Chinese military. The PLA still has relatively little experience in operating at the international level. MINUSMA has allowed it to experiment, on a small scale, with providing force protection to a regional UN camp in an African country. Operational challenges for China that are specific to force protection in Mali mainly include dealing with risks from attacks on the UN camp in Gao. Since China decided to participate in MINUSMA, the security situation in Mali has deteriorated. Moreover, violent demonstrations by local residents also present a serious challenge for those involved in guarding the UN camp. According to some sources, at least during the initial stage, the Chinese protection unit in Mali seems to have been relatively risk-averse and interaction with both the local population and with some other foreign militaries has been limited. So far, the deployment of the protection company to Mali has not produced major new opportunities for cooperation between the PLA and European UN troops or NGOs at the local level.

With regard to China's peacekeeping role, the Mali deployment reflects China's policy of becoming more involved in the security-related elements of the UN system. China wants to strengthen the role of both the UN Security Council and UN peacekeeping, as well as increase its own influence within both. China does not aim at major reforms with regard to either, but it would like to have a greater ability to keep Western countries from initiating peace operations that it regards as undesirable. The Chinese contribution to force protection in Mali (as well as in South Sudan) also seems to signal China's growing acceptance of greater involvement by peacekeeping troops in situations where no peace agreement is yet in place and where military force is needed not just for self-defence but also to 'deter' armed groups such as Islamist extremists or criminal organizations.

From the perspective of the vulnerability of Chinese citizens and commercial assets in Africa, sending a force protection company to Mali is significant when seen in relation to similar deployments elsewhere. The subsequent deployments by the PLA of force protection units in Africa – South Sudan in 2012, Mali since late 2013 and South Sudan again since 2015 – have been growing in size and in the scope of their mandate. The latest deployment to South Sudan is important, since it comprises a unit of 700 troops with a broad mandate to protect civilians, including Chinese nationals,

and the assets of Chinese (and other) oil companies. To what extent Chinese UN troops can actually protect Chinese civilians and assets during a crisis remains to be seen. Still, given the limited means that China has to provide protection for its extensive and growing economic presence in Africa, any additional option to do so is relevant. The Chinese protection unit in Mali has a mandate only to protect the UN camp in Gao, but in China's gradual approach to building up its military presence in Africa under UN command, MINUSMA has been an important and necessary step.

Compared with China's relatively large economic role throughout Africa, its involvement in crisis management in conflict areas remains modest. The deployment of a protection unit to Mali does not constitute a significant change in this regard. However, this deployment does highlight China's aim to strengthen its position within the UN and in UN peacekeeping. It also suggests that the build-up of a military presence under UN command, which may eventually open up new possibilities for protecting citizens and economic assets in Africa, could be another long-term aim.