

“The Chinese Communist Party’s Malign Influence at the United Nations—It’s Getting Worse”

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the growing influence of China at the United Nations. I am speaking today in my personal capacity as a former U.S. government official and an observer of the United Nations.

In the late 1970s, as Deng Xiaoping assumed the reins of power in Beijing, he delivered a message that would become the bedrock of Chinese foreign policy for generations: “Hide our capacities and bide our time.” For decades, Chinese diplomats adhered to this dictum at the UN, punching well below their weight as a permanent member on the Security Council. As recently as 2012, a Chatham House [report](#) found that, “China’s approach to the UN has been a near-perfect execution of Deng’s famous maxim: ‘calmly observe, secure your position, hide brightness, cherish obscurity, and never seek leadership.’”¹

That era of reticence and restraint, of course, is now a relic of the past. Since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, China has dramatically transformed its involvement with the world’s global governing body. While still reluctant to wield their veto authority, in the UN’s backrooms—and increasingly in its corridors of power—the country’s envoys are showing greater propensity to assert their newfound clout. On the tactical side, this is most visible in increasing voluntary contributions to a range of UN funds and programs and continuing efforts to insert Chinese personnel into key positions of influence throughout the UN system. But more subtly, and strategically, Beijing is using its sway within the world body to blunt criticism, shut out and stigmatize Taiwan, plug its Belt and Road Initiative, and dilute norms that might be used to hold it accountable.² The UN has become an arena for contestation between democracy and autocracy. It is a realm that Beijing is taking seriously in its quest for mounting global dominion.

As a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations and Deputy to the U.S. Ambassador to the UN for UN Management and Reform, and career long believer in

¹ Sonya Sceats with Shaun Breslin, “China and the International Human Rights System,” *Chatham House*, October 2012, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/International%20Law/r1012_sceatsbreslin.pdf.

² Suzanne Nossel, “The World Still Needs the UN,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-18/world-still-needs-un>.

global governance tools, I once viewed China's engagement with the UN with leery optimism. A China more engaged with the world, I hoped, would be a China more invested in the international system and its norms. Today, I view China's growing weight at the UN as a challenge to be met. China is determined to reshape the UN in its image—one that downplays individual rights and emphasizes national sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs.

The PRC's record on enacting the changes it seeks is decidedly mixed. As CCP officials acknowledge, China is still learning how to translate its material resources and voice into tangible clout within the UN system. Its early absence from the organization, together with its first decades of membership spent in diplomatic quiescence, have left it playing catch-up on administrative expertise and institutional savvy.³ The US holds many cards, including deep expertise, key UN leadership roles, its global diplomatic network, important allies and its status as the home base for the UN headquarters in New York. But China is quickly moving up the learning curve. The UN has become a key testing ground for Beijing's global leadership ambitions—and is not a stage China will surrender lightly. Rather than ceding ground as a consequence of ambivalence or political divisions at home over the role and credibility of the UN, the US should meet China at full strength on this global proving ground, leveraging principles, capabilities and alliances to compete across four pivotal spheres of influence.

FINANCIAL DIPLOMACY

China's rise at the UN has been fueled, in large part, by a strategic deployment of its growing economic might. In 2019, the PRC surpassed Japan to become the second-largest contributor to the UN's budget behind only the US.⁴ The contributions reflect a significant increase not only in China's assessed budget share—a function of its rapid economic growth—but also in its voluntary contributions, which have expanded nearly tenfold since 2010.

Lifting a page from a playbook long used by Western nations, China is embracing the strategic and practical value of voluntary UN funding. The most prominent example is its much-touted contribution to the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund. Financed by a \$200 million nest egg from Beijing, the Fund is designed to bolster UN capacity on initiatives aimed at conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and economic development. The Fund's steering committee is comprised mostly of PRC officials, who have used the initiative to promote projects along China's Belt and Road Initiative. According to [analysis](#) by the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, more than one-third of the projects approved since 2018 have supported the BRI.⁵

³ Courtney J Fung and Shing-hon Lam, "Mixed report card: China's influence at the United Nations," *Lowy Institute*, December 18, 2022, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/mixed-report-card-china-s-influence-united-nations#footnote67_x0upafx.

⁴ Jeffrey Feltman, "China's Expanding Influence at the United Nations — And How the United States Should React," *Brookings Institution*, September 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FP_20200914_china_united_nations_feltman.pdf.

⁵ Fung and Lam, "Mixed report card."

The CCP's high-visibility spending is part of a two-track strategy to position itself as the architect of a new paradigm of global cooperation. In meeting its financial obligations, and highlighting Washington's failure to consistently do so, Beijing aims to burnish its image as a dependable and committed global partner that contrasts with a mercurial Washington. And, in pioneering projects like the Peace and Development Fund, China is billing itself as a leading provider of "global public goods"—a set of institutions headlined by the BRI, Global Development Initiative, and Global Security Initiative that are platforms to propagate Chinese precepts like noninterference and to single out the "Western-led security order" as a prime source of global governance problems.⁶

STAFFING UP

Beyond funding, China has been making a concerted effort to secure executive leadership posts across the UN. From 2020 to 2022, the PRC headed four of the body's 15 specialized agencies—a stark contrast to the last two decades, during which China held the [lowest number](#) of UN executive positions among both permanent and aspiring Security Council members.⁷

To date, most of the jobs being taken on by China's diplomats are technical ones in agencies that garner limited attention but can have significant sway over global standard-setting and enforcement. These include the International Telecommunications Union which plays a vital role in internet governance and is a setting in which China sought to advance its vision of digital authoritarianism. Notably, while most officials serving in UN leadership roles retain ties to their own government, for Chinese appointees these linkages are unmistakable and have a measurable impact on policy. Officials typically rotate through UN roles for fixed terms, meaning that they will likely return to the Foreign Ministry upon the conclusion of their service. For a Chinese official working in a UN role, departing from Beijing's positions and interests could be personally risky.

More recently, China has begun to flex its personnel muscles at the center of the UN's peace and security work. The PRC has long deployed more UN peacekeeping troops than the rest of the P5 combined—and is now leveraging its skin in the game to fill coveted peacekeeping-related posts in Cyprus, Western Sahara, South Sudan, and even its first ever special envoy role in the Great Lakes region of Africa.⁸

Beijing has multiple reasons for extending its traditional development focus at the UN to peacekeeping. The most basic is optics: China leverages its peacekeeping deployments to bolster its image as a committed multilateral partner. Increasingly, UN deployments also allow PLA soldiers a chance to gain valuable operational experience in foreign settings.⁹ Whereas China once limited its participation to sending passive observers and technical support, its

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richard Gowan, "China's pragmatic approach to UN peacekeeping," *Brookings Institution*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-pragmatic-approach-to-un-peacekeeping/>.

⁹ Ibid.

troops have more recently taken part in enforcement mandates in Mali, Darfur, and the DRC—missions that also align with Beijing’s growing economic stake in Africa.

Most importantly, however, China is using its contributions to subtly mold peacekeeping to align with its preferences for a more technical, and less political, foreign policy instrument.¹⁰ China has frequently challenged aspects of peace operations in which it participates—most notably provisions concerning protecting human rights and democratic processes, which have been routinely incorporated into Security Council mandates since the end of the Cold War. More concretely, Beijing has also led efforts to cut funding for key human rights posts, including a 2018 decision to slash the overall peacekeeping budget by hundreds of millions of dollars. While it has stopped short of demanding wholesale changes to UN norms thus far, China's increasing involvement in peacekeeping, combined with its selective financial pressure, points to a calculated strategy to incrementally transform the UN's approach instilling human rights and democratic governance in conflict zones around the world.

FROM ABSTENTION TO ASSERTION

As Beijing’s stance on peacekeeping has evolved, so too has its approach to the Security Council—the crucial clearinghouse for the UN’s peace and security work. Historically, the PRC has been reluctant to stick its neck out as a veto-wielding power: It has deployed the authority just 16 times in 53 years, less than any other P5 member. This includes only three solo vetoes, compared to over 100 by Russia and 50 by the United States.¹¹

Over the last decade, however, China has been a far more assertive Security Council presence, joining with Russia to veto resolutions on Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, North Korea, and, most frequently, Syria. These vetoes denied UN interventions to safeguard human rights and prevent governmental abuse. The measures were rejected as intolerable breaches of national sovereignty, in line with Beijing's doctrine that places the inviolable rights of states above the individual human rights of their citizens.¹² Crucially, the vetoes were often in line with the votes of neighboring countries, part of China’s strategy that avoids taking positions on peace and security issues in the Global South that depart from those of directly affected and allied states themselves.

Zooming out, China’s actions on the Security Council reflect an evolving relationship between Beijing, Moscow, and a newfound “axis of disruptors” that also includes Tehran and Pyongyang. Despite the intricate and often distrustful nature of their bilateral ties, these four capitals have found common ground in championing the primacy of national sovereignty, minimizing the importance of human rights standards, and frustrating American interests.¹³ The growing

¹⁰ Courtney J. Fung, “China’s Small Steps into UN Peacekeeping Are Adding Up,” *IPI Global Observatory*, May 24, 2023, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2023/05/chinas-small-steps-into-un-peacekeeping-are-adding-up/>.

¹¹ Feltman, “China’s Expanding Influence.”

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

alignment among these states, with China at its center, has far-reaching implications for the UN's ability to respond effectively to crises like those currently unfolding in Gaza and Ukraine, where the interests of the P5 are increasingly at odds. Regardless of what one thinks about the UN itself, it offers an arena for coordination between nations whose actions are at the forefront of US concern. On March 28 a 14-year old UN panel of experts focused on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs was disbanded as a result of a Russian veto of the routine extension of its mandate. China abstained, giving Moscow cover for a move aimed to repay Pyongyang for the weapons it has supplied for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A SOVEREIGNTY SHIELD

As China aspires to exert greater influence on the global stage, it is asserting itself as a key actor within the UN's human rights bodies. As Ted Piccone and the Brookings Institution have [outlined](#), this stems from a two-pronged strategy to: 1) block international criticism of Beijing's own repressive human rights record, and 2) promote orthodox interpretations of national sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs that weaken international norms of transparency, and accountability.¹⁴

China's efforts to minimize scrutiny of its own human rights record are not new. However, as the country's respect for human rights has declined—its domestic human rights situation has steadily worsened under the rule of Xi Jinping—it has become increasingly brazen in its attempts to deflect criticism and undermine the UN's ability to conduct oversight. These efforts have been particularly pronounced in China's treatment of dissident writers and human rights defenders. For decades, within its own borders, Beijing has restricted dissidents' freedoms, monitoring their activities, jailing them, and wielding the specter of torture and arbitrary detention against their families. China routinely tops PEN America's annual list of the world's worst jailer of writers. Now, it is bringing a similar playbook to the UN setting, with accounts surfacing of Chinese representatives and state-controlled media outlets harassing, surveilling, and even trying to prevent investigative journalists and other dissenting voices from entering UN premises.¹⁵

Many of these themes came to a head at China's Universal Periodic Review in January, a process whereby the Human Rights Council examines countries' human rights records every five years. Rights campaigners had hoped that the UPR would offer scrutiny of China's many abuses, building on the Human Rights Council's 2022 [report](#) alleging possible crimes against humanity against Uighurs in Xinjiang. But the latest review proved risible: A parade of nations from the Global South praised China for its achievements in alleviating poverty and echoed Chinese rhetoric like a "people-centered approach to human rights" and "whole-process democracy"—coded language suggesting that economic progress should take precedence over

¹⁴ Ted Piccone, "China's Long Game on Human Rights at the United Nations," *Brookings Institute*, September 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP_20181009_china_human_rights.pdf.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

personal liberties.¹⁶ Chinese pressure, of course, loomed large. Many of the countries that spoke are deeply indebted on BRI projects and were reportedly subject to economic threats from Beijing in advance of the hearing.

Beyond blunting criticism, China has focused on changing the ground rules of debates touching on human rights and other liberal norms, exerting what Xi calls “discourse power.” PRC diplomats have worked tirelessly to introduce canonical CCP phrases into UN texts, including “win-win cooperation,” “a community of common destiny,” and—most problematically—“paradoxical universal exceptionalism,” which stands for the idea that each state is on its own unique development path.¹⁷ Such apparently benign rhetoric obscures a deeper significance in the language of international relations: most centrally, a desire to reinforce the Chinese interpretation that human rights are context-specific in contrast with the breakthroughs in international governance and understanding tied to the formation of the UN, including the recognition of intrinsic rights and universal values.

Finally, as the leader of PEN America, a nonprofit that works to protect free expression in the US and around the globe, I would be remiss not to mention China’s longstanding crackdown on civil society participation at the UN. For the last two decades, the PRC has used its seat on the UN Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations to block applications from organizations seeking UN consultative status—a vital civil society advocacy mechanism that allows NGOs to participate in UN proceedings, submit information to UN bodies, host events, and witness in negotiations.¹⁸ China links these rejections to explicit endorsements of its one-China policy, forcing organizations to recognize Tibet and Taiwan as integral parts of Chinese territory. And, by recruiting authoritarian allies to join it in lodging objections, China has created a structural bulwark that shrinks the space for human rights and other civil society voices in global governance.

BATTLING FOR THE UN’S SOUL

These shifts in Chinese engagement with the UN come at a moment when the imperatives of global governance are glaringly apparent: climate change, refugee flows, pandemics, emerging technologies, and trade-related dislocations. The world is becoming hotter, more connected, and more contagious. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres has said, “multilateralism is under fire precisely when we need it most.”¹⁹

They also come at a time when US participation in the global body has never been more in flux. The US has vacillated between retreating from the UN and punishing its arms through

¹⁶ “At a UN review, China basks in the flattery of friendly countries,” *The Economist*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/china/2024/01/25/at-a-un-review-china-basks-in-the-flattery-of-friendly-countries>.

¹⁷ Fung and Lam, “Mixed report card.”

¹⁸ Rana Siu Inboden, “China at the UN: Choking Civil Society,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 124-35.

¹⁹ Nossel, “World Still Needs the UN.”

withdrawals and the withholding of contributions and efforts to restore relations and rebuild influence after deliberately fraying ties. While the Biden administration has rightly taken key steps to restore US leadership at the UN, which has enhanced our influence on the global stage, the repeated, decades-long cycles of engagement and retrenchment have exacted a steep diplomatic cost, empowering China and leading countries who have historically looked to Washington on key votes to now weigh their positions against both capitals.

US ambivalence toward the UN is longstanding, and has roots in both legitimate weaknesses and flaws within the world body and in perceptions and expectations that are unrealistic, or misconstrue the very nature of a universal body comprised of member states.

A crucial first step in managing China's rising influence at the UN is to decide that the body is worth consistent US attention and investment. With all its limitations, the UN represents the best shot we will ever have to fortify liberal values and beliefs on a global scale. As I have previously [argued](#), if the UN did not exist—with its universal membership, foundation of shared liberal principles, and expert capabilities—it could never be created today.²⁰ Countries would never agree on the far-reaching treaties and norms that underpin the UN system, most of which were formulated with a strong US voice and vision. Moreover, the US has built-in advantages within the UN system: We are its host country, its largest contributor, and the driving force behind many of its most important initiatives and resolutions. US officials lead three of the UN's most important arms, UNICEF, the World Food Program and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, ensuring that Washington operates from a position of unshakable strength. Close allies oversee peacebuilding and humanitarian relief. China recognizes the latent power of the UN as a force multiplier for its interests across the world; we must do so as well.

In concrete terms this should mean a variety of things: First off, the US should meet its financial obligations and settle its arrears, so as to eliminate those issues as sticking points for US engagement and to deny critics fodder for questioning Washington's commitment and reliability. My very first job in government in 1999 dealt with US arrears to the United Nations and ended in what we then thought was a triumphant agreement to put that issue to rest. Twenty-five years later, the ongoing machinations over this issue are not a point of leverage or principle, but rather just a reputational hit and a distraction from the vital work of addressing rising authoritarian influence in the multilateral realm.

The US has rightly upped its game when it comes to UN appointments, securing leadership slots in the ITU and the International Organization for Migration. Recent measures to incentivize foreign service officers to do multilateral rotations and to pay US interns to the UN are important and laudable steps. But the office that has historically dealt with the placement of US officials in the UN was stripped of all its personnel some years ago and is only now building back. With the help of an expert staff with a clear mission, the US should be intentionally creating and overseeing pipelines of personnel who can climb through the UN's ranks and

²⁰ Ibid.

assume senior positions over time. They should be actively engaged with Americans who bring relevant experience and expertise, finding ways to plug them into the UN system for positions but also placements on panels and commissions. Very often within the US system the initiative for such appointments comes from the individuals themselves. The State Department should be affirmatively seeking opportunities and helping qualified Americans seize them. Diplomats should also look ahead to identify pivotal roles throughout the UN bureaucracy and play a strong ground game, both behind the scenes and in UN governance bodies, to ensure that key posts are filled by officers who appreciate the UN's normative role and seek to reinforce rather than undermine it.

The US needs to empower its UN diplomats. Within the State Department international organizations is seen as a secondary player. Key to almost any accomplishment is securing buy-in from the regional bureaus so that diplomacy can be mounted not just in UN centers, but in capitals around the world where decisions are taken. Staffing multilateral roles with seasoned, top level officers, elevating them and their priorities within the bureaucracy can help ensure that key votes are one and that the US is positioned to play offense as well as defense, driving its own agenda-setting initiatives over time, rather than sitting back while Beijing pushes forward. When the US is at full strength diplomatically, coordinating across capitals and planning ahead its ability to achieve its goals in the UN system remains unmatched.

The US should seize the initiative in shaping the UN for the future. I wrote last year in [Foreign Affairs](#) about the imperative of UN Security Council reform, offering a new proposal to link long-term seats to GDP and population, thereby surmounting some of the political hurdles to compromise by introducing objective criteria.²¹ By offering concrete proposals to advance long demanded reforms the US can position itself as a forward-looking leader in the UN System, and one attuned to the concerns of a breadth of member states. Other structural steps the US could advance would reform the UN's NGO committee, including by instituting term limits and membership criteria that would reflect concerns documented in the Secretary-General's report on intimidation and reprisals against civil society. A new human rights mechanism is urgently needed to track, monitor and push back against transnational repression, the long arm of authoritarianism that crosses national boundaries, menacing individuals and suppressing speech inside free societies.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

²¹ Suzanne Nossel, "How America Can Win Over the Global South," July 7, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-america-can-win-over-global-south?check_logged_in=1.