

China sends more troops to Lebanon

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In a bid to secure its interests in the Middle East and strengthen relations with Europe, Beijing is sending up to 1,000 troops to join the UN forces in Lebanon. It will be China's largest "peacekeeping" mission since its first involvement in UN operations in the late 1980s.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao announced the deployment at a news conference with visiting Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi on September 18. "China is very concerned about the situation in Lebanon and hopes it can be fundamentally resolved," Wen declared. He also doubled China's aid to Lebanon to \$US5 million.

The Chinese contingent will include 240 engineers already in southern Lebanon, as part of the United Nations Interim Force (UNIFIL). Earlier, before Israel's invasion in July, China had sent 180 military observers to the region as its first-ever "peacekeeping" force in the Middle East.

The Bush administration backed the Israeli onslaught that killed 1,200 people, mainly Lebanese civilians, to further US interests against Syria and Iran. It was part of a strategy of widening the war in the Middle East in order to dominate the resource-rich region. After the Israeli military failed to destroy Hezbollah-led resistance, Washington and Tel Aviv accepted a European-proposed "ceasefire" under UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

Despite holding a veto in the UN Security Council, Beijing did nothing when Israel attacked Lebanon. Only when a Chinese observer, Du Zhaoyu, was killed, along with three others, by Israel's bombing of a UN post on July 24, did Beijing threaten to sponsor a UN resolution condemning Israel's actions. China quickly backed off under pressure from the US, then jumped on the bandwagon to support Resolution 1701. Like the European powers, it was deeply concerned that the escalation of regional conflicts could undermine China's oil interests.

With the proposed UN force sandwiched in a hostile zone and lacking any capacity to disarm Hezbollah, various countries have been hesitant to send personnel there. So far only 5,000 troops, mainly Italian and French, have been deployed, far below the revised UNIFIL target of 15,000.

Initially, Beijing offered only the 240 engineers. However, it quickly exploited the situation to press for concessions by France, Italy and other European powers, on the lifting of an EU arms embargo imposed on China after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

The relatively large Chinese deployment is a political boost for the efforts of France, Italy and Germany in Lebanon. Troops from China, which established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, are also regarded as more acceptable to the Zionist regime than soldiers from Asian Muslim countries such as Bangladesh or Indonesia.

In fact, Israel is doing lucrative business with China by providing Western military technologies that are formally banned by the arms embargo. China's new J-10 fighter jet, for example, is based on a model developed by Israel and funded by the US in 1980s.

French President Jacques Chirac, a leading advocate of lifting the embargo, hailed the Chinese decision as "a not inconsiderable contribution". As EU Commission president in 2004, Prodi justified stalling any lifting of the ban, referring to China's "human rights" record. As Italian prime minister in Beijing last month, he declared that Italy "leans to lifting the embargo" and called for the issue to be resolved "as quickly as possible".

Conflicts over ending the 17-year-old Western arms embargo on China express growing international tensions. Under increased pressure from the US, China is seeking new allies in the EU. Concerned about the impact of US aggression on European interests in the Middle East, some in European ruling circles see China

as a possible counterweight to the US. In recent years, France and Germany supported a lifting of the arms embargo on China, but were unwilling to challenge the US, which has consistently opposed any such move.

Like other powers, China is deploying troops in the Middle East not for “peace”, but to pursue its own interests, particularly in securing energy supplies. China has just commenced a Sino-Syrian Kawkab Oil Company oilfield project northeast of Damascus. Before visiting China, Prodi pointedly referred to Beijing’s stakes: “It’s a big importer of oil from Iran—just think about China’s energy dependence on all that whole area.”

It is unclear what the Chinese troops will do in Lebanon. The existing engineering units are engaged in mine clearing. Although the Chinese “peacekeepers” are likely to avoid any high-profile operation, their mere presence will set a precedent for expanded Chinese military interventions elsewhere.

China’s state media and military brass have hailed the “peace” mission in Lebanon as a turning point in Chinese foreign policy. A prominent general, Peng Guangqian, welcomed the announcement. “This fits with China’s new international profile and increased responsibilities... China’s 2.3 million soldiers want to play an important role in preserving world peace and boosting common development,” he told the official Xinhua news agency on September 21.

After the 1949 revolution in China, the Maoist regime appealed to various “national liberation” movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America for support. Its anti-imperialist rhetoric, like its false claims to be socialist, was primarily aimed at maintaining support at home. After reaching a rapprochement with the US in 1971 and taking a seat in the UN Security Council, the Chinese leadership initially rejected any peacekeeping missions, fearing that overseas military interventions could provoke domestic opposition.

In 1979, when Deng Xiaoping openly turned to the capitalist market, China’s diplomacy also shifted markedly. It waged a border war against Vietnam, at the behest of the US. Beijing gradually abandoned its rhetoric of supporting the masses in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere. It first participated in UN operations in Namibia during 1989, the same year as the Tiananmen Square suppression of the Chinese working class.

As international capital flooded in and China’s economy grew rapidly in the 1990s, its UN missions expanded to places such as East Timor, Liberia and Congo. According to China’s ministry of defence, it has sent over 6,000 personnel to 15 UN missions since 1990, making China the largest contributor of any of the five veto powers in the Security Council.

Beijing’s “increased responsibilities” in deploying troops to Lebanon, reflect the aspirations of the emerging Chinese capitalist elite for a bigger role in the world. Amid deepening social inequality, Beijing also exploits the UN missions to foster a “great power” image and to promote nationalism at home. The well being of people around the world is the last consideration of the Chinese leadership.



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