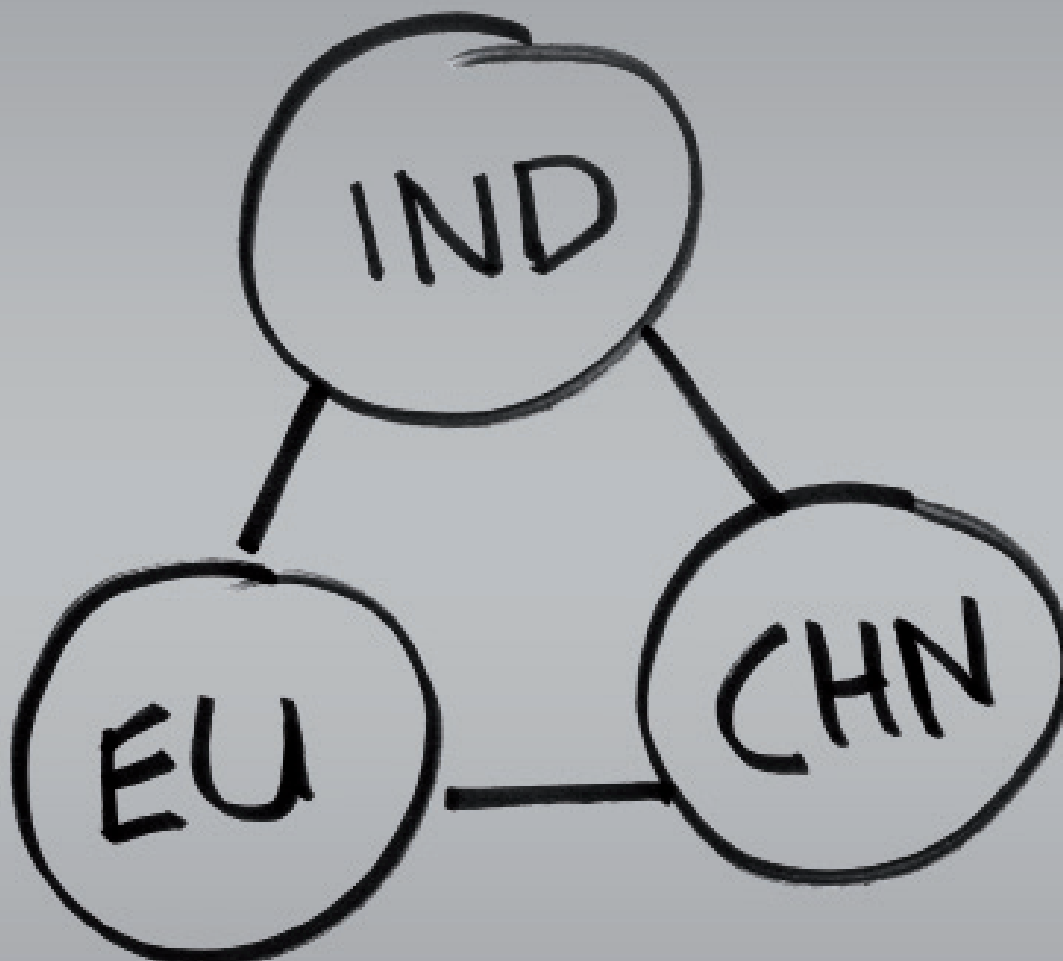


# CHINA'S PEACEKEEPING POLICIES IN MALI:

New Security Thinking or Balancing Europe?

Marc Lanteigne

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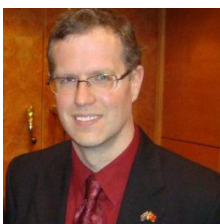
Marc Lanteigne

"The hyena chasing two antelopes at the same time will go to bed hungry."  
– Malian proverb

## Abstract

In mid-2013, China's increasingly positive policies towards United Nations peacekeeping reached a milestone when the country agreed to send a large detachment of personnel, including combat forces for the first time, to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (known by its French acronym MINUSMA). This commitment was also distinct in that the mission was not in a region which represented direct Chinese economic interests, unlike other African peacekeeping missions in which Beijing has offered support. Rather, the Mali operation has both cemented Beijing's larger commitment to building African partnerships and has demonstrated a marked contrast to the unilateral approach taken by France in pacifying the country. Although China has warmed to the principles of humanitarian intervention in civil conflicts, it retains a wariness towards peacebuilding operations outside the sponsorship of the UN. Therefore, the Mali operation has been beneficial for China, not only in building its peacekeeping credentials in Africa but also in underscoring China's increasingly distinct, 'neo-Westphalian' views on addressing intervention in domestic conflicts.

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## Keywords

Peacekeeping, China, EU, Security, Mali, Humanitarian Intervention, Peacebuilding

## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction: China's Changed Views on Peacekeeping	5
2.	Why Did China Participate in Mali Peacekeeping?	10
3.	The Trials of Mali	11
4.	Conclusion: China, France, and the Future of Mali	15
	 Bibliography	 19

## 1. Introduction: China's Changed View on Peacekeeping<sup>1</sup>

Since the People's Republic of China joined the United Nations in 1971, a significant evolution in Beijing's overall views on UN peacekeeping can be identified in terms of a more positive stance on peacekeeping policies, as well as greater openness in the consideration of the types of missions in which Beijing would be willing to participate and in what capacity. When looking at Chinese policy documents and government papers on this subject, one can ascertain a shift in Chinese peacekeeping policy between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, as well as growing confidence towards the development of a UN peacekeeping policy within the post-1990s era itself. This has allowed China to counteract international impressions that its rising power was becoming a strategic threat, and instead permitted the country to craft an identity which included being a status-quo power and a friend to developing states. Borrowing from constructivist views in international relations theory, peacekeeping has provided an opportunity for Beijing to develop a strategic identity based on cooperation to solve modern security issues, support for international stability, and the idea that state sovereignty should not be breached unless all other options have proven unsuccessful.

Once Beijing began to temper its previous reluctance towards UN peacekeeping and agreed to contribute personnel and expanded support for UN missions, there was at first a marked preference for sending observers only. One exception was the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992-3, where two separate Chinese engineering battalions were deployed, thus becoming China's first true 'blue helmets' in the common use of the term. From 1999-2002, Beijing agreed to send civilian police units as liaisons to a standing UN mission, namely the operations in East Timor. Since then, China has sent both military personnel and civilian police officials to several disparate UN missions in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, and by 2009 China had overtaken France as the largest supplier of UN peacekeeping personnel within the permanent five (P5) members of the UN Security Council.

In March 2014, China had 2,177 UN personnel stationed abroad from approximately 98,000 in total (Peng et al. 2010; UN, March 2014). Between 2012 and 2013, China also substantially increased its share of the UN peacekeeping budget, from 3.9% to 6.6%, compared with the United States (28%), the United Kingdom (6.7%) and France (7.2%) (UN General Assembly 2013). When the United Nations called for member nations to provide personnel and support for a peacekeeping mission to Mali in early 2013, this was perceived by the new Chinese government under Xi Jinping as an opportunity for Beijing to both broaden and deepen its commitment to the peacekeeping organisation as an institution. China's decision to participate in UN operations in Mali in 2013 should therefore be viewed as an important milestone in the ongoing maturation process of Beijing's peacekeeping policy, given the nature of that conflict and the economic and diplomatic goods at stake, as well as further potential contributions to China's image as a supporter of security cooperation. In light of increasingly difficult strategic relations between China and some of its immediate neighbours including Japan, the Philippines

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<sup>1</sup>The author would like to thank Olivia Gippner, Mengmeng Huang, Dongkun Li, Garima Mohan, May-Britt Stumbaum and Jizhou Zhao for their ideas and comments on earlier versions of this working paper.

and Vietnam since 2010, Beijing is very interested in developing a counter-identity to that of a revisionist, unsatisfied great power.

China's growing and diversified contributions to UN peacekeeping operations have become a great source of pride for China's security establishment and an oft-cited example of its commitment to evolving as a great power via the doctrine of 'peaceful development' (heping fazhan), a doctrine which was put into place at the start of the Hu Jintao presidency in 2003. China's UN commitments were more fully developed in order to illustrate the country's wider foreign policies, cooperative and supportive of multilateral operations designed to improve security abroad, but also in a fashion which differed from that of the West. These Chinese policies were in keeping with being a "responsible great power" (fuzeren de daguo), while gaining further global recognition for its alternative models of strategic cooperation (Richardson 2011: 286-7). Often termed China's "New Security Concept" (NSC, xin anquan guan), Beijing has sought to promote mutual and equal cooperation in the resolving of security issues rather than unrestrained great power intervention (Lampton 2005: 314-5), particularly in developing regions. Since the end of the Cold War, China has often expressed criticism of unilateral armed intervention, especially by the United States, in civil disputes and humanitarian emergencies. This is because Beijing has been apprehensive that such practices were thinly-disguised attempts to exert great power policies over weak and developing states, and also concerned over the setting of international precedents, given lingering Chinese uneasiness about its own territorial integrity, such as in the cases of Taiwan and Tibet.

During the 1990s and after, Western-backed interventions in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Afghanistan and Iraq, (the US-led "coalition of the willing" in 2003-12), as well as the NATO-led operations which contributed to the fall of the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya in August 2011 and Western pressure towards the Assad regime in Syria in that conflict, were all greeted by Beijing with various levels of consternation and criticism. This placed China's own post-Cold War security policies in a difficult situation, since Beijing was interested in maintaining its support for state sovereignty, a policy which has been termed "neo-Westphalianism", in light of growing unilateral American power. However, China was also cognisant of the fact that modern conflicts were not falling into the traditional 'state-versus-state' patterns which had dominated much of the twentieth century, and therefore a more updated international security strategy, including the NSC, was required to reconcile these two factors. Since the 1990s, China has maintained that interventions in civil disputes, when necessary, must be conducted multilaterally and through the UN Security Council (UNSC). However, Beijing has become more accepting of multilateral peace operations within states, especially in cases of state collapse and when international security is threatened. They acknowledge that there are cases where a security problem is too large or complex to be addressed by a single state and that at times intervention is required in civil conflicts, especially when there is risk of the violence spreading across borders. Nonetheless, China still retains a high degree of sensitivity towards the sanctity of state sovereignty under the rubric of neo-Westphalianism.

China's growing interest in peacekeeping was also tied to its policies under Hu Jintao to further global recognition for alternative models of strategic cooperation, a process which began with Beijing's articulation of the NSC based on mutual and equal cooperation for the solving of security issues rather than unrestrained intervention by

great powers (Lampton 2005: 314-5). The NSC, in its various forms, was a response to the rapidly changing global security situation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which left the United States as the sole global superpower capable of unilaterally addressing security concerns. The NSC was first formally articulated in a 2002 policy paper presented to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), stressing the benefits of moving beyond the 'one-sided security' thinking which was so prevalent in the age of Cold War bipolarity. Instead, respect for sovereignty was advocated, especially in the developing regions, and the requirement for the United Nations to play a "leading role" in the settlement of disputes, preferably through negotiation and reciprocity (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2002). The development of the NSC doctrine came at a time when China began to move away from its blanket condemnation of UN intervention missions and instead sought to clarify beneficial versus detrimental means of intervening in civil conflicts. The favoured methods included involving the UN Security Council in thorough deliberations over how a mission was to proceed and defining the roles of diplomacy versus force, while less favoured approaches meant the circumvention of the Security Council, usually by a great power and usually namely the United States.

Despite the more favourable stance towards multilateralism expressed in the NSC, the idea borrowed heavily on the Cold War-era Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (*heping gongchu wuxiang yuanze*), the early Maoist-era doctrine in China which advocated state equality and non-discrimination, mutual trust and benefits and non-interference in states' sovereign affairs (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2000). The Five Principles were revived by Beijing in the early 1990s after it became apparent that the international system was not yet shifting towards multipolarity with a 'new international order' favoured by China, but rather greater unipolarity dominated by the United States. The ideas which would later form the NSC began to coalesce in the middle of that decade and were formally cited by Jiang Zemin in 1999 during the UN Conference on Disarmament (Ong 2007: 13). Interpretations of these ideas continued into the current century under Hu Jintao, but became more complex as Beijing began to expand its diplomacy beyond Asia and into cross-regional policies which, by necessity, prompted a greater Chinese role not only in economic partnerships but also in security problems further from the country's periphery, including in Africa, an area in which much of the recent Chinese cross-regional diplomacy has been deeply felt.

The NSC, and subsequent policies on intervention, were also developed during a period in the 1990s when Chinese policy began to acknowledge the growing reality that many security problems could not be effectively addressed unilaterally, and that cooperation was often a more effective method of developing both security and confidence-building. By the end of the decade, after demonstrating wariness towards the ideas of 'human security', namely the enmeshing of human rights issues with security initiatives and placing a greater focus on the individual rather than on the state, Beijing began to examine this element of security much more closely, although there was a preference for the term 'non-traditional security' (*fei chuantong anquan*) in Chinese policy circles as opposed to 'human security' (Lanteigne 2011: 318). There was a growing recognition in Beijing that retaining Cold War-era perceptions of security would result in excessive rigidity in light of developing strategic challenges (Evans 2004: 275), including eventually the war on terrorism and the destabilising effects of state collapse. 'Non-traditional' security challenges have thus become embedded in modern Chinese military strategy, including in crucial economic regions such as Africa, and since the mid-2000s have



played a part in China's pursuit of increasingly engaging in "long distance manoeuvres" (changtu yanxi) (Holslag 2009: 109), including those involving overseas peacekeeping.

China, like many other UN members, was also aware of major side effects of the end of the Cold War, namely the unlocking of previously intractable or untouchable civil conflicts which had dominated the Cold War as proxy conflicts. Many crises that the UN could not previously approach due to superpower interference, as either one or both powers were indirectly involved, could suddenly be openly addressed. This led to considerable debate over expanding UN peacekeeping initiatives to achieve the ending of civil wars, such as those in Angola, Cambodia, El Salvador and Mozambique. These so-called "orphan" conflicts continued to smoulder despite the withdrawal of superpower interest and support, and in the 1990s the number of new peacekeeping missions the UN was called upon to undertake increased rapidly (Touval 1994). Adding to these types of conflicts were the incidents of collapsed states, which prompted the missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Haiti, Rwanda and Somalia. Many of these new missions forced a rethinking on China's part as to how it should respond to and support the United Nations' attempts at peacekeeping and reconstruction in cases where local governments were either too weak (or collapsed completely) to provide what Beijing saw as necessary consent. This provided an "out" of sorts in terms of Beijing's adherence to the neo-Westphalian idea. If a particular country has lost any sort of central government, the issue of state sovereignty becomes more fluid and complex, a situation with which Chinese policymakers are more than familiar. China has had extensive experience with many episodes of state collapse, including the ancient Warring States Period (Zhangguo Shidai) more than two thousand years ago, and more recently the violent Republican era (1912-49), which was scarred by warlordism, foreign invasion, and a complete collapse of centralised rule.

However, as China's peacekeeping policy matured and as international security issues began to increase in complexity and interconnectedness, there was a growing realisation in Beijing that it would have to reconsider its peacekeeping policies to prepare itself for more difficult aspects of the international peacebuilding process, including those that would challenge China's traditional views on the sanctity of state sovereignty and non-intervention. Moreover, the advent of post-Cold War peacekeeping and the need for more "multifunctional" (duogongneng) missions resulted in much internal debate within China not only over policy but also whether new broader thinking on Beijing's part was required (Wang 2012). Much of China's initial peacekeeping policies, it had been argued, were dominated by 'first generation peacekeeping' (diyidai weihe), echoing Cold-War era UN operations with a stronger emphasis on sovereignty, neutrality and the pursuit of consent, as opposed to the more multifaceted, Western-backed "robust" peacekeeping (qiangli weihe) which appeared after the fall of the bipolar system (Tardy 2011; Zhao 2013). China's growing global diplomatic, strategic and economic interests, as well as the country's increasing acceptance of "responsibility to protect" (or R2P, known in Chinese as baohu de zeren) principles, all prompted a revisiting of the robust peacekeeping question (Pang 2009; Pang 2012: 54-5; Teitt 2011: 56-70), including whether China would be in a position to send combat forces in addition to support and engineering personnel. It can be argued, however, that although China has developed a greater understanding and appreciation of R2P principles, there is much difference of opinion within the country, as within the international community as to how best to pursue it.



China's warming towards contributions to UN peacekeeping is one of the most visible signs of the country's greater acceptance of multilateralism in civil conflicts. The widening and deepening of Beijing's UNPKO interests since the late 1990s also contributed much to the development of Chinese soft power, meaning attraction rather than coercion, while mitigating the perception of a looming "China threat" (Zhongguo weixielun) especially in the developing world (Deng 2006: 186-214). Under Hu Jintao, Chinese diplomacy was greatly expanded to reach well outside the Asia-Pacific region, including developing regions which had traditionally been under the economic and security aegis of the United States and Europe, including Africa. Since the Xi government assumed office in early 2013, many signs indicated that Beijing was seeking to deepen its developing country partnerships, including in Africa. Many of these partnerships have been based on increased trade, especially in raw materials considered essential to the continuing growth of the Chinese economy. However, this diplomacy has increased the attention of Western powers, including the United States and Europe, which are sensitive to the possibility of overt diplomatic competition.

Despite China's rising power, which stands apart from previous great powers, the country has sought to build an identity or "brand" in developing regions. Unlike the United States and Western Europe, China could approach developing regions including Africa as a former colonised state itself, as well as a country with its own history of underdevelopment and instability. In many aspects of Chinese diplomacy in the developing world even today, there remain many vestiges of 1990s-era "large developing country" (fazhan zhong daguo) thinking which, in the case of its UN peacekeeping policies, have served the country's interests well (Hirono and Lanteigne 2012: 1-14). However, in light of China's increasing power, an argument can be made that the country's "middle-power" approach to peacekeeping may prove to be less viable in the future. This would have an adverse effect on China's ability to promote peacekeeping as a key component of its strategy and diplomacy. Nonetheless, China continues to make use of its support for UN peacekeeping operations not only to advance its strategic agenda but to offer an alternative approach to traditional intervention by great powers.

While Chinese foreign policy continues to incorporate a strong "neo-Westphalian" view of sovereignty and the country reacts with caution over intervention in internal disputes, Beijing has become more accepting of such interventions under specific conditions, including by obtaining as much consent as possible from local governments and other actors. Alarm in Beijing over cases of intervention where the UN was bypassed by the United States, specifically in the Kosovo conflict in 1999 and the Iraq war after 2003, further reinforced China's views that when international intervention was required, the UNSC provided the optimal solution. By the beginning of the new century, China was openly supportive of the peacekeeping idea both as a way of prompting peaceful multilateral settlement of disputes and as a means to include its armed forces in "Military Operations other than War", or MOOTW (feizhanzheng xing junshi xingdong), including humanitarian missions, disaster relief, and increasingly, peacekeeping missions. The MOOTW concept was borrowed from American military terminology to refer to non-combat operations (Gill and Huang 2009: 4; Fravel 2011: 177), and for China these sorts of operations provided the opportunity for the country to demonstrate the expansion of its military capabilities in a cooperative manner.

## 2. Why did China Participate in Mali Peacekeeping?

The case of Mali, which received a UN peacekeeping detachment in mid-2013 after that country's devastating civil war came to an uncertain close in the wake of a unilateral armed intervention by France to protect its former colonial holding, has proven to be a crucial test of Chinese commitments to peace operations. First, the Mali mission marked the first time in its history that China agreed to send combat forces to a UN mission, as previously Beijing preferred to restrict its contributions of personnel to civilian police, normally drawn from civilian units and the People's Armed Police (PAP), and combat engineers as well as other support staff. The one exception was a small detachment of combat forces sent to guard Chinese engineering and medical staff operating in South Sudan in 2012 (Xinhua, 24 February 2012). Since Beijing's turn towards greater participation in peacekeeping missions in the late 1990s, internal debates had persisted over whether the country was in a position politically to send military units as part of certain missions. Until the Mali mission, Beijing had been greatly sensitive to any international views that saw it seeking to interfere unilaterally in internal conflicts, especially in the developing world where China has been most active in its identity-building exercises.

Second, unlike in other parts of Africa where Chinese peacekeeping personnel had been committed, Mali was not a major economic partner for China and does not have an extensive resource base which Beijing would openly seek to co-develop. Other African UN missions to which China also provided personnel, most notably in Sudan and South Sudan, did involve crucial regional economic partners for Beijing in light of the fossil fuels in the region. However, the Mali mission did play a part in China's wider engagement of Africa which had developed under the Hu government and looked to accelerate under Xi Jinping. As well, Mali had played a role in China's expanding African diplomacy after the turn of the century. For example, Malian leaders had visited China four times in 2004-10, and President Hu toured Mali in 2009 as part of his government's enhanced African diplomatic policies (Shinn 2003; Xinhua 12 February 2009). Both the Hu and Xi governments have sought to engage Africa on a regional scale through a variety of means. In 2010, South Africa was added to the group of 'BRICS' large developing economies, in which China plays a major role. Shortly after taking office, President Xi visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa and Tanzania in March 2013, and in May 2014, Premier Li Keqiang made state visits to Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria (China Daily 18 March 2013; Pei 2014). Malian diplomacy, therefore, can be viewed within the larger idea of China's cross-regional diplomacy and positive identity-building with the whole of sub-Saharan Africa.

Third, China's swift pledge of between five and six hundred personnel to the Mali operation (Witcher 2013), an unprecedented number for the country, demonstrated not only a firm commitment but also a more efficient decision-making process within the Chinese government in response to new UN missions. In November 2013, it was announced by the Chinese government that its contingent of about 395 peacekeeping personnel had completed training protocols and was ready for deployment. The bulk of the forces would be charged with the repair of critical infrastructure and facilities, as well as acting as security guards. Medical personnel would also form part of the contribution. The

strategic component of the force would be drawn from the 16th Combined Corps of the Shenyang Military Area Command (MAC) of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) (People's Daily, 20 November 2013). The first two contingents of Chinese peacekeepers, totalling almost four hundred personnel, were on the ground in Mali by January 2014 (SCMP / AFP, 17 January 2014). However, although the Chinese government did make mention of the added security component to its contribution to the Mali operation, this was done in a muted fashion in an attempt to play down that aspect of its participation in the hopes of deflecting international criticism of perceived Chinese military expansion. The fact that UN peacekeeping operations in Mali were designed to protect a regime rather than to undermine or depose one was also a factor in China's decision to participate, as well as to include a security force component (Murray 2013). Related to this idea was the fact that the adversaries in Mali were largely religious extremists seeking to dismember a sovereign state through force, an issue to which Beijing could relate given the ongoing problems in China's far-Western region of Xinjiang since the rioting there in July 2009 and subsequent terrorist incidents in Kunming, Urumqi and Guangzhou in early 2014 which were blamed on Xinjiang Islamic extremists (Jacobs and Buckley 2014; Kalman 2014).

Finally, the Mali operations offered China an opportunity to tacitly challenge traditional European approaches to peace operations in the developing world, especially in the case of former colonies. China's security presence on the international level has grown to the point where Beijing is now much more comfortable entering debates over strategic affairs even in regions well outside of the Pacific Rim, as evidenced for example by differing Chinese and Western views on Middle East affairs including the post-2012 Syrian Civil War, as well as the Ukraine/Crimea crises in early 2014. In both of these cases, Chinese views of neo-Westphalianism did assert themselves, especially out of concern that Western actors were using the crises to promote unilateral regime change. In Mali, an opportunity was provided for China to contrast its peacekeeping and peacebuilding policies with that of France, Mali's previous colonial administrator, and the greater West, suggesting that Beijing is becoming increasingly willing to put forward alternative models and approaches for peacebuilding following civil conflicts. By doing so, China also hopes to avoid developing the identity of a "spoiler", despite its disagreements with European and Western powers over approaches to civil conflicts.

### **3. The Trials of Mali**

China's attempts to juggle both its suspicions of Western interventionist policies and its own expanding economic diplomacy in the developing world were greatly challenged by events in West Africa in late 2012 and early 2013. The western African state of Mali first drew the attention of the United Nations as a result of a growing separatist movement in the poor and desolate northeastern part of the country. Before independence in 1960, Mali was part of French West Africa, and it remains one of the poorest nations in the region with a per capita GDP of only US\$1100 and an economy based on agriculture, primarily cotton, and gold mining. The landlocked country's sparse population, about 16 million, is largely based in the country's south and especially within the capital of Bamako. The country's location, surrounded by conflicts and instability in Algeria, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and Niger, as well as the aftershocks of the post-2010 "Arab Spring"

uprisings across North Africa and Southwest Asia, has left the state highly vulnerable to the overspill from nearby security crises.

One of these recent conflicts, the 2011 civil war in Libya which resulted in the ousting of majority leader Muammar Gaddafi, was widely seen as the main catalyst of greater instability in West Africa. Insurgents and extremists involved in that conflict began to base operations in the desolate regions of northern Mali, along with weapons looted from the fighting, in the hopes of creating a more permanent redoubt in the desolate Sahel expanse which flanks the Sahara Desert. Worse for Mali, the Gaddafi regime had been a major economic supporter of the country and a stabilizing force along the northern Malian borders.

Mali had a history of political instability since its independence, including a failed federation with neighbouring Senegal and a military government which was only defeated in 1992, ushering in a decade of democratic experimentation which nonetheless failed to address the country's North-South divide (Hisbourg, 2013). By early 2012, local militants sought to create a separate state of Azawad, forcibly carved out of the Malian northern desert regions, and drew support from Tuareg (Berber) nomads in the territory who had been largely disenfranchised, socially and economically, from the more prosperous South and the central government in Bamako. Traditionally, Tuareg rebels had staged uprisings, both during the colonial era and after Malian independence, with the goal of gaining greater political power. However, the influx of weapons and extremist fervor from Libya and other Arab Spring revolts shifted the rebels' focus to separatism rather than forced regime change.

What would otherwise have been a relatively limited insurgency soon became an international concern when the separatists joined with a second coalition of extremists, headed by the Ansar Dine (or Ansar al-Din, 'Defenders of the Faith') and backed by Al-Qaeda au Maghreb islamique / Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a subsidiary of the Al-Qaeda network. The Ansar Dine had been a longstanding opponent of the Malian government, as well as of the Sufi religious minority in the country, and a supporter of Tuareg independence as well as the implementation of strict traditional Shari'a law across Mali. The AQIM, primarily based in Algeria, acted as Al-Qaeda's main arm in North Africa since its organization was formalized in 2007, and had been involved in northern Mali to a minor degree since the late 1990s with tacit acceptance by the Malian government. An AQIM splinter group, al-Mulathamim ("the Masked Ones") also established itself in northern Mali (Shaw, 2013: 202; Black, 2013; Bøås and Torheim, 2013: 1281). Two other Islamic fundamentalist groups, Le Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest ('Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa' or MOJWA) and Boko Haram, operating out of northern Nigeria, further destabilized the northern part of the country and began to capture towns throughout the region while flush with smuggled arms and trained militants both from Mali and from the nearby Libyan conflict in a classic "ink stain" scenario (Shaw 2013: 205; Zajec 2013: 1).

In April 2012, the rebels captured the ancient city of Timbuktu (Tombouctou), threatening ancient texts and other historical relics in the centuries-old settlement, and by January 2013 the strategic town of Konna, only seven hundred kilometres from Bamako, was also taken, thus illustrating the increasing vulnerability of the central government given that the capital was then within easy striking distance of rebel forces (France 24/AP 2013; Zajec 2013: 1). Those cities captured by the extremists were also forced to abide by Shari'a law.

The civilian government began to be viewed as incapable of adequately addressing the conflict and more concerned with regime stability than with supporting and equipping Malian soldiers on the front lines of the rebellion. As a result, the country fell further into anarchy in March 2012 when a military coup ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré, over the civilian government's perceived mishandling of the northern crisis (Lecocq et al., 2013: 346-7), as it had become more obvious that the country could not battle the insurgents without outside assistance. Rather than strengthen the resolve of the Malian armed forces, the coup actually weakened it further, resulting in mutinies and further disorder which enabled the rebel groups to gain still more territory. The traditional international view of Mali as a developing state with strong democratic foundations was irrevocably shattered as governance in the country quickly unraveled due to the crisis.

The interim military government fronted by the military junta's National Committee for the Rectification of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE), and headed by Dioncounda Traoré, requested French military assistance in early January 2013 as the security situation continued to worsen and it became apparent that, despite concerns in North Africa over Mali's deepening crisis, regional security mechanisms lacked both the coordination and the resolve to respond themselves. A tepid report on Mali released in 2012 by the UN Secretary General, as well as two UN Security Council resolutions which essentially placed the onus of solving the crisis on the fractured Malian government, also raised concerns that the UN was not in a position to respond effectively to calls for outside intervention (Lecocq et al., 2013: 355; UNSC S/2012/894).

The Mali crisis was also a test for European Union foreign policymaking, but, like the UN initially, there was little in the way of a coordinated response to the rebellion despite improvements in joint EU international relations in the wake of the Lisbon Treaty, which became active in 2009 and was designed to better coordinate a joint European Union foreign policymaking structure. In regards to northern Africa and its stability, the EU had published a set of guidelines for improving security and development in the Sahel region in March 2011 (European External Action Service, 2011). Among the points raised were that the Sahel should be treated as a distinct region in Africa and that organisations should be encouraged to promote joint security cooperation and problem-solving, in addition to the need to address hostile actors such as the AQIM. The report also praised the actions of the Touré government for establishing the Programme spécial pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement dans le nord du Mali ('Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in Northern Mali', PSPSDN) in 2011 (Thiam, 2011; EU, 2011). Neither the PSPSDN initiative nor EU support, however, was anywhere near enough to forestall the chaos which would begin in 2012. After the coup, the Union condemned the Malian military's actions but welcomed the appointment of Dioncounda Traoré as the next president. The EU was unwilling, however, to call for a joint European military response to the conflict, limiting its support to calling for military training in Mali, and thus France was facing pressure to respond unilaterally (Cristiani and Fabiani 2013:13-5).

In the face of this uncertainty, the government of François Hollande responded in January 2013 by controversially reversing its decree of the previous October that France's support for the Malian government would be restricted to material shipments only (Wing 2013: 483; Zajec 2013: 1). During an October 2012 speech to the parliament in Dakar, Senegal, Hollande sought to assure regional leaders that France was moving away from its traditional "big brother" role which marked the colonial and immediate



post-1960 postcolonial eras in Africa. “The age of what was once called ‘Françafrique’ is over. There’s France and there’s Africa. There’s the partnership between France and Africa, with relations based on respect, clarity and solidarity” (France Diplomatie 2012). Yet, with the announcement that France would go it alone in pushing back the extremist forces in Mali, or at least with African allies and without Western ones, it was demonstrated that French paternalism in Africa could not be consigned to history so quickly. Indeed, with the Mali and subsequent Central African Republic conflicts, France’s Africa strategic policy appeared to be experiencing a renaissance.

France’s decision to commit its military forces to Opération Serval in Mali was not only a test of international responses to humanitarian crises but also of Beijing’s evolving views on intervention. As Islamist forces continued to threaten the capital, the United Nations authorized the intervention of French and African troops under ECOWAS (The Economic Community of West African States) to push the rebels back during the first half of 2013, recapturing all key towns in the North by the end of January (Polgreen and Savare 2013). France’s swift actions in Mali also stood in contrast to those of the United States, which refrained from promising any armed support for peace operations as well as taking a somewhat more centrist stance between the military government and the rebels, condemning terrorist activities but not throwing Washington’s full support behind the military government either (Primo 2013). This encouraged France to take the lead in pushing back what may have been a direct threat to the stability of Mali as a whole.

A tentative peace agreement between Bamako and the Tuareg rebels was signed in June 2013, with an election successfully held in July 2013 (WP 2013), but the North remains unstable despite the presence of foreign forces in the country, due to occasional attacks by AQIM loyalists. As the peace deal was struck, the UN authorized the formation of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali or MINUSMA). The operation’s mandate included the re-establishment of Malian state authority throughout the country, as well as the protection of civilians and historical sites. The mission was authorized after the successful April 2013 passing of UN Security Council Resolution 2100 (2013), which referred to the January rebel attacks as terrorist acts and authorized as many as 11,200 personnel to be dispatched to Mali under the UN banner (UN-MINUSMA, 2013). France, however, would remain at the forefront of peace operations, and in October 2013 a major offensive named Operation Hydra (Opération Hydre) involving French, Malian and UN forces took place in the ‘Niger Loop’ region between Timbuktu and the northern Malian city of Gao as a response to ongoing insurgent attacks (Guibert 2013; Al-Jazeera, 24 October 2013). As a result of ongoing violence in the northern town of Kidal, still held by rebel forces, the MNLA announced in late November 2013 that it was ending the cease-fire put into place five months previously and promised to renew attacks against the Malian army, further complicating peace operations (Al-Jazeera, 30 November 2013). At stake for international actors was not only the continued pacification of Mali but also the stabilization of the greater West African region.

#### 4. Conclusion: China, France, and the Future of Mali

What has made the Mali case a watershed for China's peacekeeping policies, in addition to the commitment by Chinese personnel to resolve what has largely been an internal conflict, is that the West African country is very close to China's extensive African economic interests. Mali has itself been a source of Chinese trade, albeit not on the same level as other parts of the continent which have provided Beijing trade in fossil fuels and more valuable raw materials. Beijing's primary diplomatic partners on the continent have been those states with much larger resource endowments, including Algeria, Angola, South Africa, Sudan and Zambia. China's trade with Africa surpassed American and European levels in 2009, and as of 2011 stood at US\$160 billion, while Chinese trade with Mali stood at US\$622 million in December 2012 compared to US\$280 million two years previously. China had become Mali's largest bilateral trading partner by the start of the civil conflict (Xinhua November 2013; Qin 2013; Shih 2013).

In addition, before the informal diplomatic "truce" between Beijing and Taipei established after 2008, Africa was also a primary arena for diplomatic competition over recognition. While the establishment of the truce has cooled this competition, the decision by the government of Gambia to drop its relations with Taiwan underscored how fragile the arrangement was (Shih 2013). However, competition with Taipei was not an issue in terms of Chinese relations with Mali, as the African state recognized Beijing shortly after Malian independence in 1960, with no disruptions to the present day. Nonetheless, China has remained sensitive to the idea that it is engaging in economic and diplomatic competition with the United States and Europe, and has drawn a distinction between its trade initiatives on the continent and the region's ongoing security problems. During his March 2013 African tour, Xi Jinping stressed in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, that China was poised to be an important economic power for the continent while avoiding the nationalism and hegemonism previously practiced by European great powers in Africa (Buckley 2013).

The Chinese government's initial response to France's decision to send forces to protect the Malian government and to roll back territorial gains from the extremists was reserved, although Beijing's views were well short of open criticism of French actions given the difficult circumstances in Mali. In the first official statement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry after operations began, the question of France's role was sidestepped. Instead, the spokesperson condemned attacks by the rebel forces and confirmed its support for the Malian government without commenting on the actions by the French. As well, there was a call for an African regional-based support operation to be implemented at the earliest convenience (PRC Foreign Ministry, January 2013), in keeping with common Chinese government preferences for regional crises to be addressed by local actors whenever



possible. These statements reflected the Chinese government's discomfort over support for what was then a largely unilateral, French-led operation within one of its former colonial holdings.

After the French operations began, some international concerns were expressed that Beijing was seeking to "free-ride" on France's actions, similar to China's benefits from the war in Afghanistan which allowed for deeper Chinese investment there. China's economic interests in Mali were adversely affected by the fighting, since before the conflict it was estimated that approximately one third of Mali's total exports, including cotton and gold, totaling about €100 million (US\$130 million) annually, were going to Beijing (Jolis 2013). Nonetheless, the idea that China was indirectly benefitting from French-led intervention in Mali was greeted by the Chinese press with much skepticism, with one editorial noting that Beijing's tacit support for the Libya intervention cost China a considerable amount in lost contracts from the Gaddafi years. At the same time, one Chinese newspaper editorial noted that it was the United States, not China, that had augmented its military presence in Africa with the establishment of the US African Command (AFRICOM) in 2007, suggesting a double standard at work (Sun 2013; BBC Monitoring / Factiva 2013).

Moreover, as some Chinese Africa analysts have noted, France's intervention placed it in a much stronger diplomatic position vis-à-vis both China and the United States, the latter country itself having not opted for intervention. It was also argued in one Chinese newspaper editorial that the decision to intervene by the Hollande government not only risked the same quagmire that the US encountered in Afghanistan, but also created the possibility of the "legalization of a new interventionism in Africa", an unwelcome precedent in Beijing's view. As well, the article noted that "France's involvement in Mali is still a risky business. One of the drawbacks of this action is that it brings back memories of the 'African gendarmerie'" (He 2013). Another editorial in the same news agency published by two specialists from the Chinese Naval Research Institute noted that the West as a whole was seeking a stronger strategic presence in Africa, and also suggested that France might have had economic motives in intervening in Mali. The piece concluded by saying that the Chinese government should not send troops or financial support to Mali under the circumstances, a recommendation which Beijing ultimately did not follow (Li and Jin 2013). Although the suggested quagmire scenario did not become a reality, Beijing nonetheless appeared to see France's response to the worsening conflict in Mali as too unilateral and too contradictory to the development of a lasting peace in the region.

Most recently, China has also used the Mali intervention to return to its earlier diplomatic stances which equate state instability with economic underdevelopment. As one editorial in the China Daily noted (Gosset 2013), while France's actions worked to prevent the brand of radical extremism from spreading across the Sahel region in northern Africa, the real problem was that the widespread poverty in Mali and the surrounding region needed to be addressed better in order to prevent such extremist groups from returning

to the region (Yu 2013). Even before France had launched *Opération Serval*, Chinese government officials had regarded the worsening situation in the Sahel region as a product of underdevelopment and diplomatic failures. In a December 2012 speech at the UNSC, Ambassador Li Baodong stressed that the solution for Mali and the surrounding region was not only improved international coordination of aid and assistance but also the requirement that regional governments and actors take the lead in peacebuilding (China UN Mission December 2012). Once the MINUSMA mission was confirmed, Beijing took the initiative to contribute security forces for the first time along with engineers and support staff, with training for the mission being carried out during the middle of 2013 (Xinhua / BBC Monitoring June 2013). Given its lack of experience in the region, Chinese forces will, as before, need to coordinate with the UN, other peacekeeping actors, and local governments.

The “Mali effect” has also influenced other aspects of China’s peacekeeping policy in Africa. In March 2013, Beijing offered its support for a UN “offensive brigade” to be deployed to Congo-Kinshasa as a core component of the post-2010 UN Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), to directly confront and disarm rebel groups operating near borders with Rwanda and Uganda. Such a unit, contrary to previous UN peacekeeping protocols regarding rules of engagement, would be able to use force without necessarily being fired upon first, in the name of protecting civilians and other humanitarian actors in support of the Congolese government (MONUSCO 2013). Despite the nature of the mission, Beijing representatives noted that such measures were necessary given the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Congo due to repeated attacks on civilians by rebels affiliated with the *Mouvement du 23-Mars* / “March 23 Movement” (M23) and other militias operating in central Africa. Although the conflict in Congo has largely remained local, the central location of the country meant that instability there was having a detrimental effect on security in the whole of the African Great Lakes region. In giving its support for the Congo operations, Beijing called upon the UN force to maintain impartiality and stated that this mission should not be considered as setting a precedent (Xinhua, 29 March 2013; Al-Jazeera, 29 March 2013; Smith 2012). Also, in a similar vein as the Mali mission, Beijing was acting in support of a standing government rather than against it. Therefore, China could still adjust its previous policies towards armed intervention while remaining faithful to the concept of sovereignty and neo-Westphalian principles. At the same time, Beijing could continue to build its strategic “brand” based on support for peacebuilding, counter-terrorism, and multilateralism in resolving international crises.

China’s decision to support the formation of an offensive unit under the United Nations further suggested that Beijing was becoming more comfortable with UN combat missions under certain situations and in select regions. As with the Mali mission, China has been seeking to improve diplomatic ties by supporting regional security initiatives with Africa given its expanding economic interests on the continent and potential competition with established powers including France. In the wake of military successes in Mali

and the subsequent bolstering of African public opinion towards French foreign policy on the continent, the Hollande government appeared poised to develop a new form of bilateral security diplomacy, thus de facto reviving the 'Françafrique' idea, only on more equitable terms for African governments.

For France, the Mali mission changed the perception in Africa of French intervention taking place only to serve French interests or to prop up client governments and instead acted to underscore France's commitment to addressing increasingly difficult and interconnected security problems in the region (Haski 2013). As well, France appeared ready to take on new security challenges in Africa, as illustrated by the Hollande government's call for more French forces to intervene in the Central African Republic (CAR), which at the end of 2013 was facing internal sectarian violence and the distinct possibility of state collapse. During November of that year, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Liu Jieyi, also noted the faltering security situation in the CAR within the greater question of security in Central Africa, including the ongoing threat from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, and called for increased international attention and dialogue (Ni 2013). Finally, in May 2014, the Nigeria-based Islamic militant group Boko Haram attacked a Chinese factory in neighbouring Cameroon, kidnapping ten Chinese nationals (Tumanjong, 2014). This underscored the fact that Chinese economic interests in central Africa were increasingly being viewed as legitimate targets by extremist organisations.

In light of China's participation in the Mali mission and growing overall interest in central African security in Beijing, the question is whether the stage was being set for more pronounced diplomatic and perhaps even strategic interactions between Europe, especially France, and China on the continent. As China continues to rethink its traditional policies towards humanitarian intervention, Mali has demonstrated that a new variable has been added, namely that several trouble spots in the world are becoming either part of or close to Beijing's expanding network of trade and aid partners. In May 2013, as Beijing was preparing its response to the development of a UN mission to Mali, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry noted that his country was ready to build a more visible presence in Africa "as a responsible major power with a more neutral stance in the field," (Zhao 2013). Therefore, Beijing cannot as readily play the bystander, or the balancer, in future cases of civil conflict and intervention debates to the degree with which it had previously been sanguine. China's decision to support the more robust peacekeeping role for Mali suggested that Beijing was becoming more comfortable with UN combat missions under certain situations and in select regions including Africa. As well, Beijing has been seeking to develop a more positive strategic identity by maintaining strong diplomatic ties with Africa given its expanding economic interests on the continent, while demonstrating that previous unilateral forms of intervention as spearheaded by the West, including France, were neither the only nor the best option. As Western Africa, especially the Sahel region, will continue to remain vulnerable to weak governments and non-state threats in the form of Islamic extremism, it is in the interests of both France and the West

to coordinate policy further with China, given the latter's increased interest in promoting African peace and stability.

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