

CHINA'S EXPANDING INFLUENCE AT THE UNITED NATIONS — AND HOW THE UNITED STATES SHOULD REACT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's growing influence inside the United Nations is inevitable, stemming from President Xi Jinping's more assertive foreign policy and the fact that China's assessed contributions to the world body are now second only to those of the United States. Traditionally focused on the U.N.'s development activities, China now flexes its muscles in the heart of the U.N., its peace and security work. The Chinese-Russian tactical alignment in the U.N. Security Council challenges protection of human rights and humanitarian access, demonstrated in July 2020 when China and Russia vetoed two resolutions regarding Syria and both blocked the appointment of a French national as special envoy for Sudan.

Yet the fears that China is changing the United Nations from within seem if not overblown, at least premature. Whatever its ambitions, China has not replaced the United States as the U.N.'s most powerful member state. The U.N. can still be a force multiplier for the values and interests of the United States, but only if Washington now competes for influence rather than assume automatic U.N. deference. The U.N. can be characterized as "home turf" for the United States, but walking off the field will facilitate China moving in to fill the vacuum.

INTRODUCTION

In discussing China's expanding influence in the United Nations system, a three-part quip, while simplistic, has some truth in it: The United States tends to undervalue multilateralism. Europeans usually overvalue multilateralism. And China wishes to change multilateralism.

Neither the American ambiguity nor the European romanticism about multilateralism are new; both have long been incorporated into the operating assumptions of the United Nations and its officials. China's increasing visibility and assertiveness in the U.N. system are more recent. These reflect both the reality of China's astonishing economic development and President Xi Jinping's foreign policy vision. With China now the second largest provider of assessed contributions to both the U.N.'s regular budget (at just over 12% compared to 22% from the U.S.) and peacekeeping budget (15% compared to about 27% from the U.S.),¹ an honest appraisal would conclude that China indeed has a legitimate case in expecting more say in the U.N. than it has traditionally pursued. What makes Western observers uneasy is the expectation that China will use its stronger voice to patiently chip away at human rights and other values-based issues in the multilateral system — and that, despite the opportunities of tapping into wider international concerns about China, the United States currently seems more inclined to walk away than compete to preserve what — from the American perspective — is valuable about the system.

Much of the American pundit angst about the growing Chinese role² derives from the fact that four of the 15 U.N. specialized agencies — the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) — are now headed by Chinese nationals.³ At least some of the responsibilities of these agencies matter, in terms of establishing standards and practices that affect national commercial, economic, and security interests.

U.S. analysts have focused less on China's role in the U.N.'s political efforts. Especially since Xi became China's president in 2013, Beijing has raised its profile within the very heart of the U.N., specifically the peace and security pillar that motivated the signing of the U.N. Charter 75 years ago in June. I served as United Nations under-secretary-general for political affairs from 2012 until 2018 and witnessed China's expanding role in the U.N.'s political, peace, and security work under two secretary-generals, Ban Ki-moon and António Guterres.

MOVING BEYOND A DEVELOPMENT FOCUS

While it is incorrect to suggest China was absent from the U.N.'s peace and security work before Xi, China's traditional focus at the U.N. was on development, economic, and social issues.⁴ This paralleled China's domestic priorities. When I traveled to China with Ban Ki-moon in July 2012, the theme of the meetings was almost exclusively development-focused, including China's development aid to Africa, not seen as so politically significant then as it is now. Two years later, Xi's September 2015 speech to the United Nations General Assembly — his first — signaled for many listeners (including this writer) a shift.⁵ Xi's words suggested that China's U.N. priorities would expand beyond development to include peace and security matters. Xi announced a \$1 billion fund for peace and development, including to support peace and security work, and \$100 million to support the African Union's development of a standby peacekeeping force. If the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced in 2013 was not evidence enough, the General Assembly speech, followed up by Xi's January 2017 remarks at the World Economic Forum at Davos, underscored China's more assertive international profile.⁶ China's expanding influence in the United Nations Security Council and U.N. peace operations has obvious policy implications for Washington, accustomed to deference within the U.N. on many, though certainly not all, peace and security issues.

CHINA'S INCREASING USE OF ITS SECURITY COUNCIL VETO

China has deployed its Security Council veto only 16 times, less than any of the other permanent members (the so-called "P5" — the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China) who hold that power.⁷ But the frequency is increasing, with two vetoes in July 2020 alone, and China will surely soon outstrip France in using its veto privilege. For 13 of these, China joined with Russia: 10 vetoes blocking Security Council action on Syria since 2011, plus vetoes regarding draft resolutions on Myanmar (2007), Zimbabwe (2008), and Venezuela (2019). The common thread linking these Chinese-Russian vetoes is that the drafts condemned governmental behavior in the targeted countries and expressed human rights concerns — unacceptable external interference in the internal matters of other states, in the Chinese-Russian narrative that focuses on the sovereign rights of states rather than the human rights of individuals.

The Chinese-Russian alignment on the Security Council contrasts with China's first veto, in 1972, a year after the Beijing replaced Taipei in the Chinese seat on the council, blocking Bangladesh's membership in the U.N. until 1974. Reading the Chinese delegate's explanation of vote (EOV, in U.N. terms) is a window back to a lost world, in its repeated denunciation of "Soviet social-imperialism," aggression, and hegemony.⁸ The Chinese-Russian bilateral relationship remains complex and often marked with mutual suspicion, as Moscow's recent allegations that a Russian scientist spied for Beijing reveal.⁹ But whatever their strategic differences, inside the Security Council, Beijing and Moscow have made common cause in downplaying human rights norms, playing up sovereign rights, and vexing the United States. Other council members should assume that the current Russian-Chinese tactical collaboration in the council will continue for the foreseeable future, whatever bilateral tensions remain in their strategic relationship. Even though Russia uses its veto more promiscuously, while China often abstains, it is hard to imagine council action in the current environment where the two former antagonists would be on opposite sides as they were in 1972.

With China and Russia forming a strong “P2” alliance inside the Security Council, the U.S. interest should be in consolidating the “P3” (the U.S., France, and the U.K.), three Western allies which over the decades have tried to coordinate positions. Over the decades, P3 unity often provided direction for the council, as the three countries worked together to secure council votes from the 10 rotational council members elected for two-year terms (known in U.N.-speak as the “E10,” the elected 10, as opposed to the P5 permanent members). Unfortunately for American interests, the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA) and its disdain of alliances overall, *inter alia*, have inserted strains and dysfunction into the U.S.-U.K.-French P3 relationship that the Chinese and Russians can exploit. P3 unity has always had occasional gaps, with the French, especially, and British differing with the United States on Israeli-Palestinian issues, among others. But the current P2 strength has as much to do with U.S. failure to nurture P3 unity – and the subsequent difficulties in coordinating P3 lobbying of the E10 – as it does with China’s rise.

Historically, China has only used its Security Council veto acting alone on three occasions, all since the People’s Republic of China (PRC) replaced Taiwan in 1971. This compares to over 100 solo vetoes by the Soviet Union/Russian Federation and over 50 by the United States. In addition to the Bangladesh membership veto noted above, the other two Chinese vetoes were related to Taiwan. In January 1997, Beijing vetoed a resolution that would have deployed U.N. observers to Guatemala after the December 1996 ceasefire agreement between the Guatemalan government and rebels. China, in its EO, blamed “erroneous acts” of the Guatemalan government “aimed at splitting China” in the U.N.¹⁰ Chinese objections were quickly overcome via an orchestrated letter to China from Guatemalan Foreign Minister Eduardo Stein assuring Beijing that Guatemala would not advocate for U.N. membership for Taiwan. In 1999, China vetoed the extension of the mandate of the U.N. peacekeeping force (UNPREDEP) in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. While the issue was Skopje’s recognition of Taiwan¹¹ (and UNPREDEP was indeed liquidated), the Chinese EO reads very much like foreshadowing of more recent U.S. statements, noting that U.N. mandates should not be indefinite and that the U.N. needs to be mindful of budgetary issues.¹²

China’s influence in the Security Council is also linked to its relationship with Africa. Especially with South Africa currently on the council, China can usually count on the “A3” – the three rotating African seats on the council (three of the “E10”) – taking China’s positions seriously. China’s commercial and financial relations with Africa play an important part, but it is more than the alleged “economic blackmail” that gets China respect from the African member states represented on the council: Unlike the P3 (with their own colonial baggage), China studiously avoids taking positions on Africa-related peace and security issues that differ from those of the African states themselves. Nor does China comment on internal matters or criticize human rights practices, no matter how egregious the violations. China’s assertion that socio-economic development is the ultimate human right (rather than “liberal” freedoms) appeals to many leaders in Africa and beyond. It remains to be seen whether COVID-19 or any “debt regrets” during the coronavirus-induced economic crises will cool the African governments’ feeling that Beijing is more attuned to their concerns and respectful of their positions than the P3.

If a P5 country can deny the adoption of a draft resolution (which requires at least nine affirmative votes out of the 15 total), it can avoid exercising its veto. If China and Russia stay tactically aligned, which seems probable, and are confident of A3 support, they only need one other council member to side with them to block a resolution via abstention, without having to resort to the veto. China also cultivates its relationship with the Non-Aligned Movement (despite the absurdity of mighty China today being considered truly “non-aligned”). Depending on which Non-Aligned countries may be in E10 seats at a given time, China may feel confident of more than Russian and A3 support when it feels its interests are at stake. The P3 and their allies on the council should watch these dynamics warily.¹³

CHINA AND U.N. PEACE OPERATIONS

U.N. peace operations – peacekeeping operations and special political missions (including special envoys and special representatives) – operate under Security Council mandates and General Assembly-approved budgets, meaning Chinese oversight and engagement are not new. Currently, there are 13 peacekeeping operations and 26 field-based political missions.

Until recent years, the general perception inside the U.N. was that, if China had a problem with a peace operation mandate, China would quietly defer to a Russian lead in raising objections. Yet as we saw with the liquidation of UNPREDEP because of a Chinese veto, China (like the other P5 members) can be a bully when it comes to perceived national interests. And under Xi's more assertive foreign policy, the style of China's approach to peace operations has become less muted.



China has enhanced credibility in peace operations because it has skin in the game.

In considering U.N. peace operations, China starts from a strong position. Its status as the second-largest provider of U.N. assessed budgetary contributions (which are mandatory for members) — and the fact that China, unlike the United States, is current on its dues — gives it increased influence. China also has enhanced credibility in peace operations because it has skin in the game: China's 2,500-plus troops and other personnel now serving in U.N. peacekeeping operations exceed those of the rest of the P5 combined.¹⁴ The deputy force commander of the U.N. peacekeeping force in South Sudan (UNMISS), a force of more than 12,000 troops, is Chinese.

Often allied with Russia, China has more aggressively used peace operations mandate renewals (typically approved annually by the Security Council) and budgetary discussions in the General Assembly to advance its positions. Chinese-Russian efforts are typically focused on stripping out human rights monitors and responsibilities from peace operations. The previous effectiveness of the P3 and like-minded states' pushback to preserve human rights elements has been undermined by Washington's current lack of interest in human rights (except when politically expedient, as in Venezuela and Iran) and U.S. prioritization of budget cutting over human rights mandates. In September 2019, China threatened to veto the mandate renewal for the U.N.'s mission in Afghanistan in what was ultimately an unsuccessful attempt to insert praise of the BRI into the draft Security Council resolution.¹⁵

China has also scrutinized more closely the proposed appointments of the special representatives and envoys leading U.N. peace operations. One task of the under-secretary-general for political affairs is to conduct quiet consultations with Security Council members in advance of any announcement regarding appointments to head political missions. The point was to avoid embarrassing the secretary-general, the proposed envoy, and the Security Council member itself, should any of the Security Council members object.¹⁶ In the first few years of my tenure, the Chinese representative with whom I consulted on appointments would assure me, "China has full confidence in anyone the secretary-general chooses to appoint." The remaining P5 countries would invariably pose many questions and require time to consult with capitals. At one point or another, Washington, Moscow, Paris, and London had all blocked proposed appointments. By my 2018 U.N. retirement, the Chinese were asking for as much, if not more, background information on the candidate in question as the other P5 members. In June 2020, China "graduated" to the P5 club of stopping proposed appointments, when Beijing joined with Moscow in pushing back against a proposed French national to head a new peace operation in Sudan.

In a move that raised eyebrows at the time, given China's Africa policies, Secretary-General Guterres announced in January 2019 the appointment of a Chinese diplomat, Huang Xia, as his special envoy for the Great Lakes region of Africa. Assuming office in April 2019, Xia became the first Chinese national in U.N. history to lead a U.N. peace operation, and his appointment was at least in part the result of Chinese lobbying. As Xia had served as China's ambassador in three different African countries, Security Council members could not claim he was unqualified. Reportedly, Xia has scrupulously presented himself as a representative of the U.N., not of Beijing, and he got high marks from U.N. staff for his effectiveness in his first year on the job. Even if Xia is diligent in highlighting his U.N. credentials, one can imagine that, in practice, his nationality is an asset, helping to open doors at the highest levels in the Great Lakes region.

More recently, the secretary-general announced the appointment of another Chinese national, Guang Cong, as the deputy special representative for political

affairs to UNMISS. On the one hand, this is an ordinary appointment, as Cong has served in U.N. peace operations since 2002, including in Darfur, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and UNMISS – a seasoned career U.N. professional getting a promotion. On the other hand, it is unusual to have a U.N. peace operation in Africa with both its head and the political deputy coming from outside the continent: UNMISS is led by David Shearer, from New Zealand, and Cong's predecessor was from Mali. One suspects some Chinese lobbying was involved in this appointment, both in terms of Guterres' selection and in making sure that African states did not insist on an African national.

So with Xia and Cong, for the first time there are Chinese nationals in two leadership positions in U.N. peace operations. British, French, and U.S. nationals have held multiple leadership positions in peace operations for years.

CHINA AND THE U.N.'S POLITICAL WORK

While the U.N.'s 39 field-based peace operations focus on certain geographic areas or countries (Syria, Mali, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen, etc.), the U.N. Secretariat, through the political affairs department that I led, is also tasked with monitoring political developments globally, to try to prevent or resolve conflict. It is incorrect to say that China took no interest in, or was even opposed to, the U.N.'s political work before Xi came to power, although the U.N.'s political engagement with Beijing has expanded since then.

Thanks to an annual appeal and effective lobbying initiated by Lynn Pascoe, my predecessor at the U.N., China has consistently provided annual, unearmarked six-figure voluntary contributions to the U.N. Department of Political Affairs (DPA, now renamed the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, or DPPA). Neither Lynn nor I were successful in getting similar sustained support from Washington. DPA also benefitted from funds provided via the peace and development fund announced by Xi in 2015 to support mediation and other political work, which (per U.N. rules) are carried out at member state request or with member state consent. The Chinese, suspicious that DPA was "interfering in the internal affairs" of member

states, would occasionally raise questions about civil society partners or the appropriateness of some of our proposed activities. Yet, overall, they remained supportive of our attempts to prevent and resolve conflicts (unsuccessful as many were!).



The Chinese perspective on many peace and security issues was important for DPA's understanding not only of the specific situations but also to test whether there was a potential U.N. role or not.

While the Chinese voluntary contribution for political work was relatively modest compared to millions of dollars annually from the U.K. and Germany, it was politically important for DPA to be able to show non-Western support for its work, that the department was not simply a product of Western Europe and North America but had the backing of more representative group of U.N. member states. The U.N. does not have an intelligence service or embassies with political officers in countries around the world, so the Chinese perspective on many peace and security issues – Myanmar, North Korea, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, to name four – was important for DPA's understanding not only of the specific situations but also to test whether there was a potential U.N. role or not. I traveled to Beijing repeatedly during my U.N. tenure, and, each time, Chinese officials went beyond protocol discussions to compare notes on substantive issues. Most helpfully, before my December 2017 trip to Pyongyang, at a time of alarming tension between the U.S. and North Korea, no country provided better information and suggestions about how to deliver effectively tough messages to North Korean counterparts.

Two initiatives demonstrate China's growing interest in (and probably scrutiny of) the U.N.'s political work. In 2016, DPA received its first Chinese junior professional officer (JPO), and a second one was added later. These are member-state funded two-year positions, equivalent to a young professional internship. (As to the question of whether the Chinese JPOs – or other

Chinese nationals in the system — are truly impartial as U.N. employment requires, my guess is that the picture is mixed, as it is with U.N. staff from many countries, despite their oaths of office not to accept national instruction.)

More significantly, in 2017, China blessed DPA's proposal to open a DPA liaison office to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), headquartered in Beijing. While from the Washington perspective it is easy to scoff at, or loathe, the SCO — a forum set up by China, Russia, and Central Asian states (minus Turkmenistan, due to its “permanent neutrality” foreign policy) which added India and Pakistan to its membership in 2017 — the U.N. perspective is different. Links to other regional organizations are key to U.N. legitimacy and credibility with the countries involved. It is unlikely that a less confident China would have permitted the stationing of a U.N. liaison officer in Beijing: the suspicion would have been too great that DPA was “spying” on China. DPA already had liaison presences with the European Union and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (as well as a more operational relationship with the African Union and sub-regional organizations in Africa), and the liaison with the SCO again helped demonstrate that DPA was interested in partnerships across the globe.

As a U.N. official, I was eager to expand DPA's work with China: DPA could not be effective without close, cooperative relationships with key member states from around the globe and especially with P5 members. Obviously, it was easier to work with the Chinese on some issues than others, and we had tough discussions regarding Myanmar. Some critical peace and security issues were essentially taboo, such as the South China Sea. But whatever wariness the Chinese officials may have had regarding my status as a former U.S. official or about the U.N.'s political work, well before the end of my tenure we had the type of ongoing communication that I hoped was mutually beneficial and that increased DPA's credibility in China, a P5 powerhouse. The growing DPA-Chinese relationship was a subset of the increasingly higher profile China was taking throughout the U.N. system during my tenure.

PRESERVING A VALUES-BASED MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

As a U.N. official, I saw the pursuit of deeper relations with China on peace and security matters as an important responsibility and a useful tool in promoting our political work. This aligned with China's more forceful presence in the U.N.'s peace and security work. Now, as an American citizen retired from the U.N., I view China's growing power in the multilateral system with concern.

But (take a deep breath) China has not taken over: the U.N.'s own database indicates that, as of April 2020, among senior leaders in the United Nations (assistant-secretary-general and higher), there are 26 American nationals (a few of whom are part-time) compared to three Chinese nationals, in addition to the Chinese nationals heading the four specialized agencies.¹⁷ As of 2017 (the last year for which statistics are available), the U.N. reports employing 5,274 American nationals and 1,114 Chinese nationals in full-time positions.¹⁸ (In the complicated formula used by the U.N., both countries are viewed as “under-represented” in terms of U.N. employment of their nationals — obviously more so with China, given its population.)

For all its faults and signs of creakiness at age 75, the United Nations and the multilateral system under U.S. leadership has largely served as a force multiplier for American interests as well as producing, in general, global benefits. But Americans need to be realistic about the future. With its greater global weight today and in the future, China will assume a larger global role, as it is now doing. That is inevitable, and we need to accept and deal with it. But it's not inevitable that China would choose the U.N. as one of the vehicles in which to assert its growing power, especially as the PRC is the only one of the five permanent members absent from San Francisco when the basic operating system of the U.N. was established. (While the Soviet Union, not the Russian Federation, was represented in San Francisco, Russia's U.N. role as the successor state of the Soviet Union did not represent a political break.) China has not tabled a peace and security equivalent to the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

So perhaps we should welcome China's desire for increasing influence in the U.N. system as preferable to Beijing-designed alternatives that exclude or disadvantage the United States. Having China operate within a long-established system established under U.S. leadership gives us the equivalent of a home field advantage. And there are certainly areas where Beijing and Washington might find common interests — China, for example, is far more attentive to budgetary issues than it was when its assessed contributions were insignificant. We also might be able to appeal to China's interests in access for markets, investment opportunities, and natural resources, which are more readily realized in times of peace, security, and stability. This differs from Russia's exploitation of instability in places such as Ukraine, Syria, and Libya.



Given the realities of today's world, the United States needs now to join forces with others to push back against Chinese-Russian attempts to strip out or distort normative principles of the U.N. such as human rights.

But, to return to the opening quip of this essay, if we object to China wanting to change the United Nations and the multilateral system by substituting Chinese rules for those we helped author, we must not abandon the playing field. Given the realities of today's world, the United States needs now to join forces with others to push back against Chinese-Russian attempts to strip out or distort normative principles of the U.N. such as human rights. As Bruce Jones, Will Moreland, and I argued in September 2019, one element of a multi-pronged U.S. strategy to maintain leadership in an revitalized, effective multilateral system is to be prepared to compete within the existing structures for what matters to us.¹⁹ That requires patient alliance-building on both strategic and tactical levels.

Even within the Security Council, there is an opportunity for the United States to fortify P3 unity and expand the consensus within the council, by exploiting European and others' discomfort with China's expanding

influence, Chinese trade practices, and Beijing's COVID-19 response. Newly elected Security Council members for the 2021-22 term include Ireland and Norway, who could join a reinvigorated P3 bloc on many issues. India, also elected for a 2021-22 Security Council term, has sharp strategic differences with China, as revealed in the June 2020 border bloodshed.

Yet instead of building and leading competitive alliances, the United States has left a vacuum. It is curious, given the supposed focus on pushing back on Chinese expansionism, that the Trump administration has repeatedly created opportunities that essentially facilitate China's inroads in the U.N. system. The World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the U.N. Human Rights Council: the game does not stop when we stomp off the field, and the Chinese and the Russians must be delighted to see that their ability to affect the outcome and swap out our values for theirs is that much easier when we are absent.

Then there is the money. Even with the Trump administration's announced budget cuts and suspensions (UNESCO, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East or UNRWA, the WHO), the U.S. remains the top provider in dollar terms of voluntary contributions for U.N. activities such as humanitarian assistance. But the U.S. also has the dubious distinction of being the top debtor to the U.N. in terms of its assessed, or required, contributions: \$1 billion and counting in arrears. With the U.N. Secretariat currently in a financial crisis that the U.S. could unilaterally address by paying its dues, Americans should not be surprised if there's less patience with, and deference to, U.S. demands in Turtle Bay. It is not in our interest to be perceived as the scofflaw when China is on the move.

Given unease in many capitals about Chinese intentions, the potential for renewed cooperation to preserve a values-based approach to the U.N. and multilateralism exists. Indeed, even with the international disdain for the Trump administration, Washington tapped effectively into shared concerns about unsavory Chinese intellectual property practices to tip the recent elections for head of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) away from

the Chinese candidate.²⁰ Foreign missions accredited to the U.N. have reported a yearning for the type of U.S. cooperation and leadership that would allow them to counter the Chinese lobbying they receive. (“When the U.S. is silent on something and China is really pushing, and we don’t really have a strong national position, China will get our vote,” one diplomat from a small European country told me.²¹)

Yes, China’s influence inside the United Nations on peace and security matters is growing, and that is inevitable. We cannot stop that. But we can end the current absurdity by which the U.S. absence facilitates China’s ability to promote its own operating system in place of the universal values enshrined in the U.N. Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and multiple conventions.

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