UNITED NATIONS PEACE OPERATIONS WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS?

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Source: China Daily (2016).

With the end of the Cold War, United Nations peace operations became common instruments of the international community to manage crises. In this context, the number of blue helmets sent to missions increased from 10,000 to 70,000, and investments exceeded 3 billion dollars, more than ten times the previous period (MATIJASCIC et al., 2014). In addition to the exponential increase in these activities, the mandates defined by the Security Council began to include even more complex objectives, such as organizing elections, protecting civilians, and reforming national institutions (BELLAMY; WILLIAMS, 2011).

At that time, China emerged as one of the most important actors in this dimension of the UN's work, leaving aside a period of skepticism in the Security Council. From its admission to the UN in 1971 until the beginning of the 1980s, the country remained

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isolated from peace operations[2], abstaining from the body's votes and not contributing to the annual budget of these activities (FRAVEL, 1996). However, during the Deng Xiaoping administration, China gradually joined the discussions regarding peace missions, culminating, in 1981, in its first vote to extend the mandate of the UN operation in Cyprus, the UNFICYP. Led by the policy of reform and opening up, throughout that year, Beijing participated in several Security Council voting, supporting the body's resolutions regarding peace operations and contributing to the budget of these activities (LANTEIGNE, 2016).
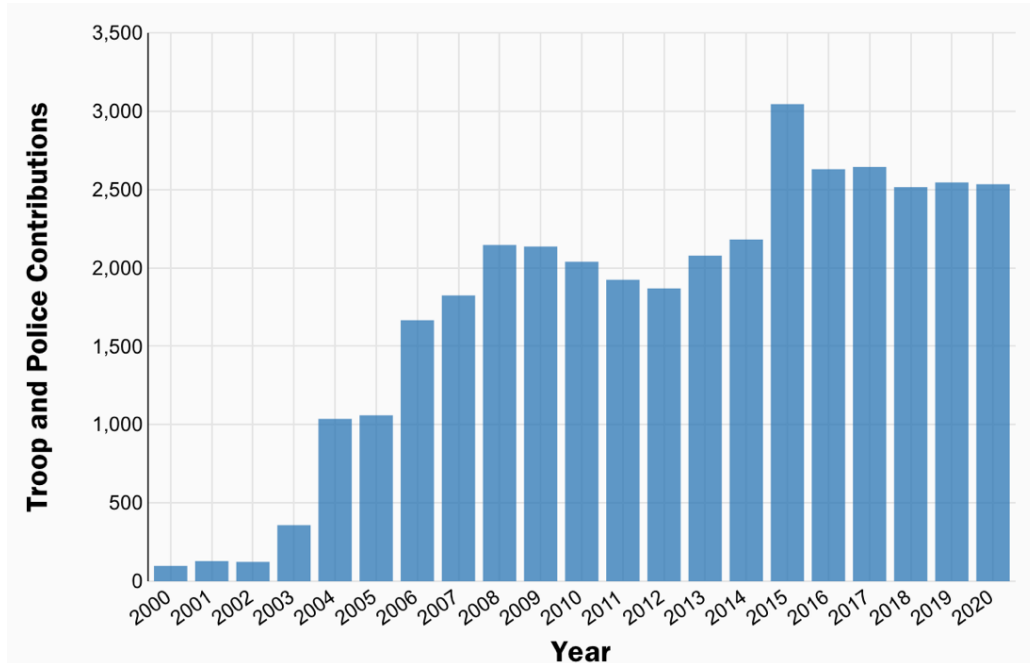
With transformations of its foreign policy, UN peace operations became even more strategic for China on the turn of the new millennium. In an international context marked by multipolarity and the rise of its international status, from 2003 to 2004, Chinese personnel deployments to these missions have significantly increased (ISDP, 2018). From that moment on, China consolidated itself as one of the most prominent states for these operations, not only in political terms but also due to its financial contribution. This article explores China's main contributions to the conceptualization of United Nations peace operations and how its approach contrasts with traditional actors of the European-US axis.

Before analyzing the characteristics of Chinese participation in peace operations, it is worth briefly highlighting the country's history in these activities and the current composition of its participation. China's gradual engagement in UN peacekeeping operations, mainly from the 1990s onwards, was boosted in the early 2000s. 2004 was a landmark year in China's history in these activities, as shown in the figure below, when the country sent more than 600 soldiers to the United Nations Mission in Liberia, more than tripling Chinese deployments compared to 2003. The continuous increase in Chinese soldiers made China the largest peacekeeping missions' personnel provider among the five permanent members of the Security Council in 2008 (ZURCHER, 2019). Although the reasons for this increase are not the focus of this study, many authors highlight operational experience, response to domestic pressures, strengthening of positive

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[2] Lanteigne (2016), for instance, understands that the Chinese skepticism was due to its experience with the Korean War and the role played by the United States to deploy a UN contingent.

perceptions at the multilateral level as primary motivators for China's adherence to these activities (RICHARDSON, 2011).

Figure 1 – Chinese personnel in UN peace operations 2000 – 2020.

Source: Gowan (2020).

Until April 2021, China was the ninth country with the highest number of personnel working in peace operations, totaling 2477 workers, including soldiers and civilians. Chinese personnel are distributed as follows: 1031 (UNMISS, in South Sudan), 413 (MINUSMA, in Mali), 410 (UNIFIL, in Lebanon), 318 (UNAMID, in Sudan)[3], 218 (MONUSCO, in Democratic Republic of Congo), 11 (MINURSO, in Western Sahara), 4 (UNTSO, in Middle East), 3 (UNFICYP, in Cyprus), according to the data provided by the United Nations as of 31 August 2021. The capacity to mobilize human resources for peace operations is due to the quality of its training centers, which have already trained more than 500 peacekeepers from 69 different countries and a large female component. In addition to the important participation in sending personnel, in 2017, China became the second-largest funder of peace operations. For the period 2020-2021, China was responsible for 15.21% of the budget plan for peace operations, second only to the US,

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[3] The UNAMID mandate was completed on 31 December 2020. Full withdrawal of personnel was as of 30 June 2021 (UNITED NATIONS, 2020).

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which corresponds to 27.89% of the financing of these activities (UNITED NATIONS, online).

Furthermore, China announced creating a UN fund for peace and development with 200 million dollars (UNITED NATIONS, online). Moreover, with China's rise as a guarantor of the UN security pillar, the country has also managed to rise to civilian posts in the UN Secretariat and key mission positions. In 2007, General Zhao Jingmin was appointed force-commander of MINURSO, the first Chinese to hold this position. In 2011, it was General Chao Liu's turn to take command of the UNFICYP contingents. As early as 2019, Xia Huang was appointed by the Secretary-General, Antônio Guterres, as a special envoy for the Great Lakes region. However, even though China has increased its space in the Secretariat structure, the decision-making process and influence within the scope of peace operations continue to be dominated by the so-called P3, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom (ZURCHER, 2019).

As already mentioned, despite the Chinese participation having gained important space in the structure of the United Nations that governs peace operations, the country has also been the target of criticism. Some states have claimed that China seeks to reshape peace operations based on its vision of the world order (GOWAN, 2020). Historically, there has been a division among states regarding the principles and objectives of missions. As the P3 countries have defended more intrusive peace missions with broader mandates since the end of the Cold War, China, echoing countries of the global south, uses a so-called Westphalian approach (BELLAMY; WILLIAMS, 2011). In this sense, non-hegemonic or non-Western states prefer peace operations that have the host state's consent, respecting the sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. Although in the recent period China has moved away from the critical of these interventions so characteristic of the Cold War period, President Xi Jinping continues to regularly defend these ideas[4] of not intervening in the internal affairs of states. By echoing positions of the global south, Chinese foreign policy aims to criticize the instrumentalization of these missions by the traditional actors of the Euro-American axis to intervene in internal issues of opposing states (CRISIS GROUP, 2017).

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[4] President Xi Jinping emphasized these principles in 2016 during the 71st Session of the General Assembly (PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2016).

Despite the dissent among China and traditional powers, Chinese foreign policy in the 2000s has reviewed its principles to these activities so that its participation is more propositive. This change occurred mainly after the 2008 economic crisis when part of the Chinese ruling elite emphasized the need for a change in the country's foreign policy that would be more active (CHANG-LIAO, 2016; LANTEIGNE, 2016). With the arrival in 2013 of Xi Jinping, this change was further amplified. Thus, China abandoned the reactive character of its foreign policy, adopting a dynamic posture that corresponded to its new status (CHANG-LIAO, 2016; BLACKWILL AND CAMPBELL, 2016). Chinese participation in these activities was further increased as peace operations began to serve as an instrument of Chinese foreign policy to appear as a responsible and peaceful rising power concerning the post-war international security architecture (RICHARDSON, 2011).

However, despite the strengthening of international influence that China's participation in peace operations guarantees to the country, these activities also allow Beijing to gradually test its capacity as a global leader of the international system, countering the prevailing views. In this sense, if interventions such as the ones led by the United States and European allies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya ended up producing a scenario even worse than the one they claimed to overcome, Chinese foreign policy for peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions has contributed to new alternatives for overcoming these crises. Based on its historical experience, the country has been emphasizing the need to respect the sovereign interest of each nation without imposing ready-made models. This form of action goes against the traditional intervenors who advocated the need to establish political systems similar to the Western liberal model[5] to overcome local crises. Therefore, unlike the Euro-American axis, China, in turn, has sought to encourage the capacity of states to guarantee the fundamental rights of the civilian population and respect for the will of local leaders and regional countries (CRISIS GROUP, 2017).

In peace operations, the Chinese Blue Helmets' activities aim to improve the State's capacity, starting with: police training, reform of security institutions and the judiciary, and infrastructure construction. In the case of the UN Mission in South Sudan,

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[5] That is, holding elections, establishing multi-party systems, strengthening civil liberties and strong civil society participation.

for example, the most significant Chinese engagement in peace operations, China led essential projects for the economic and social development of South Sudan, such as the construction of airports, schools, transport, and communication systems (SULTAN; SUN, 2019). Likewise, respect for local leaders. and countries of the region involved has been the primary instrument of Chinese diplomatic efforts to achieve peace. In this sense, the country has served as a mediator between the conflicting parties, not taking sides and emphasizing the need for other international actors to maintain a neutral stance. In this sense, Beijing has used its economic and financial capacity to create a favorable environment for the conflicting parties during peace negotiations. Once again, the case of South Sudan is emblematic, as, during the 2016 peace talks, China financed, for example, accommodation, transport, and bonuses to the belligerents (CRISIS GROUP, 2017).

Regarding the interests of regional countries, China has constantly emphasized the role that those regional institutions provide for the international community to act in a legitimate way in building peace in the African continent[6]. These are the cases of the African Union (AU), Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the G5 Sahel, the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This pattern of Chinese foreign policy action has guaranteed the country's influence and legitimacy with African states, "especially those that seek alternative partnerships to the traditional model offered by Western nations" (ROGERS, 2007, p.88). It also strengthens China's support for the African Union as there are emerging instruments of the organization to define norms and regulate interventions on their continent, as recently recognized for the slogan of 'African Solutions to African Problems'. Through regional institutions, China can strengthen its relations with local states, without violating its national principles of non-intervention, in contrast to Western powers (VAN HOEYMISSEN, 2011).

Due to the emphasis given to other elements sometimes neglected in peacekeeping and peacebuilding activities, China has debated new forms of multilateral intervention in unstable environments. Thus, by challenging the paradigms of the traditional axis that commands this pillar of the UN, China, in addition to contributing to

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[6] Xi Jinping stated on the occasion of the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2016 that: "The international community needs to continue to support the mediation efforts of regional countries and relevant organizations [...]" (PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2016).

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lasting forms of peace, establishes its position as a leader in the international system. Despite the critical contribution to the debate about the importance of economic development to overcome crises and the emphasis on activities to reduce poverty and unemployment. It is premature to say that China has a defined model for peace operations in intervention environments, as the country has little experience dealing with this type of activity throughout its recent history. Furthermore, given the long predominance of Euro-American actors in the formulation of United Nations policies in this field, China needs time and experience to demonstrate how its conception of these activities can contribute to the UN's work. Still, as in South Sudan, a country where China has taken a proactive stance in resolving the conflict, it will be possible to observe how the strategies and concepts of Chinese foreign policy will help overcome the conflict in that country[7].

As the majority of UN peacekeeping operations are on the African continent and this region plays a vital role in the "One Belt and One Road" initiative, China's most ambitious foreign policy project for the 21st century, it is expected that Beijing continues to increase its participation in these activities to contribute to peace initiatives in Africa. For this reason, and in a context of systemic competition with the United States, it is essential to be aware of the developments that may occur due to the new posture of the US foreign policy of reaffirming its leadership within the multilateral system, promising to contain the influence of China in the organization[8].

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[7] Other countries in which China has taken a more proactive stance towards overcoming conflicts are Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

[8] See, for instance, Nichols and Zergele (2021).

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