

China's Goals in International Organizations

Brett D. Schaefer

KEY TAKEAWAYS

China aims to supersede the U.S. as the preeminent global power and reorder the international system to its benefit.

China is influencing the U.N. system to promote its dubious interests with alarming success; the U.S. and its allies cannot neglect the ramifications.

The U.S. needs to be strategic in identifying its highest priorities to counter rising Chinese misuse and manipulation of the U.N..

Thank you for inviting me today to discuss China's goals in international organizations. This is a very important topic, and I'm flattered to be asked to give my perspective.

A More Aggressive China

I wanted to start with a broad question on why China has shifted course to become more aggressive in international organizations and whether that shift is driven by Xi Jinping or whether it is driven by other factors.

Xi has had great influence, but I believe China's shift is not solely attributable to him. Historically, China was a major power and the Chinese people, not just the government in Beijing, strongly wish for China to reclaim that status.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1323>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The more low-profile approach prior to Xi was not out of preference but a shrewd, patient strategy to build up China in a non-threatening manner. The goal was always to restore China to its “rightful” place as a major power.

Beijing believes that China has arrived at the point where it is the ascendant power and no longer needs to hide its intentions. This perspective is abetted by the perception that the United States, which China sees as its primary competitor, is a waning power—or at least losing power relative to China. Although Xi has overseen a more assertive Chinese foreign policy, I don’t attribute this development solely to him. I believe this was an inevitable result of China’s growth and ambitions.

Absent setbacks, China will increasingly flex its power, which will bring it increasingly into tension with the United States. As observed by foreign policy experts in recent years, this was not the way it was supposed to work. The United States and other Western countries happily entered a strategic dialogue with China designed to bring the nation into the international system as a responsible stakeholder. There was a broad consensus that China’s integration into the international system would “normalize” China—that China would come to appreciate the value of observing existing international rules and norms and gradually become freer economically and politically.

China has taken full advantage of the open, rules-based international system:

- It has enriched itself, dramatically increasing its per capita GDP.
- It has become a central cog in the international manufacturing and trading system.
- It has used its huge market to leverage concessions from investors and tech companies.
- Arguing that it is still a developing country, it demands special treatment to avoid the commitments expected of developed nations.
- It has participated in the international system with intent to defend and advance its interests but dismissed criticism or adverse outcomes, such as the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal ruling on its claims in the South China Sea.

In short, China has shrewdly applied diplomatic and economic pressure to advance its interests, maximize its benefits, and minimize its costs under the current system. Looking back, it is hard not to conclude that since the mid- to late 2000s, China has been influencing the international system more than it is influencing China.

China's Objectives

What is China using its influence to achieve?

In the short term, China wants to blunt aspects of the international system that it finds threatening (such as undermining the international human rights system) and to promote rules, standards, practices, and perspectives beneficial to Chinese interests. The long-term goal is for China to supersede the United States as the preeminent global power and reorder the international system to its benefit.

Chinese values and principles differ from Western values and principles. China values order, stability, and the preservation of the Chinese Communist Party. The liberal principles that undergird the international order—human rights, representative government, rule of law, etc.—conflict with or threaten the illiberal government of Beijing.

China claims to value sovereign equality of nations, non-intervention in internal affairs, “democratically” resolving international issues, and respect for the diversity of civilizations. It promotes these values in U.N. resolutions by embedding references and phrases like *win-win cooperation* that everyone understands to represent these goals.

But Beijing's adherence to these values is selective. The further away matters are from China, the more likely China is to observe and defend these values, particularly non-intervention, because China's interests are seldom directly involved. It also helps China position itself as the defender of developing countries against Western interference. This helps curry goodwill from other governments and earns support in places like the U.N. to either advance Chinese goals or push back on matters that China finds objectionable, such as criticism of Beijing's human rights violations or other misconduct. Closer to home, however, China is less wedded to these values, as demonstrated by its highly aggressive actions in the South China Sea that infringe on the territory of neighboring countries.

When there is a conflict between China's interests and its professed values, Beijing's interests win. As China's sphere of influence broadens, its observance of them will be more selective.

Growing Chinese Influence at the U.N.

Inside the U.N., China is pushing for changes to advance its interests. Long-standing influence tied to its relations with the G-77 and the developing world is now abetted by financial incentives under the Belt and Road Initiative and its expanding level of contributions to the U.N.

As China's assessments have increased, so has the number of Chinese nationals working in the U.N. system. In 2009, the U.N. system employed 794 Chinese nationals. Ten years later, it employed 1,336 Chinese nationals—an increase of 68 percent. This number will continue to grow as China's financial contributions increase and China presses organizations to hire its nationals.

Beijing demands that its nationals advance its goals in contravention of the principle of neutrality that international civil servants pledge to observe. An example of how this works was provided by former Under-Secretary-General Wu Hongbo who admitted in a video of how he abused his authority in having U.N. security remove a “Xinjiang separatist” from the United Nations. After relating the story, he noted, “I think being a Chinese diplomat means one can't be careless, when it is about protecting China's national interest and safety. We have to strongly defend the motherland's interests.”

This expectation extends even to those that lead international organizations. In 2018, China arrested the president of Interpol, Meng Hongwei, and charged him with abuse of power and refusing to “follow party decisions.” At the time, he was one of the highest-level Chinese nationals in any international organization. You can be sure that this signal was received clearly by other Chinese employees in international organizations.

China currently leads four of the 15 U.N. specialized agencies and has done so since 2015, excepting 2018, when it led three. By contrast, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States lead one each. A United States national has not led four specialized agencies since the 1950s.

China has used its influence, augmented where a Chinese national is in charge, to shift the organizations toward Beijing's priorities in several ways.

Economically, this involves support for the Belt and Road Initiative and facilitating Beijing's preferences in regulatory matters. For instance, Houlin Zhao, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), has encouraged China to advance its proposals for internet governance at the ITU, dismissed U.S. concerns about Huawei's involvement in 5G networks, and explicitly endorsed the Belt and Road Initiative. Likewise, Director-General Li Yong of the U.N. Industrial Development

Organization (UNIDO), has repeatedly and effusively praised China's Belt and Road Initiative. Under his guidance, UNIDO has partnered with China on Belt and Road projects. Director-General Qu Dongyu of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) regularly praises Chinese programs, including a Chinese partnership with Latin American and Caribbean countries. Last month he publicly congratulated China on its "complete victory" in the battle against poverty and pledged to have FAO work closely with China.

Diplomatically, China uses the U.N. to advance its goal to isolate Taiwan. The U.N. treats Taiwan as part of the People's Republic of China—a situation that dates to 1971, when U.N. recognition shifted from Taipei to Beijing. But as its influence has waxed, China has increasingly blocked Taiwan's participation in other parts of the U.N. system, even those regarded as non-political and technical. For instance, in recognition that diseases do not know borders, Taiwan was allowed to participate as an observer in the World Health Organization from 2009 to 2016. This was done with Chinese acquiescence. China has since changed its position, however, and Taiwan is now denied that status.

In another example, under the leadership of Secretary-General Fang Liu, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) rejected Taiwanese efforts to attend ICAO meetings despite Taiwan being a major air traffic hub. She has even gone so far as to refuse to admit Taiwanese journalists to cover ICAO meetings.

Beijing's diplomatic effort can devolve to spiteful gestures. For instance, under Chinese pressure, the U.N. Secretariat has denied entry to the U.N. to visitors with Taiwanese passports.

Reputationally, China has used its influence to try to short circuit embarrassment. We all have seen how China influenced the World Health Organization (WHO) in the COVID-19 pandemic to amplify Chinese interests, such as echoing Chinese claims that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission in the early stages of the pandemic. More recently, China tried to use the WHO investigation into the origins of COVID to promote the idea that the disease originated outside China.

It does not end there, however. In 2016, ICAO experienced the most serious cyber hack in its history, which was attributed to a group with ties to the Chinese government. Secretary-General Fang Liu and the organization reportedly tried to cover up the breach. Similarly, as COVID-19 spread globally, ICAO refused to share information about aviation operations with Taiwan. When ICAO was called out publicly on Twitter, one of the organization's Chinese communications officers blocked profiles that were critical of its policies.

Beijing has also extended much effort to opposing efforts to condemn China's human rights violations. Despite its serious human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, the Human Rights Council (HRC) has never passed a resolution condemning China. In fact, China has comfortably been elected to the HRC every time it has run. As revealed by a whistleblower, Emma Reilly, China requested and received the names of Chinese dissidents attending human rights meetings from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. They have been harassed, arrested, and some have died.

China similarly uses its position on the U.N.'s NGO Committee to block NGOs critical of China from being accredited to access the U.N. and attend U.N. meetings.

What the United States Can Do

When you put it all together, China is influencing the U.N. system to promote its interests with alarming success. Some may ask, "So what? Every country tries to influence the U.N. system to its advantage."

Yes and no. Every country pursues its interests in the U.N. system, but free democratic nations do so consistent with the principles outlined in the U.N. Charter. If they are seen to act inconsistently with the charter or accepted practice, they feel obligated to explain or modify their behavior. Their nationals in the U.N. often act independently of—even counter to—the wishes of their governments. Individuals may be corrupt or unethical, but their governments will not support or condone those actions. In essence, they fight within the rules.

China does not. It honors the U.N. principles when convenient and violates them when it is not. Its nationals serve the interests of the government, not the international system, or they pay a price.

Authoritarian states acting in concert either by design or coincidence have in the past harmed the organization and hindered it from fulfilling its founding principles. But these countries are often economically or politically minor players. China poses a challenge of another magnitude.

As China becomes more powerful economically and militarily, its influence and presence will likewise grow. The United States cannot reverse this trend, which is based on political and economic realities. Given China's priorities, however, the United States and like-minded nations cannot neglect the ramifications.

It is important to note that even as Chinese influence has grown, it is not more influential than the United States if it works diligently and in

coordination with like-minded countries. However, it is imperative for the United States to galvanize this effort because the international stage is shifting quickly. If the U.S. dithers, its options will dwindle.

In terms of the U.N., the political dynamic has profound implications for the organization and significantly limits what the United States can achieve through it.

In the Cold War, the interests of the great powers often constrained where the Security Council could act without a veto. We have already seen an uptick in Chinese vetoes. I expect that trend to continue. During the Cold War, U.N. peacekeeping was far less ambitious or robust, limited by the interests of the great powers. Addressing instability will likely require more creativity and collaboration with regional security efforts.

Given China's historical relations with and economic ties to the developing world, the United States may increasingly find itself in the minority on the Security Council. The United States needs to be prepared for more confrontation in the council and be ready to use its veto more frequently. In the General Assembly, the United States needs to overcome the tendency for bloc voting through coalition building and financial incentives. I have heard of numerous stories of countries that agreed with the United States on issues in principle but were instructed to vote with China due to their bilateral economic partnerships. The United States needs to use its aid and other incentives as a counterweight.

The United States also needs to increase its efforts to enhance U.N. transparency, whistleblower protections, and accountability. These mechanisms are essential to revealing malfeasance in the U.N. system and exposing efforts by China and other countries to manipulate and misuse the U.N.

Beijing has clearly signaled its desire to put Chinese nationals in positions of authority in the U.N. system. To counter this, the United States needs to be well prepared for appointments and elections. The United States should develop a robust list of prospective candidates and stand up ongoing procedures to campaign and rally support for these candidates. If an American candidate is not available or is unlikely to win, the United States should throw its support behind a like-minded candidate. Last year, the United States did just this by leading a successful effort to defeat the Chinese candidate for Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization.

A Strategic Approach

I know I'm nearing the end of my time, so let me conclude with one final thought. The United States needs to be strategic in its approach. If it tries

to counter China everywhere on all things, it will diffuse its influence and waste time on secondary or tertiary priorities. The United States needs to determine where its interests are highest, where Chinese influence most threatens those interests, and concentrate its efforts accordingly.

Brett D. Schaefer is the Jay Kingham Fellow in International Regulatory Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered at a virtual event on March 23, 2021.