China a trustworthy peacekeeper

By David Gosset (China Daily)

The rise of China does not have to be a divisive factor for the international community. On the contrary, it can be a catalyst for a more cohesive global village. A document published by the Information Office of the State Council in September 2011, China's Peaceful Development, explicitly underlines the unprecedented interdependence between China and the world: "China cannot develop itself in isolation from the rest of the world, and global prosperity and stability cannot be maintained without China."

Trade, finance, business and tourism are all areas in which China's global projection is having a considerable impact but Beijing's international peacekeeping effort is one of the most promising forms of the country's opening-up to the world. Not well known or fully appreciated outside China, it illustrates the country's willingness to be a globally responsible actor.

When the People's Republic of China joined the United Nations 41 years ago, it looked at the peacekeeping operations with suspicion. Putting the principle of political sovereignty above other considerations, China rejected interventions in foreign countries that supposedly contradicted the notions of non-interference and peaceful co-existence.

However, Beijing entered the special committee on peacekeeping operations after 1988, when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the UN peacekeeping system. In 1992, China sent its first company of engineers to Cambodia and, about a decade before Beijing entered the World Trade Organization (2001), China's soldiers became an active component of the UN peacekeeping force.

Last April, two decades after the mission in Cambodia, a ceremony took place in the country's Kompong Cham province to pay tribute to Chen Zhiguo and Yu Shili, two Chinese soldiers who were killed during China's inaugural peacekeeping operation.

Since the deployment in Southeast Asia, China's participation in UN peacekeeping has substantially expanded - 2,000 Chinese "blue helmets" are currently carrying out tasks in 12 different missions on a total of 15 current peacekeeping operations. In the past 20 years, China has participated in more than 20 missions dispatching 20,000 troops and military observers - since the 1948 UN Truce Supervision Organization in the newly created state of Israel, there have been a total of 67 UN peacekeeping operations around the world.

It is widely acknowledged that by their professionalism, a sense of inclusiveness and impartiality, the "blue helmets" from China serve the UN objectives with unique
effectiveness. It is on the African continent that the new China factor could have the most constructive impact. Beijing is not only the continent's No 1 trading partner ($166 billion two-way trade in 2011), but also the largest provider of peacekeepers among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

When a lack of trust between China and the West weakens dangerously the capacity of the international community to tackle crises, Beijing's growing involvement in peacekeeping constitutes a unique opportunity to activate a Sino-Western dialogue on some of the most sensitive security issues.

Fundamentally, a general agreement on the notion that Beijing has to be seen as one of the co-architects of the 21st century peacekeeping doctrine and practice would be a significant progress for the world. None of the UN's 17 specialized agencies has its headquarters in China, but it would make great sense to have Beijing as a central node of the international peacekeeping network in an effort to adjust to new global dynamics. The rearrangement of world power implies a new division of responsibilities and an improvement of the global governance conceived after World War II.

Such needs would certainly change the status quo. The useful US-based Peace Operations Training Institute does not even have on its nine-member board one Chinese expert, although the world's most populous country is the largest contributor of peacekeepers from among the Security Council permanent members.

While it is obvious that there cannot be any genuine reflection on the improvement of global governance without Chinese participation, 12 years ago, when former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan asked a group of specialists to assess the shortcomings of the peacekeeping system, Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi chaired a panel in which China had no representative.

In 2009, China's Ministry of Defense established in the north of Beijing a UN peacekeeping training center. It could, as a result of a coordinated strategy, not only serve as a platform where international troops train and prepare their specific missions, but also stand as an institution where research and teaching on 21st century peacekeeping could be organized.

In the "China-threat" narrative, the People's Liberation Army, portrayed as an antagonistic force, is a source of fear, a sentiment which remains in the Cold War cliche of the Canadian statesman Lester Pearson, "the greatest enemy of peace", but when the Chinese military cooperates with other armies to protect life and to establish the conditions for socio-economic development, it not only contributes to easing of mutual suspicion, but also puts the parties on the path toward strategic trust.

Despite the rhetorical and foolish China-bashing, Sino-Western synergies are real and demonstrate that China's re-emergence is profoundly compatible with Western modernity.
Last month, while visiting the PLA Engineering Academy of Armored Forces in Beijing, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta declared: "China's rise has brought millions out of poverty and helped to make the world a more prosperous place. I believe that it can also make the world a more secure place. If we work together - if we work together to build an enduring foundation for military-to-military relations between the United States and China, we can achieve greater prosperity and security in the Asia-Pacific region."

Far from being a threat, a disciplined, responsible and open PLA is as much a source of stability and security as any other Western military force, the most powerful one included.

The author is director of the Academia Sinica Europaea at China Europe International Business School, Shanghai, Beijing and Accra, and founder of the Euro-China Forum.