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Towards a UN with Chinese characteristics?

Heralding shifts in multilateral order

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China has considerably expanded its engagement with the United Nations (UN) system, but its influence differs significantly across issue areas. Despite this unevenness, patterns in Beijing's multilateral priorities suggest what a growing Chinese footprint may portend for the future of the UN. We examine this via three main dimensions. With regard to the underlying **logic** of multilateralism, China emphasises intergovernmental control at the expense of more autonomous UN bureaucracies. On the **substance** of multilateralism, China's objective to ensure the primacy of the state challenges core liberal values long promoted by the UN. In terms of multilateral **power** dynamics, Beijing works towards increasing space for the UN's developing country majority, with China as its de facto leader. The Trump administration's attack on international organisations further strengthens Beijing's bid to reshape UN multilateralism. The paper assesses the implications of these reordering pathways and concludes with policy recommendations.

Introduction

A widely held but under-investigated assumption is that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become an increasingly powerful actor within the United Nations (UN). This assumption is reinforced by: China's own policy statements; its past simultaneous headship of four UN Specialized Agencies; its 2015 pledge of new resources, including an 8,000-troop standby peacekeeping force; and the establishment of a China-UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (MFA 2015; Tung & Yang 2020; Schaefer 2022). However, deeper probing of China's role across the UN's three pillars of security, development, and human rights, as well as its funding and staffing levels, demonstrates an unevenness in its growing influence. While these shifts in power are mostly incipient rather than fully realised and differ across issue areas (Haug et al. 2024), we can still start to identify patterns in China's policies and normative priorities for the UN.

Beijing typically has stated that the UN is the world's most universal, representative, and authoritative intergovernmental international organisation in world politics (MFA 2005). It has tried to link its Belt and Road Initiative and its Global Initiatives covering governance, development, security and civilizational matters to the UN, and has worked at the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Security Council to protect the norm of state-based consent and non-interference in internal affairs. While Beijing's voluntary funding to the UN remains low, it is strategically earmarked; and although China remains under-represented in the UN bureaucracy, efforts to increase its presence in the long term have been initiated. These trends suggest that China is attempting a multilateral reordering process with the potential to reshape UN norms and operations.

In what follows, we explore three dimensions of how a UN with 'Chinese characteristics' might diverge from the current system, which is already shifting in ways that help promote China's perspectives. These modifications include a weakening of attachment in some Western circles – particularly US – and beyond to many of the UN Charter principles associated with the use of force, humanitarian law, and development cooperation. With these changes in mind, we consider China's approaches to multilateral cooperation with an eye to what a China-dominated UN might entail. We examine the unfolding logic of China's approach to multilateralism, its major policy and normative foci as reflected in the substance of multilateralism, and the impact its multilateral endeavours have on China's overall power

position within the UN. The paper concludes by assessing the implications of these pathways to a reordering of multilateralism and offering related policy recommendations.

The **logic** of multilateralism: towards a more intergovernmental UN

Multilateralism is generally understood as mechanisms and processes that organise 'relations between groups of three or more states' (Scott 2025: n.p.) according to generalised principles of conduct (Ruggie 1992). From a principal-agent perspective, the relationship between member states and multilateral organisations is straightforward (Abbott & Snidal 1998). As principals, member states set up multilateral bodies and decide what the latter should (not) do. As agents, multilateral bodies such as the UN Secretariat operate under these mandates and have to act in accordance with members' decisions. However, the extent to which multilateral entities have leeway in acting with relative autonomy vis-à-vis their members can differ significantly over time and from one multilateral organisation to another. At the UN, the Western-centred status quo has been an evolving and idiosyncratic combination of autonomy and control (Roberts & Kingsbury 1993). Particularly through a considerable increase in their provision of earmarked contributions, a relatively small number of rich Western member states have had a de facto say over large parts of UN work (Baumann & Haug 2024). At the same time, UN bodies have often had considerable autonomy in operational terms – from the hiring of staff to the implementation of project activities. UN leaders and their bureaucracies have also played visible roles in shaping multilateral debates in attempts to steer member-state decisions in directions that are in line with their preferences.

It is against this backdrop that China's engagement points to a potential shift that is partly in train. Contrary to some Western states, China predominantly approaches the UN system as an intergovernmental platform. For Beijing, the cooperation between state representatives matters most for what the UN is and how it operates, not the multilateral bureaucracy. This has implications for funding dynamics, UN personnel's standing and space for manoeuvre, and, more generally, the role UN bodies themselves are supposed to play.

In terms of funding, a helpful proxy to gauge a member state's support for a more autonomous multilateral bureaucracy is their level of voluntary core funding. Unlike a state's assessed contributions (i.e. UN membership fees) (Haug et al. 2022), voluntary contributions are provided at a donor's discretion. Most voluntary funding across the UN system is currently earmarked: donors decide what the money they provide is to be used for (Weinlich et al. 2020). Voluntary core funding, however, is provided without a pre-specified purpose: donors provide resources UN entities can spend as they see fit in line with their mandates, allowing this to be framed as 'multilateral' funding. Traditionally, a limited number of Western member states has provided the bulk of core contributions to the UN system.

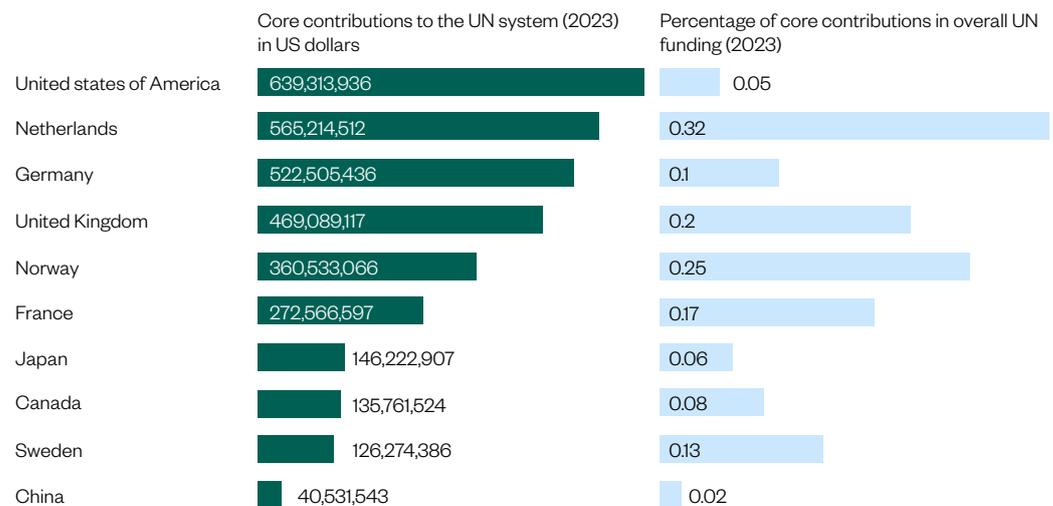
China, however, has been more reluctant. Compared to the other top-ten government donors to the UN system in 2023, Beijing was by far the most hesitant to provide core funding in both absolute and relative terms (Figure 1), ranking only 18th place among core providers (UNSOEB 2025). This is not dissimilar from the funding patterns of the majority of UN member states which are, like China, UN 'programme' (i.e. developing) countries where UN entities receive funding – mostly from Western member states – to support national development on the ground. However, China has never been a typical programme country: it has a permanent seat

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on the UN Security Council and wishes to maintain the special privileges that are attached to that role including the associated status of a great power, alongside its developing country standing. As a 'developing country superpower', then, China can strategically mobilise this duality – as a member of the Group of 77 (G77, the UN's developing country alliance) and as the world's second largest economy – to strengthen its legitimacy and power base (Baumann et al. 2024).

Figure 1

Core contributions provided by the 10 largest government donors to the UN system (2023)



Core funding has not been part of that strategy. Since 2018, China's core contributions have stagnated at about 40 million USD annually, i.e. significantly less than what the small Republic of Ireland provided in 2023 and not significantly more than what India – still classified as a lower-middle income country (Metreau et al. 2024) – provided in core contributions that year. As the second largest provider to the UN regular budget and the fifth largest overall government donor to the UN system (UNSCOE 2025), China's low levels of core funding indicate a general wariness of more autonomous UN bureaucracies.

When it comes to UN staff, China favours multilateral personnel who see their task as exclusively administering intergovernmental decisions. Instead of behaving proactively and relatively autonomously, China expects international civil servants to coordinate closely and align with the objectives of their principals. When it comes to Chinese nationals in multilateral staff positions, however, they are also expected to act in line with Chinese interests, irrespective of their official allegiance with the multilateral body they work for. While the UN Charter holds that UN staff 'shall not seek or receive instructions from any government' and are 'responsible only to the Organisation' (UN 1945: art 100(1)), it is common knowledge that many member states try to position their nationals in strategically relevant positions within the UN system as a means of exercising (mostly indirect) influence. In China's case, this practice seems to be particularly pronounced. Available evidence suggests that Chinese nationals in high-level UN positions – such as Li Yong at the UN Industrial Development Organisation (in office 2013–2021) and Qu Dongyu at the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (in office since 2019) – coordinate closely with Beijing (Baumann et al. 2022). The former Chinese head

of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the UN Secretariat, Wu Hongbo (2012–2017), even stated that ‘as a [Chinese] international civil servant, when it comes to Chinese national sovereignty and security, we will undoubtedly defend our country’s interests’ (cited in Fung & Lam 2021: 1145). The Chinese government’s efforts to increase the number of Chinese nationals among UN staff have so far been of limited success, but they illustrate the extent to which the Chinese government presses its UN staff – particularly those in leadership positions – to be ‘patriots’ who ‘love the socialist motherland’ (Lam & Fung 2024: 144) and closely coordinate their actions with Beijing.

Finally, China’s version of multilateralism also impacts the general role UN entities are supposed to play in multilateral cooperation processes. UN bodies such as the General Assembly as well as regular member-state gatherings in UN Specialized Agencies and the boards of UN Funds and Programmes provide platforms for intergovernmental negotiations and decision-making – an approach that chimes with the official Chinese perspective of how the UN system should function, including operationally. For instance, China has established South-South funding mechanisms that enable a high level of control over limited but strategically focused resources. Unlike voluntary core funding, Chinese South-South trust funds are tightly earmarked: the resources China provides to entities such as the FAO come with specific directives for how they are to be used (Waisbich & Haug 2022). Contrary to many Western-led trust funds whose operative processes are administered more autonomously by UN entities, the governance of China’s trust funds is closely connected to its officials – usually via China’s permanent representative offices – as well as Chinese UN staff. Their targeted use of voluntary earmarked contributions together with this approach to governance enable an elevated level of control over China-sponsored UN partnerships. Instead of proactively shaping the contours of these schemes, UN entities mostly act as brokers or facilitators: they provide an administrative and operational framework for member-state interactions and – via the UN branding – offer an additional layer of legitimacy to China-led cooperation processes (Haug & Waisbich 2024).

Together with the closer control of voluntary funding flows and the tighter alignment of UN staff with member state decision making, this tendency to approach UN entities not as agents in their own right but primarily as support for (China-centred) member-state cooperation are key features of what China-led multilateralism could potentially look like. The underlying logic of UN multilateralism with Chinese characteristics is a UN bureaucracy with more limited autonomy that operates under stronger (inter)governmental – including Chinese – control.

The **substance** of multilateralism: towards a less liberal UN

China’s preference for a more intergovernmental UN has implications for the substance of multilateralism. Beijing emphasises the legal principle of sovereign equality of states – a position underlined yet again in the ‘Global Governance Initiative’ introduced by President Xi Jinping in September 2025 (MFA 2025). However, as noted earlier, Beijing does still support hierarchical structures that accord special privileges to the Security Council’s permanent members. It wants a UN that pledges non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states, prioritises state security over individual security, and promotes state-led development to stabilise the global order. China has also long argued that development plays the key role in promoting and protecting human rights.

Overall, China has become more active in questioning the liberal normative content of the UN conception of a global order based on its interlinked three-pillar structure of security, human rights, and development (Foot 2020). As the UN expanded its understanding of what could constitute threats to international peace and security in the 1990s and early 2000s to include a focus on individual security and mass atrocity crimes as well as internal breakdowns of state security (Börzel & Zürn 2021), the challenge to China-endorsed norms became more acute. In 1999, UN resolutions embraced as an obligation the protection of civilians (POC) caught up in armed conflict. The recognition that women suffer disproportionately in war led to the establishment in 2000 of a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and in 2005 a World Summit Outcome document formalised states' 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) populations from mass atrocity crimes. In the event of a 'manifest failure' to do so, R2P endorsed a role for the Security Council, as representative of the international community, to ensure that protection (UNSC 1999; 2000; UNGA 2005: para 138 and 139).

This effort to impose restraints was evident in China's approach to the civil conflict in Syria after 2011, substantially increasing the frequency of its veto use in the Security Council.

In response, the PRC – often alongside Russia – has moved to hinder the progress of this liberal agenda and to further alternatives that focus more directly on state-led approaches and host-state consent. This effort to impose restraints was evident in China's approach to the civil conflict in Syria after 2011, substantially increasing the frequency of its veto use in the Security Council (14 vetoes between 2011 and 2024 compared with only 6 between 1971 and 2010; UNSC n.d.). The outcome of the UN intervention in Libya and the eventual overthrow and killing of Muammar Gaddafi influenced this behaviour, as many statements by China's UN officials, think-tank commentators, and Chinese media indicate. Beijing's Syrian-related vetoes were overwhelmingly used to bolster regime security and to promote state-led solutions to violence (Foot 2020: 167-8; 2024: 22), as it believed should have been done in Libya.

Similar efforts to protect state primacy came in December 2024 with respect to a draft resolution dealing with a mandate renewal for a UN stabilisation mission based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On this occasion, China (with Russia's support) balked at attempts to strengthen POC language in the resolution text, instead arguing that the host country had the primary responsibility to decide how best to protect its civilians (SCR 2024; see Zhang 2025). In addition, the two allies diluted textual references to WPS, thus continuing a steady trend of restricting an agenda they regarded as encroaching on state prerogatives. Casting WPS as a development rather than a security issue, China's UN representative stressed that 'development is the foundation of peace', and the Council 'should focus on promoting women's empowerment based on development' (UNSC 2024: n.p.).

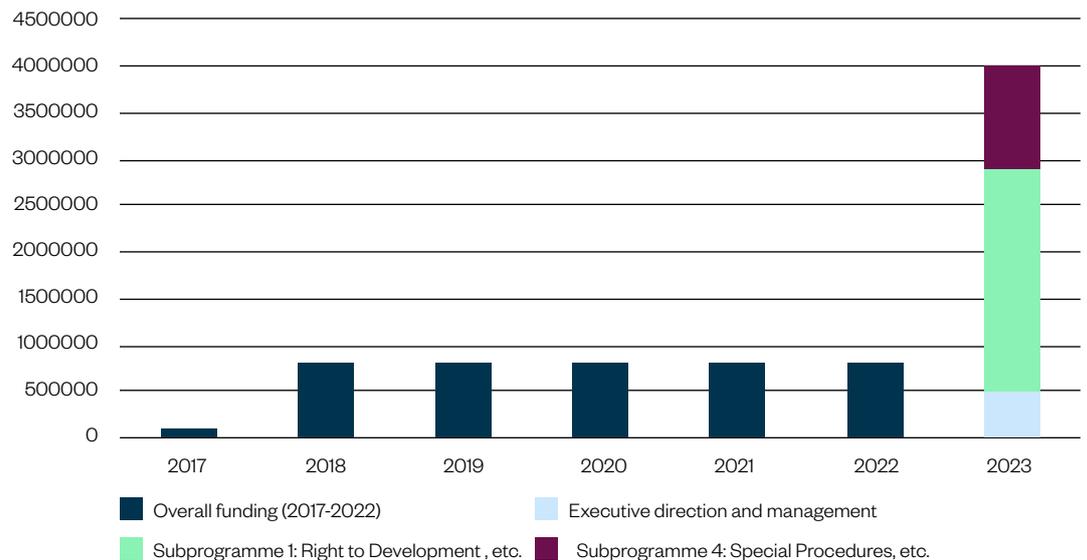
China, among other states, also contests the interventionist potential of R2P. Beijing supports pillar one of R2P, which underlines that it is the state – and not the international community – that is responsible for protecting its citizens from mass atrocity crimes. However, it remains wary of the other two pillars. Pillar two focuses on international assistance to build state capacity to prevent atrocities, while China's diplomats emphasise that states should identify their own weaknesses and tackle the root causes of conflict (Yao 2018). Pillar three, which deals with non-consensual international intervention, is of greatest concern to Beijing. It has led the PRC to challenge the idea of R2P as a universally agreed norm, stating that, for China, it does 'not constitute a rule of international law' (Liu 2009: n.p.). Indeed, in 2023, China signed a letter with the 'Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations' that described R2P as 'controversial and divisive' (GoF-FCUN 2023). Beijing presses instead for dialogue and negotiation rather than coercive international measures to deal with state failure to prevent atrocities. It believes that the stabilisation of a government in power via economic development is the main route to atrocity prevention over the longer term.

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China's human rights perspective similarly goes against the liberal substance of UN multilateralism. Whereas the UN officially adheres to the norm that human rights are universal and indivisible, Beijing promotes a pluralist and relativist position that advocates for each country to find its own pathway to human rights. Chinese leaders state that their country 'has opened a new path of human rights protection, and added diversity to the concept of human rights with its own practices' (Xinhua 2021: n.p.). Its 'Global Civilization Initiative', announced in 2023, was connected to the UN in 2024 with an annual 'International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations'. This initiative underlines Beijing's belief in cultural pluralism rather than universality (Xinhua 2024). China and its like-minded partners have also argued at the HRC that development should be seen as a foundational right and that the universality of rights needs to be tempered by relativism. Thus, for Beijing, the so-called universality of the human rights model associated with the UN should instead be seen as an instance of Western hegemony.

Figure 2²

China's voluntary funding to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2017–2023, in US dollars)



Alongside these revisions of UN longstanding norms as expressed in several China-sponsored HRC resolutions (UNGA 2017a; 2017b; 2019), Beijing has also engaged in institutional shaping through its funding choices. It has increased earmarked funding to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) designed to promote the 'Right to Development' and to raise the profile of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In 2017, this funding stood at 100,000 USD, from 2018 to 2022 at 800,000 USD annually, and in 2023 at 4 million USD (Figure 2), improving its donor ranking from 42nd to 18th. China also stepped up its - still limited - indirect financial support to UN human rights work by financing five Chinese nationals in 2023 to serve as Junior Professional Officers, compared to no support in 2019 and 2020, support for one in 2021, and three in 2022 (UNOHCHR 2024).

Overall, Beijing wants to secure a UN that defends state primacy, protects political regimes from UN-authorized international intervention, and prioritises development as the main route

to stabilising global order over civil or political rights. China's approach to the UN tries to sideline that body's 1990s emphasis on individual protection and collective security, instead reviving state primacy in ways that are reminiscent of the Cold War era.

Power in and through multilateralism: towards a more China-centred UN

The general expansion of China's economic and political capacity has translated into a marked increase in Beijing's engagement with the UN system, with a more visible shift in China-related power dynamics from the early 2010s onwards.

In light of (potential) shifts in the logic and substance of multilateralism, what is multilateral power set to look like in a UN system in which China plays an increasingly important role? Our research into power dynamics related to China's UN footprint since the early 2000s – conducted together with 15 colleagues from five continents – paints an uneven picture (Haug et al. 2024). The general expansion of China's economic and political capacity has translated into a marked increase in Beijing's engagement with the UN system, with a more visible shift in China-related power dynamics from the early 2010s onwards.³ Across UN pillars and issue areas, there is ample evidence of the PRC mobilising more compulsory (i.e. direct) power over the last two decades, evidenced by the increased use of its Security Council veto, the mobilisation of targeted earmarked funding, and pressure exercised behind the scenes on other UN member states to vote on resolutions in line with Chinese preferences (Baumann et al. 2024; Foot 2024; Haug & Waisbich 2024). In most settings, however, China has remained far behind Western states, up to this point at least, in terms of UN funding flows (Baumann & Haug 2024). China's institutional (i.e. indirect) power resources, such as Chinese UN staff (Lam & Fung 2024), and its attempts to shape bureaucratic agendas have also increased. Although these attempts mostly unfold in multilateral niches and remain cautious, dimensions such as China's growing combined financial footprint and its influence over South-South agendas (Haug & Waisbich 2024; Zhang & Jing 2024) indicate a visible increase in Beijing's ability to co-shape UN processes.

Across UN pillars, we also find that China's structural power – i.e. its position relative to other actors – has visibly expanded. At the Security Council, we see a shift towards the normalisation of China's role as a great power in its interaction with other permanent members (Gowan 2024). In the development sphere, we observe a more palpable challenge to North-South templates in which China mobilises its dual identity as a developing country superpower to bolster its authority over development-related processes. The Global Development Initiative (GDI) is the most prominent expression of China's development leadership ambition to date. Several UN entities are engaged in GDI projects as part of their Sustainable Development Goals implementation strategies, and more than 80 UN member states have joined the China-sponsored Group of Friends of the GDI (see CIKD 2023). Incipient China-related efforts to deploy productive power, via discourse, in order to shape systems of knowledge and meaning also appear across different UN venues. While observing the potential success of these efforts will require a longer timeframe, we already see China making inroads in redirecting discourses at the UN. This includes emphasising the Right to Development as a foundation for the enjoyment of other human rights (Oud 2024) and de-emphasising the relevance of good governance and inclusive institutions to the sustainable development agenda (Baumann et al. 2024).

3 This subsection builds on findings of a Global Policy Special Issue (2024:S2) discussed in Haug et al. 2024: section 4.

This uneven but noticeable increase in China's ability to mobilise different power types across UN pillars has arguably reached the next stage with President Trump's return to the White House. His administration's assault on established mechanisms of international cooperation (Haug et al. 2025), withdrawal from and defunding of a number of UN entities (such as the HRC and World Health Organisation), and failure to pay its assessed contributions to the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets (as of 10 December 2025) are likely to not only have a major impact on the future of UN power dynamics but also contribute to further shifts in Beijing's favour. The April 2025 announcement that the US State Department's budget could be halved (Toosi 2025)⁴ immediately sent shockwaves through the UN and has underlined the urgency of the UN Secretary-General's UN80 Initiative centred on suggestions on how to reform and streamline the UN system in order to ensure its longer-term (financial) sustainability (UN 2025; see Frage & Shiffman 2025).

Against this backdrop, China's reaction to US disengagement from or challenges to established elements of UN multilateralism is set to be of particular relevance for future power dynamics. If the US government does end up slashing its UN funding, China might find itself in the position of the largest de facto contributor of assessed contributions to the regular and peacekeeping budgets. However, based on its trajectory to date, Beijing is unlikely to use voluntary contributions to fill the gap left by the United States. Instead, the PRC is set to further expand its multilateral footprint in the areas it deems particularly relevant to Chinese interests. Recent increases in China's - overall still limited - tightly earmarked funding in the human rights field (see above) illustrate the targeted and strategic nature of Beijing's financial attention as it evolves to focus more on selected parts of the UN system. More generally, the decrease in the US's relevance as a donor is likely to not only make more space for Chinese preferences but also do away with an influential opponent of China – or at least reduce that opponent's leverage. The US government has long been the fiercest critic of China in UN settings, threatening to withhold funding to UN entities that continued supporting Chinese foreign policy initiatives, for instance (Haug 2024). By contrast, Southern member states generally support China's expanding engagement (or are unwilling to voice their criticism) and actively seek to participate in China-sponsored UN schemes (Haug & Waisbich 2024). Without its financial contributions, the US government is less in a position to counterbalance the numerical force of developing countries that – proactively or reluctantly – support China's expanding UN engagement.

This developing country support base is indeed a cornerstone of China's approach to UN multilateralism. Beijing has long emphasised the need to 'democratise' multilateralism (Tsang & Cheung 2023), i.e. to provide more space and voice to developing countries (such as itself). With China's insistence that it will 'always be part of the developing world and a member of the Global South' (Xu 2023: n.p.), it positions itself as *primus inter pares* among the G77 in its UN role. A more democratised UN multilateralism, by this logic, is one with more space for China as a legitimate leader. China's insistence that it wants to move to a 'UN-centred' world (Xinhua 2022) – by implication, away from a US-centred world order – reflects a vision of revamped UN power dynamics in which the relevance of Western states decreases while the developing country majority takes centre stage with Beijing as its leader. 'UN-centred', then, indeed means (more) 'China-centred'.

4 In 2024, US assessed contributions to the UN system amounted to more than 3 billion USD but were only a minor portion of the more than 14 billion USD that the US government provided to the UN system overall. See UNSCEB 2025.

At the same time, China's expanding clout at the UN also comes with responsibilities that Beijing will need to review and act on carefully. It may find that in this role it needs to respond more swiftly to security crises instead of emphasising long-term remedies – such as more attention to development – to aid conflict prevention and management. In addition, together with the United States, China is one of the major culprits of the UN's worsening liquidity crisis since it now pays its membership fees rather late in the year. China's dues that should be transferred by the end of January each year only arrived in UN coffers on 27 December in 2024 and on 29 October in 2025 (UNGA 2025), adding to the major hurdles the UN Secretariat faces in ensuring a functioning world organisation (The Economist 2025; see Chen 2024). Moreover, the normalisation of China's great-power status at the UN is likely to challenge elements of the solidarity between China and other developing country member states as Beijing seeks more of the discretionary privileges that come with that status. While developing countries tend to regularly ask for more resources from Western powers and are in favour of expanding UN structures (most of which they do not finance), China is now increasingly wary of burgeoning UN budgets and, out of self-interest, is likely to align more closely with other large donors in emphasising the efficient use of UN resources (Lynch 2023). Overall, then, a more China-centred UN multilateralism is also one in which China might find itself in a more complex position that forces Beijing to rethink how it mobilises its dual identity as the UN's only developing country superpower.

Reshaping the contours of multilateralism: possible responses

The increase in China's economic and political weight over the last two decades has led to uneven and incipient but already palpable changes across different parts of the UN system. Based on available evidence, we suggest that Beijing's growing multilateral footprint at the UN might well lead or contribute to a number of important shifts in UN multilateralism (see Figure 3). With regard to the underlying logic of multilateralism, China's emphasis on the intergovernmental nature of multilateral cooperation – in contrast to a more autonomous multilateral bureaucracy – has been evident in China's mix of UN funding, its understanding of the role of UN staff, and the ways UN entities act in China-led cooperation schemes. In terms of the substance of multilateralism, China's objectives to ensure the primacy of the state (and not the individual) in UN work and embrace development as the primary human right (and not civil or political rights) reflect a political programme that challenges some of the core liberal values promoted by the UN system over the last decades. With regard to multilateral power dynamics, finally, China's emphasis on 'democratising' multilateralism centres on increasing space for the developing country majority at the UN with China as its de facto leader. This underlines the China-centric nature of what Beijing insists should be a UN-centred world.

Figure 3: Towards a UN with Chinese characteristics?

	The logic of multilateralism	The substance of multilateralism	Power in/through multilateralism
Status quo	Intergovernmental control and the relative autonomy of multilateral bodies coexist to differing extents across issue areas.	Since the 1990s, the UN system's liberal agenda has expanded, including a focus on protecting the security of the individual.	Western states have long dominated the UN system through financial means, while G77 countries often play more marginal roles.
China's approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening inter-governmental control Reducing the UN bureaucracy's autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasising sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic affairs Prioritising state interests over human protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding engagement across UN pillars Positioning China as primus inter pares among G77 countries
Implication of China's increasing weight	Towards a more intergovernmental UN	Towards a less liberal UN	Towards a more China-centred UN
Empirical dynamics to watch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's use of funding modalities The role of Chinese UN staff The position of UN entities in China-led cooperation processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's approach to security (state vs. individuals) China's promotion of the Right to Development China's attempts to reshape the UN human rights regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's position within the G77 How China mobilises its dual role as developing country superpower How China reacts to the multilateral retreat of the United States
Potential overlaps of Chinese and US interests regarding a more intergovernmental, financially constrained, less autonomous, and less liberal UN system			

Overall, the current Trump-led US retreat from and attack on established forms of UN multilateralism are set to accelerate the trend of China gaining more space at the UN in ways that tilt underlying power dynamics in its favour. The partial alignment between Trump and Xi on what multilateralism is ultimately all about might have the most far-reaching consequences for the UN system (Haug 2025). The current leaders of these two important member states face complex and often hostile bilateral relations and are engaged in ongoing power struggles in international organisations, but they seem to agree that the logic of multilateralism should centre less on relatively autonomous multilateral bodies and more on intergovernmental or great-power-led arrangements. They also seem to coincide in their assessment that large parts of the Western-backed and often liberal substance of UN multilateralism that have gained traction since the early 1990s should be contained and reduced (Foot 2025). This means that UN norms and mandates with a strong liberal and interventionist bent – such as R2P – are increasingly likely to be marginalised. Despite ongoing rivalry and tensions in other aspects of their relations, China's partial alignment with a US administration that contradicts substantial parts of what previous US governments and their Western allies had long pushed for at the UN might turn out to be a bonus for Beijing, helping it to reform UN multilateralism in line with its own preferences.

What does this mean for those who want to safeguard the liberal parts and more autonomous elements of the UN system? To start with, member state policymakers should be more explicit in identifying their countries' core interests. Instead of spreading political capital and financial

resources across a wide range of processes and issue areas, they could concentrate their efforts on parts of the UN system they see as particularly critical to protect. The independence of UN human rights experts is a primary example. Strategic increases in voluntary core funding to entities that cover central UN functions – such as the OHCHR in the field of human rights – would help improve such support across pillars.

Member state diplomats and UN bureaucrats, in turn, should deepen their engagement with China to improve their understanding of Beijing's policy priorities. Focusing on the substance and long-term interests behind China-led multilateral debates – and not only on official rhetoric – would be an important first step. Identifying opportunities for joint action with Beijing could help to safeguard liberal elements even in the context of tightening intergovernmental control. Some Chinese commentators have suggested, for instance, that a combination of liberal peacebuilding practices and the 'developmental peace' that China prefers – focusing on state capacity and infrastructure needs – might be a path to improving UN peace operations (see Foot 2020: 245). Another starting point could be a more proactive engagement with the UN's South-South cooperation support agenda, where China has come to play a dominant role (Haug & Waisbich 2024).

Finally, analysts (including ourselves) are well advised to engage with views from across different sectors and geographies in their attempts to make sense of China's UN engagement and the context in which it unfolds. An approach that combines concrete evidence and the analysis of broader patterns can help counter simplistic narratives about China's multilateral activities and uncover dynamics – such as the partial overlap between Chinese and US interests – that are set to act as key drivers in reshaping the contours of UN multilateralism.⁵

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