



**U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission**  
**Staff Research Backgrounder**

July 9, 2013

**China to Deploy “Security Force” to UN Peacekeeping Operation  
in Mali**

by

**Craig Murray**  
**Senior Policy Analyst, Military and Security Affairs**

**Disclaimer:** This paper is the product of professional research performed by staff of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and was prepared at the request of the Commission to support its deliberations. Posting of the report to the Commission’s website is intended to promote greater public understanding of the issues addressed by the Commission in its ongoing assessment of U.S.-China economic relations and their implications for U.S. security, as mandated by Public Law 106-398 and Public Law 108-7. However, the public release of this document does not necessarily imply an endorsement by the Commission, any individual Commissioner, or the Commission’s other professional staff, of the views or conclusions expressed in this staff research report.

China plans to provide approximately 400 peacekeepers to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA),<sup>1</sup> which took over peacekeeping responsibilities from the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) on July 1. ASISMA had been providing security since January 2013 when Islamic rebels were ousted from the country.<sup>2</sup>

China's peacekeeping contingent will include what official Chinese statements are calling a "security force" from the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This will mark the first time Beijing has deployed infantry to support a peacekeeping operation (PKO) since it began participating in UN missions in 1990, according to Chinese officials.<sup>3</sup> The PLA's security force in Mali will be responsible for providing force protection for "MINUSMA headquarters and the living areas of peacekeeping forces."<sup>4</sup> China previously had limited the PLA's participation\* in PKOs to noncombat troops – mainly military observers; staff officers; and engineering, medical, and transportation personnel.

- In January 2012, China deployed a "guard" unit – consisting of about PLA 50 infantry – to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).<sup>5</sup> However, the unit's mission was limited to protecting China's own noncombat troops. Beijing explained the guards were needed because the United Nations was not providing protection for Chinese peacekeepers.<sup>6</sup>

China appears to be downplaying its planned deployment of infantry to Mali, likely to avoid raising international concerns about Beijing's intentions and the PLA's growing military capabilities. Beijing has yet to provide details on the security force's composition and armament, but it probably will consist of two to three infantry platoons (approximately 50-75 personnel) and armored vehicles. This estimate is based on the overall size of the PLA's peacekeeping contingent and the number of troops and type of equipment China sent to UNMISS.

Official Chinese statements have emphasized that China's participation in MINUSMA will be consistent with its long-espoused noninterference policy because Mali requested military assistance. Beijing distinguishes between international intervention requested by a sovereign regime and intervention it perceives as designed to overthrow a sovereign regime, fearing the latter could legitimize regime change and external intervention and threaten China's own core interests of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

China's willingness to contribute security personnel to MINUSMA reflects Beijing's increasingly proactive approach to peacekeeping. China today has 1,650 peacekeepers participating in UN PKOs,<sup>7</sup> more than fifteen times as many as it had in 2000.<sup>8</sup> China has deployed approximately 22,000 troops to UN PKOs in total, the most among the other permanent members of the UN Security Council.<sup>9</sup> From 2007 to 2011, a PLA general served as the commander of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, the first time a Chinese citizen has led a UN peacekeeping mission. In 2011, the second PLA officer to be appointed as leader of a UN peacekeeping mission assumed command of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus.<sup>10</sup>

---

\* Since 2004, China has been contributing Chinese formed police units (FPU) to UN missions. However, these FPU consist of civilians – usually drawn from provincial-level border police units – and are not under the command of the PLA. Bates Gill and Chin-Hao Huang, *China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping: Prospects and Policy Implications* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, November 2009), p. 8.

China's expanding involvement in UN PKOs appears to be driven primarily by the following factors:

- Beijing's judgment that participating in UN PKOs provides important geo-strategic benefits, such as bolstering China's international image, promoting a role for China on the world stage commensurate with what it sees as its growing international status, and increasing China's ability to influence UN policy generally and UN PKOs specifically.<sup>11</sup>
- Beijing's calculation that increased involvement in UN PKOs provides important practical benefits for its military. The PLA last fought a major war in 1979 when it invaded northern Vietnam, leading some military leaders to publicly criticize the military for its lack of combat experience\* and call for the PLA to focus on training under real-world conditions.<sup>12</sup> The PLA directly gains from involvement in UN PKOs by allowing it to field-test equipment and obtain hands-on experience addressing unconventional threats in harsh and potentially hostile environments, satisfying expeditionary logistics requirements, and integrating into multilateral operations.<sup>13</sup>
- Beijing's 2004 expansion of the PLA's missions beyond its traditional focus on Taiwan contingencies to include safeguarding China's interests abroad, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and promoting world peace. In Beijing's view, these noncombat missions are important for China's national development because they help ensure a peaceful, stable international security environment.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, PLA infantry deployments abroad allow the PLA ground force to keep up with its naval and air counterparts, which have already begun to operate beyond China's immediate periphery to fulfill the PLA's new missions.
  - Since January 2009, the PLA Navy has sustained counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (GOA) to protect Chinese commercial shipping interests. Not including naval diplomacy, the GOA mission represented China's first operational deployment of naval forces outside of regional waters.<sup>15</sup>
  - In February 2011, the PLA Air Force and Navy deployed four cargo aircraft and a surface combatant to support the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya in China's first overseas noncombatant evacuation operation.<sup>16</sup>

China's deployment of infantry to MINUSMA indicates that Beijing aspires to play a greater role in UN operations beyond China's traditional practice of contributing noncombat troops. China's involvement in UN PKOs likely will continue to broaden as Beijing's confidence in operating overseas grows and the PLA's expeditionary capabilities improve.

---

\* For example, Central Military Commission member General Zhang Youxia in 2009 said: "The fires of war are burning throughout the world. In this area, the gap between the Chinese military and foreign militaries is growing by the day. This is a real problem." Jane Perlez, "New Leaders of Military in China Announced," *The New York Times*, October, 25, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/world/asia/china-names-new-military-leaders-as-transition-nears.html? r=0>.

---

<sup>1</sup> China Ministry of National Defense, *Transcript of PRC National Defense Ministry's News Conference on 27 June 2013* (Beijing, China: June 30, 2013). OSC ID: CPP20130627680001. <http://www.opensource.gov>; China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on 27 June 2013* (Beijing, China: June 28, 2013). OSC ID: CPP20130628968145. <http://www.opensource.gov>; Kathrin Hille, "China commits combat troops to Mali," *Financial Times*, June 27, 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e46f3e42-defe-11e2-881f-00144feab7de.html#axzz2XoBd8ZtL>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *MINUSMA: United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali*. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/background.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> China Ministry of National Defense, *Transcript of PRC National Defense Ministry's News Conference on 27 June 2013* (Beijing, China: June 30, 2013). OSC ID: CPP20130627680001. <http://www.opensource.gov>; China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on 27 June 2013* (Beijing, China: June 28, 2013). OSC ID: CPP20130628968145. <http://www.opensource.gov>; Kathrin Hille, "China commits combat troops to Mali," *Financial Times*, June 27, 2013. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e46f3e42-defe-11e2-881f-00144feab7de.html#axzz2XoBd8ZtL>.

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua, "China to Send Security Forces for Peacekeeping Mission in Mali," June 27, 2013. OSC ID: CPP20130627968233.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Hartnett, *China's First Deployment of Combat Forces to a UN Peacekeeping Mission-South Sudan* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 13, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Jiefangjun Bao, "First Chinese Peacekeeping Engineering Detachment to South Sudan Established," January 5, 2012. OSC ID: CPP20120106702003. <http://www.opensource.gov>.

<sup>7</sup> Xinhua, "China to Send Security Forces for Peacekeeping Mission in Mali," June 27, 2013. OSC ID: CPP20130627968233.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress on China's Military Power, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013* (Washington, DC: May 2013), p. 2; Bates Gill and Chin-Hao Huang, *China's Expanding Role in Peacekeeping: Prospects and Policy Implications* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, November 2009), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Xinhua, "China to Send Security Forces for Peacekeeping Mission in Mali," June 27, 2013. OSC ID: CPP20130627968233. <http://www.opensource.gov>; U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress on China's Military Power, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013* (Washington, DC: May 2013), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress on China's Military Power, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2012* (Washington, DC: May 2012), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Olson and Clyde Prestowitz, *The Evolving Role of China in International Institutions* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 2011); International Crisis Group, *China's Growing Role in UN Peacekeeping* (Brussels, Belgium: April 17, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Jiefangjun Bao, "PRC [People's Republic of China]: PLA General Staff Department Issues Military Training Directive for 2013," January 14, 2014. OSC ID: CPP20130114787020. <http://www.opensource.gov>; Willy Lam, "Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping Raises the Bar on PLA 'Combat Readiness,'" *China Brief* 13.2, January 18, 2013. [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=40329&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=688&no\\_cache=1#.UdLGnZyfiop](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40329&tx_ttnews[backPid]=688&no_cache=1#.UdLGnZyfiop).

<sup>13</sup> Drew Thompson, "Beijing's Participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations," *China Brief* 5.1, 2004. [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=3860&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=195&no\\_cache=1#.UdFqK5yfiop](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=3860&tx_ttnews[backPid]=195&no_cache=1#.UdFqK5yfiop).

<sup>14</sup> Open Source Center, *Analysis: China – Media Highlight Noncombat Missions to Address Nontraditional Threats* (Washington, DC: October 16, 2008). OSC ID: FEA20081017785345.

<sup>15</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence, *The People's Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics* (Suitland, Maryland: November, 2009), pp. 7-10.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress on China's Military Power, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2012* (Washington, DC: May 2012), p. 4.