For years, American administrations have embraced U.N. peacekeeping as a cost-effective alternative to U.S. military intervention, a policy that has allowed Washington to harness the power and purse of foreign governments to promote America's security and humanitarian interests abroad. "It's a smart investment," President Obama recently [told](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-west-point-academy-commencement-ceremony) cadets at West Point.

In South Sudan, the investment is indeed paying dividends -- for China. Last month, Beijing quietly secured a deal that will put the U.N.'s famed blue helmets to work protecting workers in South Sudan's oil installations, where China has [invested](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25654155) billions of dollars over the years and holds a major financial stake -- at least 40 percent -- in South Sudan's largest oil field. American taxpayers, who fund about 27 percent of the cost of U.N. peacekeeping missions, will effectively be helping to shoulder the financial burden of securing China's investment.

The unprecedented arrangement was hammered out last month in closed-door negotiations -- which have not been previously detailed -- over how to bolster the U.N. Mission in South Sudan, or UNMISS, so it could better protect hundreds of thousands of civilians from ethnic cleansing. The beefed-up mission will include thousands of additional troops from African countries as well as hundreds more from China.

Faced with South Sudan's descent into civil and ethnic conflict over the past seven months, the United States spearheaded negotiations in the U.N. Security Council on a new resolution that would seek to ensure the safety of the country's civilian population. The resolution "focuses the mission on its core activities of protection of civilians; monitoring and investigating human rights abuses; and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance," Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, [said](http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/226572.htm) after the May 27 vote.

But garnering China's support came at a cost: ensuring the protection of South Sudan's oil workers.

UNMISS was established in July 2011, two days after South Sudan declared its independence from Sudan. With a force of nearly 8,000 uniformed peacekeepers, the U.N. was charged with consolidating peace and security and strengthening the government's ability to govern democratically.

But the United States, France, and top U.N. peacekeeping officials decided in recent months to change the mission's mandate after ethnic violence left thousands dead and hundreds of thousands homeless. The goal was twofold: improve the U.N.'s ability to protect civilians on both sides of the ethnic divide while reducing support for a government that had engaged in mass atrocities.

The decision to commit U.N. peacekeepers to the protection of the oil industry -- one of the few institutions in the impoverished nation with the financial wherewithal to pay for its own security -- initially encountered resistance from within the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations, or DPKO.

Officials warned that it risked undercutting the U.N.'s neutrality, placing it squarely on the side of the South Sudanese government, which committed extensive atrocities in a civil war that has divided the country into competing political and ethnic camps. They also maintained that it would be unseemly to put the Nobel Prize-winning peacekeepers at the service of a commercial enterprise, regardless of how vital it was for the well-being of the country.

But China received the backing of the United States, Britain, France, and other key powers, whose representatives argued that attacks on South Sudan's oil infrastructure threatened to further destabilize the world's youngest country by destroying its main economic lifeline. Indeed, one Security Council diplomat said the negotiations were not the least bit contentious. Another observer described the Security Council as "ruthlessly pragmatic" in recognition of the importance of South Sudan's oil fields and of China's increasingly important role as a power broker in South Sudan.

China, a major operator and consumer of South Sudanese crude, is the largest foreign investor in Sudan and South Sudan's oil industry. Before South Sudan's independence, it led a consortium of companies in building pipelines from South Sudan's oil fields to Sudan's Port Sudan. Today, China National Petroleum Corporation controls a 40 percent stake (the largest) in a consortium, the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC), that also includes Malaysian petroleum giant Petronas and India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, Videsh.

In closed-door negotiations with the United States and other key U.N. powers, China insisted that the peacekeeping mission -- which was being reinforced with thousands of additional peacekeepers -- also protect civilian workers in South Sudan's oil installations, according to diplomats familiar with the talks. If it got its way, China offered to provide a battalion of as many as 850 additional Chinese peacekeepers to the mission.

The [resolution](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/sc11414.doc.htm), which was adopted on May 27, calls on peacekeepers to deter violence against civilians -- including foreign nationals, humanitarian aid workers, and human rights investigators -- and to devote particular attention to "areas at high risk of conflict including, as appropriate, schools, places of worship, hospitals and the oil installations, in particular when the Government of the Republic of South Sudan is unable or failing to provide such security."

China initially wanted its peacekeepers to be deployed in the key oil provinces, Unity state and Upper Nile state, in order to protect oil installations, according to diplomatic sources. "They basically said that they wanted to be where the oil is," said one source familiar with the negotiations. But U.N. officials said that Beijing, which already has about 340 peacekeepers in the country, was also prepared to deploy troops to other parts of the country. "Chinese troops are/will be deployed in areas where there are not necessarily oil field installations," said one official. "They are amenable to be deployed also in other areas."

A U.S. official defended the deal on the grounds that South Sudan's oil installations are "high-risk" areas that, if left unprotected, could contribute to the country's destabilization. South Sudan's oil exports account for more than 97 percent of the government's revenues, making the oil vital to its survival.  The Chinese mission to the United Nations did not respond to requests for comment.

South Sudan exploded into civil war last December, following a power struggle between South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, an ethnic Dinka, and its former vice president, Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer.

Rebel forces loyal to Machar [targeted](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2014/0402/In-South-Sudan-rebel-chief-Machar-aims-to-seize-last-operating-oil-field" \t "_blank) South Sudan's oil fields in an effort to deprive President Kiir of the funds needed to prosecute the war. In February, fighting between government forces and rebels forced the [evacuation](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-02-21/south-sudan-evacuating-foreign-oil-workers-from-upper-nile-state.html) of foreign oil workers, [including](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25654155) 300 Chinese nationals. Oil workers described a terrifying [scene](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/22/south-sudan-juba-civil-conflict) of fighting as Dinka and Nuer fighters struggled for control over oil installations in Unity state.

"Those who seek to undermine the long-term stability and economic prosperity of South Sudan have targeted civilians working at oil installations and the resolution recognizes this fact," a U.S. official told Foreign Policy. "In addition, it is important to ensure that control of the oil fields does not create additional friction in South Sudan's relationship with Sudan."

The resolution "prioritizes the protection of civilians as one of UNMISS's core mandates," the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, added. "To this end, the resolution identifies areas 'at high risk of conflict' that need UNMISS to be more proactive in providing protection as appropriate. The high-risk determination reflects those sites where civilians have been particularly targeted in the past and where UNMISS has previously been called upon to provide assistance."

Some advocacy groups criticized the agreement, arguing that the U.N. should focus its efforts on protecting civilians and persuading the warring factions to make peace.

"The U.N. is walking a thin line between neutral peacekeeper and proxy military force for the government of South Sudan,"  said David Deng, a researcher for the South Sudan Law Society. "For the U.N. to protect oil facilities would clearly be a huge strategic advantage for the government and cannot be seen as consistent with the role of a neutral peacekeeping force."

Deng said the U.N. deal is only the latest example of regional and international powers intervening in the South Sudanese conflict on behalf of the government. He cited Uganda's military intervention on behalf of the government. "Now the U.N. is being drawn into a similar trap, protecting the government's oil assets while also trying to claim neutrality. Protection of civilians in oil facilities would necessarily entail the protection of infrastructure itself, which clearly favors one side in the conflict and undermines the U.N.'s ability to serve as a neutral humanitarian actor."