



## China's multilateral stretch: Crafting influence with international organizations

Hans Jørgen Gåsemyr

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Countries should work with China on achieving global development goals, including within China-initiated organizations.
- Liberal democracies should create joint responses to Chinese initiatives that contest the status of liberal democratic principles in UN programs and resolutions.
- The Norwegian government should invest in knowledge about China's multilateral engagements and improve coordination between delegations responsible for organizations in the areas of development, technology, and finance.

A characteristic aspect of international organizations (IOs) and multilateral governance is that countries tend to expand their memberships and engagements as their economies grow. From this perspective, China's enhanced involvement in the UN and other major IOs may be explained in simple economic terms. China is the world's second largest economy and has the largest population. However, China's rise as a multilateral power is stirring strong reactions internationally, with many actors worrying about Chinese influence over specific IOs and its rippling effects on multilateral governance overall.

In this brief, we discuss how and why China is working to craft influence by stretching its multilateral reach and building new institutions. The work builds on data assembled for several ongoing research projects.

## Entering the UN

The People's Republic of China did not formally join the UN before 1971. Prior to this, the China seat, including permanent membership on the Security Council, was held by the government in Taiwan.

In the first decades following its entrance, China steadily joined more IOs, appointed candidates to UN positions, and increased its voting share in institutions where powers are measured against economic size. China joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 was a significant step, signaling international respect for its market economy and furthering its integration into multilateral governance. Over the past 15 years, however, the fruits of China's steady investment in IO diplomacy have really started showing, particularly in organizations associated with development issues. Since 2007, a Chinese national has led the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), and since 2011 and 2016, Chinese nationals have held senior positions in the International Monetary Fund and in the World Bank, respectively. China, however, is still third, after the USA and Japan, in terms of voting powers in the two Bretton Woods Institutions.

## Positions and finances

One way that China has shown growing interest in crafting IO influence is by nominating Chinese candidates to UN leadership positions. Seen from China, this shows initiative, demonstrates responsibility, and increases the understanding between Beijing and the UN. At the beginning of 2021, Chinese nationals served as top leaders in five prominent UN institutions, two of whom finished their tenure later that year. Moreover, in 2019, a Chinese diplomat was appointed UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, and Margaret Chan (from Hong Kong) finished her second term as director-general for the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2017. Although these positions represent a growing interest in multilateral governance, we should remember that the Chinese are still underrepresented in the UN system and major IOs overall.

Several leadership election processes involving Chinese nominees have stirred contention, particularly from the USA, which mirrors the budding US–China power rivalry. In 2019, the USA reacted strongly to the Chinese candidate being elected head of the Food and Agriculture Organization. In 2020, the USA actively lobbied against China's nominee for the top position in the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the Chinese candidate lost. Finally, when the current secretary-general of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a Chinese national, finishes his second term in 2022, he will be replaced by an American. These types of leadership contests surrounding prominent UN organizations are only indications of sharper conflicts emerging around multilateral institutions. This is especially apparent in areas of technology and digitalization, where WIPO and ITU are examples of IOs having to balance increasingly contentious power politics.

Another avenue for molding IO influence is funding. China is now the second largest contributor to the UN regular budget, but this is merely a reflection of its economic size, and the general budget is, anyway, only a limited part of the UN's overall funding. Additionally, China is among the top contributors to UN peacekeeping operations, both in terms of funding and personnel. Considering voluntary funding, however, China is still a relatively small contributor, being ranked below the top 20 donor countries. These contributions are, nevertheless, increasing, too. In the last couple of years, support for Covid-19 responses has made the WHO a prominent recipient of China's voluntary funding, but when considering voluntary contributions over several years, China's favored destinations are the World Food Programme, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and the UN Development Programme. This underlines Beijing's enthusiasm for addressing poverty and basic development issues.

The Chinese have nurtured growing interest in specialized trust funds, a practice long revered by traditional donors preferring to direct their resources toward specific goals. The number of Chinese-sponsored funds has grown quickly, including some larger funds, such as the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, which is managed by DESA, and numerous smaller entities spread across many IOs. Several of these funds are profiled as South–South cooperation, and some are used to finance activities associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Trust funds serve several purposes: they finance projects framed by Chinese development priorities, and they promote China's own development experiences and norms.

## Initiating new institutions

Beijing has demonstrated a growing interest in setting up new multilateral organizations. A case of point is that, although many UN agencies have been working in China for several decades, no UN organization is headquartered there. The International Bamboo and Rattan Organization has its main office in Beijing but is not part of the UN and does not carry a very high profile. China is building new IOs from the ground. Like trust funds, China-based—but multilateral—institutions have several functions. They allow Chinese planners to facilitate attention and funding to specific issues, supplementing rather than replacing traditional organizations while carving out avenues for promoting interests and norms within the system of collaborating IOs.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a prominent case of Chinese institution building. Founded in 2001 but building on the “Shanghai Five,” a group formed by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 1996, the SCO provides a forum for furthering agendas and solutions in settings that are distant from liberal democracies. The SCO is evolving, with India, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan joining in 2017, with Iran and Belarus currently on track to membership, and with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Afghanistan, and other states regularly attending meetings. Most activities

focus on practical and normative responses to issues ranging from domestic and regional security to terrorism, digitalization, and economic interaction. Its members have continued to treat Russia as a normal partner after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which further strengthens the “non-Western” profile of the SCO. The organization has a clear value for China, proven to be a vehicle for sustained coordination among countries located in, or with vested interests in, Central Asia.

Another prominent, yet very different, example of Chinese multilateral innovation is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). When first established in 2015, it enlisted 57 country members spread across the world, including, much to American dismay, several NATO and EU countries. Although smaller than many traditional multilateral development banks (MDBs), the AIIB has progressed into an internationally respected organization, now counting 92 country members. Although the AIIB has faced scrutiny for not adhering to all of the safeguards typically associated with traditional MDBs, several studies have given it good marks for its environmental and societal impact standards. For China, the AIIB is a demonstration of its ability to combine Chinese experiences and finances with international practices and multilateral contributions. Thus far, it is the foremost example of a truly multilateral, China-initiated organization.

One dynamic aspect of Beijing’s multilateral organizing is the spread of regional and international forums. Some older examples include the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, and BRICS, which, in addition to China, consists of Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa. Both forums were initiated in the 2000s and have since matured. It is worth noting that despite their many disagreements, BRICS leaders have continued to meet and, in 2015, launched the joint New Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai. Other forum-building examples include the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, arranged in Beijing in 2017 and 2019. China has also initiated regional forums in other parts of the world, including various China–ASEAN forums, the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, and the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. These activities are aimed at fostering cooperative relations and gathering leaders who would otherwise require extensive travel to meet separately. However, not all forum activities have proven sustainable. The forum established between China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries back in 2012 is now considered largely dysfunctional, with two countries leaving the group in 2022 and others contemplating their exit. Some dysfunction relates to conflicts over issues involving Taiwan, but it is well known that some members have voiced general complaints about the forum garnering limited results.

### Following, making, and ignoring rules

Two much debated questions concerning China and multilateral governance are whether Beijing respects established rules and what this means for a rules-based

and liberal international order. Although it is impossible to answer conclusively, we can address these questions by studying Chinese IO diplomacy in specified settings, assessing when China adheres to multilateral agreements, when and how it promotes its own agendas and norms, and when it disregards multilaterally embedded agreements.

Within the UN Security Council, where it retains veto power, China has not been particularly active, and its voting record is pretty consistent. On issues subject to international contestation, China often abstains. If interference, intervention, or, even more so, regime changes are discussed, the Chinese say no. Following Russia, China has blocked multiple resolutions regarding the ongoing civil war in Syria. Regarding Russia’s war in Ukraine, China has thus far mostly abstained from voting on resolutions, refraining from criticizing Russia but also hesitating to flag support.

China’s votes in the General Assembly (GA) follow similar, albeit not directly comparative, patterns, given the broader set of issues and countries involved. Chinese diplomats have, however, become noticeably more active in recent years. One indication is their eagerness to insert Chinese principles and slogans into UN resolutions. The most notable example of this is the spread of the term “a human community with a shared future,” which is a conceptual slogan that alludes to an idealized, Chinese version of multilateral governance that is state led and UN based and where all countries contribute to supporting comprehensive development, mutual respect, win-win cooperation, noninterference, and collective agreement. China has long argued for UN reforms that give more voice to the developing world and to stop nudging countries into blocks and alliances. These principles have been enshrined into several recent policy initiatives.

The Global Development Initiative (GDI) warrants attention. First presented in fall 2021, it offers an articulation, albeit vague, of Chinese desires to steer multilateral governance toward collective, socioeconomic development needs and to pay less attention to political and individual rights-oriented issues. This corresponds well with China’s approach to supporting the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, and we should expect to see the GDI being promoted in more international forums and resolutions. China has established the “Group of Friends of the GDI” to help profile the initiative in UN settings, with 60 friendly states enlisted thus far. Furthermore, the GDI mirrors priorities underlined in another, arguably vaguer, policy presented by Beijing in 2022: the Global Security Initiative (GSI). It is yet to be seen how actively Chinese leaders and diplomats will work to promote and connect these initiatives, but combined with the BRI, GDI and GSI speak to a growing Chinese appetite for shaping global development and multilateral governance.

Moving the focus to other IO arenas, the signs of more active Chinese IO diplomacy have increased. Beijing has invested in boosting the skills of the representatives it sends to prioritized organizations. In many IOs, Chinese

diplomats are known for talking more in corridors and informal settings than in formal discussions. If an issue is important to China, its views get conveyed before reaching the decision-making stages. Informal discussion has always been an essential part of IO diplomacy, but China has been crafting stronger lobbying capacities. There are many recent indications of this. Some demonstrate Chinese willingness to debate and compromise, for which the last rounds of the UN climate change negotiations and the G20 agreement on Covid-19 debt relief measures are good examples.

Other incidents showcase Chinese diplomatic persistence and pressure. For instance, when Covid-19 started spreading in early 2020, Chinese diplomats were lobbying hard, inside and around the WHO, to ensure that Beijing's concerns were taken into consideration before any plans or statements were made. A more recent example is, in summer 2022, China asserting pressure on the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to stop or delay the publication of its report on human rights violations in Xinjiang. A few weeks later, after the report had eventually been released, Chinese diplomats were lobbying countries to support blocking the content of that report from becoming an item for discussion in the UN Human Rights Council. These instances do not necessarily amount to breaking established rules. Lobbying is a legitimate part of IO diplomacy, and asserting pressure is hardly a new major power phenomenon. However, scenarios like these demonstrate China's ability to shape conditions and infer subtle rules that organizations and countries must consider and that some choose to follow.

Finally, one issue that China seldom agrees to table in any multilateral forums is territorial claims and disputes. Illustratively, China disregards the 2016 ruling of the tribunal established under the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), which determined that China's claims to historic territorial rights in the South China Sea do not comply with UNCLOS.

Moreover, whenever Taiwan-related questions come up in international discussions and there is a suggestion of allowing Taiwan some form of functional IO relations, China spares no effort to shut such discussions down.

### Developing status is a resource

In some ways, China is uniquely equipped to craft influence with IOs. As the government of the world's largest population, Beijing has a legitimate argument to shape multilateral governance. China is, moreover, both a developing country, a major political power, and an economic superpower. For many countries, China is the main trading partner, the main investor, and leading creditor. China's dual, major power-developing country status is a phenomenal political resource. China has long nurtured special bonds with the G77, the leading but loosely structured group of developing countries in the UN. As the Chinese climb the income ladder, navigating advanced economic interests and developing country concerns will become trickier. However, nurturing shared identities with countries in the Global South and with other states outside of NATO, the EU and G7 will only become more important for China.

Looking forward, three predications seem clear. First, China will continue to build a position in the UN and initiate new organizations, working to ensure that multilateral institutions better reflect Chinese interests and norms. Second, IO politics will remain contested and will be further disrupted by major power rivalries. The further the US and NATO move to shut Chinese actors out of international markets and arenas, the more important nonaligned states will be to China. Third, as home to almost 18% of the world's population, China remains essential for addressing all governance issues of a global nature. In a world that is becoming both more interconnected and divided, many countries already face tough choices regarding when to work with, without, or against China in the UN and other multilateral arenas.

**Hans Jørgen Gåsemyr (PhD)** is a senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

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NUPI  
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
Postboks 7024 St. Olavs Plass, Oslo, Norway  
www.nupi.no | post@nupi.no

