

## **China, UN Reform and the Shifting Global Order: How does China fit into the UN's agenda of building a more peaceful, equitable, democratic, and ecologically sound world?**

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**This question has taken on greater relevancy** amid China's so-called "rise" in the international system. China's power capabilities, economic weight, and international influence have grown to the point where some international observers are looking to Beijing for solutions to the current global economic crisis, knowing that Washington is mired in its own difficulties.<sup>1</sup> The issue has taken on new meaning as the UN itself has come under increasing criticism from within and outside, challenges to its role, purpose and most of all, its effectiveness in future world organization.<sup>2</sup>

Two new lines of research are framing the burgeoning debate on China, in particular, and the UN, and global governance reform. The first asks whether an increasingly powerful China is pulling its diplomatic weight in the UN system? In an exploratory article, Cooper and Fues note that the sheer size of China's economy provides not only enhanced global weight and options but also added expectations.<sup>3</sup> Their investigation leads them to suggest that China's willingness to pull its weight as a top-tier state is "ambiguous". The verdict, so far, is that China has yet to pull its new weight, that its diplomatic profile and performance inside the UN's operations have been *less than* what could be hoped for, by now.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are those who argue that China has been leveraging its new capabilities and influence to constrain the agenda of the UN in ways that serve Beijing's diplomatic interests. In brief, that China is socializing the UN. The argument is China's presence and influence in the institution have expanded to such a degree that one no longer needs to question whether China is pulling its diplomatic weight but whether it has become so powerful that it is now containing the UN from acting as the protector of globalist rights. In this sensationalist image, the UN is "becoming a powerful amplifier of the Chinese world view".<sup>4</sup>

This short article suggests that closer examination of China's evolving relations in the UN system reveals three main findings – counter-intuitive observations – that give reason to rethink the conventional wisdom and reframe the debate on China and the UN. First, that China has significantly increased its contributions to the U.N. recently in some important functional areas, and that the contributions have served to strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of the UN's specialized agencies which have been the recipients of the support. Beijing's new contributions can be seen in issue-areas ranging from controlling nuclear proliferation in the Korea peninsula in the UN Security Council and the Six Party Talks, peace keeping operations in Haiti, to new international security operations such as the anti-piracy efforts off the Somali Coast. Beijing has gained international profile for its support to the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),

both the gains achieved inside China, as well as growing international contributions. Chinese authorities expanded their international contributions to the MDGs beyond agriculture and rural development, areas of assistance that China is traditionally known for, by donating Chinese anti-malarial drugs to Africa. In so doing, China was seen as making contributions in areas of science and technology. At the behest of the UN Office in China, Beijing also made large scale contributions to the UN's humanitarian relief operations in the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, sending relief supplies and experts to the affected zones, and on the Pakistan earthquake of 2005 by opening new land transport routes inside China to help move relief supplies more rapidly to the quake zone. More recently, the first plane load of tamiflu vaccine that was donated to the Mexican government in the H1N1 crisis came from Beijing's stock, arriving at the Mexico City airport the day after the outbreak was announced.

Second, by actually pulling greater diplomatic weight than many have assumed, and increasing its contributions to the UN across a full range of functional areas, Beijing ironically intensifies an existing dilemma for the UN's donor operations. China's increased contributions as a donor shine a spotlight on the question of the relevancy of international donor programs, in terms of their continuing presence in China.<sup>5</sup> To briefly summarize, China no longer needs the money of the international donors. It does not even need much of the technical assistance that has been traditionally offered. This puts all of the international donors in a transitionary mode. While it has become fashionable in international policy circles to challenge Beijing on whether it is acting as a "responsible stakeholder", when the Chinese government actually steps up its contributions, this creates a crisis of relevancy for the international donor organizations, and especially their traditional methods of engaging China. Increased Chinese contributions to the UN agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions have made it necessary for the major international organizations to adjust their operations and rationale for engaging China.

Third, despite the criticism the UN has received in other areas of its operations, in its relations with China, the UN has exhibited effective institutional adaptation. It has built new ties of influence with China, which may offset, to some degree, China's rising institutional influence, or open new channels for influence in a non-zero sum game. The UN has moved beyond North-South dynamics in its relationship with China, and shifted its attention to China's growing involvement in South-South relations. It has shown strong awareness of China's increased weight across the Global South, and strategically repositioned itself amid China's growing economic ties with Africa – flows that have increased from US\$2 billion in trade in 1999 to total economic flows of US\$35 billion in 2007. These flows are estimated by the UN to reach \$100 billion by 2010. Although this is certainly a bit of exaggeration, some people call Beijing the new Washington. The world is no longer mainly or only organized along North-South relationships, and the importance of relations and partnerships between developing countries has increased. This has been jumpstarted and sustained by China's economic rise. The UN has adjusted to this shift in the global order by, for example, supporting the China-African Business Partnership, with the UNDP emphasizing corporate social responsibility and balancing of trade and investment in the new Sino-African relations, since the latter is more important for creating sustainable jobs.

In helping to establish new partnerships between China and Africa in areas of mutual interest, the UN is, in turn, leveraging these new international relationships to promote policy and other reforms inside China. This extends to matters of general political sensitivity including the land rights of farmers and the growth of civil society. The UN has taken up these issues with China's central authorities, and made serious efforts to coordinate its programs with local priorities. It has integrated the operations of the UNDP into joint efforts and programs that the Chinese

government has also committed itself to, and invested in, including targeted reforms to bring about improvements in governance, public policy, and public management.

The UN has been able to use its core strength – multilateralism – to encourage China on global engagement. The UN has focused the engagement on “global best practices” and “global norms and standards”. This can be seen in the UN’s efforts in many areas of its recent work with China, particularly in anti-corruption, the Montreal Protocol, and environmental sustainability. The UN’s mechanisms, such as its regime of Conventions and Treaties have been very useful for engaging China as a member of the global community. The UN has the ability to influence China’s governance reforms through its Conventions, which China sees as legitimate, for example, with the Convention on Disability, and the UN Convention Against Corruption. China has come to see reforms in these areas as in the national interest, and has chosen to work more in accordance to the international principles in the UN Conventions – even if not wholly so. Beijing has “imported” international principles, norms and values into the domestic legal system. UN officials are aware that, in issue-areas such as disability rights, when the values of the UN Convention are championed inside China, it means new national rules, and significant adjustments to the system. This can be seen as “win-win benefit” for the UN and China.

It can be argued that, the UN, at its core, is about multilateralism – this is its comparative advantage as an international organization, in engaging China. At the same time, the UN also recognizes that, given China’s growing global footprint, new mechanisms for engaging China, multilaterally, are also needed. The existing regime of Conventions and Treaties may not be enough. It would be useful for the UN to look at various types of review mechanisms for monitoring its relations with China and the other Great Powers, including for reviewing the actions of the major powers both regionally and globally. This would clearly be a very different modality for engaging China than the old development assistance, project-driven partnership approach.

What the above suggests is that, the UN, in its recent engagements with China, has demonstrated new relevancy, and even comparative advantages, in diffusing shared international norms, principles and values through its regime of Conventions and Treaties – even if this diffusion is partial and incremental in relation to China. Closer scrutiny of the UN’s evolving relations with China reveal that the UN may be better positioned for engaging this rising power than many assume, especially relative to other major international organizations. Contrary to the conventional criticism, the UN’s proactive approach to adjusting to China’s evolution is enabling it to demonstrate renewed relevancy within the existing system of international governance.