



Is China's influence at the United Nations all it's cracked up to be?

Here are five things to know

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As New York geared up for the 74th U.N. General Assembly in September, Sen. Todd C. Young (R-Ind.) in Washington was introducing a bipartisan bill scrutinizing China's influence in international organizations. This bill follows a steady stream of reports pointing to China's growing influence in the U.N. system.

As China assumes a greater leadership role in the United Nations, many observers have criticized its "spoiler" role. Beijing, for example, stalled on holding international discussions on managing lethal autonomous weapons (a.k.a. "killer robots"), muzzled U.N. Security Council discussions on human rights violations in Syria and used U.N. bureaucratic procedures to respond to Western criticisms of China's Xinjiang policies.

Such headlines aren't unexpected, given China's drive to be a great power and general discussion on threats to a liberal world order. China's moves also reflect a leadership vacuum following a systematic U.S. exit from U.N. specialized agencies and lack of U.S. strategy at the United Nations.

But my research suggests the story is more complicated. Here are five things to know.

1. China has taken a more active role at the United Nations

China has moved away from generally avoiding multilateral issues and has recently assumed leadership of the Food and Agriculture Organization. It also heads the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the U.N. Industrial Development Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization. Reportedly, China is interested in leading U.N. peacekeeping.

And there are distinct Chinese additions to the U.N. lexicon: references to a “community of shared future for humankind” and “win-win cooperation” appear in U.N. resolutions on peace in Afghanistan, weapons in space, and Africa’s social and economic development.

2. Beijing plays a pragmatic game

China frequently votes with the United States at the U.N. Security Council. China has cast only 14 vetoes since assuming a seat on the council in 1971, the lowest total of all the permanent members and a fraction of the vetoes cast by the United States or Russia.

On intervention decisions, China consistently makes the case for host-state consent, the Security Council's authorization and nonintervention in domestic affairs of a state. During the 1990s uptick in U.N. intervention, China found ways to avoid confrontation, seeking compromise between its noninterventionist stance and the push to intervene.

Facing international isolation after the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen Square, China focused on pragmatism at the United Nations, emphasizing "exceptional conditions" when backing nonconsensual interventions in Yugoslavia and Somalia, and abstaining on the U.N. response to Rwanda and Haiti, despite concerns about state sovereignty.

Interestingly, China often prefers to let Russia lead when dissenting against the West. Beijing is also reluctant to be the only Security Council member to halt international cooperation; China effectively walked back its 1997 solo veto against election monitors in Guatemala, which maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

3. China's cooperation is important for successful international cooperation

There is concern in Beijing that regime change elsewhere could set a precedent for such actions against China, where Chinese Communist Party control and stability is an important core interest. This concern shaped China's seven U.N. vetoes related to the Syria conflict.

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When Security Council members address China's concerns about nonconsensual action, international cooperation is possible. In the midst of its vetoes, China supported Resolution 2165 (2014), which called for humanitarian relief with only prior notification to the Syrian government. Other council members worked with China to reduce escalatory language and emphasize that cross-border access zones would be in areas no longer under control of Syrian authorities, to circumvent the Syrian consent question.

4. Beijing is sensitive to peer pressure

China is motivated by a variety of interests, including maximizing status recognition from *both* great powers and the global south. Under certain key conditions, U.N. members can encourage China to back action beyond its traditional comfort zone. The 2011 Libya intervention is an example: Effective use of peer pressure moved China to support an International Criminal Court referral of Libya's leader Moammar Gaddafi and China's abstention vote permitting sanctions and a "no-fly zone plus" imposed on the regime.

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5. The United Nations is a key platform for China — but Beijing doesn't have a cohesive strategy

China strives to claim leadership in a shifting international order. A global platform like the United Nations offers China a veto on important decisions, as well as a forum to draw upon other skeptical nations to counter liberal agendas. China regularly emphasizes it is the second-largest funder of the U.N. regular budget and the U.N. peacekeeping budget. Of all the U.N. Security Council permanent members, China deploys the most peacekeeping personnel. China has also linked its signature Belt and Road Initiative with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the U.N. peacebuilding agenda.

However, China faces two significant hurdles to mastering the U.N. system. Besides leading U.N. specialized agencies, China wants to get more of its nationals into the U.N. civil service, gaining practical experience and granular know-how of the U.N. byzantine administration as they work their way up the system. This means contending with language barriers, suspicions about Chinese nationals' partisan allegiances, and a lack of compatibility between U.N. recruitment systems and China's domestic human resources bureaucracies. It's worth noting that other countries face the same challenges.

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Despite all its moves, it's not at all clear that China has a cohesive, alternative vision for global governance that is implementable. It remains unclear how China will sell its aspirational concepts such as the "shared future" beyond its economic partners or other countries that take a nonintervention stance.

It's also not clear how China's "win-win" vision is compatible with principles supported by the United Nations. So while U.N. officials endorse the Belt and Road Initiative as a measure to support development, China has yet to articulate what the implementation of these projects means for U.N.-endorsed principles such as accountability, anti-corruption and meaningful local participation. Without successfully addressing these types of hurdles, the bottom line is that China's influence at the United Nations may not be quite that calculated — or successful.

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