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Hearing on The Chinese View of Strategic Competition with the United States

The United Nations: An Emerging Battleground for Influence

BY

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Introductionⁱ

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify on China's growing influence in the United Nations (UN). Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's approach to the UN has gradually shifted away from that of an ascendant, regional actor seeking to gain legitimacy toward a more confident and activist role.¹ Eager to expand its influence on the world stage in ways that serve its interests, Beijing has placed considerable resources behind an effort to present its leadership at the UN as a nimbler, more dynamic, and more reliable alternative to that of the United States. It is, in doing so, steering the UN away from its founding principles and turning it into a vehicle for advancing its narrow foreign policy aims.

The contours of China's ambitions are clear. In a speech before the 19th Communist Party Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping laid out his vision for a "new era of great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" that would see "China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind."² Xi reiterated in a 2018 address before the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs that China needed to take "an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system."³ Though he spoke only in broad brush strokes about "democratizing international relations" and setting developing countries on equal footing, it demarcated a shift—that had been years in the making—away from China's traditional defensive posture in the UN.⁴

To further illuminate how these trends are unfolding, this written statement proceeds in five main parts: I begin by examining China's goals and ambitions within the UN. I, then, assess the extent to which China's growing activism within the UN is animated by competition within the United States. Third, I discuss Beijing's tactics—particularly its formation of blocs with developing countries and other illiberal states—to advance its aims. Fourth, I evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of China's approach. Finally, I conclude with a set of specific recommendations for the United States, in concert with like-minded nations, to push back on China where necessary.

I. Making the World Safe for the Chinese Communist Party

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is, fundamentally, using China's growing influence in the UN to create an external international environment that is conducive to securing and advancing its core economic and security interests. Its sovereignty over Tibet and Xinjiang has, for example, informed the positions it takes on UN Security Council votes and resolutions relating to self-determination and humanitarian intervention. China has also continued to tighten its vise on countries, non-governmental organizations, and even individual political activists that present views in the UN that challenge its core interests while elevating its own government-organized non-government organizations (GONGOs) to advance its positions. All the while, its growing contributions to development programs serve as a relatively low-cost opportunity to blunt criticisms of its policies and build support for its initiatives.

In particular, Beijing's emerging strategy for advancing its interests and policy preferences in the UN focuses on the following priorities:

- Promote an alternative, context-specific view of human rights whereby governments can cite "unique" local conditions to justify disregard for individual or minority claims. This, fundamentally, runs counter to the American belief that human rights universally belong to individuals and cannot be violated on the whims of a single government;
- Redefine "democracy" in terms of so-called "economic and social rights" rather than inalienable civil or political rights. This entails privileging the exigencies of state-led development over fundamental rights of association and expression while diminishing the standing of these rights in international law;

ⁱ My testimony draws heavily on language, analysis, and ideas from the following CNAS publication: Kristine Lee and Alexander Sullivan, "People's Republic of the United Nations: China's Emerging Revisionism in International Organizations," (Center for a New American Security, May 2019), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report-China-IO-final-web-b.pdf?mtime=20190513092354>.

- Make state sovereignty inviolable and reestablish national governments as the only legitimate stakeholders in determining countries' internal affairs, with the purported aim of “democratizing” international relations and setting developing countries on equal footing in the UN;
- Resolve political issues through bilateral negotiations, whereby the CCP can use economic coercion, inducements, and other corrupt practices to get its way, rather than through rules-based approaches, and;
- Inject consensus goals, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (colloquially known as the “SDGs”) with its ideological terms and major foreign policy strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

II. An Emerging Battleground for Influence

The UN is emerging as a key arena for ideological competition as Beijing seeks to make its brand of authoritarian rule seem as legitimate as, if not superior to, democratic governance. The CCP sees China as locked in a long-term struggle with liberal democratic nations—the United States foremost among these. According to this view, global governance institutions, when they seek to impose limits on state power and promote values around universal human rights, actively threaten China's political stability.⁵ This is evident in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for example where China has used its growing profile to aggressively silence criticism of its human rights record and, under the guise of “democratizing” international relations, to dilute concepts of universal human rights.⁶ As China's Vice Minister Le Yucheng revealingly argued before the HRC in 2018, China's achievements show that there is “more than just one path towards modernization and every country may choose its own model of human rights protection in the context of its national circumstances.”⁷ Beyond focusing on narrow “core interests” such as isolating Taiwan or forestalling criticism of its policies in Xinjiang, Beijing is also extending its concepts of human rights and sovereignty to other illiberal states.

Beyond this overarching ideological contest, Beijing is also leveraging its influence in the UN to turn it into a platform for advancing its foreign policy strategies. These efforts can be seen across all corners of the organization. Beijing is using its leadership in specialized agencies such as the International Telecommunication Union to advance its high-tech equities, such as advancing Huawei as a 5G vendor of choice. It has also steered the organization toward embracing its signature Belt and Road foreign policy strategy, which has won accolades for helping provide needed infrastructure to developing countries but has also garnered substantial criticism for falling short of international standards of financial viability, environmental protection, and labor rights.⁸ Nonetheless, Beijing has tried to make the Belt and Road synonymous with the UN's SDGs, which mobilize UN resources toward mitigating poverty, inequality, and climate change—thereby generating business for its state-owned firms and spreading its illiberal political influence across the developing world.⁹ UN Secretary-General António Guterres, speaking at the 2019 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, celebrated the “alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Sustainable Development Goals.”¹⁰ And in the UN Environment Program last year, China launched a Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition, which purportedly seeks to advance standards around environmental protections to “ensure that the Belt and Road Initiative brings green and sustainable development to all concerned countries.”¹¹

Beijing is even leveraging its tech champions in its bid to rebrand global governance in its own image. The UN recently announced that it was partnering with China's largest surveillance software company, Tencent, to conduct the organization's 75th-anniversary celebrations this year.¹² In 2018, Tencent also launched a major collaboration with the UN Development Program to tackle environmental and urban challenges in developing countries through digital platforms that connect local government bodies to entrepreneurs.¹³ These arrangements in turn position China's technology giants to mine and hoard large quantities of foreign data for commercial gain. And as Chinese technology proliferates across the reaches of the organization, China has joined hands with Russia to institutionalize international norms around surveillance and censorship, including through the passage of a joint cybercrime resolution in November 2019 that equips authoritarian governments with broad-based authority to repress and censor political dissent online.¹⁴

China has ultimately drawn considerable momentum from the perception of U.S. retrenchment from the UN in recent years and has stepped up with full force to shape the personnel, procedures, policies, and rhetoric that comprise the backbone of the organization. In 2011, for instance, the United States cut off \$80 million in annual funding to the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization—about 22 percent of its entire budget.¹⁵ Beijing raced to fill the void, pledging millions of dollars in extrabudgetary support for education programs. China increased its monetary contributions to the UN by more than fivefold in the last decade, emerging recently as the second-largest contributor to the system overall.¹⁶ Amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as the Trump administration halted its funding to the WHO in April and subsequently announced its withdrawal from the agency in May, China announced that it would donate more than \$2 billion to the UN over two years.¹⁷ Beijing has touted its leading role as a “defender of multilateralism” in its state-sponsored narratives, framing its activism in sharp contrast to Washington’s repudiation of global leadership in recent years.”¹⁸

III. Beijing’s Playbook

In the early days of its entry to the UN, Beijing was circumspect, largely avoiding scrutiny and public confrontation with the United States.¹⁹ But as the CCP has advanced a more ambitious agenda in the UN, its voting patterns have more often than not clashed with the United States. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the UN Security Council, where it has defended beleaguered autocrats in Venezuela and Syria and promoted the view that respect for “sovereignty” should allow governments to disavow individual and minority claims in the name of preserving internal security.²⁰ To this end, China has used its veto privilege in the Security Council more frequently and in growing alignment with Russia.²¹ In 2018, China had the second-lowest voting coincidence with the United States in the Security Council, second only to Russia.²² Similarly, in the General Assembly, China’s voting patterns on “important votes” converged with the United States only 5 percent of the time in 2018 (in comparison, North Korea voted with the United States 6 percent of the time and Russia overlapped with the United States 13 percent of the time).²³

China has been able to mobilize support for its priorities within the UN by strategically positioning itself as a champion of developing states and building substantial influence within the G77, which constitutes 70 percent of UN member states.²⁴ It has repeatedly characterized itself as a developing nation when engaging with the UN, despite its standing as the world’s second-largest economy. In a 2015 UN General Assembly speech, Xi Jinping declared that “China’s vote at the United Nations will always belong to developing countries.”²⁵ Xi has stated in subsequent major speeches that China would support “the efforts of other developing countries to increase their representation and strengthen their voice in international affairs.”²⁶ Through this frame, Beijing has been able to cast its actions as geared toward redressing the past imbalances and injustices of a Western-dominated system.

China has, in particular, formed blocs with other illiberal states, leveraging its Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road to strengthen its exclusive ties with countries.²⁷ Studies have shown that governments that support China’s foreign policy positions in the UN General Assembly also receive more Chinese development assistance, including Belt and Road investments.²⁸ Through its vast digital surveillance apparatus under the auspices of its Digital Silk Road, China also offers resources, technology, and know-how—particularly relating to internal security—to other illiberal states. In other words, China leverages financing for projects to exert leverage over countries, including through threatening to cut off funding pipelines to countries that fall out of line. There have been several examples in the past year alone of the CCP wielding both inducements and threats of retaliation to try to wrangle votes and pressure UN agencies into submission:

- **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) election.** In June 2019, Qu Dongyu, formerly China’s Vice Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, was elected Director-General of the UN FAO, decisively defeating two other candidates backed by the United States and the EU. Qu’s success was certainly a testament to China’s growing clout within the UN, but it also fueled allegations that China had deployed both coercion and inducements—including absolving millions of dollars in debt and threatening economic retaliation—to pull ahead in the race. In the leadup to the election, Chinese officials allegedly traveled to Cameroon and announced that

Beijing would cancel \$78 million in debt to the country.²⁹ The Cameroonian candidate subsequently withdrew from the race. China also threatened to block key exports from several countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.³⁰ All three countries reportedly backed Qu in the election.³¹

- **Xinjiang and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).** In July 2019, a coalition of 22 liberal democratic countries submitted a letter to the OHCHR urging Beijing to end its "mass arbitrary detentions and related violations" against Xinjiang's ethnic Uighurs and to allow UN experts to access the region.³² Notably, the United States withdrew from the Human Rights Council in 2018 and was not a signatory to this letter. Chinese diplomats reportedly canceled a bilateral event with Albania and threatened to deny the Austrian government land for a new embassy in Beijing in an unsuccessful attempt to preclude them from signing the letter.³³ In a heavy-handed rejoinder, Beijing then mobilized 37 authoritarian countries—including Muslim majority ones—to submit a response to the OHCHR lauding China's "contribution to the international human rights cause" through "protecting and promoting human rights through development."³⁴
- **Taiwan and the World Health Organization (WHO).** China has grown more brazen in its long-standing efforts to control political representation in the UN, particularly through constricting Taiwan's diplomatic space. In May 2017, for example, Beijing blocked Taiwan from participating in the WHO's annual World Health Assembly (WHA) meeting,³⁵ despite the contributions that Taiwan has made to efforts to mitigate global health crises, including during the 2014 to 2015 Ebola pandemic.³⁶ Taiwan was also barred from three subsequent World Health Assembly sessions, including the virtual session that took place in May 2020 as the world was still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷ Notably, the continued exclusion of Taiwan from the WHA has coincided with China's growing financial commitments to the WHO.³⁸

IV. "Hide your Weakness, Bide your Time"

Despite its growing profile within the UN, China will face headwinds in its bid to displace U.S. leadership and emerge as an unequivocal leader in the organization. Below is a brief discussion of enduring weaknesses in China's strategy and overall position, as well as emerging sources of strength:

Strengths

- **China has a clear, consistent, and well-resourced strategy that is being dictated by the highest levels of the CCP.** In particular, the Chinese government is routing talent pipelines through the UN as it seeks to "utilize international bodies as platforms to be involved in global rule-making and to gain more of a voice for China."³⁹
- **China has had considerable success with forming coalitions with developing countries, particularly those with authoritarian tendencies.** It has used these blocs to challenge what it perceives to be Western-dictated status quo in international institutions and will continue to seek international endorsement for its political concepts and foreign policy strategies, in exchange for the provision of money, personnel, and "public goods."
- **China's single greatest source of strength has been the perception of the United States' repudiation of multilateralism and global leadership.** Capitalizing on U.S. retrenchment at the UN, Beijing has seized on this window of opportunity and has stepped up with full force to shape the personnel, procedures, policies, and rhetoric that comprise the backbone of the organization.

Weaknesses

- **China lacks "soft power" appeal, despite the dramatic expansion of its global narrative shaping efforts.** In the UN, much of the ideological language that it inserts into resolutions and other documents—such as "win-win cooperation" and "community of a shared future for mankind"—not only lacks resonance with most countries but is also often seen as blatantly strategic.

- **China’s monetary contributions to the UN have increased substantially, but it still lags behind those of leading democratic countries, especially collectively.** China remains a distant second to the United States as the largest financial contributor to the UN system overall. Nonetheless, Beijing is moving quickly to close gaps in financing. As its relative share of the global economy continues to rise, it will increase the depth and breadth of its engagement with the UN.
- **China will face growing opposition, particularly from liberal democratic nations, amid global events.** Particularly in a post-pandemic world, many countries may increasingly question their preference for a world order with China at the helm.

V. Recommendations

As Beijing steadily expands its influence in the UN, it has tried to downplay its growing profile within the organization, citing the leadership void that the United States has left in the institution in recent years. It is thus quietly bending the UN toward a more illiberal ideological orientation that privileges CCP interests over freedom and rules-based norms. Fundamentally, any U.S. approach to managing China’s growing influence within the UN must accomplish four things: first, understand the evolving nature of China’s strategy; second, raise awareness and build consensus by boldly pointing out where it diverges from principles of universal human rights and justice alongside like-minded countries; third, deepen American participation in the UN; and fourth, leverage momentum from global events to offer alternatives to China’s initiatives that reinvigorate confidence in the liberal democratic path of development. Below are specific recommendations, broken out into four core pillars, for how to accomplish these objectives.

Pillar One: Gain a Deeper Understanding of Beijing’s Strategy

- **Congress should work toward breaking down barriers to a whole-of-government grasp of China’s strategy.** Congress should elevate the issue of Beijing’s growing influence in the UN and what this means for U.S. interests by continuing to hold high-profile hearings that bring senior American officials, including those serving at USUN, to testify on China’s use of the UN to legitimize the Belt and Road Initiative and other foreign policy strategies.ⁱⁱ The hearings would also provide an opportunity for members of Congress to discuss how to navigate the increasingly sharp tradeoffs between downgrading America’s participation in the UN and competing with China. Congress should also call for the establishment of a fusion center housed at the National Security Council or in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to collect, analyze, and disseminate information about how China is maneuvering in the UN to advance its Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road and implications for norms and technical standards.
- **Congress should make investments toward enabling the U.S. government to develop a comprehensive operating picture of China’s activities in the UN with key allies, partners, and fence-sitters.** This, of course, requires that the U.S. government send diplomats to consistently participate in meetings of the UN and other international organizations. Additionally, Congress should direct the State Department to establish a data-sharing platform with allies focused on tracking—and where necessary, countering—China’s activities in the UN that erode human rights and the rules-based order, and to report findings and activities annually to Congress. Finally, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN), should continue to convene and lead structured conversations with Japan, Australia, and allies in Europe as well as fence-sitters such as India and Indonesia on some of the risks associated with China’s growing influence in UN agencies and ways to advance alternatives. Insights from swing states will further enhance U.S. understanding of Chinese strategy. The United States should also leverage dedicated bilateral discussions with Taiwan—a primary target of Beijing—to identify new tactics the CCP employs to systematically exclude Taiwan’s participation in the UN.

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to CNAS Senior Fellow and Asia-Pacific Security Program Director, Dr. Daniel Kliman, for this recommendation.

Pillar Two: Raise Awareness and Build Consensus

- **Members of Congress should reaffirm American commitment to upholding norms and values in multilateral contexts, particularly in the UN.** The United States must boldly point out where Beijing's actions depart from international principles of acceptable conduct—and backstop allies as they also do so too—when the CCP engages in human rights violations. Members of Congress should introduce bipartisan resolutions that affirm the importance of advancing civil rights of speech, assembly, and religion in international organizations including the UN, while American diplomats continue to raise resolutions, statements, and letters in the UN.⁴⁰ In particular, in the UN, U.S. and ally diplomats should continue to ratchet up their demands for the UN Human Rights Commissioner to conduct an independent investigation of the human rights atrocities in Xinjiang.
- **Congress should up step up public diplomacy about China's erosion of human rights in the UN.** The United States must communicate directly to populations both at home and abroad the facts about China's human rights abuses, including its efforts to dilute consensus around universal human rights in the UN. Domestically, members of Congress can assist by ramping up their ongoing efforts on social and broadcast media to publicize China's repression of ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang. Members of Congress can also signal American commitment to multilateralism abroad through leading bipartisan Congressional Delegations, with U.S. experts, civil society, and private sector leaders, to strategically important countries in the UN system.

Pillar Three: Deepen Participation in International Organizations

- **Congress should establish a bipartisan task force to strategize with experts, industry, civil society organizations, and the Executive Branch on the future of U.S. engagement with the UN.** Congress should hold dialogues with leading experts, civil society organizations, and industry to map low-cost and high-impact opportunities to influence multilateral systems and to develop policy-relevant recommendations for the future of U.S. engagement with the UN. These dialogues should also strategize new ways to advance the American “brand” of multilateralism in select UN agencies; this could include identifying concrete opportunities for leading American companies, particularly in the technology domain, to partner with UN development agencies tasked with advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, to provide needed technological solutions while advancing norms of transparency and universal human rights in implementation.
- **Congress should play an active oversight role in assessing and restoring the United States' ties with key UN agencies.** The United States cannot credibly influence the norms in international organizations from afar. Rather than walk away from international organizations that it finds distasteful and leave a void for China to fill, the United States should marshal its own considerable leverage and shape outcomes from within. This requires much more significant Congressional attention and oversight to the funding of the UN, as well as to agency appointments, staffing, and reporting activity by the State Department. These activities should be backstopped by rhetoric from members of Congress and the highest levels of government at strategically important moments—including UN General Assembly meetings—that signals U.S. commitment to multilateralism.
- **Congress should appropriate additional resources to invest in the future of American multilateralism.** The depth of U.S. human capital is among its greatest competitive strengths, but the United States lags behind in contributing personnel to the UN. The State Department should strive to fix this by addressing barriers to entry for American candidates who lack foreign language proficiency or are deterred by convoluted hiring processes, including through building pathways for encouraging U.S. government personnel to take on posts in the United Nations system. Additionally, to advance American interests in the UN at the working level, Congress should fund new pathway programs within the U.S. State Department for promising young leaders with demonstrated interest in multilateral diplomacy modeled after the Rangel, Pickering, and Payne Fellowships that include intensive language immersion programs and incorporate rotations to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations.

Congress could also deepen its engagement with the United Nations Foundation and the Better World Campaign to expand its international outreach and engagements with younger generations in strategically important countries.

Pillar Four: Leverage Momentum from Global Events to Push Back

- **Congress should assess the legality of the Executive Branch’s unilateral decision to withdraw from the WHO and push for a restoration of ties with the agency, while pressing for the truth both within and beyond the agency.**⁴¹ A legitimate and multilateral campaign for the truth about the origins of COVID-19 and the CCP’s early blunders is essential. This requires American participation in the WHO, as well as doubling down on pressure, alongside a coalition of like-minded nations and even civil society organizations, to provide an honest account of Beijing’s handling of the outbreak, beyond the state propaganda that the CCP proffers. Congress should thus continue to hold hearings and work toward bipartisan legislation that imposes limits on the Executive Branch’s ability to unilaterally announce that it is withholding funding or withdrawing from critical agencies such as the WHO.
- **Congress should work with the Executive Branch to draw on momentum from the COVID-19 pandemic to advance the protection of human rights in the UN.** Congress, through its oversight role, should urge the Executive Branch and American diplomats to continue to raise resolutions and build awareness around the CCP’s incursions on human rights during the pandemic. The United States and like-minded countries could, for example, call upon the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to conduct an independent investigation into the silencing and detention of medical professionals and activists in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this investigation should be made public to ultimately create momentum for a resolution that broadly protects the rights of medical and health care professionals who speak out against institutional failings, including those at the WHO.
- **Congress should appropriate resources to assess alternative multilateral mechanisms, in concert with like-minded allies and partners, to address China’s cooption of international organizations.** While continuing to double down on its engagement with the UN, Congress should support increased funding for regional institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation with an eye toward elevating rules-based norms and standards in even alternative institutions.⁴² Congress should also quietly engage allies and like-minded partners to explore whether there is room to build new or leverage existing alternative multilateral mechanisms—including through leveraging insights from the new Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China—focused on advancing international coordination on global health, humanitarian crises, sustainable development, and other global issues in ways that also uphold democratic norms and values. In addition to key allies, partners such as India would be strategically important swing states to engage.

Conclusion

To be sure, all major powers, seek to promote their interests within international organizations. What is perilous about China’s pursuit of its core interests at the UN, however, is that it serves the narrow political purpose of shoring up power under a single authority: the CCP. Riding the tide of perceptions that China is a more dynamic and nimble problem-solver for today’s global challenges, Beijing is steering the UN away from its founding principles. Rather than China becoming more like the rest of the world, the CCP retooling the UN to try to make the rest of the world more like China. Washington and its allies must not allow that to happen.

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