

China as a peacekeeper: The case of MINURSO

Zoltán Vörös

Department of Political Science and International Studies

University of Pécs, Hungary

voros.zoltan@pte.hu

ORCID 0000-0002-3052-4986

István Tarrósy

Department of Political Science and International Studies

Africa Research Centre

University of Pécs, Hungary

tarrosy.istvan@pte.hu

ORCID 0000-0002-0054-6295

Abstract. This paper examines the development of active Chinese involvement in the UN missions and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of a growing Chinese presence in the multilateral security field. In this research, the authors have used descriptive and analytical methods in addition to their ongoing fieldwork in several Sub-Saharan African countries and China. After presenting China's UN-policy, drawn upon relevant literature, the authors test a wide range of the UN resolutions and other data, comparing their case study about MINURSO to other UN Peace Operations. Though MINURSO in Western Sahara was not their top priority, China also participated in this mission, to gain valuable experiences for future cooperation. In conclusion, the paper demonstrates China's global rise in general, and its ascending position as a global security provider, in particular, via its African engagements.

Keywords: PR China, UN, MINURSO, peacekeeping, Security Council, global order, Western Sahara.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Though 1971 was an iconic and fate-turning year for the People's Republic of China, when it comes to the United Nations membership, China had played a role in the creation of the global organization as one of the founding countries at much earlier stages: "As early as in November 1939, China proposed to

establish an effective collective security organization after the end of the war. On 1 January 1942, the representative of Republic of China signed the UN Declaration, which symbolized its entry in international affairs as a major power. On 30 October 1943, the Chinese ambassador was invited by the US, British, and Soviet foreign ministers to attend the Moscow Conference and draw up the Declaration of Four Nations on general security, also known as the Moscow Declaration, which laid the foundation for the establishment of a new world body to replace the League of Nations” (Guihong–Yuqiao, 2011: 973). Actually, the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-shek played a vital role in the creation of the organization, which was acknowledged by the victorious powers of the Second World War: China was the first country to sign the Charter of the UN in San Francisco (Guihong–Yuqiao, 2011; Lei, 2014) on 26 June 1945. Of course, that government was not the Communist one, and after the Civil War, the Kuomintang kept its position and the Republic of China represented China within the UN. Beijing and the People’s Republic of China (further in the text: China) tried to gain the seat within the UN and the permanent membership status of the Security Council (UNSC), but had to wait until 25 October 1971 when the UN General Assembly passed a resolution with an overwhelming majority (Guihong–Yuqiao, 2011: 974). The outcome was harsh and clear, favoring Beijing, expelling Taiwan from the UN, the decision recognized “that the representatives of the Government of the People’s Republic of China are the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations” (Lei, 2014: 3) and Beijing took the permanent seat in the Security Council as well.

1971 was the first step for China, but for many years, Beijing had been playing a moderate role within the organization, not even participating in peacekeeping operations of the UN.

The aim of this research paper is, first, to provide a short historic overview of China’s UN-policy based on the relevant literature review. Then, it looks at Chinese security engagement in Africa after 1971, with a focus on the first important learning opportunities in Western Sahara. It deals with the MINURSO as a case study under discussion, which, based on the UN data and documents (mainly resolutions), is compared to other UN Peace Operations. Finally, some concluding thoughts are presented.

This study draws upon years of field research in different Sub-Saharan African countries investigating growing Chinese presence and engagements since the launch of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. It is coupled with field work in China in the years 2012, 2015 and 2019, which focused on Chinese foreign policy and its implications for African and European countries, in particular, after the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ has been installed as supreme, overarching strategic framework for ‘China’s peaceful rise’ (see among others: Tarrósy, 2020). We confirm that although the People’s Republic of China has been a permanent member of the UN Security Council since 1971, just recently, Beijing has accelerated its participation in the UN missions and has been pushing for joint actions. Their growing interest is not just visible in the form of a more critical partner dialogue, but also since China became the second most important financial contributor in the organization – after the United States.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In light of respective literature, this section intends to deal with China’s changing behavior within the global arena, which, as Larus underlines, is seen – as of today – in the form of “enhancing its presence in international organizations.” (Larus, 2020: 267) The first decade of China within the United Nations was defined by its geopolitical position and internal changes. China then was a large developing country (a representative of the Global South), the only one within the UNSC, and continued to use its non-interference principle, respecting sovereignty of the states – thus opposing interventions, peacekeeping missions of the UN. This foreign policy strategy helped the image of China among its trade partners and Beijing was successful in selling this image to other developing countries. As Zhongying highlighted, China was skeptical about the UN Peacekeeping missions, refused to financially contribute to them and was absent

or did not participate in votes about operations throughout the 1970s (Zhongying, 2005: 89). Beside this interpretation, Zhongying adds, that China might be aware of those possible implications, UN missions “would have for international involvement in China’s key internal affairs relating, for example, to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.” (Zhongying, 2005: 88) With Deng Xiaoping’s reform program at the end of the 1970s, in the meantime, “China had been opening up significantly; it joined a wide range of international organizations.” (Harris, 2014: 19)

Several scholarly contributions confirm that the abstentionist period, therefore, was followed by the changing course of Chinese UN-policy (Sun, 2017; Chaziza–Goldman, 2014; Huang, 2011; Chen, 2009; Stähle, 2008; Senanayake, 2020), and as Chen underscores, two major changes occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, especially highlighting the years 1981 and 1992. 1981 was the year, “when, for the first time, [China] voted for the extension of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) [and] in December 1981, China agreed to pay for peacekeeping operations”. (Chen, 2009: 158-159) Later on in 1989 China sent the first observers to such missions (Ibid.). In 1992 there was a second major change, “when China supported several non-traditional” (Ibid.) Peacekeeping Operations, where non-traditional missions are those, where the consent of all parties are missing and the use of force might be an option – according to M. Taylor Fravel (Fravel cited by: Chen, 2009: 157). This proved the changing attitude of China towards the UN and its interventions, and from this moment, we can witness a growing presence of Beijing. Since the 1990s China participates in UN Operations, and expands the level of participation since those years (Guihong–Yuqiao, 2011: 977). China already is the second biggest contributor of both the UN’s regular and peacekeeping budget (after the US) and the 11th biggest contributor of personnel to the UN missions¹. Borah is right in stating that since the start of the 2010s “Beijing has incubated its intention to become a global security provider, but according to its own definition. [...]” (Borah, 2020; Larus, 2020; Rutkowska, & Adamczyk, 2017). In 2020 China is the largest contributor of peacekeepers among the P5 of the Security Council.² This is in line with how, in the meantime, Beijing “has altered its image across much of the globe, from threat to opportunity, from danger to benefactor. [...] and China’s new benign image [...] will help Beijing execute its foreign policy more successfully.” (Kurlantzick, 2007: 5-8)

Why did China decide to change its mind and what were the reasons behind generally accepting such UN missions? The aim of our study is to prove that their new intention cannot be explained with a single reason and the goal is to understand those multiple motivations via one of their earliest commitments in the frame of MINURSO.

3. RESEARCH METHOD AND STUDY DISCUSSION

Our study uses a comparative research method as it looks at the P5 of the UN Security Council with regard to their participation in and contributions to Peacekeeping Operations between 1995 and 2019. Our analysis focused on UN documents – mainly Security Council resolutions and press releases –, as well as peacekeeping datasets. The case study we present here on MINURSO is also put into a comparative context, as personnel contributions from China are revealed in light of all UN missions, thus offering the big picture of Chinese involvement. At the same time, we critically compare theories and views about China’s role in multilateral peacekeeping.

¹ Summary of Troop Contributing Countries by Ranking, 31 May 2019, from: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/2-country_ranking_report_0.pdf

² Summary of Troop Contributing Countries by Ranking, 31 May 2019, from: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/2-country_ranking_report_0.pdf

In our discussion we can underscore what Richardson says, that: “It is unclear whether there is a single Chinese position regarding peacekeeping related deployments”, (2011: 291) and there are several theories and ideas on why China’s role in UN peacekeeping has grown remarkably (Stähle, 2008: 653). First of all, critical voices (Stähle, 2008; ISDP, 2018; ICG, 2009; Fung, 2016) think that the energy and raw material interests of the East Asian country has a considerable relevance when it’s about the Peace Operations and Beijing is sending troops mostly into those countries, where they are about to strengthen their regional position. This explanation focuses on China’s energy needs and market interests, so according to these views the material factors determine Beijing’s decisions about joining UN-missions.

But of course, this is not their only interest, according to Gill and Huang, their increased presence in Peacekeeping Operations is happening because of their PR and military goals. As they put it, a ‘harmonious’ image can project a responsible image of the country, where Beijing is interested in investing in the global community, something President Xi Jinping always emphasizes lately. UN missions also provide an essential (and peaceful) possibility for Chinese police and military to have and receive combat and training experiences, something what the developing People’s Liberation Army (PLA) seriously needs: to increase the combat capacity of the PLA. (Gill – Huang, 2009: 12) Capacity building thus is also a relevant aim of deeper participation in such missions, as Singh puts it, the training of their personnel is “an integral part of military diplomacy and achieves the purpose of China’s diplomacy for peace, fulfils its international obligation and contributes to the creation of a harmonious world”. (Singh, 2011: 795)

This outreach of the military can benefit the PLA and the country itself: they can learn about good practices, train and develop personnel while they can ease and handle the concerns of their neighboring countries. As again Gill and Huang underscored, “China [...] sees participation in peacekeeping operations as a way to assuage the concerns of its neighbors about the growing military capabilities of the PLA. The Chinese leadership is increasingly aware of worries in the region that a rising China could pursue a more aggressive and destabilizing foreign and security policy in the years ahead” (Gill – Huang, 2009: 12) and UN missions provide a good ground for testing its new equipment and training its personnel outside of the East Asian, South East Asian region.

Beside these theories, there is a further one as well, connected to the dual identity of China, to the fact that the East Asian country is the only permanent member of the UNSC still belonging to the group of developing countries. As Fung notes: “Some states view themselves as ‘global good Samaritans’ and are likely to be involved in multilateral security issues because of a redefined sense of national interest [...]. These states will overcome their bounded, narrowly defined national interests to maximize the common good, offering stability in the international system when the hegemon cannot or does not.” (Fung, 2016: 418) And China, introducing its ‘Responsible Power’ image (see: Richardson, 2011) in the 1990s, tries to still look like a developing state, which tries to help its developing partners while ‘peacefully rising’ (Kissinger, 2012: 500). Also, when we are talking about the image of the country, we should not forget about the foreign policy of China, especially about its ‘charm offensive’ (Kurlantzick, 2007). Participation in peacekeeping is “proving to be an increasingly valuable and visible component” (Hirono-Lanteigne, 2011: 252) of this approach.

Therefore, regarding the multiple Chinese positions on UN Peacekeeping Operations, we can summarize these multi-vector motivations of China through the following explanations:

- They definitely have economic and political interests through their energy and raw material needs and by participating in such operations China hopes to maintain and secure such contracts and oil fields, mines and connected infrastructures.
- The operational-military goals we can also highlight, learning about good practices, training of personnel and testing new equipment is possible without engagements of armed conflict and can help the military development of the country.

- Identity concerns we have to highlight as well. China became a dedicated, ‘responsible’ country, upgrading and changing their previous views on peacekeeping and intervention. As the only developing country of the UNSC permanent members, China still has their past thoughts (on why they were rejecting interventions of the UN) and their new aims and goals: the essence of their oft-mentioned *Responsible Power* image roots from these past considerations and builds upon their recent plans on becoming a global actor.

- Finally, the potential PR benefits of peacekeeping (regarding the image of the country) also motivate Beijing for participation. They can step up as a responsible power and since China is a country without an ‘imperialist’ or ‘neo-colonialist’ past (unlike the UK, France and the US), there are less objections against a Chinese engagement.

Before looking at what is the case with the African UN missions of China in general, and with MINURSO in particular, and whether or not we can justify any of the above explanations, first, we need to see the bigger picture, within which frame this Chinese activity and growing presence is happening.

As we have discussed, China is already the second biggest financial contributor to both budgets of the UN after the US – which is coming from their economic growth and developing financial conditions. The regular budget is based upon the share of global gross national income (GNI) of the member states, with special adjustments coming from the level of indebtedness and their position to the average global income. The peacekeeping budget builds upon these scales and divides countries into 10 levels, where each level might have special discounts based upon their relative per capita incomes. In this sense, the Chinese arrival, given their economic successes is not surprising, their dedication towards the organization on the other hand is clearly visible: they are by far the biggest personnel contributors of missions compared to the other 4 permanent members (see *Table 1*) and the (ex-hegemon) superpower, the United States has an adverse stance towards the UN: Washington is rather critical with the global organization, besides President Trump’s critical words on the UN and globalization, the financial issues have been the main subjects of debates. The US consistently advocated a reduction in its contribution and the organization’s budget, successfully implementing the latter (and thereby reducing their own contribution, of course). Compared to 2016-2017, the United States achieved a 285 million USD reduction by 2018-2019, which Haley commented, “we will no longer let the generosity of the American people be taken advantage of or remain unchecked”³ referring on the UN as a political organization that exploits the United States.

Table 1

Contributions (observers, police, troops) to Peacekeeping Operations by the P5.
December 1995 – December 2019.

Year	1995	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019
US	2851	787	677	750	518	387	316	75	126	118	80	55	31
Russia	1731	1154	213	353	323	212	293	365	210	103	80	80	80
UK	475	405	498	714	563	349	362	282	279	289	290	679	579
France	475	486	516	483	317	582	1944	1610	1391	952	934	816	730
PR China	45	37	37	129	358	1059	1824	2136	1924	2078	3045	2644	2545

Edited by the authors.

Source: peacekeeping.un.org.

³ Haley touts reduced UN budget. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/26/politics/nikki-haley-un-budget/index.html>

Meanwhile, the European powers still consider it an essential organization and their perception is closer to the Chinese one: the UK put together a report (Keeping Britain Global) in 2017 to highlight the importance of the UN and to boost the activity of London within its missions, calling the peacekeeping missions of the organization the most effective and proven methods for developing and maintaining global peace and security.⁴ France is the second-largest supplier of troops of the five permanent members and they share a similar approach. The Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian in 2019 called peacekeeping operations vital to peaceful resolution of conflicts and said, “this collective endeavor, which embodies the values of multilateralism and cooperation, saves thousands of lives every year.”⁵ Russia is more interested in their own bi- and multilateral deals and their peacemaking (peacekeeping) processes are more dominated by their national interests, which they cannot pursue within the UN (Rakowska-Harmstone, 2014: 40; Amarasinghe, & Rajhans, 2020) due to lack of their influence.

4. FURTHER DISCUSSION OVER CHINESE SECURITY ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA – UNDERSTANDING A PRAGMATIC TURN AFTER 1971

Since the PRC assumed its membership on the UNSC, it has become more and more pragmatic in its foreign and security policy, also in terms of China-Africa relations. It definitely “underwent a gradual change in attitude between 1981 and 1987 after which it began to cooperate in some UN peacekeeping operations [on African soil].” (Shinn – Eisenman, 2012: 183) This started off with the Western Sahara in 1991 when China sent twenty observers, followed by other small contingents deployed into Mozambique, Liberia, and Sierra Leone throughout the 1990s. As of 2008 already, globally, “China was the twelfth-largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations with 1,981 personnel. The United States [that time] ranked forty-third with 300 personnel.” (UN Mission’s Contributions by Country cited by Shinn, 2008: 177) A long-standing stronghold of U.S.-Africa relations, Liberia, also praised for effective Chinese involvement in the recovery of the country after over a decade-long civil war. In February 2007, then-president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf underscored that: “Liberians will never forget the friendship of Chinese peacekeeping soldiers.” (Sudan Tribune, February 2, 2007) All these need to be looked at and understood in the large context of decades-long Sino-African cooperation, which from a Chinese perspective, “reflects its investment [in African countries] of both financial and political capital.” (Michel – Beuret, 2009: 143) China has a clear and sophisticated strategic policy towards the African continent, and since 2000, when the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was held in Beijing, the PRC has accelerated its engagements in all walks of life. Although this has stirred mixed reactions recently (see more: Tarrósy, 2019), African governments welcome China also in the security realm. In fact, such involvement is not only welcomed by Africans, but also by the international community so that local conflicts are reduced and security risks minimized. Ambassador Shinn rightly points out that: “Chinese military and security cooperation with African countries is a corollary to Beijing’s much greater use of soft power in advancing its interests [also] on the African continent.” (Shinn, 2008: 183) A number of knowledge facilities got installed in China for the sake of professionalization: among these we find an IR Academy, a police training centre, as well as a military peacekeeping training center. This latter one “offers English-language training, simulated UN peacekeeping camps, demining training areas [...]. It is also the primary location for international peacekeeping exchanges.” (Shinn – Eisenman, 2012: 185) This also confirms that “China’s new perception of the UN and peacekeeping brought about a new pattern of Chinese behavior with respect [also] to collective security.”

⁴ See: Keeping Britain Global. <https://www.una.org.uk/keeping-britain-global>

⁵ Peacekeeping. Permanent Mission of France to the UN. Available: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/Peacekeeping-10194>

(Wang, 1998: 108) This new behavior is tangible with regard to the management of the country's relations with Africa. One example of a responsible – and at the same time certainly self-interest-driven – presence is well documented in the case of the first Chinese overseas military base in Djibouti, where the PRC has also “financed the expansion of one of the most strategic ports in the world, Doraleh.” (Guerrero, 2020) In general, we can conclude that China has been demonstrating a balancing role, which derives from the historical fact that although “China had not left a giant footprint in Africa comparable to that of European colonialism or the two superpowers in Cold War era, [and therefore] there are no strong geopolitical considerations underpinning China's involvement in African peace and security affairs. Most of the focus has been put on addressing nontraditional security threats, such as internal fragility and violent extremism” (Lei, 2018: 84) which can be related to a development-focused approach of engagement.

5. CASE STUDY: MINURSO

5.1. The first important field experience

Although the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)⁶ was not considered as an Operation, where China was about to look for further interests, eventually it became one of the most relevant missions: MINURSO was the first Operation where a Chinese Major General was appointed as Chief Commander and coordinated the 231 military personnel serving the mission (Besenyő, 2009: 145) – already in 2007. Major General Zhao Jingmin replaced Danish General Kurt Mosgaard and became the first Chinese force commander heading a UN Peace Operation. (UN S/2007/509, 2007) As Matsuda noted, “although China's troop contributions have been limited to engineers, medical teams, and combat service support, the size of the forces dispatched means that the PLA is rapidly acquiring organizational familiarity and expertise on UN peacekeeping, and is being increasingly appreciated by the UN side. A sign of this came in August 2007 [...]”. (Matsuda, 2016: 59) Zhao Jingmin already had experience with UN Missions and with the MINURSO as well: he served as a military observer at the mission from 1991 until 1992. He was replaced in 2011, but was not the last Chinese Chief Commander at the Mission: UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reported in December 2016 that Major General Wang Xiaojun is going to take over the mission, for a term, succeeding Tayyab Azam from Pakistan (UN S/2016/1040, 2016). The second Chinese Chief Commander of MINURSO is also an experienced soldier, with versatile international background at various embassies as a Defense Attaché (UN, 2016). He stayed in office until February 17, 2019, when he was replaced by Zia Ur Rehman from Pakistan.

As it was the case with China's general UN presence, it took time for Beijing in the case of the MINURSO as well to play a more active role throughout the resolution-making process. Already from the beginning, China actively contributed to the mission, by 1993, there were already 20 Chinese military observers and headquarters personnel within MINURSO (UNSC, 1993) and China voted for the extensions in the 1990s and 2000s, but rarely commented them. In July 2003, when adopting Resolution 1495, the Chinese representative, Zhang Yishan praised consensus and the cooperation of members and parties (UN, 2003). Resulting from its changing global role, China started to actively comment the resolutions and decision-making processes, in some cases the representative of China was critical about the renewals of the Mandate of the Mission, and most of the time called for dialogues between the affected sides, always emphasizing the impartiality of PR China in the conflict, somehow still reminding us on the policy of non-interference of the country. In 2007 Resolution 1754 and 1783 were voted by the representative of China

⁶ The tasks and structure of MINURSO are discussed in detail by Besenyő, 2009: 141-162. and Besenyő, 2020: 46-59.

as well, both deciding about a six-month mandate. In 2008, the SC members decided to create full-year mandates, which were preferable regarding continuity, helping the planning of the Mission. The same year Resolution 1813 was also voted for, without any special comments coming from China, and that was the same case in 2009 with Resolution 1871, then, in 2010 with Resolution 1920, in 2011 with Resolution 1979, in 2012 with Resolution 2044, in 2013 with Resolution 2099 and in 2014 with Resolution 2152. In 2015, Chinese Representative Yong Zhao had a few words after so many years of staying in the background, criticizing the creation of Resolution 2218, especially the short time and the lack of patience (UN, 2015), though the Resolution about another one-year extension was unanimously adopted. By 2016, that unanimity was not there, but China was still among those countries, who voted for Resolution 2285. Liu Jieyi highlighted, China still supports the extension of the mandate and continues to support the UN in finding a lasting solution (UN, 2016b), but critical voices mentioned the missing negotiations between the members of the SC. In 2017, another year-long extension was voted unanimously. Zhang Dianbin said that the situation is complicated, but stability is essential, citing the impartial position of China as well (UN, 2017). In 2018, the SC returned to further extend the Mission only for six months, starting in April 2018. The first resolution of the year, Resolution 2414 was adopted, but with the abstention of China (together with Ethiopia and the Russian Federation). Shen Bo, representing Beijing explained the abstention through some recommendations, which were not considered during the process. The Chinese side again highlighted the lack of time for the discussions and the fact that many concerns were not considered (UN, 2018a). In October 2018, another six-month extension was adopted with Resolution 2440, and though Ethiopia and Russia were joined by Bolivia staying away from the vote, this time the Chinese representative Wu Haitao voted for and welcomed the adoption, but emphasized again the need of deeper consultations (UN, 2018b). The last extension was in April 2019, again for six months, and China again voted for Resolution 2468, citing the very same concerns (UN, 2019).

Through the Resolutions, a story of a globally more dedicated, but still hesitant China emerges: a country which realized that it has to work together with the international community in order to further boost its trade and economic relations, with a foreign policy still originating from the 1960s and 1970s, defined by the principle of non-interference.

5.2. Comparison with other UN Peace Operations

When it is about the entire Chinese contribution, it becomes obvious that MINURSO is not the main interest of China, somehow validating those critical voices who refer to yet another interest, a big picture agenda of the more active Chinese participation.

As we can learn from *Table 2*, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has the biggest chunk of the Chinese troops, there are over a 1,000 blue helmet contingent troops – in a civil war-torn country, where we cannot forget about the energy exports to China. According to Atlas Media MIT, in 2017, South Sudan exported \$1.23B worth of products, out of which 99.2% was crude petroleum (\$1.22B) and the top export destination of the country was China, dramatically dominating the market, 95% of the exported products (worth \$1.16B) went to the East Asian country.⁷

United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is in the second position, when it is about the Chinese contributions, not fitting the critical perspective, as well as the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is somehow out of the picture where China is only interested in those missions, where it has considerable energy and trade interests. On the other hand, these missions

⁷ See: <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/ssd/>

confirm a story about a country, which is participating only to receive more and more experiences and prove its readiness to work together with the international community.

United Nations–African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo (MONUSCO) are again about those affected areas, regions and countries where China has economic and diplomatic interests.

Table 2

Chinese personnel contributions by personnel type (as of 31 October 2020).

	Police	Experts on Mission	Staff Officer	Contingent Troops	TOTAL SUM
UNMISS	21	6	22	1030	1077
MINUSMA			13	413	426
UNIFIL			9	410	419
UNAMID				364	364
MONUSCO		7	5	218	230
MINURSO		19			12
UNFICYP	5				5
UNTSO		4			4
MINUSCA			2		2

Source: peacekeeping.un.org.

Compared to these Missions, MINURSO recently with only 19 experts, has a minor role in the Chinese UN portfolio, but we should not forget that it provided the first Chinese Chief Commander, altogether two in the history of the Chinese participation in this Mission, and United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was the only other mission, where a Chinese, Major General Chao Liu served as a Chief Commander, between 2011 and 2014.

6. CONCLUSION

From their activity within MINURSO and their further UN missions we could see that there were cases where their economic and political interests were the essential factors behind the participation of China (see: South Sudan), but each and every case, especially in those cases, where the energy import interests were not present, the operational-military goals and their identity concerns as well as the potential PR benefits were visible. Beijing, even though they were active participants of these UN missions, still tried to emphasize the impartiality of the People's Republic of China in the conflicts.

While based on the personnel contribution, MINURSO is not an essential mission for China, we have to consider other aspects as well. The changing global role and presence of China required an upgraded foreign policy while Beijing started to look for more control in global and regional organizations as well. The United Nations, as the most relevant multinational-global organization, became important for them. When in 2018 President Xi Jinping in his New Year's Speech mentioned the UN, Beijing clearly defined its needs and goals: they want to become more relevant and influential within the organization. China realized that the UN and its multinational platform, together with its missions can help their new goals, can help position China (back) into the center of the global system. Not only they can prove to be a reliable partner and a country which is ready to invest in Peace Operations, through these missions and UN diplomacy they can protect their interests (markets, friendships, etc.) as well, while their participation in UN-related missions can also contribute to the development of their military might. China understood in a smart way that through the UN, they can further boost their global presence – and that perspective can help us evaluate the MINURSO as well: though not their most populous mission, it can help China to gain more information and knowledge about the multilateral institution itself, about the setup and the structure of its missions.

So, beside the already introduced reasons explaining China's participation in Peacekeeping Missions, (a) the energy and political interests, (b) the PR-goals, (c) the military segment and the (d) identity considerations, we have to include a fifth one as well, somehow completing their interests: China joins these missions also in order to (e) gain more and more experiences in global presence and prove its readiness (not just on the PR-levels) to work together with the international community, in other words, tries to develop its global institutional operational capacity, wants to fully understand every bits and pieces of UN Peacekeeping Operations. MINURSO (or UNIFIL) is among those missions, where this new element is essential to understand the Chinese intentions. As Stähle noted: "If the Chinese leadership managed to embrace the principles of UN peacekeeping operations fully, China could become one of the most resourceful contributors to international peacekeeping". (Stähle, 2008: 631) We may, of course, further examine how much all these will end up in a more secure environment for African development in the coming years, together with more transnational security from a global perspective.

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