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# People's Republic of the United Nations

China's Emerging Revisionism in International Organizations

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### Cover Art

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# **PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

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## Executive Summary

**C**hina is increasingly using its economic, political, and institutional power to change the global governance system from within. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under President Xi Jinping has become more proactive in injecting its ideological concepts into international statements of consensus and harnessing the programmatic dimensions of global governance to advance its own foreign policy strategies, such as “One Belt, One Road.”<sup>1</sup> These efforts demand the attention of the United States, its allies and partners, and civil society. If unchecked, they will hasten the export of some of the most harmful aspects of China’s political system, including corruption, mass surveillance, and the repression of individual and collective rights.

This report examines China’s approach to seven organs and functions of the United Nations (U.N.): the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Human Rights Council, Peacekeeping Operations, Accreditation for Non-Governmental Organizations, the International Telecommunication Union, UNESCO, and the Office of Drugs and Crime. This examination yields the following insights into Beijing’s emerging strategy in the context of international organizations, which seeks to advance China’s interests and values through:

- Promoting a particularist view of human rights, in which governments can cite “unique” local conditions to justify disregard for individual or minority claims. This fundamentally runs counter to the American belief that human rights belong to individuals and cannot be violated on the whims of a single government.

- Redefining democracy in terms of so-called “economic and social rights,” rather than inalienable civil or political rights. This privileges the exigencies of state-led development over fundamental rights of association and expression, and it weakens the standing of these rights in international law.<sup>2</sup>
- Making state sovereignty inviolable and reestablishing states as the only legitimate stakeholders, with the purported aim of “democratizing” international relations and setting developing countries on equal footing in the global governance system.
- Infusing consensus global goals with Chinese ideological terms and foreign policy strategies such as the Belt and Road.
- Resolving political issues through bilateral negotiations, where China can use its full panoply of leverage to get its way, rather than through rules-based approaches.

These activities transcend China’s traditional defensive posture in international organizations, in which it was careful to avoid confrontation with the United States and instead directed its diplomatic resources toward boxing in Taiwan and preventing criticism of China. Today, rather than focusing on narrow and self-defined “core interests” such as isolating Taiwan or forestalling criticism of Chinese policies in Xinjiang or Tibet, Beijing now also seeks to grow its clout by extending its concepts of human rights and sovereignty to other illiberal states.<sup>3</sup> In short, China, through its behavior in international organizations, is making the world safe for autocracy.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

As the United States moves to compete with China across the diplomatic, economic, and military domains, it cannot overlook international organizations, which are a key battleground for determining which set of values will shape the 21st century. Washington must take Beijing's approach seriously—and reengage, starting with the U.N. system. Key actions for the United States include:

### Understand China's Strategy

- Develop a comprehensive operating picture of China's activities within international organizations by ensuring that U.S. diplomats participate in meetings of international organizations, standing up a new fusion cell at the U.S. Department of State, and engaging more deeply with U.S. allies and partners in a dialogue on this topic.
- Learn from Taiwan's experience as a primary target for Beijing in international organizations to identify future tactics that China will use to advance its geopolitical agenda in other areas.
- Coordinate with industry to identify where Chinese activities in international organizations, such as standards bodies, are creating an uneven economic playing field and positioning Beijing to dominate future technology frontiers.

### Raise Awareness, Build Consensus, and Strike Back

- Develop a common list of Chinese ideological terms with allies and partners and lead a cooperative effort to fight the inclusion of these terms in any documents guiding international organizations.
- Uphold norms and values in the international context by systematically pointing out where Beijing's actions depart from both international principles of acceptable conduct and China's own stated declarations of its values and intentions.
- Respond to Chinese human rights violations by leveraging the Magnitsky Act to sanction individual offenders.

### Deepen Participation in International Organizations

- Reengage U.N. institutions such as UNESCO, recognizing that American withdrawal from international organizations, regardless of the justification, will still leave a void for China to fill.
- Invest in the future of U.S. multilateralism by encouraging Americans to take on leadership posts in the United Nations system and developing government fellowships to bring rising talent into the U.S. Mission to the United Nations.<sup>4</sup>

## Introduction

The rise of China and the United States' partial retreat from multilateralism has provoked widespread anxiety over the future of the "liberal international order."<sup>5</sup> Although imbued with a new urgency in the United States today, these questions reflect the continuation of a decades-long debate about how a more powerful China would interact with the international system. Would it seek to sweep aside existing institutions in a decisive, possibly violent bid for undisputed hegemony or endeavor to be integrated into them, adopting their built-in complex of liberal norms and practices?<sup>6</sup>

There is a growing consensus that the latter prediction has proven incorrect, and more generally that this debate has presented a false dichotomy.<sup>7</sup> Instead, with respect to global governance, China is pursuing a hybrid strategy in which it both unilaterally offers its own institutions (and corresponding norms) and introduces them to legacy international organizations to reshape preexisting norms and activities to conform more closely to its own interests.<sup>8</sup> Worryingly, as China grows more ideological and authoritarian, these alterations not only cause institutions to deviate from their ostensible missions, but they also undermine universal values and U.S. interests. This is particularly true in the arenas of human rights, sustainable development, and related fields.

This report largely focuses on China's activities within the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The reasons for this focused scope are twofold: First, as the umbrella framework for global governance, the U.N. system is often the highest-profile stage for international cooperation in any given field; second and relatedly, the volume of information on China's activities in U.N. organizations is greater than for those at other levels. Nevertheless, China's strategy relies crucially on its activities in regional and multilateral contexts, and many of the ideas expressed herein are applicable to institutions outside of the United Nations. This study excludes the World Trade Organization, the Bretton Woods institutions, and extensive examination of the Security Council, as many scholars have analyzed China's behavior in these contexts. This report is far from exhaustive. It aims instead to shed light on important but oft-neglected arenas of policy contention, lest international cooperation be turned to purposes antithetical to U.S. values and core interests.

The report proceeds in the following manner: After elaborating on China's strategy in international organizations and the opportunities and constraints it faces, it examines a number of case studies that offer insight into

how China is beginning to remake several U.N. bodies in its authoritarian image. The case studies encompass bodies as diverse as the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Human Rights Council, and the International Telecommunication Union, to name a few. Finally, it concludes with a set of recommendations for how the United States, together with like-minded allies and partners, can best push back where appropriate on China's efforts to impose its core national interests on the broader mandates of international organizations. At the end of the day, China's incremental erosion of the global governance structure, particularly around human rights, will only be fully successful absent clear, compelling, and consistent leadership from the United States.

## China's Evolving Approach to Global Governance

Chairman Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Communist Party Congress laid out his vision for a "new era . . . that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind."<sup>9</sup> Four decades after China's opening to the world, the CCP is confidently proclaiming a newly activist approach to foreign policy— notwithstanding that many of the constituent parts of this new approach go back to the administration of Hu Jintao and before.<sup>10</sup> China is operating economically and militarily in new places and, as it grows more capable, is discarding long-standing self-imposed restraints on its behavior.<sup>11</sup> A central objective of this "new era great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" is to "take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system."<sup>12</sup> This section describes what changes China wants to make to the global order, especially in the political and human rights arenas, and how it is going about seeking those changes.

The Communist Party sees China as locked in an ideological struggle with liberal democratic nations—one that it does not intend to lose by loosening control. Xi believes that key to accomplishing the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" is avoiding the fate of the Soviet Union, which, in his perspective, collapsed because it failed to hew closely enough to Leninist ideology.<sup>13</sup> In trying to institute economic openness, the Soviet Union—under "assault" from Western nations—succumbed to ideological disunity and confusion. Xi sees China as under similar pressure from "hostile forces foreign and domestic" that seek to sow doubt among Chinese citizens about the benevolence and legitimacy of the Communist Party's rule.<sup>14</sup> According to this view, global governance institutions, when they promote universal

values such as human rights and attempt to articulate limits on state power, are acting as agents of Western ideological hegemony that actively threaten China's political stability.<sup>15</sup>

In shaping global governance, China seeks to insulate itself from criticism of its increasingly repressive political system. This requires Beijing both to pressure individual nations to refrain from disparaging China and to change the standards by which domestic politics and international cooperation are judged in ways that legitimize China's brand of authoritarian corporatism. Chinese leaders and scholars pay close attention to increasing China's "discursive power" to weaken threatening norms, such as political freedoms and human rights, and promote Party-friendly ones. International organizations thus have become an arena for ideological contestation, in which Beijing's goal is to make authoritarian rule seem as legitimate as democratic government.

Xi's preferred mantra for this purpose, in keeping with Communist predilections for grand yet vague sloganeering, is the anodyne-sounding "community of shared future for mankind."<sup>16</sup> People's Republic of China (PRC) international messaging encompasses such laudable concepts as dialogue, common security, win-win cooperation, and cultural exchanges. Another common Chinese term is the "democratization of international relations," through which it purportedly endeavors to give greater voice to developing countries in the global



*President Xi Jinping addresses the U.N. General Assembly on September 28, 2015, in New York City, where world leaders gathered for the 70th session of the annual meeting. (John Moore/Getty Images)*

## TWO DIVERGENT APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

### China's Strategy

1. Promotes a particularist view of human rights, in which each country's unique conditions can provide justifications for the government to disregard individual or minority claims.
2. Redefines democracy in terms of so-called "economic and social rights," rather than inalienable political rights.
3. Makes state sovereignty inviolable and re-establishes states as the only legitimate stakeholders in global governance.
4. Resolves political issues through bilateral negotiations, where China can use its full panoply of leverage to get its way over smaller, weaker states.

### Liberal Democratic Approach

1. Supports a universal view of human rights in which civil liberties are inalienable rights regardless of a country's internal political circumstances or considerations.
2. Affirms that representative systems of government support peoples' aspirations to peace and prosperity and that countries need not choose between democracy and development.
3. Supports the independent role of civil society in shaping international organizations' responses to political problems.
4. Strengthens rules-based multilateral approaches that provide big and small states alike with avenues to advance their interests, subject to clear consensus principles.

governance system. Beyond the façade of activism on behalf of the developing world, however, it is clear that China's interest in greater "democratization" only extends as far as Beijing's domestic political cost-benefit analysis allows.<sup>17</sup> What it fundamentally seeks is the dilution of Western hegemony and its liberal norms.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, when interpreted through the domestic writings of Communist Party organs, it is clear that China's emerging strategy does four things to narrowly advance its values and interests (outlined in the table above).<sup>19</sup>

Beijing's emerging strategy has been characterized by a growing proactiveness—one that far transcends its traditionally defensive posture in international organizations. Rather than simply advancing narrow Chinese "core interests" such as isolating Taiwan or forestalling criticism of Chinese policies in Xinjiang or Tibet, Beijing now also seeks to grow its clout by extending its concepts of human rights and sovereignty to other illiberal states<sup>20</sup>—in short, to make the world safe for autocracy.

Exporting its political system in this fashion requires a strategy of "embedded revisionism," that is, "seeking substantial transformation within the dominant order." The next section lays out the nature and requirements of such a strategy and shows that Beijing is seeking precisely the resources to achieve such a "rule-based revolution."<sup>21</sup>

### How to Change an Order from Within

China is attempting a tricky feat: using the language and levers of existing institutions to reorient them in a direction that is divergent from—if not antithetical to—their historical ethos. Beijing has been rather open

about this ambition. Xi Jinping has stated in major speeches that "China will firmly uphold the international system with the U.N. as its core," but also that it will "[support] the efforts of other developing countries to increase their representation and strengthen their voice in international affairs . . . take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance."<sup>22</sup> But this type of reform requires substantial resources.

In order to change institutions from within, states need both access and brokerage.<sup>23</sup> That is, states need to have both authority within the institutions they are trying to change and strong, exclusive interstate ties separate from those targets. Institutional power alone enables states to advance proposals for international cooperation, but it confines them to the strictures of the existing institution's norms and procedures. However, when a state also has significant unilateral where-withal, it is able to "mobilize alternative networks to slip the leash of existing institutions."<sup>24</sup> This augmented leverage can powerfully shape institutional responses to political issues.<sup>25</sup>

China already possesses significant access to the international system—the very thing that proponents hoped would transform China into a status quo power. Beijing assumed its permanent Security Council seat in 1971, and its membership in international organizations of all kinds has grown steadily in the years since (see the chart on page 5). It also has made considerable strides in securing leadership positions in important

components of the global governance architecture, including the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the International Civil Aviation Administration, International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), and others.<sup>26</sup> The Chinese government is taking steps to send more civil servants to work in international organizations “to utilize these international bodies as platforms to be involved in global rule-making and to gain more of a voice for China.”<sup>27</sup> Its monetary contributions to legacy institutions have grown substantially (see the below chart); Beijing is now the largest supplier of U.N. peacekeepers within the permanent five members of the Security Council, as well as the second largest financial contributor to the U.N. system overall. Crucially, Beijing is augmenting these positions with China-led alternative platforms (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, discussed in further detail below) for international cooperation, which in turn amplifies its clout in legacy institutions.

China’s signature international initiative, the Belt and Road, serves to strengthen its exclusive ties with countries across the globe and mediate among them in ways that grant it significant authority as a broker. Many analysts have noted how the significant debt burdens associated with Belt and Road projects can make



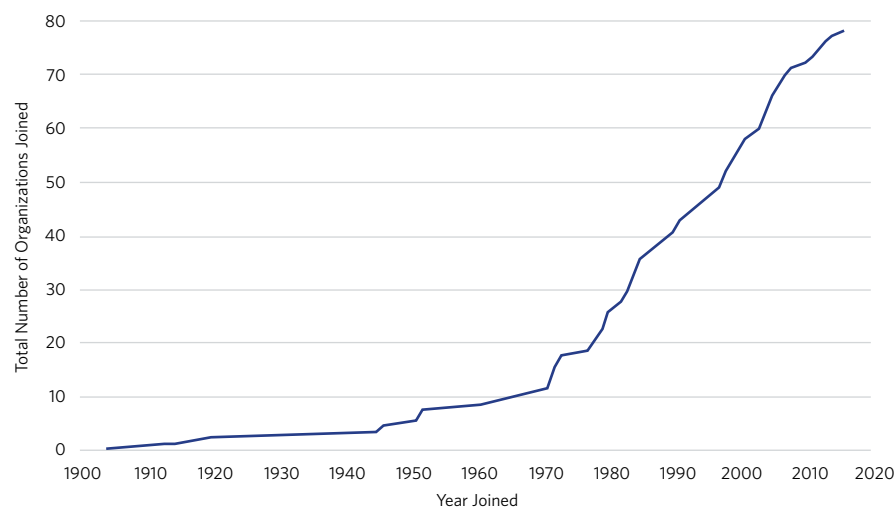
Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks during the 86th INTERPOL General Assembly at Beijing National Convention Center on September 26, 2017, in Beijing, China. (Lintao Zhang-Pool/Getty Images)

individual states beholden to Beijing, and the practices associated with Chinese state capitalism can spread corruption and a corporatist style of political economy.<sup>29</sup> But in addition to strengthening China’s bilateral position, the Belt and Road also has the deeper potential to transform the network of international cooperation. Take, for example, the pan-Asian railway that China seeks to build stretching from Yunnan province to Singapore.<sup>30</sup> By furnishing capital for constructing the railroad, China can interpose itself between the states of mainland Southeast Asia, which otherwise might have negotiated solely with one another. More generally, China’s push to build infrastructure for “interconnectedness” grants it a privileged position: If it owns or controls the points of physical connection between states, it acquires influence over the nature of their political connections as well.

Events so far indicate that China intends to keep Belt and Road ties exclusive, and therefore useful for brokerage. Following the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and subsequent criticism from the United States, liberal democracies were invited to join the bank and take a voting share in its activities. This appears to have produced an institution with procedures

**CHINA’S INCREASED MEMBERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS<sup>28</sup>**

China’s membership in international organizations has grown rapidly and steadily since the 1970s.



Note: Graph does not account for the few international organizations that China has exited or have gone defunct while China was a member.



that align with other multilateral development banks. However, the AIIB is largely a distraction meant to call Western attention away from China's real activities. As of May 2018, the AIIB had loaned out only \$3.5 billion, in comparison to more than \$100 billion in Belt and Road lending by Chinese policy banks.<sup>31</sup> This is unsurprising, given that unmediated Chinese lending maximizes Beijing's bilateral leverage and network dividends.

When a country with high international access pursues brokerage, the two can be mutually reinforcing. China's exclusive ties developed outside international organizations generate political support for revisionist

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efforts within them. At the same time, Beijing's increasing access to powerful positions within legacy institutions means it can leverage those institutions to promote unilateral Chinese actions. Indeed, the U.N. has undertaken a thoroughgoing promotional campaign for the Belt and Road, throwing both the stature of senior leaders and programmatic support behind China's efforts, despite no evidence of an accountability mechanism to ensure that the projects uphold human rights and other core U.N. values.<sup>32</sup>

China is in the beginning stages of its attempt to remake international order from the inside out. It is doing so through a multi-level campaign.<sup>33</sup> The following section details how these dynamics are playing out within the U.N. system.

## China and the U.N. System—Seven Snapshots

More than 40 years after the CCP took up its U.N. seat as the legal government of China, Beijing is capitalizing on a window of opportunity to extend its influence on the highest stage of international cooperation. In the early days of its entry to the U.N., Beijing was circumspect, avoiding public confrontation with the West whenever possible. Lately, however, China has spoken up more often, usually in favor of beleaguered autocrats such as Bashar al-Assad of Syria or Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela.<sup>34</sup> However, alongside these high-profile actions in the U.N. Security Council, China has engaged in an incremental and steady campaign to acquire leadership of and influence in important U.N. institutions.

In recent years, Beijing has pursued and gained senior posts in a wide range of U.N. principal organs and programs—ranging from the International Court of Justice to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to the Economic and Social Council.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Beijing also has positioned itself as the second largest financial contributor, after the United States, to U.N. peacekeeping. It also has deployed roughly 2,500 personnel (far more than any other permanent member of the Security Council) in active combat zones, particularly where it has oil interests, such as in Mali and South Sudan.<sup>36</sup>

The general arc of China's growing activism is not without precedent. Scholars have argued for decades, for example, that wealthier and more powerful states make disproportionately large financial contributions to



*China's Ambassador to the United Nations Liu Jieyi votes against a measure to adopt the agenda of human rights violations in North Korea during a meeting of the U.N. Security Council to discuss North Korea on December 22, 2014, in New York City. (Kena Betancur/Getty Images)*

existing institutions in order to protect their core interests.<sup>37</sup> To be sure, all major powers seek to promote their own vital interests within international organizations. As President Donald Trump once memorably stated in an address to the U.N. General Assembly, “as the President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your countries first.”<sup>38</sup>

What is unique—and ultimately perilous—about China’s pursuit of its core interests is that its growing activism in the U.N. is rooted in a number of narrow self-interested political purposes that ultimately shore up its power under a single authority: the CCP. First, China views its participation in development initiatives and peacekeeping operations as a relatively low-cost

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opportunity to blunt criticisms of and anxieties about its geopolitical ambitions, both regionally and globally. Additionally, and perhaps even more fundamentally, China is trying to use the United Nations to create an external international environment that is conducive to securing and advancing its core economic and security interests, as defined by CCP leaders. Beijing’s sovereignty over Tibet and Xinjiang, for example, has informed the positions it takes on U.N. Security Council votes and resolutions on issues relating to self-determination and humanitarian intervention. China continues to tighten its chokehold around non-governmental organizations and individuals who present views that challenge its core interests.<sup>39</sup> It has routinely blocked those organizations and individuals from participating in international bodies. China also has used positions of power in international policing bodies such as INTERPOL to target political dissidents who question the legitimacy of the CCP.

Finally, as Beijing steadily expands its influence in the U.N., it has tried to downplay its growing profile within the organization, citing the leadership void that the United States has left in international institutions in recent years.<sup>40</sup> Riding the tide of perceptions that

China is a more dynamic and nimble problem-solver for today’s global challenges, Beijing is bending the international system away from the values and norms that the United States and its allies have promoted since the system’s inception.

The following seven case studies trace how and to what end Beijing is increasing its involvement in specific U.N. agencies and systems, with concerning results.

### **1. The U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

In the United Nations, nowhere are China’s ambitions to shift the balance of power more pronounced than in its marquee development organization, which was once dominated by U.K., French, and American diplomats. Since 2007, China has held the top position in the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). Since then, Beijing has drawn on an extensive network of Chinese nationals to steer the organization toward embracing its signature Belt and Road foreign policy strategy.<sup>41</sup>

In effect, Beijing has tried to make Belt and Road synonymous with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (adopted in September 2015, and colloquially known as the “Sustainable Development Goals” or “SDGs”), which mobilizes U.N. resources toward the alleviating poverty and inequality, as well as mitigating the effects of climate change.<sup>42</sup> At the Belt and Road Davos Forum-Interregional Cooperation for a New Globalization in 2018, Liu Zhenmin, formerly China’s Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs and the current U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, cast Belt and Road as a panacea to promote “improved globalization that is more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable,” characterized by “South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation in which countries can participate as equal partners.”<sup>43</sup> At the 2018 U.N. DESA High Level Symposium on the Belt and Road Initiative and 2030 Agenda, Liu again spoke of the synchronicity between the Belt and Road and the U.N. 2030 Agenda, arguing that “both of them serve the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations” and “aim to promote win-win cooperation, shared development and prosperity, peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, and mutual understanding and trust.”<sup>44</sup>

On a programmatic level, DESA has opted to try to use momentum around the SDGs to advance China’s Belt and Road. It has launched a China-funded program, “Jointly Building Belt and Road towards SDGs,” which touts a mission of networking countries that have signed up for Belt and Road for “research on the economic,



*China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China's President Xi Jinping, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and South Africa's Minister of Economic Development Ebrahim Patel (from left to right) pose during a guided tour of an exhibition at The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in Pretoria on July 24, 2018, during Xi's official state visit. (Phill Magakoe/AFP/Getty Images)*

social, and environmental effects of cooperation activities under the Belt and Road” to support national policies that “promote and harness the [Belt and Road] for the acceleration of the SDGs.”<sup>45</sup> Building states’ capacities to ascertain the actual effects of Belt and Road cooperation and develop “coherent and integrated macroeconomic, social and environmental policies” in response is, in principle, a welcome idea. DESA smartly employs British macroeconomic modeling tools rather than Chinese-supplied analysis.<sup>46</sup> However, it is unclear whether this DESA program, which is funded by China and has a clear bureaucratic interest in justifying Belt and Road projects, can be sufficiently objective.

Following DESA’s lead, the United Nations as a whole has thrown its full-throated support behind the Belt and Road, which offers the prospect of trillions of dollars of desperately needed infrastructure investment at a time when the United States is skeptical of foreign assistance. At the Belt and Road Forum in 2017, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke about China’s key role in “shaping the 2030 Agenda and in making possible the adoption of the Paris [Climate Accord]—two of the past decade’s signal achievements in international diplomacy,” even hailing China as “a central pillar of multilateralism.”<sup>47</sup> Perhaps even more notably, Guterres has directly adopted Beijing’s own signature rhetoric about “win-win cooperation” and its central argument that both the Belt and Road and the SDGs advance “sustainable development as their overarching objective” while striving to “create opportunities” and provide “global public goods.”<sup>48</sup> Shortly thereafter, U.N. Deputy

Secretary-General Amina Mohammed endorsed the Belt and Road with an equal measure of enthusiasm at the African Union summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, contending that Belt and Road is an “opportunity not just to provide alternatives to silencing the guns for our people but one that will keep our assets both human and natural on the continent building our tomorrow today.”<sup>49</sup>

It is striking that the highest offices of the U.N. would so unreservedly support a single country’s unilateral initiative, without a crystal-clear articulation of how the Belt and Road supports the principles and standards of the 2030 Agenda for the long term.<sup>50</sup> The reality remains that Belt and Road activities are undermining international norms and best practices, often at the expense of the United States and its allies and partners.<sup>51</sup> Dual-use infrastructure and the incurrence of unsustainable debt burdens<sup>52</sup> by recipient countries have served to cement China’s status as a global power. International commercial standards intended to minimize risks, such as transparent investment procedures and anti-corruption guidelines, have come under pressure as China’s state-owned enterprises embark on projects without conducting prior due diligence on local social and economic impacts.<sup>53</sup>

While China’s growing diplomatic engagement in international initiatives such as the Paris Agreement ought to be commended and encouraged, its international initiatives also must be given appropriate scrutiny. Skepticism is all the more warranted given that, official rhetoric notwithstanding, Belt and Road projects around the world often have detrimental environmental and social impacts and rely on muted backlash from local populations.<sup>54</sup>



*U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres speaks during the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum at the China National Convention Center in Beijing, Sunday, May 14, 2017. The Belt and Road Forum focuses on the One Belt, One Road trade initiative. (Mark Schiefelbein-Pool/Getty Images)*

## 2. U.N. Human Rights Council

China's engagement with the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has been desultory at best and farcical at worst. On the one hand, China has gone through all of the motions of permitting external reviews of its treaty compliance, allowing independent U.N. human rights experts to visit China and participate in assessments of its human rights records as part of the Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process.<sup>55</sup> During the latest iteration of the UPR process in 2018, China's delegation, headed by Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng, vigorously defended its freedom of religious belief and freedom of speech,<sup>56</sup> including the purported freedom of expression that citizens enjoy on the Internet and through blogging; he further maintained that "minority ethnic groups enjoy extensive human rights" and "their freedom of religious belief and the rights to use and develop their spoken and written language are respected and guaranteed."<sup>57</sup> Yet, in the past year alone, China has banned the online sale of Bibles,<sup>58</sup> declared that the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama must comply with Chinese laws,<sup>59</sup> and rewritten religious texts.<sup>60</sup> It also has stepped up its persecution of religious communities such as Muslim ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang, its arbitrary detention and imprisonment practices, and its export of mass surveillance systems to other illiberal states.<sup>61</sup>

Ultimately, China's pursuit of critical international posts has raised alarm<sup>62</sup> among human rights and free speech advocates who fear that Beijing will wield its influence to curb progress on human rights and freedom of expression.<sup>63</sup> As a result of China's growing international influence, the stakes of China's activism in the

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U.N. system transcends the trajectory of its own human rights record and threatens to challenge the integrity of the system as a whole.<sup>64</sup> As Louis Charbonneau, Human Rights Watch's U.N. director, has noted: "With China's international influence growing, there is a worry that what it's doing could undermine the U.N. human rights

system overall."<sup>65</sup> Beijing's ambivalence—and at times outright hostility—toward external assessments of its domestic human rights situation, for example, shows that China's assertions of rights protections are hollow. Despite its superficial engagement with the UNHRC, China has worked consistently and often aggressively to silence criticism of its human rights record before U.N. bodies and has taken actions aimed at weakening some of the central mechanisms available in those institutions to advance rights. During the 2018 UPR process, Western countries, most notably the United States, singled out China's repressive policies cracking down on ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang and called on Beijing to protect religious freedoms in Tibet, and stop harassing and detaining human rights lawyers.

Amid this criticism, Beijing pushed back vigorously on what it has described as attempts to politicize human rights and question its territorial integrity. Indeed, China's attitudes toward human rights and the international rule of law, and its behavior within international organizations writ large are fundamentally informed by its own domestic political culture that privileges resolving disputes by social consensus (which can be manipulated and controlled) over mechanisms of accountability. All of this is shaped in turn by the CCP's cost-benefit calculations on how best to advance its narrowly defined interests under the veneer of democratizing international relations. In the words of Vice Minister Le Yucheng, China's achievements show that there is "more than just one path towards modernization and every country may choose its own path of development and model of human rights protection in the context of its national circumstances and its people's needs."<sup>66</sup>

## 3. U.N. Peacekeeping Operations

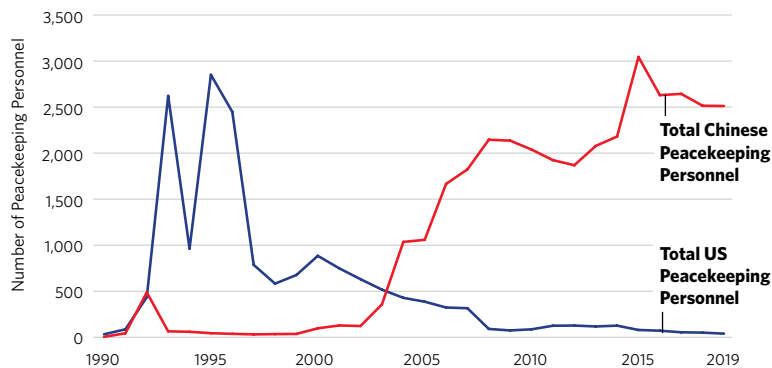
Until the early 1990s, China's engagement in peacekeeping was limited, due in large part to its near-unbending fixation with state sovereignty. Beijing viewed peacekeeping missions as running counter to the principles of neutrality and sovereignty that have informed its domestic security considerations, ranging from Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia to its claims over Taiwan.

But after decades of opposition to U.N. peacekeeping missions, China today has emerged as an energetic new actor in such international operations worldwide, particularly in Africa. Beijing dispatched its first military observers in 1989, deploying 20 military personnel to help monitor elections in Namibia as part of the U.N. Transition Assistance Group.<sup>67</sup> China's contributions since have proliferated. Today, its activities range from participation in Mali, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo,

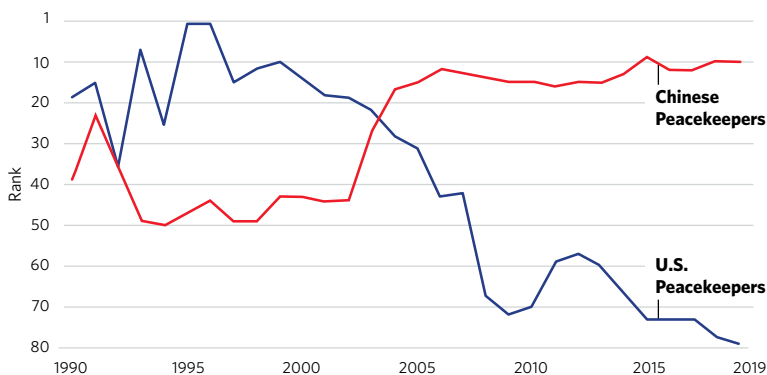
### CHINA'S INCREASED CONTRIBUTION TO U.N. PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS

After nearly two decades of opposition and then tacit acceptance of U.N. Peacekeeping missions, China contributed a civilian observer group to the U.N. Mission in Namibia in 1989.<sup>71</sup> Since then, Beijing has significantly increased the number of personnel it sends on peacekeeping missions. Increased Chinese peacekeeping engagement has filled the vacuum left by gradual U.S. disengagement and has even surpassed every other permanent member of the Security Council for nearly 10 years.

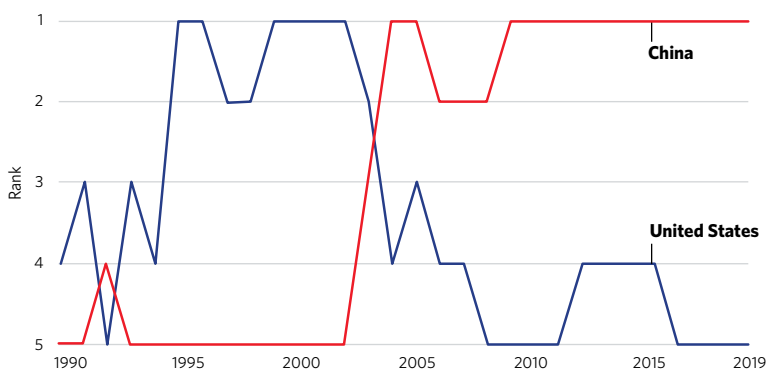
**U.S. and Chinese U.N. Peacekeeping Personnel Contributions**



**U.S. and China Ranked by U.N. Peacekeeping Personnel Contributions among all Contributors**



**U.S. and China Ranked by U.N. Peacekeeping Personnel Contributions among Permanent Members of U.N. Security Council**



All data was collected from U.N. Troop and Police Contributors (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>) and corresponds to personnel levels on December 31 of each year, except 1990 (November 31), 1998 (November 31), and 2019 (February 28).

and Darfur, including civilian protection and humanitarian aid.<sup>68</sup> Making a significant push in 2015 to ramp up China's international commitments, President Xi Jinping also pledged to establish a \$1 billion peace and development fund, earmarked \$100 million for African Union military assistance, and promised to contribute a standby peacekeeping force of 8,000 troops.<sup>69</sup> In addition to being the second highest contributor to the U.N. peacekeeping budget after the United States, as of February 2019, China is the 10th highest provider of peacekeepers (and also the largest contributor of peacekeepers among the permanent members of the Security Council).<sup>70</sup>

China's activism is grounded partly in a desire to be perceived as both a great power and as an ally to developing countries, particularly as the United States has become a more reluctant leader within the U.N. system. Peacekeeping contributions and related initiatives steadily have become an important part of China's influence campaign as the United States has scaled back its contributions to the U.N. In March 2018, the United States announced it would not supply more than 25 percent of the U.N. peacekeeping budget in the future, down from its contribution of 28.5 percent that year.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, China supplied 10.3 percent of the U.N. peacekeeping budget in 2018, a sharp increase from 6.6 percent in 2016.<sup>73</sup>

China's peacekeeping initiatives are decidedly strategic and directly advance its core interests. They have evolved as part of a broader foreign and economic policy primarily centered on force projection and safeguarding commercial interests. In particular, China has invested extensively in peacekeeping in Africa because it has economic stakes in countries like South Sudan and the Congo and seeks sustained access to Africa's natural resources and potential market of one billion people.<sup>74</sup> Peacekeeping missions also provide opportunities to enhance the operational capacity of the People's Liberation Army. In addition, they may



Riot police from Guangdong Province, which will join the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti, gather at a training base for inspection on December 18, 2004, in Foshan, China. The contingent of 125 peacekeepers will receive months of training in Hebei province before they head for Haiti. (China Photos/Getty Images)

expand markets for Chinese military equipment, as developing states that are beneficiaries of peacekeeping operations might be more likely to purchase Chinese equipment, which is also cheaper than Western products.<sup>75</sup>

Some countries view China's contributions to peacekeeping as generally beneficial. For example, its support troops are hailed in African countries as a positive force due to their low visibility and cultural sensitivity, and its financial support has expanded the U.N.'s overall peacekeeping capacity.<sup>76</sup> In its contributions, Beijing also has committed significant resources and personnel—including technicians and engineers—to mitigating non-traditional security threats, such as water and food security, in conflict areas.<sup>77</sup> And beyond the scope of U.N. peacekeeping, China has provided training, equipment, and financial aid to African Union-led peacekeeping missions, which tend to be undermanned, undertrained, and under-resourced.<sup>78</sup>

China continues to view its participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations as a useful foreign policy tool for several reasons, including training its personnel for military operations other than war,<sup>79</sup> supplementing Chinese diplomacy and official development assistance,

and blunting perceptions in developing countries about a "China threat," particularly as its military budget<sup>80</sup> continues to grow.<sup>81</sup> China's peacekeeping operations advance broader themes enshrined in the CCP constitution, whereby growing Chinese military might and political strength are necessary to promote the concept of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" globally.<sup>82</sup> Within the framework of this vision, Xi's stated goals are to provide greater contributions to humanity and promote world peace, while ultimately safeguarding hardline interpretations of state sovereignty.<sup>83</sup>

#### **4. U.N. Accreditation for Non-Governmental Organizations**

A core component of the global governance system is its incorporation of civil society stakeholders through the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). In 1946, ECOSOC established the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, which allows non-governmental organizations worldwide to obtain consultative status with ECOSOC.<sup>84</sup> Substantively, this consultative mechanism is designed to foster direct collaboration between the U.N. and civil society organizations, particularly those representing marginalized

groups, including women, people with disabilities, and indigenous individuals.<sup>85</sup> Practically, consultative status provides NGOs with “access to not only ECOSOC but also to its many subsidiary bodies, to the various human rights mechanisms of the United Nations, ad-hoc processes on small arms, as well as special events organized by the President of the General Assembly.”<sup>86</sup> It also enables accredited NGOs to obtain grounds passes for U.N. facilities in New York, Geneva, and Vienna.<sup>87</sup> In their application for consultative status, NGOs are expected to produce financial statements demonstrating that a “major portion of the organization’s funds [are] derived from . . . national affiliates, individual members, or other non-governmental components.”<sup>88</sup> This is to ensure that organizations are representing legitimate civil society organizations funded by individuals, rather than governments or corporations with explicit interests in U.N. activities.

In recent years, Beijing has pursued two simultaneous tracks to deny the legitimacy of non-governmental voices in international politics. First, it has fought to bar any civil society organization critical of its policies on sensitive issues, such as minority rights. This effort stems from China’s desire to delegitimize

non-state claims on political action, and instead to bolster intergovernmental channels where China can flex its growing muscles to get its way. At the same time, Beijing has used its growing influence at the U.N. to engage in international “astroturfing”: flooding the U.N.’s consultative platforms with state-sponsored “civil society” organs that dilute critical voices and support government policy.

Consequently, numerous Chinese non-governmental organizations have gained consultative status with the U.N.<sup>89</sup> Given the legal limits to organized civil society within China, analysts question the ability of NGOs to operate independently from CCP mandates and argue that many Chinese civil society organizations are in fact “GONGOs,” government-organized non-governmental organizations.<sup>90</sup> Concurrently, separate allegations have emerged that specific Chinese organizations have abused their U.N. accreditation to bribe officials in order to further the business interests of Chinese state-owned enterprises.<sup>91</sup> In late 2018, former Hong Kong Home Affairs Secretary Patrick Ho was convicted of bribing the President of Chad and the Ugandan Foreign Minister in order for a Chinese enterprise to obtain preferential energy rights.<sup>92</sup>

### THE RISE OF CHINESE “GONGOS”

One tactic employed by China to marginalize its critics within international organizations and promote favorable voices is the creation of government-organized non-governmental organizations or GONGOs. This is a type of international “astroturfing.” A non-exhaustive list of China’s self-reported GONGOs includes the following:<sup>93</sup>

#### Environment

- Huai River Eco-Environment Research Center
- Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims
- Center for Environment Development and Poverty Alleviation

#### Culture

- The Rural Development Research Center of Qinba Area
- Genuine Love
- Beijing Rural Children’s Cultural Development Center

#### Labor and Migrants

- Beijing Yilian Labor Law Aid and Research Center
- Suzhou Migrant Workers Home
- Shenzhen Chunfeng Labor Disputes Services Center

#### Ethnic Minorities

- Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture
- Yothok Yonden Gonpo Medical Association
- Lanzhou Chongde Women Children Education Center

#### Law and Governance

- Justice for All (天下公)
- Equity & Justice Initiative
- Dongjen Center for Human Rights Education and Action

#### Education

- Guangzhou Grassroots Education Support Association
- China Zigen Rural Education & Development Association
- Beijing Hongdandan Education and Culture Exchange Center

Source: Organizations retrieved from China Development Brief’s NGO Directory, <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/directory/>.



Students for a Free Tibet protest below a new electronic billboard leased by Xinhua, the news agency operated by the Chinese government, as it makes its debut August 1, 2011, in New York's Times Square. (Stan Honda/AFP/Getty Images)

Beyond financial gain, U.N.-accredited Chinese GONGOs have lobbied at the United Nations in order to spread the CCP's stances on human rights conditions within China. In particular, the China Association for Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture (CAPDTC), which received accreditation in 2007, repeatedly has conveyed Beijing's stated position on Tibetan issues while presenting itself as an unbiased non-governmental organization.<sup>94</sup> However, in an October 2015 submission to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the organization details that, above all other objectives, "the purpose and principle of the association is to abide by the constitution, laws, regulations and state policy of the People's Republic of China."<sup>95</sup> It further states that "all behaviors endangering national sovereignty, territorial unity and security, splitting the country . . . and others endangering the society . . . should be considered as crimes."<sup>96</sup> CAPDTC's commitment to Party priorities is unsurprising given the makeup of the organization's leadership: On the margins of the organization's 2006 "China Tibetan Culture Forum," it was revealed that many of CAPDTC's leaders simultaneously held senior positions in the Party's United Front Work Department, which is responsible for burnishing China's image internationally.<sup>97</sup> Of note, CAPDTC's honorary president, Liu Yandong, subsequently was promoted to serve as the Vice Premier of China and was at one point the highest-ranking female political figure in China.<sup>98</sup> In March 2014, a member of CAPDTC, present at China's U.N. Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review through his U.N.-issued credentials, harassed a witness present to document Beijing's extraterritorial kidnapping of her father,

democracy activist Wang Bingzhang.<sup>99</sup> Despite these incidents, as of December 2018, CAPDTC still retained its special consultative status.<sup>100</sup>

### 5. U.N. International Telecommunication Union

Since the election of Zhao Houlin (who began his career in China's Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications)<sup>101</sup> as Secretary-General in 2014, the U.N.'s specialized body for information and communications technologies (ICT) increasingly has cooperated with and promoted the Chinese companies and technical standards that undergird Beijing's oppressive surveillance state. The role of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is to "[facilitate] international connectivity in communications networks," and its work will shape the uptake of advanced technologies such as 5G mobile networks and the Internet of Things.<sup>102</sup> Notably, the ITU has spoken positively about China's attempts to monopolize future communications infrastructure in countries under the umbrella of the Belt and Road, known as the Digital Silk Road, which could threaten the freedom and openness of the Internet.

As Beijing has succeeded in largely walling off its own domestic Internet from the rest of the world, it is endeavoring to "remake cyberspace in its own image" on a global scale.<sup>103</sup> It is seeking to internationalize the standards and backbone technologies that undergird its domestic model of digital censorship and surveillance. Companies such as Huawei, ZTE, and HikVision have been mobilized to extend these technologies abroad to connect the developing world, shape new technology standards, and capture even more data to further China's already-impressive achievements in artificial intelligence. What Beijing has branded as a Digital Silk Road has provoked concerns that states receiving these technologies may be tempted to use them in the same repressive manner as China.<sup>104</sup> Chinese firms may protest that they would not force customers to surveil their citizens, and are not ultimately responsible for what is done with their products.

Yet, the more far-flung China's economic interests become, the greater the incentives to pressure partners into protecting them, including through cyber-enabled rights violations. According to Freedom House, in 2018 China organized large-scale training sessions with representatives from more than 30 countries on new media and information management.<sup>105</sup> Even if states do not wish to follow Beijing's lead at home, countries economically dependent on Chinese-made infrastructure are likely to take up Beijing's doctrine of cyber sovereignty when negotiating international policy. For example,



Tanzania and Uganda have passed restrictive laws on online media, and Zambia is weighing the merits of adopting certain standards—based on Chinese models—on censorship that would seek to limit freedom of expression in order to support social stability.<sup>106</sup>

Despite these concerns and its ostensible neutrality, the ITU has lauded and pledged to cooperate in the Digital Silk Road. In 2017, Secretary-General Zhao visited China's inaugural Belt and Road Forum and signed an agreement to “cooperate with China to assist countries to strengthen their ICT networks and services.” It also pledged future collaboration “on other developing projects to assist OBOR-participating countries.”<sup>107</sup> While the nature of the proposed cooperation is not clear, the fact that ITU is carrying water for the Digital Silk Road despite its attendant dangers—and with seemingly no accountability about rights protection in exchange for the ITU's cooperation—is concerning.

Chinese state-affiliated technological institutions also are increasingly involved in the ITU's work of setting technical standards and best practices. ITU draws on stakeholders from industry, academia, and state regulatory bodies to help inform its policies. According to the ITU's website, China has the second largest number of academic affiliates (13), behind only Argentina (16), while the United States only maintains six.<sup>108</sup> However, information from China's Academy of Sciences states that there are 34 members from China.<sup>109</sup> Of the listed Chinese affiliates, four are component institutes of the state-run Academy of Sciences. Given China's leading role in many advanced technologies, it is natural that it would be heavily represented in such efforts. Nevertheless, this constitutes one more channel for the CCP to shape U.N. policy on cyberspace to conform with its authoritarian views.

## 6. UNESCO

The United Nations' chief cultural body may seem like an unlikely battleground for great-power competition over world order, but China's leaders perceive a strong connection between culture and discursive power. Strengthening its voice in the development of U.N. cultural policy provides cover for both Beijing's particularist narrative of human rights and its actual repression of minority cultures within China. In addition, Beijing has leveraged UNESCO programming to foster scientific cooperation in the service of the Belt and Road. Following the U.S. withdrawal of funds in 2011 and formal exit in 2018, China is set to become the largest contributor to UNESCO and is seeking to double the number of Chinese staff.<sup>110</sup> Its increased sway will bring both normative and practical benefits.

In the foreign policy section of Xi's 19th Party Congress speech, he stated that “We should respect the diversity of civilizations. In handling relations among civilizations, let us replace estrangement with exchange, clashes with mutual learning, and superiority with coexistence.”<sup>111</sup> Though on its face a laudable sentiment, for the CCP this means that notions of sovereignty, complete state autonomy, and cultural particularity—again, as defined by governments—can override universal human rights. At the U.N., China promotes a statist approach to cultural policy that enables the cooptation and repression of minority groups.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, one of China's signature initiatives within UNESCO is the Yuelu Proclamation, a commitment to protecting linguistic diversity that calls for governments and “national language harmonization institutions” to take the lead in deciding how to set language policy. Meanwhile, China's own language policy bans the use of Uighur in schools as part of its thoroughgoing repression of Muslim identity in Xinjiang. The mismatch between China's leadership role and its actual behavior weakens human rights standards. Additional shifts toward statist cultural policy norms will only further erode the claims of minority groups vis-à-vis governments.

In addition, China is harnessing UNESCO to help lay the technical and human capital groundwork for the Belt and Road. UNESCO has broad discretion over U.N. educational programming and is increasingly partnering with Chinese institutions to explicitly promote Belt and Road connectivity. Recent examples include a new UNESCO initiative to promote vocational and job training in countries partnering with China on the Belt and Road. Although harboring positive potential for development, this initiative may be at cross purposes with efforts to raise labor standards in the developing world.<sup>113</sup> The Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) recently signed a partnership agreement with UNESCO to “[develop] joint science, technology, and innovation (STI) activities for the Belt and Road Initiative and [enhance] capacity building in Belt and Road Initiative countries,” implemented in part by a Chinese research institute on using space technologies for heritage conservation.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, UNESCO recently held a program hosted by the CAS Institute on Remote Sensing and Digital Earth designed to build capacity for using satellite imagery and other data in countries partnering with China on the Belt and Road. The specifics of these programs are unclear, but in the future will likely trend toward China's broader effort to promote the international use of its growing space-based data architecture, a competitor to the United States' GPS system.<sup>115</sup>

China's efforts to supplant U.S. funding and standards for UNESCO activities have the potential to contribute to real public goods, but they are not neutral. In a gradual but ultimately significant way, they can reinforce the legitimacy of China's authoritarian political system and promote China's geopolitical and technological ambitions.

### 7. U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime

Through cooperation with the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the U.N.'s specialized agency for combating transnational organized crime and corruption, Beijing is building pathways to influence regional norms and practices on criminal justice and corruption. China's legal system is founded on "rule by law," as opposed to rule of law, in which legal structures are used chiefly to control grievances and forestall collective political claims.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, although the anti-corruption campaign Xi has led since his accession has exposed and shamed genuine wrongdoing, it is still led at a political level through Party organs. Without careful attention, UNODC under Chinese influence may be spreading norms that are counterproductive to its own aims and the larger U.N. mission set.

China's priorities in UNODC settings in recent years have been to burnish its reputation for legal governance and to secure international cooperation in pursuing fugitive officials abroad. UNODC officials have eagerly complied with the first objective. In the wake of Beijing's recent expansions of legal aid and other criminal justice initiatives, UNODC has praised China's steps and signed up to a partnership to "enhance cooperation" with China and to conduct capacity-building seminars throughout the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>117</sup> Yet, positive steps like broader access to legal aid notwithstanding, China's legal system still exists fundamentally to funnel grievances into state-controlled channels and pre-empt collective protests.<sup>118</sup> Those activists who seek to raise the plight of the disadvantaged are ruthlessly suppressed, and under Xi, China has undertaken a particularly harsh crackdown on civil rights lawyers.<sup>119</sup> In addition, China's "judicial" reach increasingly extends across borders: It has detained Swedish and American citizens on trumped-up charges related to political disputes and disappeared its own former head of INTERPOL, Meng Hongwei.<sup>120</sup>

In addition to boosting its reputation, China's closer relationship with the UNODC is advancing its efforts to extend the reach of its anti-corruption campaign abroad. At home, Xi is increasingly institutionalizing his crusade to rid the Party of both corrupt officials that sully its good name and, conveniently, his political enemies. One key

step has been the elevation of the National Supervisory Commission and its transformation into little more than an appendage of the Party's own disciplinary body, the Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection.<sup>121</sup> Beijing is now seeking to promote linkages between these bodies, regional governments, and UNODC, which is the implementing agency for the U.N. Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC).<sup>122</sup> In a 2015 speech before a high-level UNODC conference, then-Chinese Justice Minister Aiying Wu called for UNODC to "enable mutual assistance to the greatest extent possible, and to upscale cooperation particularly in the areas of extradition, mutual legal assistance in criminal matters and asset recovery."<sup>123</sup> A 2017 statement of anticorruption activities to the G20 declared that China had provided anticorruption training "in the UNCAC framework" to ASEAN states and dozens of other developing countries since 2008, and offered further opportunities for developing countries to learn from Beijing.<sup>124</sup> More recently, China has progressed to calling its desired alterations to U.N. policy a "new international anti-corruption order."<sup>125</sup> Sure enough, UNODC's executive director has included corruption in a list of areas for expanded cooperation with China. In June 2018, China won its first successful extradition, from Sweden, under UNCAC auspices.<sup>126</sup>

Scholarly research has provided evidence that, when states interact with corrupt counterparts in the context of international organizations, corruption diffuses, weakening the rule of law everywhere.<sup>127</sup> While UNODC cooperation with China to fight against crime is natural and necessary, valorizing and spreading the deeply problematic legal norms of the CCP is not.

## Implications

There is a battle of narratives under way between liberal democracies and illiberal powers—most notably China—in nearly all major international organizations. And as the United States has stepped back diplomatically, China has stepped up with full force and is bent on shaping the personnel, procedures, policies, and rhetoric that comprise the backbone of global governance institutions. In effect, Beijing has chipped away at a prevailing consensus around a system that has historically held political rights—as codified in articles 18 to 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—as sacrosanct. China is seeking to displace this status quo with a new consensus that privileges sovereignty over freedom of speech, the press, and assembly, as well as development over-representation. China's massive Belt and Road effort both provides Beijing leverage to seek its

institutional revisions and benefits from the U.N. holding up the China model, namely through the Belt and Road, as a way of the future.

The U.S. government has publicly recognized the challenges posed by Beijing's approach to international organizations, stating in the 2017 National Security Strategy that "authoritarian actors have long recognized the power of multilateral bodies and have used them to advance their interests and limit the freedom of their own citizens."<sup>128</sup> Yet China has managed to sidestep these criticisms, instead framing a tradeoff between liberal democracy and development.<sup>129</sup> It has been able to socialize and shape institutions and organs within the U.N. system with remarkable success, responding to the needs, desires, and pressure points of elites in developing nations, which make up the bulk of member states. Objections from civil society and other voices have been met with bullying, silencing, and repression.

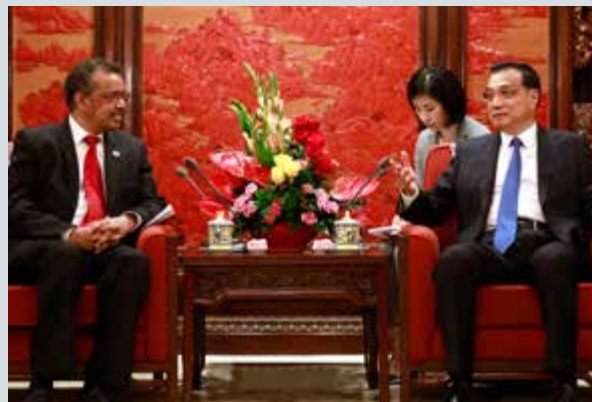
China has built country coalitions and voting blocs that bolster its status internationally and preserves the security of the CCP domestically. Through a simultaneous system-exploiting and system-revising approach, Beijing has been able to cast its actions as redressing the past imbalances and injustices of a Western-dominated system.

Looking across the seven organs and functions of the U.N. system surveyed above, the contours of Beijing's present and future behavior become clear:

- First, China will continue to create coalitions involving developing countries to challenge what it perceives to be the Western-dictated status quo within international institutions.
- Second, within international organizations, China's dedication to elevating its citizens to key posts and at the working level will yield future dividends as the CCP shapes these organizations internally and pushes forth the proliferation of PRC citizens at the working level.
- Third, China will continue to seek international endorsement for its political concepts and foreign policy initiatives, in exchange for money, personnel, and other forms of public goods provision.
- Fourth, China will attempt to delegitimize political activists that criticize its policies, while elevating those of party-sponsored "non-governmental organizations."
- Fifth, China will continue to use its position in international bodies to isolate Taiwan and attack critics of its policies in Tibet, Xinjiang, and other areas.

#### BEIJING DOUBLES DOWN ON ITS ATTEMPTS TO ISOLATE TAIWAN

While China's ambitions are expanding, it also has grown more brazen in long-standing efforts to control political representation in international organizations, such as constricting Taiwan's diplomatic space. Beijing has gone to new levels in bullying those that challenge its own expansive conception of its sovereignty. In May 2017, for example, Beijing blocked Taiwan from participating in the World Health Organization's (WHO) annual World Health Assembly meeting,<sup>130</sup> despite the contributions that Taiwan has made to efforts to mitigate global health crises, including its \$1 million donation to the WHO amid the 2014-15 Ebola pandemic in West Africa.<sup>131</sup> Beyond this, it also has endeavored to systematically exclude Taiwan from participating in policing and global aviation agencies,<sup>132</sup> even threatening dozens of foreign airlines and hotels, including U.S. firms, that did not refer to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau as Chinese territories.<sup>133</sup>



*Director General of World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (left) chats with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during their meeting at Zhongnanhai Leadership Compound on August 18, 2017, in Beijing, China. (How Hwee Young-Pool/Getty Images).*

- Sixth, using both unilateral initiatives and bargaining within institutions, China will seek to fracture the international consensus that civil and political rights are an inherent component of good governance and sustainable development.
- Seventh, as China's relative share of the global economy continues to rise, it will have the means to further increase the depth and breadth of its engagement in international organizations.

Some may argue that China's moves, in Xi's words, to "play its part as a major and responsible country" are not universally inimical to American interests and values, and the United States cannot prevent other countries from cooperating with the U.N. system—in its own image.

To be sure, there are some ways in which a more activist China is indispensable for accomplishing U.S. international goals. For example, China's efforts to address the systemic threat of climate change have been sincere, if self-interested. If China benefits economically from exporting its green technology, this still brightens the climate outlook for the United States and other countries. Millions of people also have been lifted out of poverty in China, and the money China pledges to put to development can transform the lives of millions of others. But ultimately, these benefits come with illiberal political strings attached.

The next section offers recommendations about how to seize the benefits while meeting the challenges of China's stepped-up participation in global governance.

## Recommendations

The United States and its allies should not sit by as China reshapes international organizations, particularly as China's strategy of elevating its citizens to key posts will further enable the CCP to shape organizations internally. Washington can and should spearhead a meaningful effort among like-minded allies, developing countries, and the international public to reform and re-energize the global governance system without sacrificing core human rights values.

Fundamentally, any U.S. approach to managing China's growing influence within international organizations must do four things: first, participate in international organizations, rather than cede them to China; second, understand the evolving nature of Chinese strategy; third, boldly point out where it diverges from consensus principles of human rights and justice; and fourth, offer alternatives to the Belt and Road that reinvigorate confidence in the liberal democratic path of development. Below are specific recommendations for how to accomplish these objectives.

### Understand Beijing's Strategy

- *Develop a comprehensive operating picture.* The U.S. State Department's Bureau of International Organizations should establish a cell focused on tracking—and where necessary, countering—China's activities within international organizations. In parallel, U.S. missions to key international organizations such as the U.N. would designate a full-time China watcher, if they have not done so already. Finally, and most fundamentally, U.S. diplomats must show up to and participate in meetings of international organizations.
- *Engage in dialogues with U.S. allies and partners.* The U.S. State Department, as part of existing bilateral discussions, should hold structured conversations with Europe, Japan, and Australia on China's growing influence within international organizations. Insight from these American allies and partners will further enhance U.S. understanding of Chinese strategy.
- *Learn from Taiwan's experience.* China's evolving approach toward Taiwan within international organizations may provide an early warning of future tactics it will use to advance its broader geopolitical agenda. U.S. bilateral discussions with Taiwan should seek to identify new tactics employed by Beijing to constrict Taiwan's diplomatic space and systematically exclude it from participating in international organizations.
- *Participate in regional organizations.* China's strategy has components at every level of international society. The United States must hear and understand what China is saying in institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and other regional bodies in which China is a member or observer. Washington should seek observer status or full membership in these institutions where it has not already done so, and with an eye toward elevating rules-based norms and standards in even alternative institutions.
- *Engage with global civil society actors.* Beijing's actions within the U.N. system have implications for non-governmental organizations, which China generally seeks to marginalize. To develop a comprehensive understanding of China's behavior within international organizations, the United States should hold quiet dialogues with civil society organizations.
- *Coordinate with industry.* In addition to civil society, some of the negative effects of China's activities in international organizations are likely to be felt first by those engaged in business. The U.S. government should engage with corporations, particularly in the technology domain, to identify where China's influence in international organizations are creating an uneven playing field and positioning Beijing to dominate future technology frontiers.
- *Break down barriers to whole-of-government grasp of China's strategy.* The United States should establish a fusion center, perhaps housed at the National Security Council or in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, to collect, analyze, and

disseminate information about the Belt and Road and its implications at every level of international politics, including Chinese maneuvering in international organizations.

### **Raise Awareness, Build Consensus, and Strike Back**

- *Uphold norms and values in the international context.* The United States must not shy away from criticizing China at the United Nations and elsewhere when Beijing engages in human rights violations. It must point out where Beijing's actions depart from both international principles of acceptable conduct and China's own declarations of benevolent intentions toward developing countries. Washington also should continue raising resolutions that affirm the importance of civil rights of speech, assembly, religion, etc.<sup>134</sup>
- *Develop a common list and definitions of Chinese ideological terms.* Washington and its allies must understand the discourse China uses to undermine civil and political rights. A compendium of such terms with explanations of their meaning within the Communist Party context can be used to develop a basis of shared understanding from which to fight these terms' inclusion in any document guiding the actions of international organizations.
- *Act boldly in response to CCP wrongdoing.* To convince international organizations and other countries to stand on principle vis-à-vis China, Washington must accept additional tensions within the U.S.-China relationship. On human rights, the United States should consider leveraging and expanding the scope of the Magnitsky Act to sanction egregious Chinese human rights offenders, for example, officials directly responsible for the deaths of human rights activists in China such as Cao Shunli and Liu Xiaobo.
- *Step up public diplomacy.* With international organizations increasingly unwilling to criticize Beijing and elites in many developing countries often standing to benefit personally from cooperation with China, the United States must communicate directly to the public here and abroad the facts about China and its international activities. The United States should ramp up its ongoing effort to publicize China's repression of ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang, including through tools like social media in local languages. The U.S. State Department also should organize speaking tours that bring U.S. experts on

human rights to countries that play an influential role in the U.N. system.

### **Deepen Participation in International Organizations**

- *Reengage U.N. institutions.* The United States cannot credibly influence the norms that emanate from international organizations from afar. Washington should not cede international organizations to China because of single issues, such as the Palestinian recognition measures that provoked American withdrawal from UNESCO and the Human Rights Council. Rather than walk away from international organizations that it finds distasteful and leave a void for China to fill, the United States should marshal its own considerable leverage and seek to shape from within.
- *Invest in the future of U.S. multilateralism.* The depth of U.S. human capital is among its greatest competitive strengths. Washington should build pathways for encouraging U.S. government personnel to take on leadership posts in the United Nations system. A starting point would be to develop programs within the U.S. State Department such as the Rangel, Pickering, and Payne Fellowships that not only include tenures in U.S. government but also incorporate a rotation to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations.<sup>135</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Since the early 21st century, China's approach to international organizations gradually has shifted away from that of a regional actor seeking to gain international legitimacy and toward a more confident, activist role.<sup>136</sup> Since the 16th Party Congress in 2002, the CCP has touted the "democratization of international relations" as a national priority.<sup>137</sup> To this end, China repeatedly has characterized itself as a developing nation when engaging with international organizations, despite its standing as the second largest economy in the world.<sup>138</sup> In 2015, Xi Jinping even went as far as to declare that "China's vote at the United Nations will always belong to developing countries."<sup>139</sup>

But what China seeks more fundamentally is to dilute elements of Western ideological hegemony in the present global governance system that threaten its stability. The contours of China's growing activism have become clear. As we argue in this report, its

objectives can be distilled into four broad trend lines. First, China will continue to seek international endorsement for its political concepts and foreign policy initiatives—such as the Belt and Road—in exchange for money, personnel, and other forms of public goods provision. Second, China will attempt to delegitimize political activists that criticize its policies, while elevating those of party-sponsored “non-governmental organizations.” Third, China will continue to use its position in international bodies to isolate Taiwan and attack critics of policy in Tibet, Xinjiang, and other areas. And finally, using both unilateral initiatives and bargaining within institutions, China will seek to fracture the international consensus that civil and political rights are an inherent component of good governance and sustainable development.

The United States cannot afford to ignore the salami-slicing approach China is taking to the liberal international order. By putting forth money, technical assistance, and other goods, China is acquiring influence over the terms of international politics. It is using that influence to further valorize its own authoritarian political-economic model, generating a feedback loop that, if left unchecked, will result in a “rules-based revolution” of the values and norms that have undergirded the international system since the Second World War. Rather than China becoming more like the rest of the world, the Communist Party is trying to make the rest of the world more like China. Washington and its allies must not allow that to happen.

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