

China's Role in Peacekeeping and Counter Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism in Mali

On Thursday 30 April from 14:00 – 17:30 followed by a reception At Clingendael Institute,
Clingendael 7, 2597 VH The Hague

On Thursday 30 April 2015 the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – Clingendael and the International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) hosted an Expert Seminar on “China's Role in Peacekeeping and Counter Terrorism and Counter Violent Extremism in Mali”. This Seminar is part of an ongoing project on China's role in the UN-led Peacekeeping Operation in Mali (MINUSMA) carried out within the broader framework of the “Sahel Programme” at Clingendael, which focuses on the political economy of instability in Africa's Sahel region and is supported by the *Nationale Postcode Loterij*.

Even though China's participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations is not a new phenomenon, China's involvement in MINUSMA is to some extent unique. Indeed, it is the first time that Beijing sends a separate protection unit (infantry and special forces) to a UN mission, not only to protect Chinese personnel but also other international UN personnel. This event signals a turning point in China's engagement in Peacekeeping Operations. For this Seminar, leading experts gathered to discuss the reasons and the relevance of China's security role in Mali, both with regard to MINUSMA and counter terrorism (CT) and counter violent extremism (CVE).

Why has China sent a force protection unit to Mali? In general, explanations for Chinese involvement in Africa revolve around four main points: securing natural resources, facilitating export, gaining military experience and taking an increasingly responsible role as a global stakeholder. It is therefore interesting to note that Mali is of limited interest for China with regard to the former two motives. Participants of the Seminar pointed to the relatively low-risk potential for China to gain military experience and expand their existing sphere of influence in Africa under a UN mandate. Even though Mali has relatively little to offer China in terms of natural resources or export market, the MINUSMA mission in Mali can be seen as a cautious way of responding to the growing responsibilities of China in international affairs (Xi Jinping's “great power diplomacy”). The fact that China is currently the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping among the permanent members of the Security Council (SC) also reflects that China perceives the UN in general and the SC in particular as the guarantors of international order. There was some discussion during the Seminar regarding the question whether China would make use of Chinese troops deployed under UN command to protect its own interests in Africa even if these would clash with the UN mandate.

One of the questions posed during the discussion was about how the public in China perceived these peacekeeping missions, and the answer pointed to a general lack of interest by Chinese citizens in the topic as evidenced in domestic media coverage. In peacekeeping missions, China has not been eager in their cooperation with NGO's, which may have contributed to China not being viewed too favorably in some of these conflict areas. However, it was also noted that MINUSMA as a whole is increasingly perceived by Malians in a negative way, as it has failed to effectively communicate its mandate.

Part two of the Seminar focused on China's Counter Terrorism and Counter Violent Extremism strategies in the region. There is a difference between China's position on countering terrorism internally and the country's position on countering terrorism outside its borders. With regard to its domestic policies, China considers separatists to be terrorists, who need to be countered with severe measures. In the international context, China seems to be open to the idea of distinguishing between the two different forms of political violence.

China assesses poverty as one of the main root causes of terrorism, and therefore considers development as one of the tools to counter this problem in the long term. The recipient party of this development is, however, China itself, instead of the local population. In Mali and the broader Western African region, China is especially interested in protecting Chinese civilians, their economic interests, and to contribute to regional stability as the best condition to protect their economic interests.

Indeed, rather than contributing to a comprehensive CT strategy in Mali, participants found that 'keeping a low profile' has thus far been crucial in China's CT efforts. In that respect, China is not very much involved in local community engagement and in building a relationship with the local population. China's role in the UNMISS mission in South-Sudan was for instance limited to the protection of the larger Chinese economic interests. The MINUSMA mission in Mali could nevertheless be an example of China's willingness to further engage in CT operations. They seem to show an interest in understanding the processes of radicalization, and the profile of the extremists, and thereto are carefully engaging with other international actors and think tanks. Whether that knowledge will be used to amend their policies and adopt a more comprehensive approach, needs to be seen.

According to the participants, the issue of a direct terrorist and extremist threat to China due to their involvement in Mali was deemed unlikely by Beijing, compared to the threat of a future spill-over of terrorism and extremism they perceive from Syria. Mali is regarded by Beijing as a safer option because of these spill-over risks linked by Beijing to the Syrian conflict and a relatively higher chance of possible confrontation with the US in the Middle East. However, this attitude might change overnight if an attack on Chinese companies or civilians takes place in the region