



# Emerging Asian Powers and Their Role in Post-Colonial Africa

Unearthing China's United Nations Peacekeeping Missions in Africa

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## **Background**

Over the past few decades, China has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the global arena as a result of its vast inroads encompassing trade and infrastructure, politically and economically, in most parts of the world. Of late, much attention has been paid on how Beijing's recent appearance as a vital actor in Africa has challenged the West's position on the continent in terms of security, aid and trade. As a result, China's recent involvement in Africa is often viewed as the most momentous development on the continent since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017). Agubamah (2014) contends that the vital need for a positive trade environment and stable market(s), together with Beijing's growing accountability as a global power, underpins its increasing obligation to peace in Africa.

With Western powers, including the United States, reluctant to be actively involved in African conflicts, China's willingness to increase her commitment toward African stability is robustly welcomed. One way in which Beijing is projecting the country as an emerging global power over recent years is by increasing its involvement in the United Nations' peacekeeping operations in Africa. It has done so by providing medical teams, engineers, military observers and other specialists geared toward the support of stability and peace. Such has been done, under the banner of the U.N., in various African countries, including Burundi, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan. U.N. peacekeeping was originally developed during the Cold War era as a means of solving conflicts between countries by deploying unarmed or lightly armed military personnel from diverse countries. This article focuses on the extent to which China's contribution to the U.N. peacekeeping has been beneficial to Africa. Africa offers a useful context in which to examine the nature of Beijing's U.N. peacekeeping as Africa, during its post-colonial period, has continued to be prone to periods of instability perpetuated by politics and terrorism.

### ***China's Recent Rise in UN Peacekeeping Missions in Africa***

A pivotal question that has attracted much scholarly attention centers on Beijing's approach to involvement in Africa: Does it stem from a quest for global hegemony? To some, China's footprints in Africa lead to its gaining global hegemonic power and winning the heart of African countries; a stepping stone to gaining this hegemony. On the other hand, to some, Beijing is after Africa's natural resources at the expense of African states (Mlambo, D.N., Mlambo V.H. and Mubecua, 2018). Nevertheless, in tracing China-Africa relations, one starting point would certainly point to the 1955 Bandung Conference that was organized by the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization. Discussed at this conference were issues pertaining to colonialism, imperialism and the hegemonic posture of some Western states. It should also be noted that the conference sparked the instant interest of China in African affairs. Hence, years after the conference, Beijing gradually made significant gains in military, economic and political sectors on the continent. Following the demise of colonialism, by which was associated with European countries, Africa has continued to face vast challenges, inter alia, socio-economic development, governance, corruption, poverty, terrorism and political instability. The U.N. had mandated peacekeeping missions from 1948, and in 1971 Beijing became a member of the U.N. Security Council (Wuthnow, 2013). To Neethling (2015), the reluctance of China to become a U.N. member was because of the notion that the U.N. had been utilized for the Korean War (1950-1953). Also, a second argument was that the sovereignty of countries allowed them the platform

to monitor and regulate their own affairs with no needed intervention from third parties.

Thus, the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) was more occupied in safeguarding Beijing's territorial borders, and had no interest in partaking in peacekeeping missions. Vital military, political and social changes tend to produce a shift in a country's national identity. From 1971 to the end of the 20th century, Beijing's national identity underwent two policy phases: from a semi-revolutionist country that ought to stay out of the international community that was largely dominated by Western powers in the 1970s, to an integrated member of the international community from the 1980s to the 1990s. Such phases made Beijing develop different policies toward U.N. peacekeeping missions.

Such policies, as He (2019) argues, were later replaced by a third and current one, that of a rising superpower and bringing with it robust Chinese engagement(s) with U.N. peacekeeping missions. Cabestan (2018) asserts that Beijing's role in U.N. peacekeeping dates back to the 1980s and particularly after the end of the Cold War; since its first peacekeeping mission in Cambodia (1992-93) and generally making strides in peacekeeping missions in Africa from the 1990s. Hence, over the years (see Table 1), China has involved itself in various U.N. peacekeeping missions in Africa:

**TABLE 1:** SHOWING SOME OF THE UN PEACEKEEPING MISSION CHINA HAS PARTICIPATED IN AFRICA.

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>UN Mission</b>
MINURSO	UN mission for the referendum in the Western Sahara.
MONUSCO	UN organization mission in the DRC
UNIOSIL	UN integrated office in Sierra Leone
UNMEE	UN mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea
UNMIL	UN mission in Liberia
UNMIS	UN mission in Sudan
UNOCI	UN operation in Cote d' Ivoire

*Source: see Rodgers (2007).*

Lanteigne (2018) submits that China’s policy in U.N. peacekeeping missions could be summarised as follows:

1. Abiding by the purposes and principles of the charter of the U.N.. The U.N., rather than just a few countries, should play a leading role in peacekeeping operations.
2. Enhancing partnership with regional organizations in U.N. peacekeeping operations on the condition that the leading role of the U.N. is guaranteed.
3. Persisting in resolving disputes by peaceful means and to oppose the abuse of force, since it may result in worse or more complicated situations in conflict zones.
4. Following the principles of consent among the conflicting parties, impartiality and non-use of force, except for self-defense, and
5. Carrying out U.N. peacekeeping operations by following the available U.N. capabilities to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the U.N. peacekeeping operations.

Thus, for the U.N., China’s support in peacekeeping operations is vital as it brings with it considerable political, human and material resources. From the 21st century, China–Africa relations have further been stimulated as a result of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) initiative, which is held triennially (see Table 2) and takes place in Beijing or an African country.

**TABLE 2:** SHOWING COUNTRIES THAT HAVE HOSTED THE FOCAC FORUM SINCE 2000.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Host City/Country</b>
2000	Beijing, China
2003	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
2006	Beijing, China
2009	Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt
2012	Beijing, China
2015	Johannesburg, South Africa
2018	Beijing, China
2021 (forthcoming)	Dakar, Senegal

Source: See Dembele (2018).



As part of the FOCAC initiative, various other frameworks have been implemented, each geared toward peace and security in Africa. Such frameworks include the Addis Ababa Action Plan of 2003; China–Africa Policy Paper of 2006; China–Africa Cooperation Policy Paper of 2006;; and China–Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan, 2013–2015 and 2019–2021. As a result of these frameworks, the Beijing Action Plan clearly states that:

*“China will launch initiative on China-Africa cooperative partnership for peace and security and will provide, within the realm of its capabilities, financial and technical support to the African Union for its peace and support missions, the development of the African Peace and Security Architecture, personal exchanges and training in the field of peace and security and Africa’s conflict prevention, management and resolution and post-conflict reconstruction development.”*

Again, during the 2015 China–Africa summit, President Xi Jinping outlined that “China stands ready to take an active part in Africa’s effort in capacity–building for maintaining and strengthening peace and security and support in its endeavours to speed up development, eradicate poverty and realize durable peace.”

By 2015, Beijing had deployed 3,082 personnel (2,883 troops, 176 police officers, 23 military experts) to the U.N. peacekeeping missions. As a reflection of its role in the African peace architecture, China established a naval base in Djibouti. This base is utilized to conduct anti-piracy operations and to enhance the logistical

competence underpinning U.N. peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. This military base is capable of hosting up to 10,000 troops, repair facilities, four helicopters and ships (Hirono, 2019). The changing dynamics in China’s peacekeeping missions should be seen in the context of Beijing’s changing foreign policy (van der Putten, 2015). If one has to look at the recent (2019) Global Peace Index (GPI), one could note that Africa’s peace positions do not look good: DRC, Libya, Central African Republic (CAR), Somalia and South Sudan are ranked as the least peaceful countries in the world.

The growing development of China–Africa relations makes one wonder if Beijing is becoming a neo–colonial power in Africa. Former European colonial “landlords” on the continent, including Great Britain, France, Belgium and others, exploited

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African resources and are still prevalent in most people's minds. Hence, the question is whether China will follow in the footsteps of these erstwhile colonial powers and suck the continent of its abundance of resources for its own economic growth prospects (Ayenagbo, et al., 2012).

There are scholars that are of the view that Beijing takes advantage of its relations with the developing world, predominantly in Africa, to expand its economic and political interests with the notion of narrowing its distance with the U.S. via both soft- and hard-power currencies. However, with the virtue of expanding its security presence in Africa, Beijing's objectives may be looked at in a three-fold perspective. First, it aims to protect its flourishing economic interests in the continent; second, it seeks to further strengthen the China-Africa partnership, expediting the transition of regional order from the West to a new one dominated by Beijing. The third objective has to do with China being a responsible power in the international community with regards to maintaining peace and security, particularly in Africa (Yu, 2018).

In 2015, Xi Jinping clearly articulated that China would intensify its contribution in peacekeeping missions, both in funding and human resources. Joining the the U.N. Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System, China has since contributed 8,000 military personnel to the U.N peacekeeping standby force. Also, the president pledged a donation of USD 100 million toward military assistance to the African Union standby force, thus assisting its capacity to address any arising crisis response in Africa. In the same vein, he announced a 10-year USD 1 billion China-UN peace and development fund to be utilized for peacekeeping operations (Cabestan, 2018). Perhaps this is why, as Hirono (2019) expounds, over the years Beijing's investments to African states have also increased from about USD 391.68 million in 2005 to about 2.4 billion in 2016.

Again, with regards to U.N. peacekeeping, China has provided vast financial backing from USD 286 million in 2012 to about 811 million in 2016 and 2018. In 2018, China's PLA were positioned at 10 different peacekeeping projects across North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, the largest being in the DRC, Mali and South Sudan (Lanteigne, 2018). With such peacekeeping and investment initiative in mind, Cabestan (2018) argues it should also be noted that Beijing's public image in Africa differs from one state to another. As a result, over the years that image has been tarnished by the extensively publicized complaints voiced by some African elites and societies pertaining to the poor and bad quality of Chinese products and infrastructure work.

Again, what further complicates things is the influx of Chinese migrants, including traders who in turn compete with local businesses. This, in both the short and long run creates a tense relationship between Chinese individuals and those from

Africa. While Beijing's, peacekeeping in Africa must be praised, China will also both in the short and long run need to work on policies and frameworks that will protect its business interests in Africa. Over the years, Chinese businesses and members of the PLA in Africa have come under physical attack in countries such as Angola, Mali, Ethiopia and Nigeria. Upheaval and violence are likely to continue as some Chinese companies operate in some of the continent's most volatile places (Benabdallah, 2016). While the pros and cons of China's engagement with Africa (particularly from a peacekeeping viewpoint) have been articulated, perhaps in order for us to draw a nuanced appraisal with regards to China-Africa relations, it is pivotal to offer (1) concluding remarks to this ever-flourishing relationship and, importantly, (2) to offer any valuable recommendations to China-Africa relations moving forward.

### ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

This article did not intend to cover the full length of China's peacekeeping operations in Africa, but merely to offer a sketch of its U.N. peacekeeping operations on the continent. With that said, Beijing's participation in U.N.-backed peacekeeping missions in Africa illustrates its already growing stance in global peacekeeping operations and generally in stability and peace around the world. Such that it is willing to show that it does not merely contribute to the continent's economic development and human development prospects but also to the stability and peace of Africa. Hence, over the years it has altered its foreign policy to contribute more to the stability of the world, particularly Africa (Cabestan, 2018).

In the same vein, one should not run away from the fact that Beijing's recent surge into the African political landscape (not forgetting other external actors) has brought with it much-needed resources and assistance with regards to continental security, while at the same time enhancing the image of the PLA. As a result of its blueprint projects, it appears China will continue to grow its peacekeeping missions under the banner of the U.N. with the aim of bringing stability in African states, particularly in the eastern and western parts of the continent. However, such will further depend on the political stability of African countries such as Ethiopia, South Sudan, Mali, the DRC and so forth (see Mlambo ., Mlambo V.H. and Mubecua, 2019). Perhaps importantly, Yu (2018) provides us with a very significant point with regards to China-Africa relations. To Yu, irrespective of the current commitment China is making in all sectors in Africa, Beijing may find its peacekeeping stance tested as a result of some authoritarian regimes in Africa.

Some African heads of states welcome China's economic involvement and financial assistance, which in most cases does not come with any strings attached.

Drawing from this, if Beijing fails to enhance its efforts (in some African states) in promoting good governance and the rule of law, its continuing security stance in Africa will be severely tested. This also manifests from the point that over the years China has failed to win the hearts of African labour unions, civil society and some political parties. As a result, it will find the going tough in pleasing these critical societal components. If China does not iron out some of these issues, in the long run it could be detrimental to Africa's law and order, as well as the continent's prospects for economic growth. In turn, these prospects for Africa will impact important aspects in Beijing's economic, security and trade efforts. Currently, with a plethora of instability taking place in some African countries, China's peacekeeping presence in Africa is gradually welcomed by many and also driven by the fact that the U.N. is always looking for more troop-contributing countries since the decrease in such from the West and the U.S.

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