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China's strategy in the continent: peacekeeping and economic goals

The deployment of the first Chinese infantry battalion in the UNMISS (UN Mission in South Sudan) operation in South Sudan at the beginning of 2015 is definitely a signal of the growth of China's role in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa. It is indeed the first time that China sends special ground troops in a foreign country. A commitment not by chance taken in a decisive area for China's interests and recent expression of a different general approach to the foreign affairs, especially in relation to China-Africa ties of the last years.

Likewise the authorization granted by the Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh for the construction of a military base in Obock; according to Colonel Wu Qian, spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defense of Popular Republic of China, it is necessary to ensure better support for UN peacekeeping operations and it will play a positive role for the Chinese military to effectively fulfil its international obligations and maintain international and regional peace and stability. US naval analysts point out that it is also part of a wider strategy of global maritime choke-points surveillance.

The consolidation of Chinese presence reflects a dual strategy: an undeniable increase in troop-contributing and economic commitment in UN missions and in counter-terrorism co-operation, now a

duty to safeguard regional security; but simultaneously the defence of its swelling economic interests in Africa, one of the major trading partners and one of the main markets for Chinese exports and foreign investments.

As Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in the last FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Co-operation) summit in Johannesburg, China is willing to promote the political stabilisation of Africa's pivotal crises, reinforcing the peacekeeping capability, in order to allow the achievement of a sustainable and inclusive development. Despite a rather reinforced military presence and the gradual forgoing the past non-intervention practice in peacekeeping operations, a Chinese-led counter-terrorism operation or any unilateral action are highly unlikely, because the Chinese interest on security will remain subordinate to the economic one. China needs Africa's energy resources to sustain its reduced economic growth, as shown by the import of 1,2 million barrels of crude oil from African countries, a long-term crucial alternative to an unstable Middle East. Therefore it will increasingly cooperate, aiming at: satisfying its energy demand; overcoming African structural deficiency; granting interest-free or preferential rate loans; carrying out infrastructural improvements. It will continue to use an approach differing from the strategies of the former western colonial powers, which is appreciated by African governments, and through its bilateral agreements China will slowly let crumble the established economic and political alliances in the continent.

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