

War and Peace: Chinese Blue Helmets for National Interests?

South Sudan as a Case Study

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*‘World is made up of optimists and pessimists:
“In the end they are both wrong, but the optimist is happier.”*

– Kofi Annan

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was accepted into United Nations (UN) on 25 June 1971, replacing the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, who fled to the island of Taiwan in 1949. Chiang’s Republic of China had been among the founding members of the UN. Being one of the five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) with veto rights, China is presently the second largest fund contributor after the United States (US). As for troop deployment, it has the largest number of troops deployed amongst the P5 though the troop contribution of a 1,000 plus¹ makes PRC the sixth largest contributor amongst others like India and Rwanda (Figure 1).

In September 2015, President Xi Jinping announced a standing troop contribution of 8,000 and funds to the tune of US\$ 1 billion for China–UN Peace and Development Fund during the UN General Assembly.² China has thereon passed muster for standby readiness force and also made available the promised funding. The present contribution

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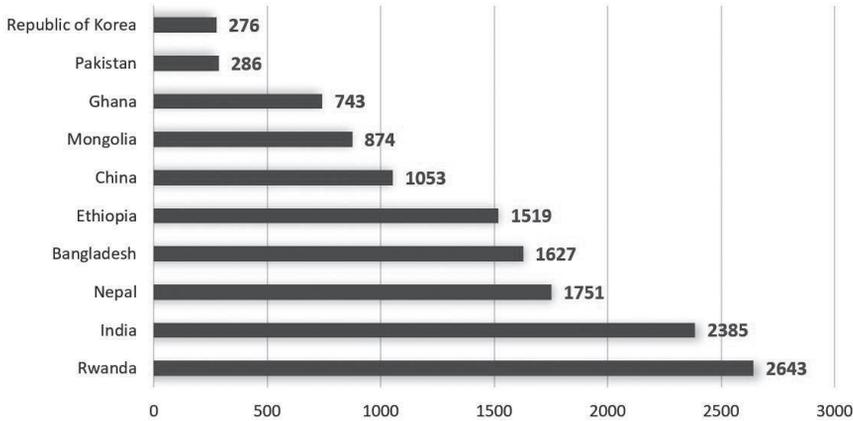


Figure 1 Top 10 Troop Contributors: UNMISS

Source: 'Troop and Police Contributors', United Nations Peacekeeping, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>

of Chinese peacekeepers, including police and other mission experts, stand at around 3,000. The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has the largest troop deployment by PRC, where an Infantry battalion is deployed in Juba, within the same compound as the Force Headquarters (HQ). This Infantry battalion was deployed in 2015, the first such major troop deployment by PRC. Known as CHNBATT, this battalion is part of Sector South of the 17,000 plus UNMISS Force and is responsible for the security of the capital Juba and adjacent areas to the south as per tasking of the Sector Headquarters.

CHINA AND PEACEKEEPING

The traditional form of UN Peacekeeping is now transitioning into negotiations, peacebuilding, peace enforcement, ceasefire monitoring and political missions. Greater focus is now on peace enforcement and peacebuilding. The term 'peacekeeping' implies a multinational force, sometimes with a civilian component, mandated to administer, monitor or patrol areas of conflict in a neutral and impartial manner while 'peacebuilding' involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels of conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritised, sequenced and

therefore, relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives. Thus, while peacekeeping prevents the resumption of conflict by monitoring ceasefires, etc., it does not address underlying causes of conflict in a comprehensive manner as peacebuilding does.³ There is also an attempt at troop reduction with the primary aim of budget cuts and optimisation. The concept of Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), as tried out in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), was developed with the aim of reducing troops but increasing the offensive potential against armed belligerent groups.⁴ Even as the efficacy of the FIB is being debated vis-à-vis proactive troop deployment, the fact is that there is an increased pressure on the UN to be more efficient with lesser resources even as armed conflicts increase across the entire world.

Peace enforcement as a concept runs counter to China's traditional stance of non-interference in internal affairs of other states, which is also with the aim of preventing any meddling in its internal affairs. But as peacebuilding gains more traction, technological and resource intensive efforts from China would be more than welcome. China's position as a P5 and its economic might cannot be ignored by an organisation that is dependent on its member states for a contributory effort towards peace. The structure and policies of the UN ensure that one single country cannot sway the outcomes, even as it ensures that cooperation between members is the only way to ensure long-lasting peace. The US approach to the Gulf War and the famous deliberations in the UN General Assembly by the then Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the US President George Bush give an insight into the machinations of multilateralism.⁵

In September 2020, China released a white paper on 30 years of UN Peacekeeping titled 'China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations'.⁶ The paper outlined various engagements of Chinese forces all over the world and once again reiterated the concept of 'peaceful development' while staying away from supporting external interventions and becoming a global security provider. Peaceful development or peaceful rise of China was a concept first proposed by the previous Premier Hu Jintao, which under President Xi Jinping was subtly modified. Clearly, engagement in international forums like the UN gives China a platform for international cooperation, which is diminishing in other fronts. In September 2021, about 1,000 troops from China, Pakistan, Mongolia and Thailand participated in a 10-day exercise at a People's Liberation Army training base in Queshan County in the central

province of Henan, though most of the soldiers appeared to be Chinese. The exercise, codenamed “Shared Destiny 2021”, underscored China’s position as a “staunch defender of world peace and international order”, Senior Colonel Lu Jianxin, a Chinese military expert on peacekeeping, told reporters at the base.⁷

CHINA IN SOUTH SUDAN

South Sudan is a landlocked country in Central East Africa that gained independence from Sudan after decades of civil war. In July 2011, South Sudan became the newest country in the world, bordered by Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Republic of Congo and Central African Republic. The country fares poorly in many socio-economic categories and is one of the poorest countries of the world. It covers an area of 2,39,285 square miles and the population is around 12.2 million, one-fifth of which is internally displaced.

In addition to aspects like good publicity and increased participation in multilateral endeavours, it is seen that the majority of Chinese deployments are in sync with its investments. With an Infantry battalion plus in South Sudan and an engineering contingent of around 200 plus in Congo, maximum troop deployments of China are in Africa while the other missions have personnel in logistic or leadership positions. While the battalion in South Sudan drew flak for its poor response during the South Sudan crisis of 2016, along with peacekeepers from other countries like Ethiopia, China did not withdraw its troops from either South Sudan or Lebanon despite suffering casualties.⁸ Though a special investigation was convened in 2017 supported by China to focus on security of peacekeepers, the report highlighted that UN forces should take more risks to counter existent threats.⁹ China has since then raised issues concerning security of peacekeepers and improving situational awareness and intelligence.

South Sudan boasts of 3.5 bn barrels worth of crude oil reserves. China invested in Sudan in 1995 much before the new country of South Sudan was formed. Even while other countries hesitated, Chinese investments continued with some journalists speaking of its risk aptitude, which was evident in the way the Chinese company China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) established office in Juba as major oil reserves were anticipated in South Sudan. Indian company Oil and Natural Gas Corporation ONGC also had two projects ongoing at that point of time. In August 2018, CNPC inked an

agreement with the South Sudanese Petroleum and Mining Ministry to conduct hydrocarbon exploration in the heart of the country, outdoing French and Kuwaiti competitors. Given that South Sudan depends on petroleum for 98 per cent of its budget, China also enjoys more than enough leverage to bring the East African country into its sphere of influence. The return of peace to South Sudan could yield exceptional profits for its Chinese benefactors.¹⁰ The establishment of a logistic base at Djibouti is aimed at improving support operations of Chinese troops abroad, especially in Africa.¹¹ One Chinese base in the Horn of Africa might be less when compared to the large number of US and western bases in the African continent, but this move is being viewed sceptically by others.¹²

Beijing's new tactic involves bartering oil for developing infrastructure in the region. South Sudan tripled the amount of oil it is providing to the Export-Import Bank of China (China Eximbank) to fund one of the biggest infrastructure development projects in the country. It is supplying 30,000 bpd (barrels per day) of oil compared to 10,000 bpd in the past to China Eximbank. The bank has financed a hefty loan to build a 392-kilometre (244-mile) road from the capital city of Juba to Rumbek in the central region, according to Policy Research Group. China has been closely working with the Horn of Africa's regional body—the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—in bringing the warring factions together to the table of dialogue.

UNMISS

As per the Secretary-General's report to the UNSC, UNMISS troop strength stands at 13,902 military personnel (of the authorised 17,000 troops), comprising 222 military liaison officers, including 50 women (23 per cent); 425 military staff officers, 80 of whom (19 per cent) were women; and 13,255 military contingent personnel, including 721 women (5 per cent). One of the largest high-risk mission with the highest number of military troops deployed, alongside MINUSMA (Mali) and MONUSCO (Congo), UNMISS force has five sector or brigades deployed to fulfil the pillars of the mandate, which are:

- Supporting the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement and the peace process.
- Protection of civilians and mitigating intercommunal conflict.
- Rule of law and accountability.

- Creating conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance.
- Monitoring and investigating human rights violations.

A landlocked country with 75 per cent of the oil resources, which it inherited after splitting from Sudan, South Sudan has its own share of geographic and humanitarian challenges. About 1.7 million internally displaced people, poverty, violence, killings over cattle, non-existence of roads, adverse weather conditions existent for more than seven months in a year and ever-warring factions between and within tribes could be listed as some of the concerns. A major concern for the UNMISS force is to balance freedom of movement with protection of civilians as any movement must be sanctioned by the government and a majority of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) stay in Protection of Civilian (POC) camps, which in many places are located adjacent to the UN camps. In October 2020, UNMISS commenced converting the POC camps with almost 1,65,000 occupants to IDP camps, which effectively meant the transfer of security responsibility to the government and thereby ownership of peacekeeping as well.¹³ This step can be seen in the background of incidents of 2016 crisis.

The 2016 crisis saw UN forces deployed in Juba and Malakal getting caught in the crossfire between government forces and rebel personnel in such camps, with some UN camps like those in Juba (UN House, where the Force HQ and CHNBATT are present) getting swarmed by the occupants of POC camps fleeing from fire and bombardment. There were other incidents of peacekeepers leaving their outposts, not responding to SOS calls from the adjacent Terrain Compound where UN relief workers were being brutalised and lack of command-and-control coordination between the various commanders. Two Chinese peacekeepers lost their lives as they could not be evacuated from UN House to a higher-level Level 3 hospital at Tomping due to lack of clearances from the government. These events resulted in the removal of the Kenyan Force Commander, who was three weeks into his appointment, followed by Kenya withdrawing her troops in protest. Use of Force and Rules of engagement (ROE) received a fresh review especially in such scenarios wherein the government forces themselves were perpetrators of violence.¹⁴ ROE authorise use of force including deadly force for protection of civilians against hostile act or hostile intent and the Rule No 1.7 qualifies it to state, 'to maintain public safety and security within and of UNMISS protection of civilians sites against

a hostile act or hostile intent that involves a grave threat to life or of serious bodily injury'. However, since government forces themselves were indulging in violence, this created a decision dilemma.

CHINESE BLUE HELMETS FOR NATIONAL INTERESTS?

It is evident that China has had a long-lasting presence in South Sudan and Sudan, even before the peacekeeping mission was set up or the new nation was born. Through economic engagements and regional initiatives, China has ensured a permanent place at the negotiating table where the warring factions would get together to discuss the way forward. It can be stated that China would enjoy a similar position in South Sudan even without deploying its Blue Helmets.

The only avenue where the Chinese Blue Helmets would be of use to China would be in extricating its personnel and securing its assets if they are within reach. During the 2013 crisis, Chinese nationals found refuge in UN compounds and with international aid agencies even as the government mobilised resources to rescue them through backdoor diplomacy. Maybe such a scenario can now be avoided with a large military presence in the capital while simultaneously engaging the government with infrastructure development projects and fund donations in the medical and education sectors.

What Chinese Blue Helmets can contribute in terms of the latest in technology can be matched by a very few of the other troop contributing countries and hence the Chinese Blue Helmets can be considered as an asset in peacekeeping. In sync with the white paper on UN Peacekeeping and other stated policies as witnessed in the recently concluded multinational exercises as well as active standby force commitments, it can be assumed that the Chinese Blue Helmets are effectively contributing towards the efforts of PRC to be a global security provider while simultaneously enjoying the publicity and power that comes with such multinational commitments.

My personal experience as the Deputy Chief of Staff (Personnel, Training and Evaluation) at UNMISS Force HQ remained positive while interacting with and evaluating the Chinese Blue Helmets. Deployed in customised containerised accommodation, with additional security cover within the main base, the Chinese Blue Helmets always came across as a set of hardworking professionals with the right set of equipment and technology. Their reactions and responses during the contingency exercises were up to the mark. Discipline standards were above par

with reports of no leave during such deployments and rigorous physical training regimes and public show of physical prowess, sometimes just to make a point.

LESSONS FOR INDIA

India with such a long-lasting tradition of contributing to UN Peacekeeping can adopt some of the best practices found in the Chinese approach, while China could learn from the vast experience that Indian peacekeepers hold. Chinese and Indian foreign policy are both based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence with other countries.¹⁵ Despite being one of the largest troop contributors and a major regional fund donor, Indian deployments have been more balanced with no allegations of pursuing national interests through Blue Helmets. Achievements of Indian peacekeepers including the sterling performance of the women contingent at Liberia have been phenomenal. Indian claims to a permanent seat at the UNSC and expansion of the number of countries with veto rights are some long-pending aspirations. What needs to be done now is to infuse our peacekeeping missions with more technology and better gender balance as these are the two domains where the UN is presently expecting more. Focused programmes, like 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and start-up seeding, can be used to improve our performance in the peacekeeping and peacebuilding domain as well. Available domain expertise can be tapped through existing institutions like the Centre for UN Peacekeeping (CUNPK) to conduct more intensive leadership and peacekeeping programmes for members of other nations. A peacekeeping brigade with rapid intervention capabilities, like the airborne brigade is the need of the hour. Military diplomacy needs to be given more traction to exploit the soft power generated from India's interactions and relations with other nations.

CONCLUSION

As Kofi Annan said, "Today's real borders are not between nations, but between powerful and powerless, free and fettered, privileged and humiliated. Today, no walls can separate humanitarian or human rights crises in one part of the world from national security crises in

another.” In a world that is becoming increasingly fraught with violence and insecurities, the only hope for humanity lies in cooperation and collaboration. While reduced security resources drive nations to the verge of competition and conflict, organisations like the United Nations can qualify to be the last bastion of hope for multilateralism and cooperation.

NOTES

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