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Doing Well by Doing Good? Strategic Competition and United Nations Peacekeeping

by Bryce Loidolt



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Cover: Peacekeepers from China serving with United Nations Mission in South Sudan build temporary operating base in Terekeka village, 90 kilometers from Juba, South Sudan, July 4, 2021 (UN Photo/Gregorio Cunha)

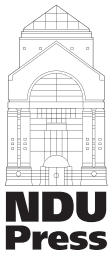
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By Bryce Loidolt

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	3
International Competition and UN Peacekeeping	5
UN Peacekeeping as a Policy Instrument	9
Research Design and Data	11
Findings and Analysis.....	12
Recommendations.....	24
Conclusion	27
Notes	28
About the Author	38

Executive Summary

The Joseph Biden administration's Interim Strategic Guidance emphasizes the importance of ensuring that international organizations “continue to reflect the universal values, aspirations, and norms that have underpinned the UN [United Nations] system since its founding 75 years ago, rather than an authoritarian agenda.”¹ In this context, several trends in competitor contributions to UN peacekeeping operations could be cause for alarm and warrant greater U.S. engagement. Although Washington remains the largest billpayer for these missions, both Russian and Chinese personnel contributions to UN peacekeeping have surpassed those of the United States. Chinese financial contributions are slowly increasing and, unlike the United States, are paid on time, in full, and without conditions. China is also the largest troop contributor to peacekeeping missions among the Permanent 5 members of the UN Security Council.

Russian and Chinese investments alone do not require a response from the United States. Both countries could presumably offer much-needed political and material support to UN peacekeeping missions, which have grown in complexity and frequency since the end of the Cold War. Russian and Chinese support for peacekeeping could thus be benign—even helpful—to the United States. Nor is competitor involvement the only reason the United States might consider increasing its own participation in this important dimension of global governance. UN peacekeeping missions could indeed offer opportunities for U.S. military personnel to serve in diverse multinational coalitions, bolster America's global image, or develop and implement peacekeeping capacity-building programs.

Still, Chinese and Russian influence on peacekeeping could have serious repercussions for U.S. interests. Engagement in UN peacekeeping could allow Russia and China to establish footholds in host countries, develop military experience, and then influence or topple the procedures and norms guiding the behavior of the over 60,000 peacekeeping troops currently deployed under a UN mandate. Much of this could undermine the effectiveness of the peacekeeping enterprise at a time when the United States may wish to rely more on multilateral approaches to managing civil conflicts and other forms of instability.

This study thus evaluates the benefits that U.S. competitors have gained through their engagement in UN peacekeeping and assesses the extent to which these benefits necessarily challenge U.S. interests. It finds the threat to U.S. interests from Russian and Chinese participation in UN missions and deliberations to be most pronounced at UN headquarters. At the UN, China has advanced initiatives that reflect its desire for a less-muscular brand of peacekeeping,

just as Russia has been able to protect its access to lucrative peacekeeping contracts during budget negotiations. Both countries have sought to eliminate human rights posts in UN missions.

Competitor activities within UN missions have not yet systematically eroded their effectiveness or impartiality, however. This is not to say that Russia and China have avoided using their presence in UN missions to pursue national objectives. China has been able to use its peacekeeping deployments as a platform for its own development activities and, likely, information-gathering for local business opportunities. Beijing's peacekeepers have also at times attempted to pilfer personally identifiable information about their foreign counterparts and gain insights into the operating concepts of more advanced militaries. Russian staff officers have sometimes obstructed the activities of UN peacekeeping missions that conflict with Moscow's interests in host countries.

At the same time, though, U.S. competitors have also faced several obstacles in their attempts to wield peacekeeping contributions more forcefully or in ways that more directly infringe on mission priorities. Risk aversion and geographic separation have rendered Chinese peacekeepers unable or unwilling to directly protect Beijing's economic interests in host countries, and Chinese pursuit of information about advanced militaries in or adjacent to UN missions has not yet distracted from mission effectiveness or undermined mission cohesion. Russia's disruptive approach has also only occurred in rare instances where its interests in the host country were particularly intense. Neither competitor has been able to uniformly improve bilateral ties with host governments due to its personnel contributions alone.

Collectively, these findings imply a measured response from the United States to address this challenge. Though Washington should still seek areas of agreement with both Russia and China in the UN peacekeeping sphere, U.S. policy must shift from viewing it as a purely cooperative domain. Specifically, this study recommends that the United States focus on competing for senior-level positions within the UN Department of Peace Operations, while also working to prevent and identify competitor pursuit of parallel interests in missions. Doing so requires the United States to build a bench of qualified personnel who can serve in UN headquarters; establish a consensus and work to separate national contingents and personnel from parallel interests; prioritize missions with competitor presence and parallel interests for U.S. staff officer deployments; and develop mechanisms to identify, name, and shame competitor behavior that harms mission effectiveness.

Introduction

The United Nations is no stranger to China's rise or Russia's renewed assertiveness. Drawing on its growing economic and political clout, Beijing's expanding leadership presence across various UN bodies has provided it opportunities to promote its initiatives and worldview.² Russia, too, has been particularly combative in its dealings in the UN Security Council (UNSC), often seeking to protect violators of human rights and pursuing an agenda that runs counter to Western-backed norms.³ These efforts to influence the procedures and values of the United Nations have not gone unnoticed in Washington; strategy documents from both the Trump and Biden administrations express alarm at growing competitor influence in the UN and have emphasized the need for greater U.S. engagement in international organizations.⁴

Chinese and Russian contributions to UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKO) could thus be particularly concerning. Washington remains the largest financial contributor to these missions, but both Russian and Chinese personnel contributions eclipse those of the United States.⁵ And the financial contributions from Beijing have been ascendant.⁶

Involvement in peacekeeping—an activity that consumes the plurality of the UN's financial resources and is among the most visible manifestations of the organization's presence abroad—could in turn expand Beijing and Moscow's influence over the behavior and employment of the tens of thousands of troops deployed worldwide under the UN flag. So too could it offer opportunities for U.S. competitors to establish and expand an expeditionary presence in countries hosting UNPKOs or gain operational exposure and knowledge for their militaries.

Competitor pursuit of these interests could move UN peacekeeping in a direction that would be detrimental to U.S. interests and peacekeeping norms. UNPKOs provide the United States with its own opportunities to serve in multinational coalitions, improve its peacekeeping capacity-building programs, or build international good will. At its core, though, peacekeeping offers the United States an avenue to distribute the costs of stabilization and peacebuilding activities across the international community.

Far from perfect, UN peacekeeping has had a demonstrable effect on reducing the intensity, spread, and externalities of civil conflicts at lower cost than unilateral U.S. deployments.⁷ Much of this success can be attributed to post-Cold War enhancements to UNPKOs, including an emphasis on protecting civilians, monitoring and preventing human rights atrocities, and often pursuing governance and security sector reforms.⁸ By diverting resources and attention away from mission objectives and contesting peacekeeping norms and procedures, both Russian and

Chinese activities could thus detract from mission effectiveness and undermine the efficacy of UN peacekeeping.

Alternatively, Russian and Chinese activities in this area could be cause for little concern. As rising or aspirant major powers, countries such as Russia and China could be helpful peacekeeping partners. UN peacekeeping missions require political support within the UNSC and are often in need of reliable equipment and personnel.⁹ Russian and Chinese activities in UN peacekeeping could thus help fill these important gaps.

Whether or the extent to which Chinese and Russian participation and contributions to UN peacekeeping are harmful or benign has considerable implications for U.S. policy. If participation in this important UN function is yielding opportunities for competitors to secure bilateral interests, generate military power, or otherwise erode the norms and procedures of UN peacekeeping, it would warrant greater U.S. investments and engagement in this area to counter or displace Russian and Chinese influence. Alternatively, if Russia and China have been unable or unwilling to draw on their peacekeeping contributions for national ends, it would justify a more passive U.S. posture and even attempts to encourage competitor participation in this important multilateral function.

For all their importance, the benefits U.S. competitors have gained through their peacekeeping activities remain underexamined in existing scholarship. A burgeoning literature on China's increasing engagement in UNPKOs has tended to focus on the determinants of Chinese deployments rather than evaluating whether Beijing has managed to translate its presence in UNPKOs into strategic outcomes.¹⁰ Policy-oriented commentary and scholarship on China's rise have also been divided regarding whether China's peacekeeping troop deployments signal benevolent or expansionist intentions.¹¹ Moreover, Russian contributions to UN missions have received far less scholarly attention than Russian peacekeeping efforts in its near abroad.¹²

Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with U.S. personnel who have observed and served alongside Russian and Chinese peacekeeping personnel and officials, reporting on UN peacekeeping missions, and other primary and secondary sources, this study finds that U.S. interests and peacekeeping norms are being challenged most directly and consequentially at UN headquarters rather than from within the missions themselves. This implies that while the United States should no longer view UN peacekeeping as a purely cooperative space vis-à-vis Russia and China, it should not seek to match or displace Chinese and Russian personnel contributions from UN missions. The United States should instead compete for senior assignments within the UN Department of Peace Operations while continuing to monitor competitor

activities in UNPKOs to ensure that they align with peacekeeping norms and procedures and contribute to mission effectiveness.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows. It begins by describing the evolution of UN peacekeeping, as well as whether and how the United States, China, and Russia have supported these missions since the end of the Cold War. It then reviews the study's analytic framework and research design, outlining how countries like Russia and China might benefit from their support for UNPKOs and reviewing the data it uses to make this assessment. It proceeds with the analysis, identifying when and where Russian and Chinese activities in UN peacekeeping threaten to undermine U.S. interests and concludes with the implications this analysis has for U.S. policy.

International Competition and UN Peacekeeping

The frequency, procedures, and norms of UN peacekeeping have historically been linked to major power rivalries. Throughout the Cold War, Soviet-U.S. tensions dictated whether the United Nations would be permitted to deploy peacekeepers and the tasks they could perform in the field.¹³ This first generation of peacekeeping missions thus generally consisted of lightly armed forces positioned between combatants after a ceasefire or truce. They were also located outside of areas where U.S. or Soviet interests were particularly intense, and neither power made pronounced personnel contributions to the missions themselves. Even with these already strict boundaries in place, approval of new missions slowed even further during the 1970s and halted for much of the 1980s, when U.S.-Soviet tensions yielded deadlock in the UNSC.¹⁴

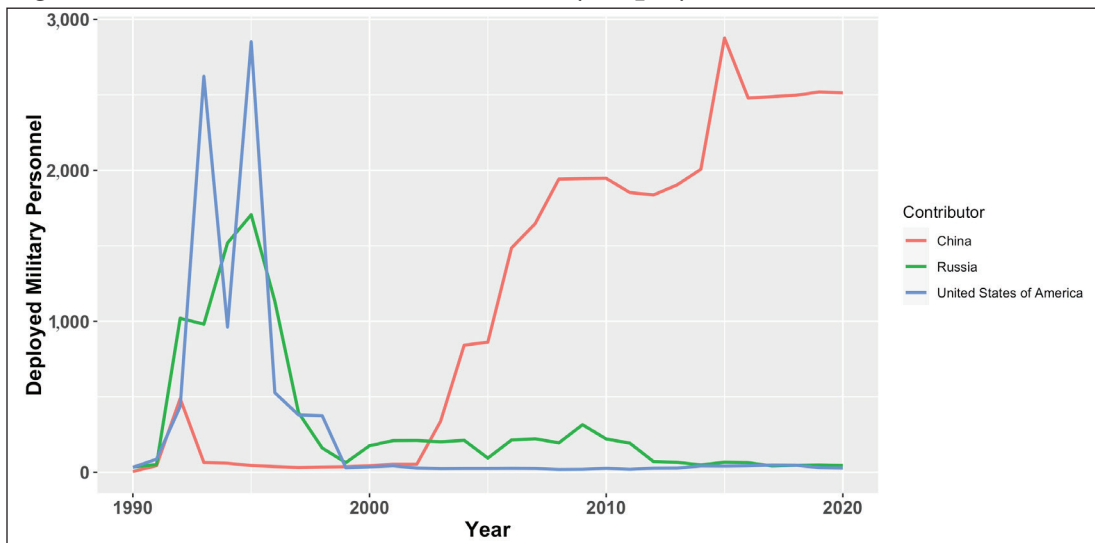
The end of the Cold War and subsequent era of unipolarity offered a much more permissive context for multilateral peace operations. The poor performance of UN missions in Somalia, Angola, Rwanda, and Bosnia led to a temporary retrenchment in UN member state enthusiasm for peacekeeping by the mid-1990s. Eventually, successful efforts in East Timor, Indonesia, and Kosovo—not to mention improvements to peacekeeping doctrine and organizational processes—generated and supported “multidimensional” and “robust” missions.¹⁵ These undertakings entailed UN peacekeepers executing tasks that went far beyond the observation of peace accords and included activities such as monitoring human rights and using force against recalcitrant factions that were disrupting the ability of the mission to execute its mandated duties.

The growing complexity and expanded geography of post-Cold War UNPKOs created a demand for and potential supply of peacekeeping personnel from Russia, China, and the United States. As peacekeeping missions took on new tasks, they required more capable peacekeepers. Coupled with changing norms surrounding the inclusion of major powers in peacekeeping, this

opened the possibility that countries like the United States, Russia, and China might participate in these missions directly.¹⁶ The post–Cold War concentration of UNPKOs on the African continent also rendered these missions of potential strategic relevance to each of these three countries. Just as the United States has come to consider the diverse African continent as central to both international commerce and its ability to project global power, so too have Russia and China pursued commercial and military interests in the region.¹⁷

Yet the post–Cold War military personnel contributions from the United States, Russia, and China to UN peacekeeping have been distinct (see figure 1).¹⁸ The roles of these personnel vary. Most serve in infantry and enabler units that their respective country has agreed to deploy to the UN mission. Others, referred to by the United Nations as military observers or experts, are typically unarmed military officials tasked with monitoring and supervising cease-fires and truces, and many others serve as staff officers in UNPKO headquarters elements.¹⁹ The subsequent paragraphs describe and explore determinants of each major power’s military contributions to UNPKOs.

Figure 1. Chinese, Russian, and U.S. Military Deployments to UNPKOs, 1990–2020



Sources: International Peace Institute, “IPI Peacekeeping Database,” available at <<https://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/contributions/>>; United Nations Peacekeeping, “Troop and Police Contributors,” available at <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>>. This figure includes numbers of military staff officers, contingent troops, and observers for each contributor.

The United States

U.S. military personnel contributions reached their zenith in the early 1990s, when the United States sent peacekeepers to missions in Haiti, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia. The failures of these missions subsequently ushered in a greater degree of caution and restraint. In May of 1993, the Clinton administration issued Presidential Decision Directive 25, *U.S. Policy on Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations*, which initiated many enduring pillars of U.S. policy toward UN peacekeeping.²⁰ These pillars include a preference for acting through regional coalitions and alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization rather than the UN, the extrication of U.S. contingent troops from UN peacekeeping missions, an emphasis on accountability and enhancing institutional reforms, building partner capacity for UN peacekeeping, and the only occasional U.S. provision of niche capabilities, whether in the form of personnel, materiel, or logistical support, to UNPKOs.²¹

Policy outlines the principles under which the United States should deploy its personnel to support UN peacekeeping missions, to include instances where U.S. support would

*(1) constitute a capability in which the United States has specialized expertise or capability; (2) have the potential to improve substantially the overall effectiveness of the UN mission, particularly one with significant implications for U.S. national security; and (3) not adversely impact current or projected U.S. operations elsewhere.*²²

As of February 2021, just over 30 U.S. staff officers are occupying positions within the military components of UN mission headquarters in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, Central African Republic (CAR), South Sudan, and Israel.²³ Beyond its personnel contributions, the United States is both the largest financial contributor and capacity-builder for UN peacekeeping missions.²⁴

Russia

Russia's participation in UN peacekeeping aligns closely with U.S. personnel contributions. Through the mid-1990s, Russia's UN peacekeeping deployments remained relatively tethered to its immediate neighborhood. This includes the 1993 deployment of over 900 contingent troops to the UN Protection Force in the Balkans, a contingent that grew to over 1,500 troops by 1995. During this same period, however, Russia made far larger contributions to non-UN peacekeeping missions in Tajikistan, Georgia, and Moldova.²⁵ Russia's preference for regional

and unilateral peacekeeping forces has largely endured through the 21st century.²⁶ Russia currently deploys forces through a Commonwealth of Independent States mandate in Transnistria and also contributes troops to a Collective Security Treaty Organization peacekeeping force.²⁷ More recently, it has deployed peacekeepers to Nagorno Karabakh.²⁸

Although Russia often voices support for UN peacekeeping, Russia's contributions to UNPKOs are rather measured.²⁹ Russia's assessed financial contributions of 3 percent of the UN peacekeeping budget fall well short of China (15 percent) and the United States (28 percent).³⁰ Even so, its personnel contributions to UNPKOs exceed those of the United States. As of February 2021, Russia had nearly 90 military observers and staff officers deployed across eight UN missions in South Sudan, the Sudan, CAR, DRC, and Cyprus.³¹

China

The trajectory of China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations is the inverse of that of the United States and Russia. After its accession to the UNSC in 1971, China maintained a deep skepticism of UN peacekeeping, viewing it as an infringement on state sovereignty and an instrument of U.S. or Soviet hegemony. Coupled with the fact that China itself had been a combatant in a conflict that drew UN intervention, China thus often abstained from UNSC votes related to UN peacekeeping and did not assume any financial responsibility for missions. China's recalcitrance began to thaw by the 1980s, as it voted in favor of expanding the UN peacekeeping mission in Cyprus and paid dues to the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon in 1981 and 1982, respectively.³² In the 1990s, China began providing small personnel contributions to missions in Cambodia, Mozambique, and Western Sahara, among others.

A combination of Hu Jintao's emphasis on "new historic missions" for the People's Liberation Army, the need to protect its overseas interests, shifting beliefs about the utility of peacekeeping, and the desire to signal a peaceful rise likely led to Beijing's more pronounced deployments to UN missions in the early 2000s.³³ In tandem with increased participation in UNPKOs, in 2009 China established a peacekeeping center within its Ministry of National Defense, which included a training base and other facilities to train Chinese and foreign peacekeepers.³⁴ China has also participated in peacekeeping exercises with international partners, including Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Mongolia, while also providing instructors for courses offered in Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Thailand, and Vietnam.³⁵ Moreover, China has registered a 19-unit "standby peacekeeping force" that, once certified within the UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System, could be called on at short notice to deploy to peacekeeping missions.³⁶

China has touted its contributions to UNPKOs in its Defense White Papers since the early 2000s, and in September 2020 China published a standalone white paper outlining the history and objectives of its contributions to UN missions.³⁷ The paper describes how Chinese peacekeepers “fulfill their missions of meeting the responsibilities of a major country, safeguarding world peace, and contributing to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.”³⁸ Currently, China’s personnel contributions include a mix of individual military observers and experts, as well as engineering, medical, and infantry units. As of February 2021, most Chinese peacekeepers are serving in UN missions in South Sudan, Mali, DRC, Sudan, and Lebanon.³⁹

Summary

Since the end of the Cold War, the demand for UN peacekeepers has grown in tandem with the size, frequency, and complexity of these missions. Yet the United States, Russia, and China have responded to these changes differently and currently make diverse investments in UN peacekeeping. The determinants of these inputs are no doubt important. But the appropriate response from the United States to competitor investments in UNPKOs hinges on whether and how U.S. competitors wield these contributions to their advantage and the extent to which these advantages come at the expense of U.S. interests. The following section provides a framework to make this assessment.

UN Peacekeeping as a Policy Instrument

This study aims to evaluate whether and how U.S. competitors have leveraged contributions to UN peacekeeping to pursue their national agendas and, in turn, the extent to which this comes at the expense of mission effectiveness and/or U.S. preferences. The following sections review the benefits that U.S. competitors might gain through their contributions. Critically, each of these could serve to undermine U.S. interests, either by countering liberal UN peacekeeping norms or otherwise diverting mission resources and attention away from fulfilling the mandate.

Influence in the United Nations

Whether by establishing a coterie of personnel with experience in UN peacekeeping or by supplementing their status as members of the Permanent 5 (P5) and credibility with Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs), both Russian and Chinese contributions to UNPKOs could allow them to promote agendas that run counter to U.S. and Western-backed peacekeeping norms and initiatives. This includes influence over personnel assignments, other more proce-

dural dimensions of UN peacekeeping, including budget negotiations and mandate writing, as well as the ability to successfully promote their own peacekeeping initiatives.

The United Nations is not a pure meritocracy.⁴⁰ Historically, when evaluating candidates for senior-level positions, the UN Secretariat has weighed a country's material power, direct contributions to UN missions, and unique skillsets.⁴¹ Participating in UNPKOs could thus help a major power develop experienced and skilled personnel to serve in senior-level military and civilian positions in the UN Department of Peace Operations (UNDPO).

Participation in and support for UNPKOs could also provide Russia and China an opportunity to improve their status, indirectly empowering them to successfully promote their own initiatives by building influence with other stakeholders. The 21st-century division of labor in UNPKOs has typically placed the financial burden for UN missions on the P5, who pay nearly half of the assessed financial contributions to UN peacekeeping but contribute only around 5 percent of the personnel for these missions.⁴² It is the developing world that puts its soldiers at risk in UN missions. By making earnest personnel contributions to UNPKOs, then, a major power could theoretically enhance its credibility and relationships with other TCCs by sharing in some of this risk, thus in turn allowing it more sway at UN headquarters. This enhanced status could augment Russia and China's already influential positions as members of the P5, which affords them veto power over UNPKOs.

Parallel Interests in Host Countries

Russia and China may have interests—and even friendly forces—in a country where a UNPKO is operating.⁴³ Having a presence in the adjacent UN mission could allow these countries to pursue and support parallel interests, which could distract or divert resources from fulfilling the mission's mandate. A country's contingent troops or military observers might, for example, prove useful in gathering information on potential economic or political opportunities in the host country. It might also use contingent troops on a mission to pursue and expand its interests, diverting or directing the mission's activities to protect its investments, provide protection for its expatriates, or serve as a platform to pursue bilateral interests within the host country.

Operational Experience and Knowledge

For some countries, participating in the United Nations offers little more than monetary remuneration for its armed forces.⁴⁴ But others could capitalize on the deployments to gain valuable military experience. This includes learning how to deploy, sustain, and redeploy troops abroad and operate in foreign countries as part of a multinational coalition. UN missions also

offer numerous chances to see other militaries in action. UNPKOs can indeed bring a personnel contributor into contact with staff officers and combat troops from more advanced militaries. This provides an opportunity for less advanced militaries to learn about the personnel, processes, and behaviors of other militaries to enhance their own military proficiency.

These benefits could be relevant to strategic competition in two ways. Taken to an extreme, efforts to learn about militaries within or adjacent to the mission could distract from effectiveness or otherwise undermine the cohesion of UNPKOs by degrading trust across constituent forces. It could also help U.S. competitors' efforts to modernize their militaries, particularly in developing and testing approaches to expeditionary operations.

Summary

Just as peacekeeping could serve as a means of burdensharing, so too could it allow U.S. competitors to pursue national objectives. In many instances these benefits could imply costs for the United States and its likeminded allies by distracting from the mission or eroding important peacekeeping norms and procedures. In the section that follows, the data used to make this evaluation is presented.

Research Design and Data

This study aims to evaluate the benefits U.S. competitors might gain through their support for UNPKOs. To make this assessment, it draws on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, each of which have their own benefits and flaws. The following describes the data sources in turn.

The core of the study's evidence comes from the nearly 50 semistructured interviews the author conducted with U.S. military and civilian officials throughout 2020 and 2021. These personnel interacted with or observed Russian and Chinese peacekeeping forces and officials in the field or at UN headquarters or were otherwise responsible for devising and implementing U.S. policies and strategies toward international organizations. To help ensure that the findings were not an artifact of any single interview, the author used two complementary sampling procedures. First, a purposeful sampling technique involved soliciting interviews with U.S. staff officers who had served in specific UNPKOs and other officials from functional and regional bureaus in the U.S. Government. Each interviewee was then asked to refer others whose background or expertise might be relevant to the study, creating a snowball sample as well.⁴⁵ Critically, the interview sample includes at least two U.S. staff officers from every mission where U.S. and Chinese/Russian personnel contributions overlap.⁴⁶

Where appropriate, the study draws from a complementary set of quantitative and qualitative data to help measure several outcomes of interest. To evaluate Chinese and Russian influence in the United Nations and UNDP, this includes data on the nationalities of Force Commander (FC) and Special Representative of the Secretary-General positions, as well as UN General Assembly Voting Data, which provide quantitative estimates of a country's preferences based on its voting history in the assembly. To evaluate competitor pursuit and achievement of parallel interests in host governments, the study uses country-level and, where possible, subnational, data on energy and mineral deposits and production, foreign investments, arms sales, strategic partnerships, and memorandums of understanding (MOUs).

Finally, the study uses additional primary and secondary reports to help supplement these data sources. These include official documents and statements from both Russian and Chinese officials, external reporting on UN deliberations, as well as other media reporting on the activities and behavior of Russian and Chinese peacekeepers. These also include evidence drawn from the extensive secondary literature on China's growing peacekeeping contributions.

Findings and Analysis

This section reviews the study's key findings. It examines how Russia and China have capitalized on their contributions to and presence in UNPKOs to gain influence at the United Nations, pursue national interests within host countries, and generate operational experience and knowledge.

Influence in the United Nations

This section evaluates whether and how Russia and China have been able to influence the priorities, procedures, and deliberations related to UN peacekeeping at UN headquarters in ways that conflict with U.S.-backed initiatives or other peacekeeping norms. It does so by describing the nature and success of Russian and Chinese efforts to gain leadership positions within the UNDP, steer budget deliberations and mandate writing to align with their preferences, and pass their own initiatives related to UN peacekeeping.

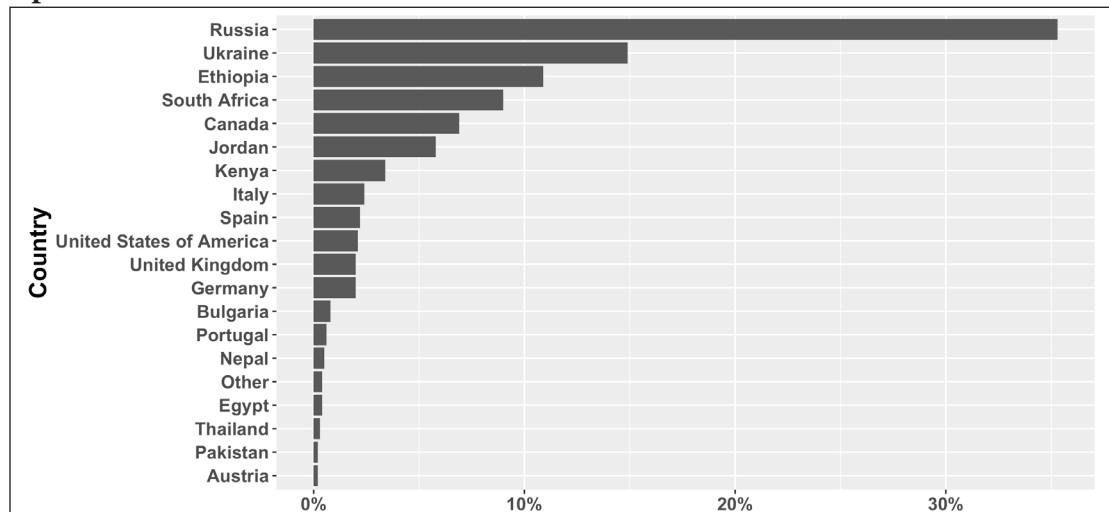
Both Russia and China have aggressively pursued leadership positions within the UNDP, though Beijing has been more successful in securing them. Russia has lobbied heavily and unsuccessfully, for example, to have a Russian national serve as the head of the Israel-based UN Truce Supervision Organization.⁴⁷ In 2017, Moscow also attempted to take the reins of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, a bureau long-dominated by the West.⁴⁸ Conversely, Chinese nationals have been appointed as FCs in the UN Force for Cyprus and the UN Mission for

the Referendum in Western Sahara.⁴⁹ In total, China’s peacekeeping white paper boasts that 13 of its personnel have served as FCs, deputy FCs, sector commanders, or deputy sector commanders in UNPKOs.⁵⁰ China is also rumored to be eyeing the leadership of the UNDPO itself, a position held by a French national since 1996.⁵¹ In comparison to other members of the UNSC, however, both Russia and China have been largely underrepresented in the UN Secretariat, and most Chinese nationals serve in secretarial or translation roles in the UNDPO.⁵²

This variance in Russian and Chinese ability to secure influential positions aside, both countries have been able to effectively steer certain dimensions of the UNDPO’s budget deliberations. A key objective of Russia during these negotiations has been to protect the UNDPO’s air operations budget, which provides Moscow’s contractors with a lucrative source of revenue.⁵³ In negotiations over the 2018–2019 peacekeeping budget, for example, Russia agreed to back off its proposal to cut the environmental activities from UNPKOs, in return for minimal reductions in the air operations budgets for the missions.⁵⁴ Such efforts appear to have paid off for Russia—from January 2012 to April 2021, Moscow won over one-third of the UN’s air transportation contracts, totaling over \$1 billion (see figure 2).⁵⁵

China’s posture during budgetary negotiations has instead often been rather technocratic. As described by one U.S. official with experience at UN headquarters, “Their approach on the budget is technical . . . we may disagree on how they come up with calculations, but they are

Figure 2. UN Peacekeeping Air Transportation Contracts, January 2012–April 2021



Source: United Nations Procurement Division, “Contract Awards,” available at <<https://www.un.org/Depts/ptd/contract-awards/>>.

always pushing for fiscal discipline.”⁵⁶ At times, then, Chinese calls for the more efficient use of UN resources aligns closely to those of the United States.⁵⁷

Where both Russia and China have been most transparent in pursuing their political preferences in budget negotiations is also where they have thus far been least effective. During deliberations for the 2017–2018 budget, China sought cuts that would eliminate human rights positions or otherwise render human rights monitoring more challenging in DRC, Mali, and South Sudan.⁵⁸ The following year, both Russia and China made a similar push. In budgetary discussions in 2018–2019, Chinese diplomats attempted to eliminate human rights posts in several UN missions, whereas Russia called for a 50 percent cut in the overall human rights budget. Yet Moscow or Beijing found little success in these efforts. The result of the 2018–2019 budget negotiations left all but 6 of the proposed 471 human rights–related posts in place.⁵⁹ More broadly, neither competitor has managed to eliminate an occupied human rights post in the past 5 years.⁶⁰

Mandate renewals are another area of potential Russian and Chinese influence. Russia has often criticized UN peacekeeping as being too intrusive on host-nation sovereignty, spoken out against “robust” mandates that allow UN peacekeepers to use force, and also sought to water down UN commitments to gender equality and mechanisms to address sexual exploitation and abuse within UN peacekeeping missions.⁶¹ As one U.S. official with experience at UN headquarters described, “The Russians are a roadblock . . . anytime we put any documentation forward regarding WPS [Women, Peace, and Security]; they’re like, ‘Nope, take that out. . . .’ They will bully the mandate and not let it be pushed through.”⁶² Generally, though, Russia has been willing to negotiate on these positions and has otherwise abstained from mandate votes when its preferences are not met.⁶³

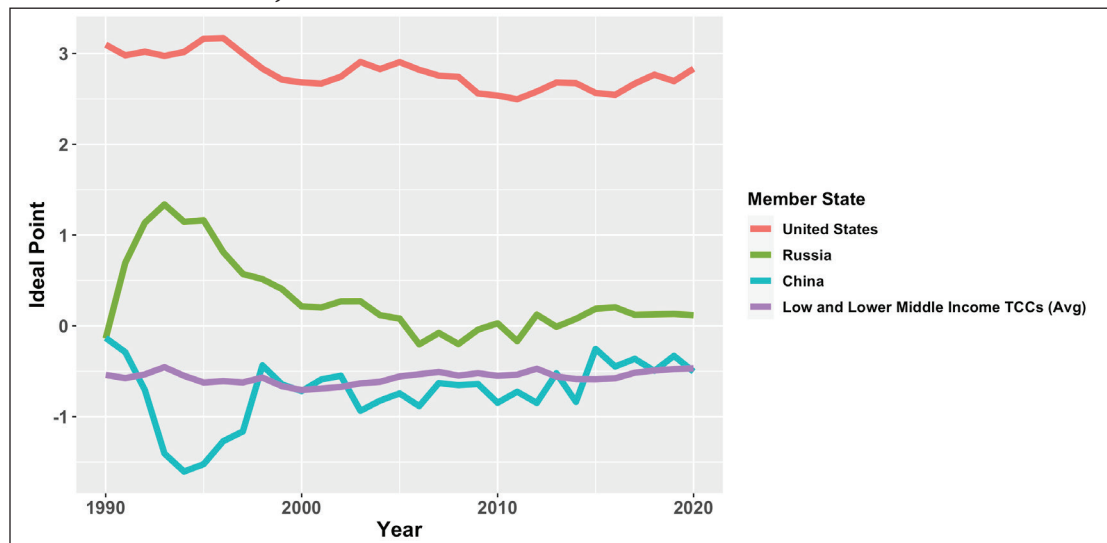
China has often been more capable of influencing and shaping some mission mandates to serve its interests. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, China vetoed or threatened to veto UN missions due to the host nation’s recognition of Taiwan.⁶⁴ More recently, China successfully lobbied for a broader interpretation of the UN mandate in the South Sudan, including adding provisions that would allow the mission to protect oil employees and installations, many of whom are Chinese and Chinese owned, respectively.⁶⁵ China also attempted to have its own peacekeepers deployed to South Sudan’s oil-producing regions.⁶⁶ Indeed, one interviewee described how the Chinese “are trying their best to slide into mandates.”⁶⁷

Finally, both Russia and China have actively sought to pass their own resolutions related to UN peacekeeping, with the latter finding far more success. Whereas Russia’s posture vis-à-vis UN peacekeeping has often been more obstructive than productive, during its last tenure as

UNSC president in the fall of 2020, Russia introduced a highly controversial resolution aimed at diluting commitments to preventing conflict-related sexual violence, female inclusion in civil society, and other dimensions of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.⁶⁸ The resolution failed to pass.⁶⁹

Beijing has had more success, possibly because of its credibility with other TCCs. China has indeed couched its guarded criticism of U.S. emphases on peacekeeper accountability, as well as its own initiatives related to peacekeeper safety, as demonstrative of a commitment to the developing countries that make up the bulk of peacekeeping forces. After the passage of a resolution calling for improvements in peacekeeper behavior and accountability, China’s representative stressed the importance of showing “due regard for troop-contributing countries.”⁷⁰ In fact, the preferences between China and the TCCs show some degree of convergence. Drawing on UN General Assembly Voting Data, figure 3 depicts the ideal point, a quantitative measure intended to reflect a country’s preference toward the U.S.-led international order, for the United States, Russia, China, and low/lower middle income TCCs. Comparing scores across countries over time demonstrates a convergence in countries’ preferences. In this regard, figure 3 shows the already close alignment between China and developing world TCCs and the distance between them closing after 2015.

Figure 3. Chinese, Russian, U.S., and TCC Preferences Toward the Liberal International Order, 1990–2020



Source: Michael Bailey, Anton Strezhnev, and Erik Voeten, “Estimating Dynamic State Preferences from United Nations Voting Data,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no. 2 (2017). The TCC line includes all countries who both contributed more than 500 troops to a single UN mission and fall within the World Bank’s lower and lower-middle income classification.

China's peacekeeping initiatives both draw on and likely contribute to its relationship with other TCCs. In March 2020, China and several TCCs cosponsored UN Resolution 2518, promoting the safety and security of UN peacekeepers.⁷¹ In April 2021, China and 40 other countries launched the Group of Friends on the Safety and Security of UN Peacekeepers to further promote these concepts.⁷² Although few object to measures that would help save the lives of UN peacekeepers, many interviewees expressed concerns that an overemphasis on safety and security could lead to underperformance in other key mission functions, to include monitoring human rights violations or protecting civilians. As one U.S. official with experience at UN headquarters noted, "If you [maximize safety by staying on forward-operating bases], how effective are you going to be?"⁷³

In sum, Russian and Chinese efforts have been both distinct not only in their ambition but also in their level of success. Russia has been most successful in protecting its rather narrow interests in UN procurement contracts. China's approach is more far reaching. Drawing on its status as both a TCC and a member of the P5, Beijing has advanced major initiatives related to UN peacekeeping while also working to direct UN mandates and budget negotiations into line with its preferences, often at the expense of those of the West.

Parallel Interests in Host Countries

This section evaluates Russian and Chinese peacekeepers' pursuit of parallel interests within host countries. It first provides an overview of the current alignment of both Russian and Chinese peacekeeping footprints and material interests before turning to the ways each country has attempted to use its presence within missions to support these interests. It concludes with a discussion of whether Russian and Chinese efforts have been successful, examining historical patterns in Russian and Chinese participation in UNPKOs and subsequent strategic benefits they have achieved.

Chinese peacekeeping deployments often align closely with its material interests (see table 1).⁷⁴ As of February 2021, over 80 percent of China's peacekeepers were present in countries that produce a critical mineral or precious metal.⁷⁵ In the DRC, a producer of over half of the world's share of cobalt, for example, China supports the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with engineering and medical support elements, just as it sends observers to the mission in Western Sahara, which is estimated to have exported more than \$170 million worth of phosphate in 2020.⁷⁶ Mali's potential lithium deposits have sparked Beijing's interest, and China currently supports that mission with a force protection and engineer company.⁷⁷ Chinese contingents also currently overlap with over \$30 billion in

Table 1. Chinese Peacekeeping Deployments and Parallel Interests

Country (Mission)	Deployment (Percent of Total Mission Size)	Host Government Natural Resources	Belt and Road Participant?	Diplomatic Partnership	Investment and Contracts (Billions USD\$, 2005–2020)
South Sudan (UNMISS)	1056 (6)	Oil, gold	Yes	None	4.9
Mali (MINUSMA)	421 (3)	Gold, silver, phosphates, potential lithium	Yes	None	2.4
Lebanon (UNIFIL)	419 (4)	None	Yes	None	0.0
Sudan (UNAMID)	318 (3)	Oil, gold, silver, manganese	Yes	Strategic partner	6.8
DR Congo (MONUSCO)	230 (2)	Oil, cobalt, gold, tin, tantalum, silver, tungsten, diamond	Yes	None	16.1
Western Sahara (MINURSO)	11 (5)	Phosphates	No	None	0.0
Cyprus (UNFICYP)	5 (1)	Gold, silver, oil, potential natural gas	Yes	None	0.3
Israel (UNTSO)	4 (3)	Oil, phosphates, potash, magnesium	No	Innovative comprehensive partnership	12.7

Sources: International Peace Institute, "IPI Peacekeeping Database," available at <<https://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/contributions/>>; UN Peacekeeping, "Troop and Police Contributors," available at <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>>; British Geological Survey, "World Mineral Production 2015–2019," available at <<https://www2.bgs.ac.uk/mineralsuk/statistics/worldStatistics.html>>; Green Belt and Road Initiative Center, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative," available at <<https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>>; Georg Struver, "China's Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests or Ideology," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2017) (with author updates); Derek Scissors, "China Investment Tracker," American Enterprise Institute, available at <<https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>>.

investments and infrastructure contracts, and every host country where China currently has deployed troops has signed onto the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁷⁸

Although 65 percent of China's peacekeeping personnel are deployed to oil-producing host nations, the relationship between Beijing's peacekeeping deployments and its energy interests is less straightforward. Historically, China has at times avoided missions in oil-producing countries. China elected not to participate in a Chad-based mission, for example, likely due to

the host government's only lukewarm support for it.⁷⁹ China has also continued to participate in missions even as its oil imports from those countries decreased, as was the case in Sudan.⁸⁰ In other instances, though, China has committed contingent troops to oil-producing host countries, to include the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), where the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has a 40 percent stake in a joint venture developing the country's oil fields.⁸¹

There is a similarly close relationship between Russian deployments and its national interests. Russia has managed to deploy to several countries where it has economic or security interests (see table 2). As of February 2021, six of the seven countries where Russia had deployed peacekeeping personnel have signed economic- or security-related MOUs with Moscow. And more than half of Russian peacekeeping personnel currently serve in countries where the Russian security firm Wagner Group has been reported as having a past or current presence.

This alignment is likely intentional. In the Central African Republic, for example, Russia began establishing a foothold in the country around 2017, signing a military MOU, deploying Wagner Group advisers, and working within the UN to have an arms embargo lifted so that it could advise and equip the Central African armed forces.⁸² It agreed to participate in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in 2019.⁸³ Russia similarly began participating in the UN mission in Cyprus in 2016 after it had delivered over \$70 million in weapons and signed an agreement securing access to Cypriot ports.⁸⁴

China and Russia draw on these deployments to advance their local interests in different ways. Critically, China's peacekeeping contingents are not diverting significant time or attention to guarding or securing their economic interests in host nations. One staff officer with experience in UNMISS described how China's contingents did "nothing outside of the normal peacekeeping construct" and that they were "not in a position to guard Chinese interests."⁸⁵ "They're content just guarding Juba," described another U.S. staff officer.⁸⁶ U.S. officers who had deployed to the UN mission in Mali had a similar view. "It was very difficult to get them to perform missions," described one, just as another noted, "they would be directed to increase the range of their patrols, [but] they always resisted it . . . overall, their behavior from force protection to engineers to medical staff was very risk averse."⁸⁷

Beyond risk aversion, in other instances Chinese contingents have not been collocated with Beijing's material interests. In DRC, for example, Chinese engineering and medical units are located hundreds of kilometers away from the vast majority of Chinese mining interests, which are concentrated in the country's southern regions.⁸⁸ Although Chinese contingents in

UNMISS are deployed near Chinese expatriates and the CNPC headquarters in Juba, as mentioned, Beijing's lobbying effort to have its peacekeepers deployed to oil-producing regions in the North was unsuccessful.⁸⁹ In Mali, many of China's economic projects have historically been located in the West, hundreds of kilometers from China's Gao-based contingents.⁹⁰ Depending

Table 2. Russian Peacekeeping Deployments and Parallel Interests

Country (Mission)	Deployment (Percent of Total Mission Size)	Host Government Natural Resources	Wagner Group Presence?	Military or Economic MOU?	Arms Sales (Millions USD\$, 2005–2020)
Central African Republic (MINUSCA)	13 (<1)	Oil, diamond, gold	Yes	Yes	1
South Sudan (UNMISS)	12 (<1)	Oil, gold	Yes	Yes	82
Western Sahara (MINURSO)	11 (5)	Phosphates	No	No	0
DR Congo (MONUSCO)	10 (<1)	Oil, cobalt, gold, tin, tantalum, silver, tungsten, diamond	Yes	Yes	0
Cyprus (UNFICYP)	8 (1)	Gold, silver, oil, potential natural gas	No	Yes	91
Israel (UNTSO)	5 (3)	Oil, phosphates, potash, magnesium	No	Yes	0
Sudan (UNISFA)	2 (<1)	Oil, gold, silver, manganese	Yes	Yes	506

Sources: International Peace Institute, "IPI Peacekeeping Database," available at <<https://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/contributions/>>; UN Peacekeeping, "Troop and Police Contributors," available at <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>>; British Geological Survey, "World Mineral Production 2015–2019," available at <<https://www2.bgs.ac.uk/mineralsuk/statistics/worldStatistics.html>>; Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Moscow's Mercenary Wars," available at <<https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>>; Kimberly Marten, "Intro Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military," PONARS Eurasia, January 4, 2019, available at <<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/into-africa-prigozhin-wagner-and-the-russian-military/>>; Ahmad Askar, "The Increasing Presence and Role of Private Security Firms in Africa: The Russia Company 'Wagner' as a Model," Emirates Policy Center, June 7, 2020, available at <https://epc.ae/topic/the-increasing-presence-and-role-of-private-security-firms-in-africa-the-russian-company-wagner-as-a-model#_ednref16>; Institute for the Study of War, "Russian Security Cooperation Agreements Signed July 2014–May 2020," (author updated), n.d., available at <<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/List%20of%20Russian%20Security%20Cooperation%20Agreements%20Post-2014.pdf>>; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Arms Transfers Database," current as of March 15, 2021.

on the location, China thus relies on private security firms or host-nation armed forces to protect its investments and business personnel. Indeed, amid heavy fighting in Juba in 2016, it was a Chinese security firm, not Beijing's peacekeepers, that came to help stranded Chinese workers.⁹¹

Whereas Chinese peacekeepers may not be diverting time or attention to securing Beijing's material interests in host countries, China may more subtly draw on its personnel to explore local business opportunities. In South Sudan, China has reportedly deployed civilian geologists, scientists, and other analysts who could identify local business opportunities in the country.⁹² Chinese peacekeepers—military observers in particular—also often have the chance to travel freely, allowing them to access and gather information. One U.S. staff officer recounted how in the DRC Chinese military observers could be “out there interacting, building relationships, building business contacts.”⁹³ Indeed, one U.S. official with responsibility for African affairs described how UN rotator flights in DRC and South Sudan could theoretically allow nationals from personnel-contributing countries such as China to reach otherwise “pretty inaccessible areas.”⁹⁴

China has also used its presence in UNPKOs to employ direct, small-scale development projects outside the supervision of the UN mission. One staff officer with experience in Mali, for instance, described how Chinese peacekeepers distributed items to the local population without having cleared it through the mission.⁹⁵ In South Sudan, a U.S. official with responsibilities for African affairs described how China's peacekeepers pursued a “whole separate side hustle” and stated that “the Chinese are doing their own quick impact projects separate from the mission.”⁹⁶

Finally, China has attempted to leverage its peacekeeping contributions to strengthen bilateral relations with host countries. Describing China's sometimes awkward cross-cultural engagements on the African continent, one U.S. official with responsibilities for African affairs noted that “Beijing's talking point is clear: ‘we are here in Africa, supporting your interests.’”⁹⁷ Several staff officers indeed described the Chinese penchant for branding their peacekeeping presence. Describing the Chinese engineer base in Mali, one U.S. staff officer recalled that “there was not a single light blue anything in that particular camp,” just as a U.S. staff officer who had deployed to DRC noted that within the Chinese-run base “there was no UN flag [and] no reference to the UN whatsoever.”⁹⁸

Russian pursuit of parallel interests is less widespread but far more harmful to mission effectiveness when it does occur. This has been most pronounced in CAR, where Moscow's interests and activities in the country predate its participation in the UN mission.⁹⁹ In one instance in the mission, Russia “slow rolled” information on an impending attack on UN peacekeepers, presumably to protect Russian interests.¹⁰⁰ Another U.S. staff officer described how “a potential

operation against an armed group . . . found its way to the Russian embassy prior to the operation . . . we traced it back to that Russian officer within the [mission] HQ” leading to the cancellation of the operation.¹⁰¹ Other Russian staff officers in CAR have served as Russia’s de facto defense attachés in the country when needed.¹⁰² The intermixing of Wagner Group advisers and UN peacekeepers in CAR has raised concerns within the UN that the latter could become implicated in the former’s human rights abuses.¹⁰³

This phenomenon may be rather limited to these specific cases, however. In the DRC, another country where Russia has considerable economic interests, U.S. staff officers described their Russian counterparts as generally professional.¹⁰⁴ One minor exception is an instance in the DRC where a Russian staff officer shared mission intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance imagery with contacts back home.¹⁰⁵ Yet this action did not inhibit ongoing operations.

Having a presence on peacekeeping missions has not provided durable strategic benefits for either China or Russia. China’s approach to leveraging its presence in UNPKOs has yielded mixed results. In several instances, China’s participation preceded investments, construction contracts, and arms deals with host countries. Of the eight host countries where China began deploying personnel after 2005, investments and/or arms deals followed in all but two, and all but one has signed onto the BRI.

The case of Mali is emblematic of both trends. Deepening Malian-Chinese ties can be attributed to several factors—key among them donor availability. But after China contributed troops to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali in 2013, its relationship with the Malian government has grown considerably. This has taken the form of enhanced military ties, as China donated more than \$15 million in equipment, uniforms, and other goods to the Malian military; sold the Malian armed forces two Tiger armored personnel vehicles and Y-12 light transportation aircraft; and pledged enhanced military cooperation.¹⁰⁶ Chinese investments have similarly followed, to include a \$1.5 billion deal to renovate and extend Mali’s railway connection to neighboring Senegal, signed in 2015.¹⁰⁷ Mali signed onto China’s BRI in 2019.¹⁰⁸

More strategic-level indicators suggest some limitations for Beijing. For one, China’s presence in a UNPKO has not necessarily led host nations to uniformly support its policies and behavior. Just over half of the host countries that China began supporting with peacekeepers since 2005 were signatories of a 2019 letter to the UN Human Rights Council that praised China’s “achievements in the field of human rights.”¹⁰⁹ Upgrades in China’s strategic partnerships with host governments have also been rare. China has elevated its strategic relations with only two of the eight host governments that it began supporting through a PKO deployment after 2005

(Timor-Leste and Sudan).¹¹⁰ Currently, China maintains strategic partnerships only with host governments in two of the eight missions where it is present (Israel and Sudan).¹¹¹

Much narrower in its ambitions, Russia has similarly had success only in select instances. Moscow's relationship with the Faustin-Archange Touadéra regime in CAR, for example, has continued to deepen since its participation in MINUSCA. But this likely has more to do with Russia's employment of other policy instruments that have worked in concert with its roughly dozen staff officers in the mission.¹¹²

Beyond this case, Russia's presence in UNPKOs has been more adept at helping it maintain relationships rather than establish new ones. Of the eight host countries where Russia started sending personnel since 2005, in only two instances have Russian arms sales followed (Sudan and CAR).¹¹³ New or additional economic or security MOUs after Russia has deployed its peacekeepers are slightly more frequent; Moscow signed bilateral agreements with CAR, Chad, and the Sudan after deploying peacekeepers to each country.¹¹⁴ In each of these cases, though, Russian diplomatic engagement preceded its deployment of peacekeepers, suggesting more continuity than change in Moscow's bilateral relations with host nations.

Ultimately, the obstructive approach vis-à-vis the activities of UNPKOs witnessed in CAR has not been portable for Moscow. As discussed, Russia has thus far unsuccessfully vied for the Force Commander position in the UN Truce Supervision Organization, for example, which would allow it to monitor and pursue its interests in the Levant. Russian staff officers also remain absent from the UN mission in Mali, despite Moscow having signed a military cooperation agreement with Bamako in 2019.¹¹⁵

In sum, both Russia and China have capitalized on their peacekeeping deployments to pursue parallel interests in host countries, but this has not significantly diverted mission resources and attention away from fulfilling the mandate. Tending to work more subtly, China has carried out its own individual development projects and engagements in South Sudan and Mali and has likely drawn on its peacekeepers to collect information on business opportunities. Russia has at times disrupted mission activities that conflict with its interests but has been unable or unwilling to apply this model beyond one specific host country. Neither competitor has consistently translated its peacekeeping presence to its strategic advantage in host countries or in ways that consistently undermine ongoing operations or broader peacekeeping norms.

Operational Knowledge and Experience

This section reviews the military benefits Russia and China have gained through their UNPKO deployments. It examines how each competitor's presence and activities might provide

it with unique operational benefits for its militaries not only through direct experience but also by learning from other militaries.

Peacekeeping deployments provide opportunities for Chinese forces to learn through direct experience in the field. Chinese peacekeeping troops have engaged in a bevy of tasks, including long-range movements, demining, airlift, and infrastructure repairs in austere and often violent places.¹¹⁶ In South Sudan and the DRC, Chinese contingents have been stationed in areas of relatively high violence. Accordingly, Beijing has lost a total of 20 peacekeepers in the field across its deployments.¹¹⁷ Beyond the need to operate under pressure, peacekeeping deployments also provide China opportunities to learn how to prepare, transport, house, and sustain its troops abroad.¹¹⁸ That said, given the small size of Chinese peacekeeping deployments, this direct experience is likely to reach only a minuscule portion of the Chinese military.¹¹⁹

Whereas experience of this nature and scale can hardly be a benefit of UN peacekeeping that would undermine the effectiveness of a mission or warrant a response from the United States, China has also capitalized on its peacekeeping deployments to collect information from other countries within the missions or forces operating adjacent to it. U.S. military officers interviewed for this study consistently experienced attempts by China to pilfer personally identifiable information (PII) from mission records or extract descriptions of U.S. military operational concepts. One U.S. officer described a “clumsy attempt” by China to obtain PII in the DRC.¹²⁰ In another instance, an officer recalled arriving at a Chinese camp where Chinese peacekeepers appeared intent on capturing faces on camera and that a Chinese staff officer likely left the mission with personnel records on his external hard drive.¹²¹

Beyond obtaining information by accessing mission records, Chinese staff officers and contingents have also attempted to obtain sensitive information from U.S. staff officers or otherwise closely observe adjacent forces. One U.S. officer described how in UN missions, the Chinese “would try to get us to give them briefings on things related to our military, knowing they couldn’t get it from the Defense Attaché in Beijing. . . . They had pretty smooth operators, HUMINTers [human intelligence analysts] doing that strong elicitation.”¹²² Another U.S. officer who had encountered Chinese peacekeeping personnel in a multinational peacekeeping forum recalled how China’s delegates were laser-focused on learning how U.S. forces performed tasks, such as casualty treatment at altitude, sidestepping topics that were more germane to the forum’s subject matter.¹²³ China’s Mali-based contingents have also demonstrated a great deal of curiosity in France’s former counterterrorism operation in the country, Operation *Barkhane*.¹²⁴

Russia’s modest personnel contribution to UNPKOs are unlikely to yield experiential benefits like those gained by Chinese personnel. To be sure, Russian presence in UNPKOs affords it

similar opportunities to those of China, particularly when it comes to accessing PII of mission personnel or gaining insights about operational concepts from more advanced militaries. In one case, for example, a U.S. staff officer serving in DRC witnessed a Russian officer accessing emails sent by his American predecessor.¹²⁵ Apart from this incident, however, most U.S. staff officers characterized their Russian counterparts as fairly unintrusive when it came to U.S. operational concepts or security affairs.¹²⁶

Ultimately, then, neither China nor Russia has pursued military experience or information about competitor forces and personnel in a way that might detract from the cohesion or effectiveness of UN missions. Chinese curiosity has not yet reached a level at which it is distracting from performing mission duties. Nor have Russian staff officers consistently demonstrated intrusive behavior that might undermine the missions themselves.

Summary

In sum, both Russia and China have managed to benefit directly from their contributions to UN peacekeeping, albeit to different degrees and sometimes rather modestly. This does not mean the United States should view UN peacekeeping as an unequivocal area for cooperation with Russia and China or remain passive in the face of either competitor's investments and initiatives. Unimpeded Russian and Chinese influence could yield UN peacekeeping missions that are less willing and able to monitor human rights violations, protect vulnerable populations, and address spoilers to peacekeeping processes, and more interested in protecting competitor interests. The section that follows outlines the implications the above findings have for U.S. policy.

Recommendations

U.S. defense priorities have shifted to interstate competition, but civil conflicts and other forms of instability will continue to demand U.S. attention. UN peacekeeping exists as one multilateral instrument the United States might wish to employ to address these challenges, and accordingly, America has an enduring interest in ensuring that UNPKOs remain effective, accountable, and efficient. This study has evaluated whether and how the contributions of Russia and China might threaten to erode these dimensions of UNPKOs by allowing these U.S. competitors to gain influence in the United Nations, pursue parallel interests in host countries, and generate military experience and knowledge.

This study has found the benefits for U.S. competitors, and in turn, the threats competitor activities pose to U.S. interests to be most consequential at UN headquarters. China has drawn

on its status as a TCC to make a compelling case for the selection of Chinese nationals for senior-level positions in the UNDPO, while also advocating for a less intrusive brand of peacekeeping that would place less burden on contingent troops. Russia has worked to obstruct and counter Western peacekeeping norms with little success but has managed to protect its financial interests. Both Russia and China have attempted to hamper the ability of UNPKOs to monitor human rights violations.

At the same time, Chinese and Russian activities have not yet systematically disrupted the effectiveness of individual missions. This does not mean U.S. competitors have avoided using their presence in UN missions to pursue national objectives. Personnel attached to Chinese deployments are likely to have leveraged their positions to collect information on local business opportunities and to otherwise gain new military skills. Beijing has also lobbied for the deployment of its peacekeepers to areas where it has economic interests in South Sudan. When needed, Moscow has drawn on the presence of peacekeepers to monitor and obstruct mission activities that conflict with its interests. Yet several obstacles have prohibited Chinese troops from playing a direct role in securing its economic interests in host countries. Moreover, Russian behavior in CAR notwithstanding, its presence on missions has not yet uniformly disrupted the ability of UNPKOs to execute their missions.

Ultimately, this demonstrates that peacekeeping is no longer a purely cooperative space. Although the United States may find some common ground with competitors in standardizing peacekeeping equipment and training, and ensuring missions remain efficient, neither Russian nor Chinese preferences and activities perfectly align with those in Washington. U.S. policy needs to not only acknowledge this challenge but also adopt an approach that focuses on competing where U.S. interests are at greatest risk. As such, in coordination with likeminded partners and allies, the United States should position itself to compete with Russia and China for influence within the UNDPO, while continuing to monitor—but not counter or eliminate—competitors' presence within the missions themselves. This competitive approach implies several changes and amendments to U.S. policy and procedures, outlined below.

Build a Bench of Qualified Personnel to Serve at UN Headquarters

Both Russia and China have openly and sometimes successfully pursued agendas within the UNDPO that run counter to U.S. preferences. Competing within the UNDPO necessitates that the Department of Defense build a bench of personnel with experience in UN missions. Historically the United States has been successful in securing civilian positions related to UN

peacekeeping. Still, senior U.S. military officers who are qualified to serve in senior UN billets have been rare exceptions.¹²⁷

Generating a group of U.S. military personnel who are qualified to serve in senior UN billets will first require making staff officer assignments to UN missions more attractive. This could entail offering U.S. officers joint credit for serving in UNPKOs and altering language in promotion board guidance to ensure UN peacekeeping experience is properly understood and considered. Once U.S. staff officers have served in UN missions, the United States should establish mechanisms to monitor their availability for emerging vacant senior positions in the UNDPO.

Separate National Contingents and Personnel from Parallel Interests

U.S. and allied policymakers and diplomats should seek to establish a consensus regarding the separation of peacekeeping contingents from parallel interests that they may have in a host country. This should entail clarifying redlines for countries' pursuit of parallel interests in UN missions. In this light, continued scrutiny to mandates is an important first step. After mandates are approved, however, the United States, its partners, and allies should continue to inform and advise mission planning efforts to ensure that competitor deployments—and any economic projects, infrastructure, and resource interests they may have in a host country—are separated.

Prioritize Missions with Competitor Presence and Parallel Interests for U.S. Staff Officer Deployments

The United States should update the criteria guiding its deployment of staff officers to UN missions and seek to align with competitor deployments that might be at risk of pursuing parallel interests. The United States has an interest in limiting the extent to which peacekeeping operations can serve as platforms for competitor behavior that exceeds or violates the UN mandate. This will require at a minimum having a presence in missions that are at risk of being diverted toward competitor objectives. When determining whether to deploy staff officers to a UNPKO, the United States should weigh competitor presence, interests, and activities in the mission country alongside the traditional deployment criteria outlined in U.S. policy. These should include competitor parallel interests and activities, as well as arms sales, extractive natural resources, strategic partnerships, signed MOUs, and the presence of security contractors; mandate complexity, including whether the mission is authorized under Chapter VII, as well as the activities mission personnel will carry out; and the extent of competitor participation in the mission itself.¹²⁸

Develop Mechanisms to Identify, Name, and Shame Competitor Behavior That Harms Mission Effectiveness

Simply being present in missions will not be sufficient to deterring, and where required, exposing, competitor pursuit of parallel interests when it undermines mission effectiveness. So the United States and its likeminded allies who are already active in the peacekeeping space should also develop mechanisms to identify, name, and shame this behavior. To date only Russian behavior has crossed this threshold, though China could soon be next. The prospect indeed exists that China's peacekeepers may come to play a more direct role in securing its economic interests as Beijing grows more influential at the UN and confident in missions. Monitoring this type of behavior will require direction for U.S. staff officers regarding the dynamics they should observe when deployed, particularly as they relate to competitor interests in the host country.

Conclusion

With both the Trump and Biden administrations recognizing the centrality of the United Nations to furthering U.S. interests, Russian and Chinese support for UN peacekeeping operations could warrant a change in U.S. policy and procedures. This study has thus assessed whether, where, and how U.S. competitors have benefited from their contributions to UN peacekeeping and the extent to which this threatens U.S. interests. Overall, it has found that Russia and China have attempted to subvert important dimensions of UN peacekeeping, particularly at UN headquarters, and sometimes within the missions themselves. This should not motivate the United States to uniformly attempt to counter Russian or Chinese influence over UN peacekeeping, displace their personnel for missions, or match their investments, however. Instead, the United States should not only consider UN peacekeeping's competitive dimensions but also acknowledge the limitations of competitors' success in aligning this important UN function with their own preferences.

Notes

¹ *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), 13, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>>.

² Kristine Lee, “Coming Soon to the United Nations: Chinese Leadership and Authoritarian Values,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 16, 2019, available at <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-09-16/coming-soon-united-nations-chinese-leadership-and-authoritarian-values>>; Tung Cheng-Chia and Alan H. Yang, “How China Is Remaking the UN in Its Own Image,” *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2020, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/how-china-is-remaking-the-un-in-its-own-image/>>; Jeffrey Feltman, *China’s Expanding Influence at the United Nations—and How the United States Should React* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, September 2020), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FP_20200914_china_united_nations_feltman.pdf>; and Brett D. Schaefer, *How the U.S. Should Address Rising Chinese Influence at the United Nations*, Backgrounder No. 3431 (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2019), available at <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/BG3431_0.pdf>. For overviews of the history of Chinese activities in the United Nations, see, for example, Joel Wuthnow, *Chinese Diplomacy and the UN Security Council: Beyond the Veto* (London: Routledge, 2013); Courtney J. Fung, *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

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¹²⁰ Interview with U.S. military officer with responsibilities for peacekeeping, October 2021.

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¹²² Interview with U.S. military officer with responsibilities for peacekeeping, October 2021.

¹²³ Interview with U.S. military officer with responsibilities for peacekeeping, October 2021.

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¹²⁵ Interview with U.S. military officer with experience in MONUSCO, October 2020.

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¹²⁸ Currently, the United States has deployed personnel to many of the missions where competitor interests are most intense, to include those in South Sudan, Mali, CAR, and DRC. Yet UN missions in Lebanon, a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) participant who has also signed an economic memorandum of understanding with Moscow, as well as Cyprus, also a BRI participant and Russian arms recipient, should be priorities.

About the Author

Dr. Bryce Loidolt is a Research Fellow in the Center for Strategic Research, Institute for National Strategic Studies, at the National Defense University (NDU). Dr. Loidolt's research draws on statistical, archival, Arabic language, and interview-based methods to examine the instruments and dynamics of interstate competition, counterterrorism, and irregular and hybrid warfare. Prior to joining NDU in 2018, he was a Defense Analyst at RAND. He has deployed twice to provide research support to special operations forces in Afghanistan and has conducted field research in Egypt, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates. Dr. Loidolt's work has been published or is forthcoming as RAND and NDU Press monographs, *War on the Rocks*, West Point's CTC *Sentinel*, the Modern War Institute's *War Room*, and in scholarly journals such as *Texas National Security Review*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and *Terrorism and Political Violence*. A Southern California native, Dr. Loidolt received his bachelor of arts in Middle East studies from Middlebury College, his master of arts in political science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and his Ph.D. in political science from The George Washington University, where he held the Rumsfeld Fellowship from 2015 to 2017. Dr. Loidolt is a Term Member at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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