



China already leads 4 of the 15 U.N. specialized agencies — and is aiming for a 5th

Beijing is campaigning to lead the global intellectual property agency

By **Courtney J. Fung** and **Shing-Hon Lam**

March 3, 2020 at 7:00 p.m. GMT+8

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a U.N. agency specializing in intellectual property protection, will pick a new head this week. China now heads up four of the 15 U.N. specialized agencies — the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Telecommunication Union, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the U.N. Industrial Development Organization.

Beijing is running a campaign to lead WIPO — despite U.S. and E.U. concerns about China's lack of protection for intellectual property rights. China is also a huge user of the global intellectual property system, filing almost half of global patent applications in 2018.

Research shows how China is no longer a passive side-player within multilateral institutions. Indeed, analysts point out that China is increasingly keen to pursue its interests within traditionally Western-led multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. China's growing economic might, strategic reach and foreign policy ambitions help drive Beijing's increasingly active participation within the multilateral system.

AD

Why worry about China's leadership at the U.N.?

What's the big concern? Analysts worry that Chinese international civil servants heading up these multilateral organizations will promote China's national interests, rather than strengthen liberal values like accountability, equality and transparency. Wu Hongbo, former undersecretary general for the U.N.

Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said that "as a [People's Republic of China] international civil servant, when it comes to Chinese national sovereignty and security, we will undoubtedly defend our country's interests."

Other reports note China uses its U.N. leadership roles to block activists from participating in human rights forums — refusing to allow civil society members to join U.N. discussions if they offer views critical of the Chinese government.

AD

China has many levers of influence

China's growing economic stature translates into more resources for bargaining and coercion — and here's how Beijing is using those levers: Last year, China forgave Cameroon's debt the month before the small African nation withdrew its candidate to head the Food and Agriculture Organization. According to U.S. officials, China also threatened to cut off key exports from Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay if those countries did not back Qu Dongyu, Beijing's FAO candidate. China is now reportedly using investment and job opportunities as incentives for votes for its WIPO candidate.

China also uses its resources strategically to set the agenda for multilateral engagement. For example, China is the sole contributor to the U.N. Peace and Development Trust Fund, which gives Chinese officials four of the five steering committee seats. This committee advises the U.N. secretary general on which projects to fund — allowing Beijing to promote its Belt and Road projects.

AD

It's an uncommon, but not altogether new, approach. Japan, for instance, also established the Trust Fund for Human Security to support projects aiming at removing pervasive threats to human lives. But that fund is advised by members of various nationalities and backgrounds.

The Chinese approach seems to be working — Belt and Road goals are getting a lot of attention throughout U.N. agencies. UNICEF praised the initiative's capacity to “multiply our impact” in fighting child poverty, while the U.N. high commissioner for Refugees applauded the Belt and Road's emphasis on connectivity. Those comments suggest that having key people working within the U.N. system helps China advance its own interests as synonymous with global interests.

China has another target: Taiwan

AD

China uses the U.N. system to exclude Taiwan globally as an independent player. In January, the International Civil Aviation Organization blocked the Twitter accounts of scholars, policy analysts and congressional staffers who asked whether the ICAO would include Taiwan in covid-19 planning and logistics. Though Taipei is a significant aviation hub, China has not requested Taiwan's participation in recent ICAO assembly meetings.

But it is important to remember that China's influence in the U.N. system isn't monolithic, and China does not automatically achieve all of its foreign policy objectives. For example, in 2019, China nominated ex-Hong Kong police chief Andy Tsang Wai-hung to lead the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, at the equivalent rank of undersecretary general. Instead, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres appointed Ghada Fathi Waly of Egypt. And U.N. Security Council members have begun pushing back on the inclusion of the words "Belt and Road Initiative" in U.N. resolutions, pressing China's diplomats to clarify or drop their preferred terminology.

What does the U.S. say?

AD

The U.S. government has taken a strong stance at times, warning FAO representatives in June that China-led specialized agencies "demonstrated a bias towards Chinese foreign policy and a lack of transparency and accountability." The United States recently created a special envoy for multilateral integrity within the State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs — a role that will focus on "countering the malign influences of the PRC and others in the U.N. system." The United States is reportedly running a diplomatic campaign to see its preferred candidate elected to head WIPO.

But the U.S. special envoy may have difficulty countering China's growing influence, particularly given the backsliding of U.S. priorities and policies toward multilateral institutions. To work effectively, the special envoy will rely on support from within the State Department. State is still missing key appointments, with the Bureau of International Organization Affairs in particular depleted by weak morale, staff departures and inability to recruit personnel, and by hostile treatment of career diplomats.

The United States has its own image problems within the multilateral system, including late payments and arrears in its U.N. contributions. The Trump administration also proposed cutting U.S. contributions to the World Health Organization in half. But the United States currently makes zero budget contributions to a range of U.N. agencies, from the Palestinian-focused U.N. Relief and Works Agency to the U.N. Population Fund. And the United States withdrew from the U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N. Economic and Social Council.

AD

Without the U.S. strategic commitment or U.S. resources for the multilateral system, China may continue to find ways to fill the financial and manpower leadership roles the United States seems to be abandoning.

Don't miss anything! Sign up to get TMC's smart analysis in your inbox, three days a week.

Courtney J. Fung (@courtneyfung) is an assistant professor at the University of Hong Kong and an associate fellow at Chatham House. She is author of “China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status” (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Shing-Hon Lam (@shinghonlam) is a research assistant at the University of Hong Kong.

AD

