

Advancing U.S. Statesmanship in the United Nations

The U.S. and China on the Global Stage

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Following World War II, international regimes and institutions significantly expanded. These regimes and institutions have come to exert significant global influence, reshaping the way countries engage and conduct their relations with each other.¹ While the People’s Republic of China (PRC) may not be a liberal republic, its behavior on the global stage has been socialized by those international norms. Since the 1990s, the PRC has integrated itself within global institutions, taking on leadership roles and adapting its behavior on the global stage to portray itself as a responsible great power. As academic Manjari Miller states, by the late twentieth century, “great power was not simply a recognition of a country’s capabilities, but also a recognition of a country’s ability to set the global agenda through institutions.”²

This paper discusses how the PRC—like the United States—is leveraging multilateral institutions to advance development and security objectives that reflect Beijing’s values as well as challenge U.S. ideology and norms. It then presents recommendations for how the U.S. can strengthen its influence across multilateral institutions to maintain leadership on the global stage.

The PRC’s Evolving Diplomatic Strategy

As the United States and the PRC engage in a comprehensive contest for power and global rule-setting, guardrails are gradually forming within international institutions through a deep economic interdependence and a military balance of power between the two countries. For the United States and the PRC, multilateral institutions present a front line for strategic competition, allowing each nation to vie for influence and cooperation on issues that affect the whole world. Both countries diverge over important political issues, such as democratic governance, territorial sovereignty, and human rights. They also showcase their differences in values and norms in a range of economic sectors such as semiconductors, electric vehicles, critical minerals, the digital economy, climate change negotiations, and restoring the World Trade Organization (WTO).³

The PRC is actively working to modify global systems and institutions to advance its interests by relying on three key approaches. First, by placing its personnel in key leadership positions in specialized UN agencies, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the PRC is able to diverge global standards from U.S. policy. Second, the PRC’s use of “minilateralism” and discrete coalition-building through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has enabled Beijing to gain support among developing nations and clip U.S. influence in the UN General Assembly on key votes, which at times has left the U.S. isolated. Specifically, BRI and flexible financial assistance have been used to secure UN votes that are favorable to China’s interests. Finally, the PRC’s veto power on the UN Security Council (UNSC) has historically served as an obstacle for US military intervention in places like Ukraine and Syria.⁴

Since World War II, U.S. strategic leadership within international institutions has focused on significant financial contributions to the tune of \$10 billion a year (surpassing the PRC's \$2 billion a year contributions); leveraging major ally groups, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) and the European Union (EU), to secure key votes at the UN; and advocating for democratic values. However, U.S. leadership and values are increasingly questioned as Washington is unable to rally support from other UN member states to end the crises in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, and other countries both because the position is unpopular with some member states and due to incongruent U.S. policy objectives and actions. For example, the U.S. provided logistical, intelligence, and advisory support to Saudi Arabia during its military campaign in Yemen, with the U.S. halting its support six years later as a result of the high civilian casualty rates.⁵

Great Powers at Odds with One Another

In recent years, U.S. ideological leadership has shifted, allowing the PRC to increase its influence in the UN to pursue its core interests. This shift has enabled Beijing to use the UN as a platform to advance policy goals that challenge U.S. interests and strategic competition with the PRC. For example, Beijing is leveraging its influence in specialized agencies like the International Telecommunication Union to promote its high-tech interests, including positioning Huawei as the preferred 5G vendor. Beijing also has sought to align the BRI with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which focus on addressing poverty, inequality, and climate change, thereby creating business opportunities for the PRC's state-owned companies.⁶

Meanwhile, the first Trump administration oversaw a cascade of U.S. international disengagement over its four years. The Biden administration, then, embraced multilateral institutions by augmenting the U.S. role in, and increasing funding for, these groups. However, Trump's reelection in November 2024 suggests the U.S. will continue its inconsistent approach toward multilateralism. Even before 2016, the U.S. shift toward unilateralism and away from multilateralism was signified by U.S. doctrines of preventive war and regime change abroad, as manifested by the U.S. invasion of Iraq without UN authorization.

Lately, the PRC's role has expanded beyond influencing economic development and investment in developing countries to exert a stronger presence on peace and security initiatives through its UNSC role, such as brokering a peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The PRC has been a permanent member of the UNSC alongside the United States since the organization's founding. Increasingly, PRC-Russia voting congruence in the UNSC, especially vetoes, have been leveraged to support one another, such as in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.⁷

Implications for International Diplomacy and Recommendations for the U.S.

The PRC approach could be viewed as a revisionist state that aims to challenge the current liberal international order and turn it into an "authoritarian-capitalist international order."⁸ However, this view oversimplifies the PRC's interactions within the liberal international order and overlooks the transformations occurring independent of the PRC's influence: the rising

populism and disorder in regional politics and society, the increasing inability of the liberal international order to address the range of global crises, the widening wealth gap between rich and poor nations under Western-led globalization, and the growing under-representation of developing and emerging countries.⁹ It overlooks how the PRC increasingly works within the existing international order, rather than confronting the United States outside of it, to advocate for its interests. While the PRC selectively chooses which international norms and institutions to engage with, Beijing has not attempted to change the foundational basis of the current order. For example, the PRC government supplies military equipment in support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in direct contradiction of the UN Charter.

At the same time, the PRC has benefitted immensely from engaging with international institutions, such as the WTO, and the trajectory of its economic and military growth depends on continuing this engagement. Recognizing the PRC's use of multilateral institutions to maintain world order, albeit not a liberal one, the U.S. needs to strengthen its foreign affairs agencies to drive actions that curb the PRC's growing presence and influence on a span of development and diplomacy issues. While these agencies maintain a diversity of approaches, such as countering the PRC in multilateral and bilateral settings, U.S. foreign policy in limiting the PRC's influence remains largely focused on strategic military advantage.

In doing so, the U.S. needs to reassert itself within the UN to balance the PRC's growing influence. To do this, the U.S. will need to deepen its participation and involvement within the organization and offer alternatives to the PRC's initiatives that restore confidence in the liberal democratic order. While the U.S. continues to maintain a stronger presence among the specialized UN agencies and the Secretariat, with an opportunity to better leverage those roles to secure U.S. values, the PRC is stepping up its attempts to systematically position Chinese nationals at the head of numerous UN agencies. In fact, Beijing has made strides in placing people throughout all levels of the UN, ensuring a much greater impact over time. The U.S. cannot lose its focus on maintaining this diplomatic balance of power.

To build upon this advantage, the United States should recommit to a bipartisan task force supporting the creation of a more effective oversight body to ensure that leadership structures within the UN can address corruption and mismanagement. Past efforts, like the Gingrich-Mitchell Task Force on UN Reform in 2004, fell short of their goals. Reinvigorated commitment to improving the UN's capacity to respond to crises swiftly would align with the intent of past bipartisan efforts and are necessary to confront future global challenges. For example, strengthening global health governance, particularly through organizations like the WHO, lays the groundwork for the United States to address global health and pandemic responses, like COVID-19. Moreover, a bipartisan task force in Congress should focus on ensuring peacekeeping missions are well-resourced and strategically planned. Finally, a renewed focus on human rights through the UN is critical, and the United States should take a leading role in advocating for UN reform on membership criteria for the UN Human Rights Council with a focus on admitting countries that are committed to democratic values.

Another critical initiative is coalition building and bilateral engagement across developing countries to address the challenges they confront when partnering with the PRC, including from their development loans. This is more readily achieved through both the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development in developing countries where the

United States maintains diplomatic initiatives and programs, many of which are grant-based. These programs are a strong opportunity to curb the PRC's influence. A bipartisan task force and higher prioritization by the National Security Council would ensure stronger interagency coordination that would enable strategic engagement with key federal agencies that can strengthen the development of functional economies, including addressing challenges with supply chain mechanisms and access to resources and markets.

Moreover, Congress should invest in human capital by addressing barriers to entry for U.S. candidates in the UN system and strengthening recruitment efforts for pathway programs for young leaders interested in multilateral diplomacy. This means recruiting and grooming the next generation of U.S. UN personnel. Congress should engage with organizations like the United Nations Foundation to expand international outreach and engagement with younger generations in strategically important countries.¹⁰

Lastly, the United States needs to continue calling out the PRC on areas of international noncooperation. In March 2024, the PRC (along with Russia) vetoed a U.S.-led draft resolution in the UN Security Council that called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield criticized the PRC for undermining diplomatic efforts, accusing it of hindering meaningful progress on the ground, particularly in addressing the humanitarian crisis.¹¹ Such U.S. actions put a spotlight on the PRC and incentivize other, less powerful states to rally against Beijing's wrongdoings on the global stage. Multilateral cooperation is necessary to confront PRC pressure, and the United States can play a unifying role again.

Conclusion

The international order created under U.S. leadership has changed since the post-WW II period, and the PRC arguably is using the rules of the game to increasingly change the game itself. While the PRC has leveraged its role in multilateral organizations to challenge U.S. dominance and promote its own interests, the United States must reinvigorate its engagement with these institutions to restore confidence in the liberal democratic order. By deepening participation in the United Nations, fostering coalition-building with developing countries, and investing in human capital, the U.S. can counterbalance the PRC's growing influence and reaffirm its leadership on the global stage.

The views expressed herein belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. government.

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