



U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Staff Memo

“China’s First Deployment of Combat Forces to a UN Peacekeeping Mission—South Sudan”



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Cover Photo:

Ribbon cutting ceremony for an engineering project in South Sudan. *Source:* Zhang Dongjie, *China Military Online*, Feb 16, 2012. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2012-02/16/content_4792561.htm

Despite little acknowledgement in Western press, on January 11, 2012, China dispatched its first combat unit in support of a United Nations (UN) mission since China began participating in peacekeeping operations (PKO) in 1990.¹ The unit, a small infantry platoon, will provide force protection for a larger group of PLA engineers and medical personnel deployed to South Sudan. The addition of a combat unit for force protection likely reflects China's belief that it needs to safeguard its deployed peacekeepers while in South Sudan. Below are some additional details about this deployment.

First deployment of peacekeepers to South Sudan

This is the first deployment of PLA forces of any kind to South Sudan. The dispatched unit, consisting of roughly 350 personnel, comprises three engineering units, a medical unit, and a security unit. The force left China on Jan 11, 2012, for an eight-month deployment to the town of Wau, in western South Sudan.² The unit is to support the “UN Mission in South Sudan,” which since July 9, 2011, seeks “to consolidate peace and security, and to help establish conditions for development in the Republic of South Sudan.”³ It is worth noting that the units deployed—to include the combat troops—are all from the 162nd Motorized Infantry Division (54th Group Army), an elite rapid reaction unit of the PLA.⁴ This mission likely will provide the 162nd with fresh deployment and operational experience since its last actual deployment—to Beijing in support of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre.⁵

First deployment of PLA combat forces in support of a PKO

The security contingent support, likely an infantry platoon, is the first combat unit China has contributed to a PKO since it began participating in UN missions in 1990.⁶ Since then, Chinese PKO participation had consisted entirely of non-combat forces, such as engineers, police, medical, and logistics personnel.⁷ The infantry platoon will provide force protection for the

¹ A linguistic exception is the PLA Navy escort mission off the Horn of Africa, which consists not only of naval combatants, but also a contingent of special operation forces. However, this mission is not considered a traditional “peacekeeping mission” since it is a sea-based operation.

² Jin Hanbo and Li Deying, “First Chinese Peacekeeping Contingent to South Sudan Sets Out,” *PLA Daily*, Jan 12, 2012. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/photo-reports/2012-01/13/content_4767793.htm; Tao Shelan, “First Chinese Peacekeeping Engineering Detachment to South Sudan Established,” *China News*, Jan 5, 2012. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2012-01/05/content_4334685.htm.

³ United Nations, “UNMISS Background.” <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unmiss/background.shtml>.

⁴ SinoDefence.com, “Rapid Reaction Units,” October 30, 2008.

<http://www.sinodefence.com/army/organisation/rapid-reaction-units.asp>.

⁵ The Associated Press, “Former Chinese soldier Zhang Shijun's Story is a New Look at Tianenmen Square Crackdown,” March 18, 2009. http://articles.nydailynews.com/2009-03-18/news/17917509_1_tiananmen-square-vast-square-54th-army.

⁶ China's first official participation in a PKO was in 1990, when it sent military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East. International Crisis Group, “China's Growing Role in UN Peacekeeping,” *Asia Report*, No. 166 (April 17, 2009), p. 5.

⁷ It is worth noting, however, that according to one source, China attempted to dispatch a force protection unit with its peacekeepers in support of the 2007 UN-African Union Mission in Darfur, but was denied by the Sudanese

Chinese peacekeepers, likely in response to perceived dangers that the PLA engineering and medical forces face in South Sudan. Prior to deployment, the PLA combat unit underwent three months of specialized combat training in China.⁸

Ninth PKO deployment to Sudan

Although this is the first Chinese PKO deployment to South Sudan, it is actually the PLA's ninth deployment to the region. China first began dispatching noncombat PKO forces to Wau (then a part of Sudan) in May 2006, under the "UN Mission in Sudan."⁹ Begun in March 2005, this mission was in support of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army. On July 9, 2011, this mission ended and the South Sudan mission began.¹⁰

government. Chin-Hao Huang, "U.S.-China Relations and Darfur," *Fordham International Law Journal*, vol. 31, no. 4 (April 2008), pp. 827-842.

⁸ Tao Shelan, "First Chinese Peacekeeping Engineering Detachment to South Sudan Established," *China News*, Jan 5, 2012. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2012-01/05/content_4334685.htm.

⁹ Jin Hanbo and Li Deying, "First Chinese Peacekeeping Contingent to South Sudan Sets Out," *PLA Daily*, Jan 12, 2012. . http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/photo-reports/2012-01/13/content_4767793.htm.

¹⁰ United Nations, "United Nations Mission in the Sudan: Background." <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unmis/background.shtml>.