



# China's UN Peacekeeping in Mali: Strategies and Risks

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### **China's peacekeeping in Mali represents another example of the country's increasing willingness to send personnel into an active conflict zone and a shift in Chinese strategic thinking.**

One of the less-prominent changes in China's security thinking over the past two decades has been the country's greater willingness to engage with, and take part in, United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) in parts of the world well beyond the Asia-Pacific region. As of March of this year, China had [deployed 2513 peacekeepers](#) to UN missions abroad, including to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lebanon, South Sudan and Sudan. Over the two decades, Beijing has been more willing to send peacekeeping personnel into regions where combat remains ongoing, with one prominent example being the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). China's peacekeeping contribution to UN operations in [Mali](#) represents not only another example of China's developing willingness to send personnel into an active conflict zone, but also a departure from previous Chinese thinking regarding the choice of missions to engage in. It also reflects the developing acknowledgement from China that civil conflicts can have regional and international effects, especially as Africa becomes a critical part of Beijing's expanded cross-regional trade interests.

China began to expand its interests in UNPKO engagement in the late 1990s. But the country's participation in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) since 2013 marked the first

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time Chinese combat forces have been deployed as an integral part of a UN mission. In 2012, a small platoon of Chinese troops was sent to South Sudan, but its **role** was specifically to guard other Chinese personnel in the country. By contrast, the military detachment sent to Mali, originally numbering 170 troops, represented the first true combat forces to be integrated within a UN mission, given their considerably wider role in protecting both Chinese and non-Chinese personnel.

Until the Mali mission, China had demonstrated a **preference** for supplying non-military personnel – including civilian police, engineers and medical teams – to United Nations missions. Also, unlike in other parts of Africa where China has **significant resource diplomacy interests**, including DRC and Sudan/South Sudan, bilateral economic links between China and Mali remain comparatively modest at best, **reported** as totalling US\$405 million in 2017. Nonetheless, Beijing's ongoing commitment to MINUSMA has sought to demonstrate that China's engagement with Africa has moved beyond the economic realm.

### **The Background: Mali's Ongoing Security Challenges**

Mali, along with many other neighbouring states in the **Sahel region** of northern Africa, was entangled in the aftershocks of the 2011 Libyan civil war. This resulted in the overthrow of longstanding leader Muammar Gaddafi, the fracturing of the country, and a swift re-igniting of hostilities which continues today. Mali's fragile security structures buckled under the influx of both weapons and political extremism emanating from the Libyan conflict, resulting firstly in an aborted attempt by northern separatists to create a **separate state of Azawad** in 2012, and then regular attacks by armed fundamentalist organisations, including factions backed by *Al-Qaeda* and later the **Islamic State (IS)**.

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In March 2012, a [military coup](#) resulted in the removal of Malian President Amadou Toumani from office, and subsequent governments, including the current administration of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, continue to struggle to prevent the country from becoming a collapsed state. France, the former colonial power in Mali between the nineteenth century and independence in [1960](#), took the lead in launching *Opération Serval* in January 2013 to expel Islamic extremist forces from northern Mali, followed by *Opération Barkhane* in August 2014 which incorporated French counter-insurgency campaigns throughout the Sahel region, linking the Mali mission with those in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger, to the quintet of states also known as the 'G5 Sahel'.

The United Nations Security Council [agreed](#) to create MINUSMA in April 2013 under the provisions of Chapter VI of the UN Charter and with the blessing of the Malian government. Since then, the operation has been [referred](#) to as the "world's most dangerous UN mission". The [UN mandate](#) in the country has been to help protect and stabilise the country in light of the eroded security situation, as well as to promote a durable democratic system in the country and to uphold the foundations of a shaky [2015 peace agreement](#). As of March 2019, there were [slightly over 16,400](#) total UN personnel attached to the MINUSMA mission.

China [decided](#) in mid-2013 to supply peacekeeping personnel for the mission. The first detachment, which arrived in December of that year, was an [advanced force](#) of 135 personnel, including combat forces from the then-Shenyang Regional Military Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). The sixth Chinese peacekeeping force was established in Mali in May 2018, with all of its 395 members being [awarded](#) the UN Peace Medals of

Honour in March of this year. A **seventh** detachment is planned to arrive in Mali during the middle of this year. Beyond MINUSMA itself, Beijing has also been a **strong advocate** of international financial support for the post-2017 G5 Sahel joint force initiative, which was created by the five Sahel nations to share information and support on counter-terrorism and to promote regional stability.

### **Why Did Chinese Peacekeepers Go to Mali?**

There were numerous rationales behind Beijing's decision to agree to send peacekeepers to Mali, despite the many dangers involved. The first reason concerns China's desire to show African governments that Beijing's engagement in the continent is now truly about broader concerns than China's economic interests in Africa's raw materials. For example, the opening of a Chinese logistics base in **Djibouti** in 2017 was a strong sign that Africa was factoring more prominently in Chinese cross-regional security policies. As a **recent book** on Sino-African studies explained, the expansion of Chinese security engagement in Africa is now being affected by Beijing's ambitions to being viewed globally as a 'responsible great power', as well as the realisation by the Chinese government that its traditional views on non-interference in civil conflicts were becoming incompatible with modern civil conflicts, such as the case of Mali.

Secondly, and relatedly, China's expanded business interests in Africa, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have resulted in calls for greater protection of Chinese assets and citizens abroad. Over the past decade, China has **stepped up** its dispute mediation activities, including work in many countries now part of the BRI. It has also sought to assure overseas Chinese, including those working in conflict-prone parts of Africa, that Beijing is **seeking** to better protect them. The danger to Chinese nationals based in combat zones

has been well-illustrated in Mali in recent years. Three Chinese business people were casualties of a [hotel attack](#) by insurgents in Malian capital of Bamako in November 2015, with another Chinese national [killed](#) at a nearby resort in June 2017. As the conflicts in Mali are symptomatic of a larger set of security threats emanating from the whole of the [Sahel region](#), China's engagement in MINUSMA, as well as other African peacekeeping missions, helps to underscore the country's regional security commitments in the region.

Operations in Mali have also provided [an opportunity](#) for further education and training in out-of-area operations for both civilian and military branches of China's security apparatus, especially within the rubric of 'military operations other than war,' (Mootw) and expanded cooperation with other peacekeeping forces. Yet the dangers of operating in a country where there has frequently been little peace to keep, were driven home by the [death](#) in June 2016 of a PLA sergeant caused by an explosive device planted near the MINUSMA base at Gao, in central Mali. Four other Chinese peacekeepers were wounded in that incident.

### **The Economic Sides of Mali Engagement**

Finally, although bilateral trade between China and Mali is unlikely to match that of Beijing's main African trading partners such as Angola, Nigeria and South Africa, Mali has nonetheless factored into Beijing's overall expanding trade in the continent. In 2017, the Malian government expressed its [willingness](#) to align with the BRI, with plans announced in 2015 for the [renovation](#) of a rail link between Mali and neighbouring Senegal, as well as plans for a railway [to be constructed](#) between Bamako and the Guinean capital of Conakry put forward the previous year.

Economic diplomacy remains the cornerstone of Chinese diplomacy in Africa, with Sino-African trade reaching **over US\$204 billion** in 2018. At the most recent Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (Focac) in September of last year, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced **new economic initiatives** for the continent, including closer cooperation in the areas of connectivity, 'green' projects, health, industry, infrastructure and peace and security. Africa has also been subject to a revival of diplomatic competition between China and Taiwan over the past three years. With Burkina Faso **officially recognising** the People's Republic in May 2018, all African governments now recognise Beijing. The solitary exception is eSwatini (Swaziland). Thus, ongoing participation in Mali peacekeeping remains an important component of China's regional-level African diplomacy, demonstrating that China wishes to be an 'all-around partner' for the continent as Beijing's economic commitments there continue to deepen.

By the beginning of this year, MINUSMA was under much greater strain as Canada and the Netherlands were **making preparations** to withdraw their personnel from Mali, while US support for the operation has become **increasingly tentative** in the wake of escalating violence and threats to the overall Sahel region. There is therefore the strong possibility that China may play an even more expanded role in UN peacekeeping, and perhaps even peace-building, in Mali as the security situation there continues to be **tenuous, at best**.

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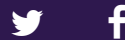
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