

# China's Evolving Approach to UN Peacekeeping in Africa

Cedric de Coning & Kari M. Osland



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## Main arguments

### 1. China's peacekeeping and peacemaking practice in Africa reflects a re-interpretation of their approach to non-interference

- Significant shift from being sceptical to the concept of UN peacekeeping and participating only with support staff, to contributing combat troops.
- China is assertively engaging in shaping the socio-economic and security landscape in countries like Mali and South Sudan and are cooperating with international partners in the process.

### 2. 'Peaceful development' discourse

- Discursively, China calls for a rules-based multilateral world order, where no one power can dominate others.
- China is aware that its own rapid rise to global power status may be perceived as threatening to some, and has been careful to present itself as a responsible, peaceful and non-threatening actor, using concepts such as:
  - peaceful rise/development.
  - community of shared future for mankind/common destiny/interest.

### 3. Peacekeeping in Africa – testing grounds for a future global role for China?

- China's engagement with Africa is expanding from a bilateral and primarily economic & development role (e.g. the older FOCAC)<sup>1</sup>, to a political-institutional relationship with the African Union, which now includes a clear peace and security element (e.g. the 2018 FOCAC).
- China's FOCAC diplomacy is based on a discourse that frames China and Africa as friends and allies in the common struggle against Western hegemony.<sup>2</sup>
- China is Africa's main trading partner, and Africa has become a sizeable market for many Chinese goods (e.g. 20% of its arms sales).
- China sees UN peacekeeping as a non-threatening instrument through which to project its power, reach and influence and Africa is perceived as a relatively safe space – an innovation laboratory – for China to explore and test the boundaries of its new position and role as a global power.

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<sup>1</sup> FOCAC: Forum on China–Africa Cooperation.

<sup>2</sup> This excellent point is borrowed from Carrozza, Ilaria (2019) 'China's Multilateral Diplomacy in Africa: Constructing the Security-Development Nexus'. Chapter 10 in: Johanson, Daniel, Jie Li and Tsunghan Wu (eds) *New Perspectives on China's Relations with the World*. National, Transnational, International. Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, p.142.

## Introduction

China's new, assertive role in UN peacekeeping, especially in Africa, represents a significant shift in Beijing's peace and security posture that is not yet fully reflected in official discourse and rhetoric, but that reflects China's new confidence with its global power status. Every significant adaptation in its peacekeeping policy has reflected an important shift in the country's practical foreign and security policy. Tracing and tracking China's peacekeeping policy and practice is thus a useful proxy for analysing the evolution of its peace and security considerations. In this policy brief we consider the medium- to long-term trajectory of China's peace and security practices by analysing its recent activity in Africa, focusing on how China has used its contributions to the UN peacekeeping missions in Mali (MINUSMA) and South Sudan (UNMISS).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The interviews in Mali were conducted with government officials, civil society actors, non-governmental organization leaders, researchers, journalists and the general public in May 2019, by researcher Souleymane Maiga. Regarding South Sudan, this paper has benefited from the PhD field research of Meng Wenting, who conducted field research in Addis Ababa and Juba in early 2019. The interviews and seminars in China were carried out between 14 and 21 September 2019 by de Coning and Osland. Thanks to all who accepted being interviewed and also to Jenny Nortvedt for research assistance, Susan Høivik for language editing and Åsmund Welitzien for layout and editing. This report is part of larger project on China and the international Sustainable Development Agenda, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Framework Agreement No 14/9422).

## China and UN peacekeeping

Chinese policy towards UN peacekeeping has changed significantly since 1989, when Chinese first served on missions in Africa. Until 2013 these consisted of small contingents in unarmed support roles such as medical, transport and engineering, but since then China has deployed combat-ready soldiers to Mali and South Sudan. As of October 2019, China deployed 2,520 peacekeepers in eight UN missions, among them, 78 women. Of these, 1,058 troops were deployed in South Sudan and 421 in Mali.<sup>4</sup>

### *Chinese peacekeeping history*

- 1981: First vote on PK (authorized extension of UNFICYP)
- 1982: First payment to UN PK Ops; membership UN Special Committee on PK Ops
- 1989: Participated in its first PK mission (UNTAG) – monitoring elections in Namibia
- 1990: 5 military observers to UNTSO
- 1992-93: First military units (engineering troops) + military obs. to Cambodia
- 2000: Civilian Police PK Training Center (Langfang)
- 2003: First female military officer to a PK mission.
- 2009: PK Training Center (Huairou, Beijing)
- 2012: Largest troop-contributor among P5
- 2013: First combat ready guard unit to Mali (MINSMA)
- 2015: Infantry battalion to South Sudan (UNMISS)
- 2016: 4 Mi-171 multi-purpose helicopters and 140 personnel to UNAMID
- 2017: Estbl military base in Djibouti, also as support hub for its peacekeepers
- 2019: First China-Africa Security Forum

Well into the the 1970s, China opposed UN peacekeeping on the basis of how it then interpreted the implications of peacekeeping operations for its own policy of non-interference and sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> Following developments in the late 1970s, when China set about reforming domestically and integrating internationally, it started to deploy peacekeepers – but with a strict policy of deploying only non-combat personnel, mostly engineers, transport units and medical personnel.<sup>6</sup> When China surpassed Japan as the second largest world economy in 2010, and began to play a significant role in stimulating global economic growth after the financial crisis, it slowly and cautiously became more confident about assuming greater political and security responsibilities associated with its emerging great-power status. UN peacekeeping was seen as a relatively safe and non-

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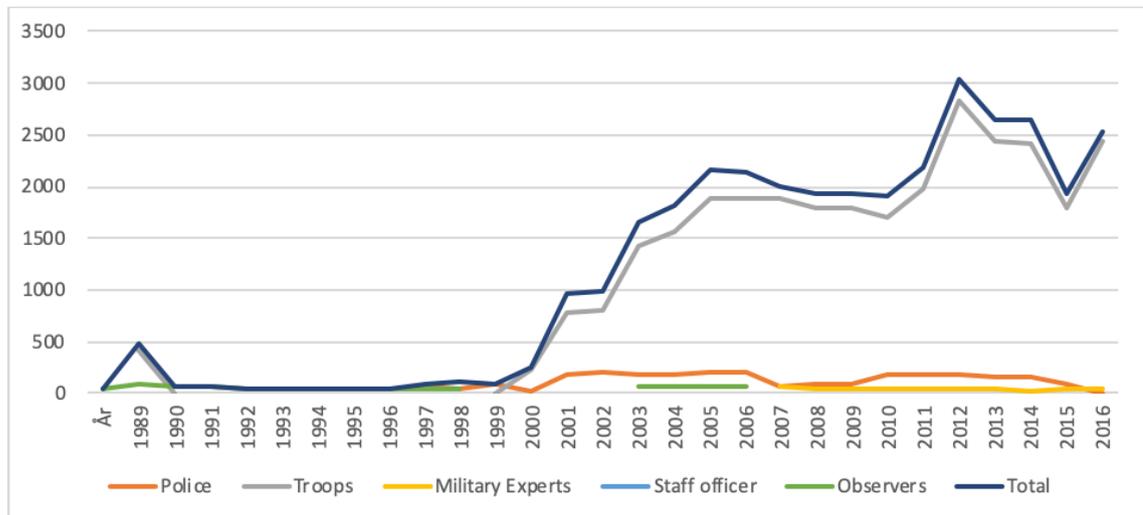
<sup>4</sup> United Nations (2019), see <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>. Since China started to send female officers to peace operations in 2003 and until today, they have deployed approximately 1000 women peacekeepers.

<sup>5</sup> He Yin (2019) 'China rising and its changing policy on UN peacekeeping', in Cedric de Coning and Mateja Peter (eds), *UN Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order* (Palgrave Macmillan), p. 255.

<sup>6</sup> Shinn, D. H. (2015). China's growing security relationship with Africa: for whose benefit? *African East Asian Affairs, The China Monitor* (3)4, 125–143.

threatening way in which China could play a role in maintaining international peace and security.<sup>7</sup>

*China's troop contributions to UN Peace Operations 1989-2019\**



\*Numbers from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

Between 2000 and 2015, China significantly increased its personnel contribution to UN peacekeeping operations, from under 500 to around 3000. The number of troops fell slightly after 2015 but still hovers around 2500. China has been willing to contribute more troops, but the demand for UN peacekeepers has declined as the UN has successfully brought its missions in Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti and Liberia to a close, and several other missions have been downsized due to financial pressures.

Over this same period China's financial contribution also increased significantly. A country's contribution to the peacekeeping budget is assessed based on the size of its economy; and as China's economy grew, so did its contribution to the UN peacekeeping budget. Between 2000 and 2019, its share grew from around 2% to around 15%, making China the second largest financial contributor after the USA.

In 2015, President Xi made a number of pledges at the United Nations that signaled China's resolve to play a significant role in UN peacekeeping. Amongst others, he pledged to develop an 8000 strong peacekeeping standby force; to train 2000 peacekeepers from other countries; and to contribute USD 100 million to the African Union's African Standby Force. China has also made significant investments in police and military training

<sup>7</sup> Zhou Bo (2017) 'How China can improve UN peacekeeping: The right way for Beijing to step up', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 November 2017.

facilities, and have prepared and offered two Formed Police Units that are ready to deploy on short notice.

In 2017, China established a military support base in Djibouti, inter alia to serve as a logistical support hub for its peacekeeping troops in Africa. The Djibouti base also supports China's contribution to anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Since 2008 China has deployed 32 escort fleets, including more than 100 ships and more than 26,000 personnel in the Gulf of Aden. Its naval presence in the region has also enabled China to evacuate citizens from Libya and Yemen and to contribute to the OPCW-UN mission to destroy Syria's chemical weapons in 2014.<sup>8</sup> In practical terms, these peacekeeping and anti-piracy deployments provide Chinese soldiers and police officers with the opportunity to gain experience from being part of an international operation, and from operating in hostile environments.

China's contribution to international peace and security is not limited to peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations. One of the pledges that President Xi made at the UN in 2015, was to establish a 10-year, USD 1 billion China-UN peace and development fund. China is also a contributor to the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund. The number of China nationals working in the UN system has increased, including several senior appointments and elected positions. For instance, Mr. Huang Xia was appointed in 2019 as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region of Africa.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew S. Erikson (2020), The China Anti-Piracy Bookshelf: <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2019/01/the-china-anti-piracy-bookshelf-statistics-implications-from-ten-years-deployment-counting/>, accessed 5 January 2020.

## China in South Sudan and Mali

In a significant shift of its peacekeeping policy, China decided to deploy a combat-ready guard unit to the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013 and an infantry battalion to the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in 2015. In 2016 China deployed four Mi-171 multi-purpose helicopters and 140 personnel to the African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID). However, although outside observers would characterize some of the Chinese contributions as combat troops, China’s Ministry of Defence has not formally recognized these as such (‘combat troops’/zuozhan budui), as the purpose of their mission is to ‘maintain peace, prevent war and control the ceasefire’ – ‘not to be a direct party to the internal military conflict’.<sup>9</sup> In this Policy Brief we emphasize the combat readiness of these units, to distinguish them from the support troops to which China has restricted itself in the past. The peacekeepers in Darfur, Mali and South Sudan are all deployed in missions that have the mandate to protect civilians, and could thus find themselves in situations requiring the use of force.

The increased risks associated with such combat-related deployments are reflected in the fatalities China has suffered in Mali and in South Sudan. On 1 June 2016, one Chinese peacekeeper died and four others were injured when their base in Gao, Mali, was attacked. And 10 July the same year, two Chinese peacekeepers died and five more were injured in Juba, South Sudan, when a mortar landed in their UN base. Although Beijing’s resolve to deploy combat troops to peacekeeping missions has not changed as a result, Chinese peacekeepers in both missions have become more security-conscious.

### Mali

China has maintained friendly and cooperative relations with Mali since the latter gained sovereignty in 1960. A majority of Malians see China as having greatest external influence in their country, after France. This influence is perceived largely in positive terms, due to its contribution to Mali’s socio-economic development.<sup>10</sup> However, people also emphasize

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Defence of the People’s Republic of China, ‘Chinese Peacekeeping Forces Will Perform Such Tasks as Security Guards in Mali’ [in Chinese], 27 June 2013, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2013-06/27/content\\_4458431.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2013-06/27/content_4458431.htm); see also J. Cabestan (2018). *China’s Evolving Role as a UN Peacekeeper in Mali*. Special Report 432. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace.

<sup>10</sup> However, some interviewees were more critical to China’s presence in Mali, accusing China of ruining the Malian economy by imitating the traditional work done by women in Malian society, fabric dyeing in particular. Other interviewees acknowledged China’s developmental efforts in Mali, but wanted China to adapt its policy to Western countries’ policies, in order to put civil society organizations at the heart of their actions for harmonious development (interviews in Mali by Maiga 2019); M. Lekorweert al. (2016), ‘China’s growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews’, *Afrobarometer Dispatch* (No 122). However, findings from another project, where Mali was one of the cases studied, showed that, despite years of EU involvement, despite having been involved professionally or being the beneficiary of EU engagement, and despite reporting good impressions of the EU, half of the study respondents were unaware of what the EU had actually been doing (M. Bøås and P. Rieker (2019) *EUNPACK Executive Summary of the Final Report and Selected Policy Recommendations* (Brussels: CEPS).

the no-strings attached approach of the Chinese, as contrasted with the Western approach. In addition, several of our interviewees pointed out that “the Chinese are like us, they work hard and do the job without drumming the drums...and it is easier to communicate with them than with the French.” According to another respondent, Westerners have other considerations that often conflict with local cultural codes, whereas the Chinese simply don't ask such questions. While Western actors seem to take responsibility for specific sectors and themes, China is active in many more fields, making its presence more visible. China is particularly involved in agriculture, trade, construction, health and education, in addition to its engagement in MINUSMA.

MINUSMA has a strong mandate in the sense that it is ‘to use all necessary means...to stabilize key population centres, especially in the north, deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas’.<sup>11</sup> Since 2014, it has also supported the political dialogue. The Chinese contingent is posted in Gao and consists of around 400 troops, serving in police, engineering and medical units, with responsibility for guarding and protecting the UN military camp, building hospitals and clearing mines. Its operational role has been limited by French counterterrorism forces (Operation Barkhane), who have not allowed Chinese soldiers to operate in areas under their control, due to fear of intelligence leaks. Consequently, Chinese units today primarily take care of casualties and build infrastructure.

On the bilateral level, China provides considerable support to the Malian government to strengthen the institutions of the Republic as well as the operational capacity of Mali's defence and security forces.<sup>12</sup>

## South Sudan

China is today arguably the most influential non-African bilateral actor in South Sudan, as shown by its role in the oil sector, the size of its economic investment, its presence in UNMISS and its role in the cease-fire agreements – and by South Sudan's relative dependence on China.

China's influence is most directly linked to its role in the oil sector in South Sudan. The Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) is the largest oil producer in the country. Prior to the crisis in 2013, South Sudan accounted for 2% to 5% of all of China's oil imports. Oil revenues are the single largest source of income for the government of South Sudan.<sup>13</sup> The 2013 conflict was sparked, in part, by internal disagreements over the

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2100 (2013), April 25, 2013, [www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/documents/mali%20\\_2100\\_E\\_.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/documents/mali%20_2100_E_.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Interviews, Maiga 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Meng Wenting, ‘Chinese peace: Untold stories on the ground in South Sudan’, *Chinadaily.com*, 6 October 2019.

distribution of the oil revenues. China is South Sudan's largest trading partner. In addition to the oil sector, China is engaged in several infrastructure projects, including Juba airport, as well as development projects and humanitarian assistance.

China also has a significant presence in UNMISS. It deployed its first combat-ready infantry battalion to this mission, to protect the UN headquarters and for the protection of civilian sites in Juba. With just over 1000 personnel, China is the sixth largest contributor to the UN mission in South Sudan. For strategic political reasons, neither the Sudan government nor the opposition forces would want to have a direct confrontation with the Chinese peacekeepers. The Chinese contribution is thus tactically useful for contributing to the security of the UN and POC sites in Juba. China's prominent role in UNMISS also gives the mission additional credibility in a context where the government is otherwise sceptical to and suspicious of the role of the UN. Further, China has been an active participant in, and supporter of, the African-led mediation initiatives that led to the ceasefire agreements between the government and opposition forces.

China has probably been more drawn into the internal affairs of South Sudan than in any other African country. It has used its leverage to encourage the government and the opposition parties to negotiate, to come to an agreement, and to implement the ceasefire agreements. It has reportedly used its economic leverage by signalling that it would be unable to renew and expand its support to the South Sudanese government and economy as long as the fighting was ongoing. China has engaged with the Troika<sup>14</sup> and other regional and international actors involved in the peace process. However, it has been reluctant to support sanctions or stronger punitive measures against the government, or to suspend oil production, preferring to maintain a constructive channel of communication with the government and opposition groups.

Taken together, these developments suggest that in South Sudan, China has surely gone beyond its traditional interpretation of the principle of non-interference, and has opted to use its economic footprint and political leverage to try to encourage the government and opposition parties to reach and implement the ceasefire agreements and to pursue a comprehensive political settlement. According to the International Crisis Group, 'South Sudan became a real-world laboratory [for China] to test the boundaries of its non-interference principle'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Norway, the UK and the USA.

<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan, Asia Report N°288, 10 July 2017, p.9.

## Principles guiding China's approach to UN peacekeeping

The official Chinese discourse emphasizes that what distinguishes the Chinese approach to peace and development from a Western approach is that it is not prescriptive. At the 2018 FOCAC Summit, President Xi Jinping announced China's 'five-no' approach in its relations with Africa: no interference in African countries' pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in their internal affairs; no imposition of China's will on them; no attachment of political strings to assistance; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation.<sup>16</sup>

However, analysis of Beijing's activities in places like Mali and South Sudan shows the evolution of a more assertive - yet nuanced - Chinese approach to peacekeeping and peacebuilding. We note three distinctive characteristics that inform the temporal, spatial and transformative aspects of the emerging Chinese approach: a long-term perspective, a collective approach, and a development-led peace.

### Long-term perspective

China's aid and peacebuilding theories of change hold that addressing the underlying causes of conflict, which are often socio-economic in nature, are the soundest way to prevent violent conflict in the long term. Results are thus assessed against anticipated long-term outcomes, regardless of the politics of the day. However, more recently there has been growing recognition that Chinese aid can have short-term side-effects and that better planning, more care in the selection of partners, and more results-orientated aid governance may lead to better outcomes (including also for China, e.g. an improvement in the payment of interest on loans).

### Collective approach

China's aid and peacebuilding efforts are aimed at achieving collective effects ('the best for the most'). When China talks about its own domestic experience it focuses on the millions of people who have been lifted out of poverty over the past decades. There is recognition that this kind of change requires sacrifice. The individual making sacrifices for the sake of the collective good is presented as a social virtue. Achievement is measured not at the level of impact on the individual, but at the level of systemic change. This thinking is reflected in the use of a concept like 'community of shared future for mankind' (人类命运共同体),

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<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. (2018). *Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2019–2021)*. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/t1593683.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1593683.shtml) (accessed 01.08.2019).

which has become an essential part of Beijing's overall diplomatic discourse and was in 2017 enshrined in the Chinese Communist Party statutes.

### Development-led peace

The unique Chinese approach to peacekeeping and peacebuilding builds on a theory of change that sees peace as emerging from development. Several Chinese scholars have focused on these developments. He Yin has termed this approach 'developmental peace'.<sup>17</sup> Steven Kuo refers to it as 'Chinese Peace' and he highlights three characteristics, namely sovereignty, stability, and economic development.<sup>18</sup> Both He and Kuo emphasize that China does not see its own approach to peace as a rival or alternative approach to the Western or Liberal Peace approach, but as complementary. Under both 'development-led' and 'Chinese peace', stability is seen as a prerequisite for socio-economic development and thus precedes it. Socio-economic development, in turn, is a prerequisite for and precedes self-sustainable peace. This development-led theory of change helps to explain the Chinese emphasis on infrastructure, economic development and peacekeeping, especially in Africa. China sees such contributions as having the most sustainable long-term and collective effect, and as a prerequisite for a self-sustainable peace.

#### *Liberal and Developmental Peace (He Yin 2019)*

Comparison Aspects	Liberal Peace	Developmental Peace
Origin	Western Civilization	Chinese Civilization
Conditions for Aid	Yes	No
Top Priority	Institution Building	Economic Development
Role of Government	Small	Big
Transformation Approach	Radical	Gradual
Governance Model	Good Governance	Effective Governance
Diffusion Strategy	Teaching & Imposing	Imitating & Learning

<sup>17</sup> He Yin (2017) 'Developmental peace: Chinese approach to UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding' [Fazhanheping: lianheguo weihejianhezong de Zhongguofang'an], *Journal of International Studies* (Guojizhengzhi yanjiu) 38: 4, pp. 10–32; and He Yin (2019) *Developmental Peace: Normative Competition and Mutualism in Global Security Governance* (Fazhanheping: quanqiu anquanzhili zhong de guifanjiangzheng yu gongsheng), (China Social Sciences Press). Both currently available only in Chinese.

<sup>18</sup> Steven C.Y. Kuo (2020) *Chinese Peace in Africa: From Peacekeeper to Peacemaker* (Routledge).

### **Improved stability?**

Some question whether China's developmental peace approach will improve peace and security in Africa over the short, medium and even longer term. Conflict drivers include not only state weakness and under-development, but also political exclusion, repressive leadership, exploitive and corrupt self-enrichment and the politicization of state institutions. By tending to ignore these drivers, Chinese economic and political influence could exacerbate those dynamics – for instance, by deepening debt, enriching elites, widening disparities, fostering corruption and stifling dissent and the development of civil society and the private sector. However, we note greater recognition of these factors among Chinese researchers, and a growing interest among Chinese bureaucrats responsible for aid and peacebuilding in risk management, responsible aid governance and 'do no harm' principles.

A predominantly military or security driven approach is limited in its ability to bring about peace. China has signalled that it is not satisfied with being only a military and police contributor. In the future, China is likely to become more actively engaged in trying to influence peacekeeping policies and guidance. To do so, it would need to invest more in research and capacity building, and to further strengthen the peacekeeping expertise in its think tanks and universities. China is already showing an interest in mediation and it is likely to invest more resources over time on developing its contributions to the civilian dimensions of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

## Conclusions

Beijing's peace and security discourse, including its emphasis on non-interference and sovereignty, has remained relatively constant over the last decades. However, China's practice in Mali and South Sudan, as well as in Africa more generally, has evolved significantly. China is supporting international efforts to improve the peace and security landscape in these countries. China is also bilaterally influencing developments through significant investments in infrastructure, agriculture, health and education. However, it is its active engagement in supporting international and regional mediation and the assertive way that Beijing has chosen to use peacekeeping that are the most telling indicators of how much its actual practice on the ground has evolved beyond its official rhetoric. At the same time China has been developing its own unique approach to peacekeeping and peacebuilding, based on a theory of change that sees peace as emerging from development. Taken together, these developments reflect turning points in how China chooses to contribute to international peace and security, and are indicative of how China is adapting to its new global power status.

### **Selected recommendations to Norway**

Underlying these recommendations lies the understanding that Norway is likely to continue working with like-minded countries in promoting democratic values and human rights in its overall relations with China. However, we are of the opinion that if Norway wishes to further enhance its relationship with China, including on issues related to peace and security, it would need to scale-up its cooperation, dialogue and trust-building activities with China. Below we suggest some options for how this can be done.

1. Encourage dialogue, both officially and across all levels of people-to-people engagements, on the fundamental concepts that underly both China and Norway's understandings of the role and limits of multilateral organizations and cooperation in peace, security and development, the future of UN peacekeeping, and international cooperation in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
2. Because concepts like 'liberal world order' and 'liberal peace' are so contested globally, Norway should be concrete about what it wishes to achieve, for instance using concepts like: more transparency and accountability, less corruption and greater stability.
3. Encourage and support research cooperation and civil society cooperation among, for instance, Norwegian and Chinese development and humanitarian institutions.
4. Reconsider the traditional donor-recipient relationship and explore implications of strategic partnership and triangular cooperation (for instance China, Norway and an African country or institution like the AU, cooperating on a joint project within the context of a peace operations).



## Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from short-term applied research to more long-term basic research.

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