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Articles

China's Role in the United Nations: Utilitarianism Overshadows Universal Values

Asoke Kumar Mukerji*

Abstract

The United Nations (UN) system of multilateral diplomacy is widely seen to be under pressure. World leaders have mandated reforming its primary political organ, the Security Council, to make it more effective and representative. New global challenges have pushed the UN to respond faster and more substantially than ever before. Chinese President Xi Jinping's advocacy of the multilateral system at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2017 is a pointer to China's interest in dominating the UN system. As the Trump Administration in the United States continues to withdraw from playing a leadership role in many UN bodies, and Europe is consumed by structural challenges symbolized by Brexit, China faces an unprecedented opportunity to achieve its goals. This will have a significant impact on the UN system as well as on individual member-states in implementing the objectives of the UN Charter in a holistic manner. China's growing role within the UN system and the policies it has pursued underline a fundamental variance between the values and goals it stands for and the universal values and common good that the UN represents.

Attention has focused on China's role in multilateral institutions following President Xi Jinping's speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos in

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January 2017 (CGTN, 2017)¹, positioning China as an upholder of the multilateral system.² This assertion was made in the context of the beginning of a series of policy announcements by the Trump Administration withdrawing the United States from some of its commitments and obligations to the multilateral system as represented by the United Nations (UN).³

China's view of multilateralism may be looked at with specific reference to China's participation in the UN, where it is a privileged veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The veto gives China (along with the other four permanent members of the UNSC) an advantage denied to the 188 other member-states of the UN in taking decisions that affect international political and security policies. The emergence of China as the world's second largest economy has added a significant new dimension to this advantage, impacting on multilateral policy making through the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and UN specialized agencies, including in the acquisition and development of technology. How will China leverage these advantages as modern multilateralism marks its centenary in 2019?

Background

China's influence in creating the contemporary structures of global governance can be traced back to its military contribution to the eventual Allied victory during the Second World War (Mitter, 2013)⁴. China was included in the Conference of 26 Allied nations held in Washington D.C. on 1 January 1942, which issued the "Declaration by United Nations". China's objective was directed to gaining recognition of its major power status. It succeeded in being accepted as one of the major Allied powers at the Cairo Conference of 1943. The U.S. and UK accepted China's post-war aspirations in Asia, including the consolidation of its territories occupied by Japan (U.S. Department of State)⁵.

Between October 1943 and February 1945, restricted negotiations between the U.S., Soviet Union, UK and China conceptualized the UN, (United Nations, 1946 p.3)⁶ outlined its structures, and decided to designate these four as "permanent members" (later expanded to include France) in the proposed

UNSC, with the right to veto decisions. These proposals were endorsed by the United Nations Conference on International Organization, held at San Francisco between April-June 1945 (Ibid p.9-10).⁷

Delegations from the 46 other countries at the Conference were not allowed to re-open provisions already agreed to between the five self-selected permanent members of the UNSC (United Nation, 1945)⁸. The adoption of the UN Charter in June 1945 firmly placed China at the exclusive high-table of decision-making as one of the five permanent members of the UNSC with veto-power. As “the first victim of aggression by an Axis power,” China was given the honour of being the first country to sign the UN Charter.⁹

China’s objectives in the UN negotiations on international financial and economic cooperation at Bretton Woods in July 1944 were to “maintain China’s international standing; promote international economic co-operation; improve friendship with other countries; enhance technical standards” (Zhongxia, 2015).¹⁰ China took the stand that the share of a country’s quotas of the IMF “reflected a country’s international standing”. China’s procedural opposition to initial proposals on this issue by the U.S. was instrumental in the eventual agreement at Bretton Woods for the top five shares of quotas to be allocated to the U.S., United Kingdom (UK), the Soviet Union, China and France. China’s negotiating tactic was supported by five other participating delegations, including India (International Monetary Fund).¹¹

Apart from seeking recognition as a major power, China’s participation in the UN has also reflected the momentous change within China. In November 1949, the Chinese Communist Party defeated Chiang Kai-shek’s government and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It is useful to recall the initiatives taken in the UN during 1950, the first year after the PRC was established, on the representation of China in the UN. On 13 January 1950, the Soviet Union moved a resolution in the UNSC to expel the Guomindang-led Republic of China (ROC) from UN membership which was defeated by voting. India, serving its first term as a non-permanent member of the UNSC,

voted in favour of the Soviet resolution, along with Yugoslavia (UNSC, 1950).¹² In September 1950, the Soviet Union and India tabled a resolution in the 5th Committee of the UNGA to seat the PRC in the UN. This resolution was also defeated by a vote, and the matter was referred to a committee, which kept it in abeyance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China).¹³ It was only in October 1971 that the PRC replaced the ROC (the original founder member of the UN) both in the UNGA and the UNSC (United Nations, 1971).¹⁴ A similar change occurred in China's status in the IMF in April 1980 (IMF, 2004).¹⁵

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It is worth noting that, despite the change of name, Article 23.1 of the UN Charter continues to designate the Republic of China (ROC) as one of the five permanent members of the UNSC (United Nations).¹⁶ This is a legal anomaly which none of the five permanent members, including the PRC, has been keen to rectify through an amendment of the UN Charter which could

theoretically open the Pandora's box of UNSC reforms.

The Political Pillar

As a major power, China's contribution to the UN can be assessed with reference to its participation in UNSC decisions on critical political issues. It is worth noting that the ROC did not use the veto even once during its occupancy of China's seat in the UN from 1945-1971. Despite the opposition of the other four permanent members of the UNSC, China (ROC) was the only permanent member to actually vote in favour of the 1963 UNGA resolution tabled by newly independent developing countries, which amended the UN Charter to expand the membership of the UNSC from 11 to 15 (UNGA, 1963).¹⁷ China supported the UNGA resolution essentially to keep this majority on its side as the ROC faced annual challenges in the UNGA to unseat it from UN membership.

The first time China used its veto was on 25 August 1972, when the PRC, as an ally of Pakistan, opposed the admission of Bangladesh to the UN. Since then, China has used the veto 10 more times, with 6 of these being cast between October 2011 and February 2017 on the issue of Syria. It cast its veto in January 2007 to prevent any international investigation into Myanmar's domestic situation and applied the same argument in July 2008 when casting a veto against proposals to look into the internal situation in Zimbabwe. China's vehement opposition to countries allied with the ROC (Taiwan) came to the fore when it vetoed a January 1997 UNSC resolution offering support for Guatemala, which it accused of being "anti-China" (United Nations, 2018).¹⁸

One consequence of China's low profile in using its authority as a veto-wielding power in the UNSC has been to cede decision-making functions on threats to international peace and security to other permanent members like the U.S., UK and France. China's ambivalent attitude on securing and sustaining the peace, especially in Asia and Africa, has eroded her credibility as a major power, especially among many of the 108 countries from these two regions represented in the UNGA. The populations of these countries have borne the brunt of the more than 50 conflicts currently on the UNSC's agenda, which have impacted over 68 million people, the highest such number since the end of the Second World War (UNHCR, 2018).¹⁹

Within the UNSC, China's participation in decision-making on the deployment of UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) was till recently low-key. This changed with President Xi Jinping's announcement in September 2015 that China would create an 8000-strong standby force of troops available for UN PKOs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 2015).²⁰ Currently, China is the only major troop contributor to UN PKOs from the five permanent members of the UNSC, with 2519 troops on the ground (UN Peacekeeping, 2018).²¹ China's profile has been enhanced by its decision to contribute 10.25% of the annual \$6.7 billion budget for UN PKOs, making it the second largest financial contributor after the U.S. which bears 28.47% of this budget (UN Peacekeeping, 2018).²²

On the ground, however, China's ability to use PKOs to pursue its national interests has not been enhanced. The case of China's involvement in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) illustrates the challenges for outside powers to resolve complex political crises within UN member-states. China's primary motivation for using both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to bring the civil war in South Sudan to an end is the fact that China is the largest investor in the oil and pipeline sectors of South Sudan through its state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). China's bilateral initiative using Sudan to broker a peace agreement in 2015 between South Sudan's warring factions, which was endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 2206 in March 2015 (UNSC, 2015),²³ as well as its decision to contribute 1000 combat troops to strengthen the multilateral attempt through UNMISS have not yielded results. Exposure of its combat troops to UN peacekeeping has also brought unexpected international scrutiny on the larger than life image of the Chinese People's Liberation Army troops in UN PKOs. An independent UN inquiry into the attack on the UN building which was protected by UN peacekeepers highlighted "poor performance" of UN peacekeepers, "including at least two instances in which the Chinese battalion abandoned some of its defensive positions at POC 1 on 10 and 11 July" (United Nations, 2016).²⁴

Terrorism directly challenged the UNSC's authority in 2014, when the Al Nusra terrorist group kidnapped Filipino and Fijian UN peacekeepers of UNDOF in two separate incidents. This was widely reported by international media as well as by the UN (United Nations, 2014).²⁵ The response of China as the sole permanent member from Asia in the UNSC to this direct challenge to the Council's authority by a terrorist group based in Asia and listed in the sanctions list under UNSCR 1267 (United Nations, 2013)²⁶ remains unknown. So far, China has not publicly asked member states to investigate, prosecute and penalize terrorist groups to deter terrorism through the UNSC.

Instead of taking a leadership role in the UNSC to counter terrorism, China has instead chosen to use its hidden veto power (contained in the provisional working procedures of the UNSC) to apply blocks or technical holds

to listing terrorists in UNSC sanctions lists. More than a decade ago, when China first used this tactic to deny a listing request by the U.S. in the sanctions committee, the U.S. responded by tabling a UNSC resolution to list the individuals. China abstained from the vote on the resolution, which effectively overcame its technical block (United Nations, 2006).²⁷ However, when dealing with requests for listing terrorists by countries not represented in the UNSC, like the request for listing Masood Azhar of Pakistan, China has continued with its opaque policy of applying technical holds on such requests, without accountability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 2018).²⁸

These three examples illustrate the shortfalls in China's performance as a permanent member of the UNSC. The inability of China, together with the other four permanent members, to ensure that UNSC decisions are implemented on the ground has resulted in an ineffective UNSC. World leaders, including from China, meeting at the UN World Summit in 2005, unanimously mandated early reforms of the UNSC to restore its credibility and effectiveness (United Nations, 2005).²⁹ There has been little progress in achieving this goal in the past 13 years, and China is clearly reluctant to endorse either Japan or India as candidates, thereby effectively opposing change and reforms.

The Socio-Economic Pillar

The malfunctioning of the political pillar of the UN has significant repercussions for the success of the other two pillars on which the UN is founded – socio-economic development and upholding of fundamental human rights. In the socio-economic pillar of the UN, China has attempted to achieve its primary objective of influencing the global policies for sustainable development to meet China's national interests, without drawing any linkage between peace, security, sustainable development and fundamental human rights.

China's quest to dominate the UN's second pillar has followed two tracks. Among the member-states of the UNGA, who elect members to the 54

-member Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as well as the 47-member UN Human Rights Council (HRC), China has leveraged the G77 (G77 Secretariat)³⁰ to pursue its objectives. Although not a member of this grouping of 134 developing countries in the UNGA, since 1994 China has extended political and financial support to the G77, which has reciprocated by participating in negotiations in the UNGA as "G77 and China". The major benefit to China of associating with the G77 has undoubtedly been to acquire

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the "strategic depth" of numbers in achieving its priorities in economic and environmental negotiations under the UN. The most recent example of this was the unanimous agreement of the UNGA on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which are the core of the UN's Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2018).³¹

The second track followed by China is to use its increasing economic heft in multilateral diplomacy to influence the election or appointment of UN officials who head UN departments or UN specialized agencies critical to pushing forward China's objective of dominating international socio-economic and technological policies. China's support for the current UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's UN Secretariat Reforms plan may be seen in this perspective (Candela, 2017).³²

The UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), which is responsible for servicing negotiations and high-level reviews (including the annual review of the implementation of Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development) by the ECOSOC has been headed by China since 2006. Its current head is China's Liu Zhenmin, Under Secretary General since 2017. Among the UN's specialized agencies, UNIDO, which plays a crucial role in issues relating to technology and industrialization, is headed by China's Li Yong since 2013. The International Telecommunications Union or ITU, which

has a major role to play on matters relating to the flow of communications, including cyber data, is headed by China's Houlin Zhao since 2014. The International Civil Aviation Organization or ICAO is headed by China's Dr. Fang Liu since 2015. Till last year, the World Health Organization or WHO was headed by Dr. Margaret Chan of China.

Two areas illustrate China's determination to prioritize its own interests using "developing country solidarity" in the UN.

On international development cooperation, China's effort has been to focus on playing a dominant role in setting the norms for the infrastructure, rather than the substance, of development. China sees this infrastructure as a profitable investment in both political and economic terms. China's focus on using institutions where it dominates the decision-making process to influence the global sustainable development agenda became apparent in 2016 at the UN review of the implementation of Agenda 2030. Presenting its Voluntary National Review at the High-Level Political Forum in the UN, China provided an impressive list of activities it was engaged in domestically and internationally to help achieve the goals of Agenda 2030. As part of the Voluntary National Review, China also asserted that "China will carry forward the Belt and Road Initiative and promote the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank and other institutions to play greater roles with a view to making contribution to global development" (United Nations, 2016).³³

On environment issues, China participated in the ongoing UN negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), adopted by the Rio Summit of the UN in 1992, for "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system" (United Nations, 1992).³⁴ To meet its objectives, China joined a developing country negotiating grouping with Brazil, South Africa and India called BASIC from 2009 onwards. The objective was to widen (and thereby dilute) the focus of Western industrialized countries to pressure China under

the UNFCCC to drastically reduce its carbon emissions. After the signature of the December 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change, China stepped up its multilateral diplomacy to implement its “strategic choice of building an ecological civilization”. Under this framework, China established a South-South Co-operation Fund on Climate Change, to establish “10 low-carbon model areas and implement 100 projects of climate change mitigation and adaptation.” By extending its diplomatic outreach under its Paris Agreement commitments to 27 developing countries by March 2017, China has effectively incorporated these countries in any future international attempt to isolate China on greenhouse gas emission issues (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 2017).³⁵

China is committed to maintaining the status quo in the UNSC....

The Human Rights Pillar

China has been conspicuous in the UN by its lack of interest on issues concerning the third pillar of the UN, which focuses on upholding fundamental human rights and freedoms. Its policy on these issues is reactive, attempting to block any attempt by the UN to “interfere” in its internal situation.

Some Conclusions

This brief overview provides the canvas for assessing what China’s attempt to become the custodian of multilateralism means for other members of the UN.

China is committed to maintaining the status quo in the UNSC, which will ensure it continues to enjoy the privileges of permanent membership with the existing four other permanent members. China needs permanent membership of the UNSC to allow the unfettered pursuit of its core political interests, including issues like the South China Sea, which are linked with the “rise of China”. Its permanent membership is also an important bargaining chip in relations with its allies and adversaries. For example, without China’s

concurrence, issues on the UNSC agenda like the “India-Pakistan Question” cannot be removed. Neither can UN PKOs like UNMOGIP be wound up, nor the terrorists behind the Mumbai 2008 terror attacks be fettered, prosecuted and penalized. The dilution of interest by the Trump Administration in the UN (although not yet in the UNSC), and the preoccupation of two permanent members (France and the UK) in the Brexit-linked future of the European Union, give China more strategic space to consolidate its interests through the UNSC.

The implications of this are obvious for others, including those in China’s periphery, who need a supportive political environment for pursuing their national security and development objectives. This can only be brought about by challenging China’s current stranglehold on the UNGA process to reform the UNSC (Rattray, 2016).³⁶ The most dramatic manner for doing so would be for a group of 128 countries in the UNGA (the required two-thirds majority under the UN Charter) to co-sponsor a resolution proposing amendments to the UN Charter to reform the UNSC in each of the five areas agreed to for negotiations in 2008.

Secondly, beyond the political sphere, China’s grip on the UN infrastructure has already given an impetus to its attempt to influence the global economic and technological infrastructure. China has already succeeded in projecting its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as being endorsed by the UN (United Nations, 2018)³⁷. The response from other major powers like the U.S. at the recent Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Washington DC (U.S. Department of State, 2018)³⁸ to China’s BRI is too feeble for China to be seriously concerned about any countervailing move from within the UN to the BRI.

Any attempt to recalibrate and regain ground would need to come instead from the very constituency that China is targeting as prospective beneficiaries of the BRI – the developing countries grouped under the G-77 in the UNGA.

Thirdly, China's determination to become the foremost global technological power by leading the fourth industrial revolution needs to be taken seriously. China's leadership of the opposition in the UN's governmental group of disarmament experts meeting in July 2017 to agree on cybersecurity norms is indicative of China's larger strategy to dominate attempts at rule-making for the global digital technology landscape (Segal, 2017).³⁹

Responding to this challenge requires a cooperative endeavor in the UNGA to create a UN treaty, like an international convention on cyberspace, to regulate multi-stakeholder activities in the digital domain. Only then can it be ensured that the global commons of cyberspace are not appropriated/ dominated by any one country or entity.

Finally, China's single-minded obsession with its political privilege in the UNSC, and its ability to push its world view through its current economic strength, ignores the biggest attraction of the multilateral system for most of its member-states. This is represented by the principles and values embodied in the UN Charter, which have been carried into practice through cooperative, values-based initiatives in the UNGA. The fight for non-discrimination, the fight for gender equality, the fight for equality in decision-making, the fight for the dominant role of the rule of law in international relations and the successful pursuit of decolonization have all given meaning to the UN Charter. The emphasis on values like non-violence and looking at the world as one family have brought countries together for mutual benefit. It is possible to respond to China's current mercantilist and transactional objectives in trying to achieve leadership of the multilateral system by creating a momentum within the UNGA to reassert these values and uphold the validity of the principle of international cooperation with a human face.

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2. For the purposes of this article, the framework of the United Nations as the primary multilateral institution is used as China is a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, which gives it a dominant role in the multilateral system.
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