

From 9 to 13 November 2011 an international conference took place at the Empark Grand Hotel in Beijing on international humanitarian law and peace operations. The conference was co-organized by the Academy of Military Science of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the International Society for Military Law and the Law of War, and hosted by China's Military Law Society. Some 90 participants hailing from 23 different countries participated in this important event.

On Thursday 9 November 2011 the Political Commissar of the Academy of Military Science, Lieutenant General Sun Sijing, and the President of the International Society for Military Law and the Law of War, Mr. Arne Willy Dahl, wished a warm welcome to all participants followed by a reception hosted by the Chinese authorities.

The next day, the conference officially got underway with an opening ceremony in the presence of various dignitaries, such as the Chief of Foreign Affairs of the Office of the Ministry of National Defense, Major General Qian Lihua, and the President of the Academy of Military Science, PLA, Air Force General Liu Chengjun. In his keynote speech Lieutenant General Liu Jixian, Vice-President of the Academy of Military Science, PLA, and Chairman of China's Military Law Society, offered comprehensive insight into the PLA's practice of international humanitarian law. The subsequent presenters focused on the legal framework of peace operations, the threshold of armed conflict and the application of international humanitarian law to UN peacekeeping operations. The presentations and the related questions from the audience stimulated an interesting panel discussion on these themes. In the late afternoon, Dr. Claude Bruderlein, Director of the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard University, chaired a panel on the topical issue of the applicability of human rights treaties in peace operations and on SOFA development and the status of forces in peace operations. The day was concluded with an informative presentation on monitoring mechanisms in the implementation of international humanitarian law, particularly in the context of peace operations.

On Friday 11 November 2011 the participants were treated to a morning of presentations and debate on self-defense as well as the protection of civilians in peace operations. In the afternoon particular attention was paid to legal restrictions on the use of weapons and capabilities by peacekeepers and recent developments in international humanitarian law in the context of peace operations. In the evening Professor Boris Kondoch, Executive Director at the Asia Center for Peace and Security Studies, shared his views on the accountability of peacekeepers and the last presentation of that day dealt with the case of East Timor and the lessons learned by the Australian Armed Forces. After the closing ceremony the participants enjoyed a taste of Chinese cuisine and were delighted by the prospect of an enriching social-cultural trip, to be organized by the Chinese hosts the following day.

On Saturday 12 November 2011 the foreign participants paid a visit to the magnificent Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square in Beijing and to the astonishing Great Wall of China.

The male participants learned that Mao once said that a man can only be a real man if he has climbed the Great Wall and with these motivating words in mind most if not all participants proudly succeeded in reaching the summit set as their target by the trip organizers. The participants felt privileged to have taken in the delightful scenery of this famous landscape.

This conference marked the start of a research project of the International Society for Military Law and the Law of War, launched to establish an authoritative Manual of the International Law of Peace Operations. The conference proved most fruitful in identifying areas of the law which require further research with a view to clarifying their content and practical implications for policy-makers and troops in the field. All participants paid tribute to the wonderful way in which the Chinese hosts had taken care of every organizational aspect of the conference. During the discussions it was also confirmed that the desire for international peace and security, with due regard to States' territorial integrity and sovereignty, remains (and must remain) central when looking into the subject matter of peace operations. The conference offered excellent networking opportunities and took place in a collegial spirit conducive to future debates on this fascinating topic.