

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Comprehensive power shifts in the making: China's policy transfer partnerships with the United Nations

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Abstract

China and the United Nations (UN) have set up a growing number of partnerships to transfer Chinese domestic development policies across the South. By examining these partnerships through a power shift lens, we suggest that UN-endorsed policy transfer processes can function as a window into shifting international cooperation dynamics. The paper first provides an overview of the evolution and key characteristics of China–UN policy transfer partnerships, focusing on China's trajectory as a provider of policy solutions. It then analyses the extent to which the evolving partnership landscape contributes to and reflects shifts in China's compulsory, institutional, structural and productive power. Overall, we argue that policy transfer partnerships contribute to comprehensive power shifts in the making: while empirical data point to China's often (still) limited and evolving ability to influence the actions of others, our findings provide evidence for increasing levels of Chinese influence in and through policy transfer partnerships across all power types.

1 | APPROACHING CHINA–UN POLICY TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

The debate about the People's Republic of China's growing clout at the United Nations (UN) has considerably expanded in recent years, including on peace and security (Foot, 2020, 2024, this volume), international norms (Inboden, 2021; Oud, 2024, this volume) and increasingly so on development issues (Baumann et al., 2022, 2024, this volume). Here, China has not only expanded its engagement with the UN development pillar per se but also intensified its collaboration with individual UN entities to share its own domestic development experiences across the South (Waisbich & Haug, 2022). While these *policy transfer partnerships*, as we call them here, have remained a largely overlooked dimension of China's role as development partner, they offer insights into the evolving contours of global power dynamics through shifts of and contestations over who shares what, why and how. By making state-led policies—including the knowledge and technologies embedded in them—move from one

jurisdiction to another (Marsh & Sharman, 2009), policy transfer processes are an important dimension of international development cooperation flows and thus a window into the global landscape of knowledge and power (Stone et al., 2019).

This article examines China's expanding collaboration with the UN on development-related policy transfers through the prism of power patterns: To what extent, and how, does the rise of China's policy transfer partnerships with the UN contribute to and/or reflect global power shifts? Policy transfer processes with the UN, we suggest, are both an instrument for shaping and a mirror of changes in the geographies of power that condition international cooperation and the relevance of different kinds of expertise. Our analysis focuses on partnerships between China and UN entities set up as mechanisms and platforms to transfer Chinese development policy experiences across the South. It builds on our decade-long engagement with development-related cooperation processes involving China, other Southern providers and the UN system. Besides reviewing existing academic and policy

literature, we analysed publicly available UN and governmental documentation as well as data on specific cooperation initiatives. From September 2017 to July 2023, we also conducted semi-structured interviews, met for background conversations and engaged in written exchanges with 23 UN staff, diplomats and development experts from or working on China to corroborate findings and complement the scarce data available in the public sphere.

Taken together, we mobilise insights stemming from 18 major policy transfer partnerships China has set up over the last two decades with eight UN entities (Table S1)¹: the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO). The data analysis for this paper included mapping the trajectories of all South–South cooperation support schemes, projects, programmes, and centres (Table S2) that were set up by China and these eight UN entities with the—at least partial—goal to transfer Chinese policy experiences (Figure S1). We also developed a systematic overview of Chinese and UN agents involved in these policy transfer partnerships (Figure S2), examined the main policy areas they covered—notably agriculture (Figure S3)—and identified the specific instruments used for policy transfer (Table S3).

Many of the policy transfer partnerships we examined are multi-year programmes or fully institutionalised policy centres that harbour a myriad of individual initiatives and projects,² such as the WFP Centre of Excellence in China set up to share Chinese rural development experiences and the China–FAO South–South Cooperation Programme dedicated to the transfer of Chinese agricultural technologies. As China's links with FAO have led to the most comprehensive set of policy transfer partnerships to date, we particularly draw on China–FAO initiatives to unpack evolving cooperation patterns.

In what follows, we introduce the power dynamics at play in transfer partnerships and, building on power (shift) literature (Barnett and Duvall, 2005; see Haug et al., 2024, this volume), offer a four-legged conceptualisation of power shifts that serves as the central heuristic for our analysis. We then provide an overview of the evolution and key characteristics of China–UN partnerships, focusing on China's trajectory as a provider of development-related policy solutions. The central analytical section examines whether and to what extent there have been shifts in compulsory, institutional, structural and productive power in and through China–UN policy transfer partnerships. We argue that these partnerships contribute to comprehensive power shifts in the making: while empirical

Policy Implications

- China–UN policy transfer partnerships suggest that China's multifaceted exercise of power can unfold beyond contestations observed in the UN human rights or peace and security fields.
- Member states and UN entities should pay attention to how China provides less financial resources through trust funds than Northern donors but exercises more direct control over the use of these funds.
- Policy transfer partnerships can be effective vehicles for Southern states to introduce their policy priorities into global (development) agendas.

insights point to China's evolving and often (still) limited ability to (in)directly affect the actions of others in and through policy transfer partnerships, we find evidence of variable but increasing levels of influence across all power types.

2 | ANALYSING POWER SHIFTS THROUGH POLICY TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS: A CONCEPTUALISATION

The role of international organisations in sharing 'policy solutions' across the globe has been widely studied (Bazbauers, 2018; Stone, 2004). Both bilateral and multilateral policy transfers were long characterised by entrenched asymmetries with expertise flowing from 'rich Northern donors' to 'poor Southern recipients'.³ Historically, such transfers featured as a crucial component of North–South assistance flows (Chang, 2011; Hickey & Mohan, 2008). While UN entities have usually engaged in 'soft(er)' forms of policy transfer as opposed to 'hard(er)' forms characterised by different degrees of coercion or imposition—such as the structural adjustment programmes led by the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 1990s (Stone, 2004)—power dynamics are an essential component of how all kinds of transfer processes work. The politics of policy transfers (who receives what, how, why and from whom) have contributed to shaping the hierarchical boundaries and thus the distribution of power in the field of international development. For a long time, policy solutions transferred to the developing South through UN mechanisms were invariably shaped by the weight of Northern donors (Romano & Porto de Oliveira, 2023). Since the 2000s, however, global cooperation dynamics have undergone significant transformations with the

economic and political ‘rise’ of large Southern providers (Mawdsley, 2012), leading to a new wave of policy circulation from and through the South (Constantine & Shankland, 2017; Xu & Carey, 2021). As a consequence, Southern heavyweights—led by China, Brazil and India—have significantly expanded their policy transfer activities with the UN, contributing to an increasingly complex web of cooperation-related power relations.

Building on Barnett and Duvall (2004), we understand power in world politics not only as owned by a specific (group of) actor(s) but, more broadly, as the social production of effects that shape actors’ capacities to act. Regarding China–UN policy transfer partnerships, this invites us to not just ‘measure’ the evolution of Chinese power as such but rather examine changes, if any, in the extent to which, and how, China’s transfer partnerships re-shape the spaces and structures in which UN development entities and member states interact. Our analysis contributes to the examination of power regarding changes in China’s engagement patterns over time, also considering the evolving trajectories of other member states. In line with the Special Issue Introduction (Haug et al., 2024, this volume), we build on a four-legged heuristic to analyse how and to what extent China’s policy transfer partnerships with the UN contribute to shifts in four types of power: compulsory, institutional, structural and productive.

First, *compulsory power shifts* are changes in the distribution of resources actors have at their disposal and make use of to directly control actions by others, often facing some level of resistance (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 13f). In the analysis of transfer partnerships, this prompts an examination of changes in whether and how funds that enable transfers are used and controlled; how transfer foci and conditions are determined; to whom and how policies are transferred (or not); or how expertise is used as a resource to steer partnerships. Overall, compulsory power shifts in and through China-led policy transfer partnerships would be reflected in changes in the production of direct effects on other actors involved, including UN entities and other member states.

Second, *institutional power shifts* are changes in the indirect control of others via (in)formal institutions—including rules and procedures—through guidance of or constraints on action (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 15f). Applied to transfer partnerships, this invites us to examine changes in agenda-setting processes, policy priorities and management procedures at the UN, or how UN-endorsed policy transfer partnerships promote bias and privilege that advantage some and disadvantage others. Overall, institutional power shifts in and through China-led policy transfer partnerships would be reflected in changes in the production of indirect effects on actors’ ability to act.

Third, *structural power shifts* are changes in the mutual constitution of actors, that is, the relative positions actors occupy. Structural positions define ‘what kinds of social beings actors are’ (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 18)—usually along ‘hierarchical and binary relations of domination’ (21)—with implications for their capacities, interests and identities. In the analysis of transfer partnerships, this prompts us to examine changes in the traditionally dominant differentiation between donors and recipients, or in how international bodies relate to richer and poorer member states. Overall, structural power shifts in and through China-led transfer partnerships would be reflected in changes in the production of effects on how UN member states are classified and positioned relative to each other.

Finally, *productive power shifts* are changes in how social relations are constituted through systems of meaning (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 20f). Influence over the evolving ways in which concrete terms and broad identities are understood has diffuse impacts on the directions and (im)possibilities of action. In the analysis of transfer partnerships, this suggests examining changes in the very categories used to frame cooperation arrangements or dominant interpretations of who holds legitimate knowledge relevant for UN development work. Overall, productive power shifts in and through China-led policy transfer partnerships would be reflected in changes in how partnership subjects and objects are (re)shaped through the allocation of meaning.

While these four power shift types provide a heuristic for examining transfer partnerships, they are not always neatly separated and instead invite us to focus on different but interrelated aspects of what power is and whether or how it shifts. Also, some dynamics—such as changes in productive power—are more difficult to identify than the implications of visible compulsory action, and usually take more time to manifest. Our discussion of changes across the four power types thus highlights the incipient nature of our findings and draws on extant scholarly work to complement insights from our primary data. Before applying the power shift framework to the analysis of China’s policy transfer partnerships with the UN, we provide an overview of the context in which China–UN collaboration has expanded to embed and make sense of the empirical dynamics discussed in subsequent sections.

3 | THE RISE OF CHINA’S POLICY TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE UN

Over the last two decades, the global policy transfer landscape has changed considerably. With the emergence of new policy innovation hubs (Porto de Oliveira & Pal, 2018), current policy travel dynamics emphasise

not only classic North–North and North–South diffusion but also circulation from and through the South (Romano & Porto de Oliveira, 2023; Stone et al., 2019). In this context, international organisations' traditional 'screening function' (Porto de Oliveira, 2017) and their quest for best practices have coincided with the growing willingness of Southern powers, including China, to share and showcase development experiences as part of foreign policy rationales (Constantine & Shankland, 2017; Porto de Oliveira & Romano, 2022). Since the early 2000s, entities in the UN system have expanded the review and dissemination of 'Southern solutions' as part of their engagement with evolving global development agendas, from the poverty-focused Millennium Development Goals to the more comprehensive 2030 Agenda (Porto de Oliveira, 2017). Many UN entities have included South–South cooperation support in their strategic frameworks as part of attempts to circumvent the continuing funding and legitimacy crisis of traditional North–South cooperation (Haug, 2022).

For China, in turn, the last two decades have seen an intensifying engagement with development cooperation and the sharing of development-related policies (Xu & Carey, 2021), including with the UN development system (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume). Since the early 2000s, China has significantly expanded its South–South cooperation with other developing countries (SCIO-PRC, 2021) and has also made use of what is commonly known as triangular cooperation, where 'traditional donor countries and multilateral organisations facilitate South–South initiatives through the provision of funding, training, management and technological systems' (UNOSSC, n.d.). While triangular cooperation remains a small fraction of China's overall development cooperation portfolio, particularly when compared to development financing and bilateral assistance, it has grown over the past decade (Han, 2017; Waisbich & Haug, 2022). In its triangular initiatives, the Chinese government has preferred working with UN entities rather than Northern donors, based on the assumption that the UN enjoys higher levels of neutrality and is more likely to recognise and apply China's development practices (Zhang, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020).

Since the mid-2010s, China has further intensified efforts to 'multilateralise' its global development footprint to create a more responsible image and expand its influence across the UN system (Han, 2017; SCIO-PRC, 2021). A central component of these efforts has been the setup of new and more robust triangular partnerships with UN entities that feature strong policy transfer components. While cooperation with agencies like UNDP and FAO to promote Chinese expertise outside China goes back to the late 1980s (Gu et al., 2016; Zhang, 2020), the China–UN partnership landscape has become increasingly diverse since the early 2000s and more visibly so

from the 2010s onwards (Waisbich & Haug, 2022). Dozens of Memoranda of Understanding have been signed since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, also with reference to the Belt and Road Initiative, where UN entities seek to participate in China's most ambitious umbrella framework for global infrastructure engagement (Haug, 2024; SCIO-PRC, 2021). As a result, China currently holds partnership agreements related to policy transfer with several UN entities. Out of the 18 partnerships set up since the 1980s with FAO, IFAD, ILO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIDO and WFP that we have mapped (Table S1), two-thirds have been created over the last decade.

While China has engaged in development-related exchanges with the South since the early days of the post-1949 era, in the early 2000s, it mainly adopted what Zhang (2020, p. 232) calls a 'cautious and incremental approach' when partnering with UN entities. This mostly meant experimenting with triangular initiatives without proactively leading them and refraining from issuing clear guidance on what was long seen in Beijing as a 'new modality' (Zhang, 2020, p. 51). Chinese stakeholders' initial caution towards triangular cooperation initiatives—involving Northern donors or UN agencies as facilitators—related to a lack of Chinese ownership when funding came from external sources, as well as unease with agreements that were not clearly beneficial to China (Zhou, 2016). While these concerns have not disappeared, China has recently endorsed a more 'confident' (Waisbich & Haug, 2022, p. 12) approach sustained by economic and political backing for triangular initiatives at the highest political levels (SCIO-PRC, 2021, VII). This has included larger financial commitments by China to initiatives with the UN that focus on the transfer of Chinese policy experiences and technologies through seminars, studies, trainings or cooperation projects, with UN entities acting as enablers, facilitators or brokers (Waisbich & Haug, 2022). China now emphatically uses policy transfer partnerships with the UN to advance its own 'development models' and 'wisdoms'.⁴

Development cooperation 'with Chinese characteristics' is usually geared towards financing infrastructure and strengthening the productive sector in partner countries (Bräutigam, 2009; Gu et al., 2016). Compared with other Southern—notably Latin American—providers, China's approach is more oriented towards economic development as it aims to connect China and its Southern partners under a broad 'win-win' paradigm, through initiatives that fall both within and outside its 'aid' budget (Alves & Lee, 2022; Yu, 2019). China's policy transfer partnerships with the UN largely follow this rationale. While some of them address social development issues, including small-farming agriculture or health, they generally exhibit a strong emphasis on economic productivity, digitalisation as well as individual skills and capacity building in partner countries

(SCIO-PRC, 2021, II). Contrary to Northern-induced conditionality-based policy transfers in the past, the specific policies shared through China–UN partnerships do not target the institutional setup of political systems or macro-economic reforms but mostly operate at the technical level. Chinese actors taking part in these partnerships include national and subnational governmental agencies and line ministries, official think tanks and Chinese companies (Figure S2).

4 | EXAMINING CHINA'S TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS: SHIFTS IN COMPULSORY, INSTITUTIONAL, STRUCTURAL AND PRODUCTIVE POWER

Against the backdrop of expanding China–UN collaboration, we use the four-legged power shift heuristic introduced above to examine the extent to which, and how, China's development-related policy transfer partnerships with the UN have contributed to and reflect changes in Chinese leverage over the production of effects that shape the abilities of member states and UN entities to act. In comparison with 'harder' fields such as trade or security, we suggest that development-related policy transfer partnerships offer an insightful window into more hidden but influential tranches of China's engagement with the UN system. They are an integral part of the cooperation patterns that challenge traditional North–South hierarchies and increasingly co-shape multilateral development politics.

4.1 | Compulsory power shifts: Controlling transfer arrangements

As outlined above, compulsory power refers to the distribution of resources actors make use of to directly control others' actions. While we have not found evidence for coercive dynamics per se in China–UN transfer partnerships, our analysis suggests that there have been elements of expanding direct control by China through the use of funding flows. Compared with China's overall development cooperation portfolio or Northern voluntary contributions to UN development work (Baumann et al., 2022, 2024, this volume; Zhang, 2020), Chinese resources dedicated to transfer partnerships with the UN have remained comparatively small (Waisbich & Haug, 2022). The ways in which they are used, however, point to subtle shifts in how providers mobilise funding instruments and exercise control. After taking part in FAO-led—but usually Northern-funded—South–South initiatives until the 1990s, China set up a trust fund in 2003 to finance transfer projects and, from 2009 onwards, enable a more comprehensive programme for transferring Chinese agricultural policies

to Asian and African countries (FAO, 2019). China's voluntary contributions to this partnership with FAO totalled USD 130 million between 2009 and 2020, making China the champion of FAO's South–South work: over roughly the same period, Brazil's voluntary contributions to FAO were worth slightly more than USD 50 million, while Mexico, Morocco and Venezuela contributed between USD 5 and 15 million each (WFP, 2021). Similar funding facilities for policy transfer projects—all with restricted budgets—were set up through the China South–South Cooperation Assistance Fund with UNDP in 2017 and via the China-IFAD South–South and Triangular Cooperation Facility in 2018 (Waisbich & Haug, 2022). China has also become a major financial contributor to South–South cooperation work at WFP, particularly through the Global South–South and Triangular Cooperation Initiative—co-led by WFP and the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs—that fosters pilot projects on value chain development, post-harvest loss and disaster risk reduction.⁵

Contrary to assessed contributions for UN regular budgets that evolve in line with member states' economic weight and are spent on multilaterally agreed purposes, trust funds are mechanisms member states can use in flexible ways to directly influence the policies of multilateral agencies (Reinsberg, 2017; Weinlich et al., 2020, p. 179f). Trust funds promoting policy transfer activities direct resources to projects that favour certain member states or UN entities over others and directly shape cooperation initiatives and the evolution of public policies in specific sectors or policy areas. While this also holds true for how Northern donors have used trust funds, direct influence seems to be a more relevant motivation for systemically less dominant providers (Reinsberg, 2017, p. 90). Similar to India, China has been more visible than Northern states as the source behind its funding schemes with the UN, through the explicit focus on China's own development experiences and decision-making processes dominated by Chinese representatives (see below). The China–FAO programme, for instance, has been 'almost exclusively dedicated to supporting Chinese bilateral co-operation with African countries, mostly on agricultural technologies' (Baumann et al., 2022, p. 20). For individual UN entities, particularly those with strong(er) South–South support schemes such as FAO and WFP (Haug, 2022), Chinese funding for policy transfer initiatives is limited when compared with funds provided by traditional donors. However, it provides an alternative revenue stream in the context of tightening Northern aid budgets and thus additional direct leverage to shape both content and form of UN entities' cooperation portfolios.

Another more covert but not less effective factor that provides China with the ability to exercise direct control over policy transfer partnerships is its obvious material dominance vis-à-vis its partners. What attracts attention among Southern countries and UN

entities is usually not the (rather modest) budgets of Chinese technical cooperation initiatives per se but the general promise of benefitting from China's politico-economic weight. This includes opportunities for partner countries to connect with Chinese businesses via UN-sponsored transfer partnerships, such as the Chinese e-commerce company Pinduoduo Inc. with regard to the digital enhancement of agricultural productivity (FAO, 2019). Our interviews suggest that over the last 15 years, and somewhat similar to the position Northern donors have long enjoyed, there has been a perceptible evolution in China's ability to make other states preemptively comply with its preferences on the content or modalities of transfer processes without having to engage in explicit coercion.⁶ As a multifaceted foreign policy tool (Porto de Oliveira & Romano, 2022), policy transfer arrangements offer China concrete instruments for deepening political and trade-related ties with Southern countries—through the promise of sharing particular sets of technical expertise, for instance—that come to play in UN voting alignments or through active support of what China refers to as the One-China principle (Baumann et al., 2022; Raess et al., 2022).

Although Northern powers are increasingly wary about China's use of South–South cooperation and have pressured UN entities to reduce their engagement (Haug, 2022, 2024), China's Southern partners have not expressed—or not dared to express—resistance against China's transfer approach or Chinese preferences. As an African diplomat put it during an interview: 'We love China. Of course we want their expertise, we want more trade with them, investment [...] Well, and sometimes we have to love China. Think what would happen if we refused their offer!'⁷ This resonates with the representative of an Asian government who stated that 'saying no to China is not an option. We need to be more careful than ten years ago [because] China is China. We are the much smaller partner, so we better accept what they have on offer'.⁸ Ensuring good relations with China has become even more important in a post-pandemic context where foreign investment is desperately needed, infusing all potential engagement opportunities—including transfer partnerships—with additional relevance.

Overall, China's expanding footprint through UN-endorsed policy transfer partnerships has neither been particularly confrontational nor has it led to any major resistance, except for a general Northern wariness about UN support for China's South–South cooperation. Instead, trust funds set up with the UN to enable transfer partnerships provide China with an overall minor but quite effective instrument to exercise direct control over what is shared, how and with whom. Policy transfer partnerships also act as vehicles that mobilise influence over cooperation processes, stemming from perceptions, notably among

Southern countries, of China's politico-economic relevance. This increase in (in)tangible resources—enabling decisions that lead to direct effects on who agrees to taking part in transfer initiatives, and under what conditions—contributes to China expanding its zone of influence and, at least in relative terms, limiting that of traditional North–South flows. China's ability to exercise compulsory power through policy transfer partnerships with the UN may seem negligible; but it has increased over the last decade, contributing to co-shape the (often hierarchical) contours of how China collaborates with its Southern partners, re-shaping UN portfolios on the way.

4.2 | Institutional power shifts: Reconfiguring the 'what' and the 'how' of UN cooperation

Institutional power refers to the indirect control of others through (in)formal institutions, via guidance of or constraints on action. While limited overall, shifts in China's ability to exercise indirect control through policy transfer partnerships with the UN have been at least twofold. First, changes in the policies and priorities adopted by the UN (the 'what') attest to China's increasing agenda-setting power. Expanding China–UN collaboration has contributed to a strengthened focus on economic development issues (see Mawdsley, 2018), marking a visible shift from the good governance and poverty alleviation agendas promoted by many traditional donors and multilateral development banks (Hickey & Mohan, 2008) or rights-based social development approaches championed by both Northern donors and Southern providers like Brazil or Mexico (Pomeroy et al., 2019). Topics close to China's national development concerns in UN-wide debates are increasingly shaped by Chinese voices, including infrastructure development (PM-PRC, 2022), digitalisation (FAO, 2020) and food security. China–FAO policy transfer partnerships link food security to enhancing agricultural productivity or fostering smart agriculture—unlike Brazil's partnership with FAO, for instance, that promotes a rights-based approach linking food security to social protection (Waisbich & Haug, 2022). This contributes to the promotion of the Chinese approach to food security—strongly related to digital transformation and science, technology and innovation more generally (FAO, 2020)—that has recently gained prominence as a priority area under China's Global Development Initiative (Chu, 2022; CIKD, 2023; see Baumann et al., 2024, this volume). The increasing visibility of social agendas well 'beyond the pro-poor redistributive paradigm' (Urbina-Ferretjans & Surender, 2013, p. 262) traditionally advocated for by Northern donors—or Brazil, for that matter—is thus another facet

of China's agenda-setting impact through its transfer partnerships.

Second, the growth of China's transfer partnerships with the UN has put forward alternatives to established decision-making and organisational procedures (the 'how'), notably regarding the role of trust funds (see above). In addition to decisions taken by China-dominated boards, Chinese trust funds also offer more indirect means of exercising influence. While indirect control of UN entities through—softly earmarked—voluntary funding has been practised by Northern countries for decades (Weinlich et al., 2020), China's approach remains comparatively more restricted in terms of financial volumes (Zhang & Jing, 2004, this volume) but puts forward an alternative take on decision-making processes. Traditionally, UN-managed and Northern-funded trust funds have tended to downplay or even conceal the identity of funders (Reinsberg, 2017). By contrast, China has been more visibly involved in co-managing its UN trust funds, and Chinese diplomats based in Southern partner countries have played an important role in accompanying related transfer activities.⁹ Contrary to Northern donor practices, China's approach to UN trust funds thus puts the funder's identity and development expertise at the core of operations. While China's trust fund at FAO—providing China with a double role of expertise hub and strategy manager (Tang & Zhu, 2019)—exemplifies this approach, partnerships with UNICEF, WFP and IFAD reflect similar dynamics (Waisbich & Haug, 2022), as does the China-funded UN Peace and Development Trust Fund established in 2016 at the UN Secretariat (Baumann et al., 2022, p. 21).

In some ways, such functioning of trust funds exhibits features of a 'bilateralisation' of multilateral development cooperation where a single provider dominates not only funding streams—as in Northern donors' earmarking practices (Patz, 2023)—but also exercises (in)direct influence over structure, content, operational decision-making procedures and implementation processes. While Northern donors have long used trust funds to channel their resources and preferences into the UN system, their emphasis has been directed at multi-donor trust funds that pool funding across providers (MPTFO, 2023) and largely leave management and implementation questions in the hands of UN bodies. The approach championed by China, however, reflects a different understanding of the role of trust fund donors. It centres on China's ownership as a 'Southern' or 'developing' country that translates into an effective claim to (in)direct influence over the use of UN funding facilities operating through voluntary contributions. This procedural approach is set to consolidate in a context where an increasing number of Chinese nationals (try to) occupy key positions within the UN system (Lam & Fung, 2024, this volume), including at FAO where not

only the Director General but also the South–South cooperation division head are former Chinese government officials (Baumann et al., 2022).

Overall, both the 'what' and the 'how' of Chinese transfer partnerships with the UN thus point to some first indications of potential shifts in institutional power. Whereas the indirect influence of Northern member states through financial and human resources as well as general institutional capacities has long been a defining feature of the UN development system, China's partnerships with UN entities have started to challenge these 'frozen configurations of privilege and bias' (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 16) in both substantive and procedural terms. While these shifts are incipient and should not be overstated, they highlight concrete ways in which China's indirect control evolves at the UN.

4.3 | Structural power shifts: Towards the 'Southernisation' of UN development partnerships

Structural power refers to influence over the positions actors occupy relative to each other. While this mutual constitution is a direct relationship that conditions capacities, interests and identities, structures usually do not operate through direct control but rather through broader 'hierarchical and binary relations of domination' (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 21). A central question about structural power here is whether China's policy transfer partnerships with the UN have had any impact on how member states are classified, and how they interact among themselves and with UN entities. Our analysis points to two related—and incipient—shifts reflected in China–UN policy transfer partnerships, one general and one more specific.

Generally speaking, the rise of China's partnerships with the UN has provided a—minor but concrete—contribution to ongoing transformations in broad as-signations of North and South. As highlighted above, traditional transfer arrangements were built on the binary of developed (Northern) donors providing aid to developing (Southern) recipients (see Waisbich et al., 2021). This duality continues to exercise dominance in the field of international development, notably through the still central role of Official Development Assistance provided by Northern donors. At the same time, however, it has been challenged in a variety of ways, including through the rise of cooperation led by Southern heavyweights, notably China (Horner & Hulme, 2019). Reflecting China's strategic use of the South frame (Kohlenberg & Godehardt, 2021), Chinese partnerships with the UN combine 'mutual benefit' or 'win-win' framings (FAO, 2019, p. v, 3, 11–12) that build on trajectories of developing country solidarity with its increasingly dominant global position (MFA-PRC, 2022; SCIO-PRC, 2021). In combination with China's

flexible approach to Southern alliance politics across global fora and Southern partners' embrace of China as an ally irrespective of framing preferences (Haug & Kamwengo, 2023), these partnerships reflect and contribute to China's challenge to established structural positions.

Relatedly, and more specifically, the rise of China–UN transfer partnerships contributes to transforming the subaltern notion of 'developing country' as the traditionally inferior pole in North–South divisions. Through the expansion of South–South cooperation since the late 1990s, the once marginal position occupied by the increasingly heterogeneous group of developing countries has undergone significant transformations (Mawdsley, 2012, 2018). While UN budgets still reflect the dominance of Northern providers, the transfer of Southern—including Chinese—domestic development experience has been a cornerstone of this trend (Constantine & Shankland, 2017). The continuous increase in number and size of China–UN transfer partnerships over the last two decades exemplifies a general shift in global positions: considerable parts of the South are no longer (only) recipients, and the UN as a universal framework for multilateral cooperation supports and champions the evolving roles assumed by Southern providers.

UN-endorsed partnerships with China as the world's superpower-cum-developing-country (Baumann et al., 2022, p. 36) show that former recipients of development aid have a lot to share, and that their policies might even be more immediately relevant for other developing countries than those emanating from Northern donors. This is what we suggest referring to as the 'Southernisation' (Mawdsley, 2018) of UN cooperation processes: In addition to challenging established framings of Southern countries as poor recipients, China's transfer partnerships and similar schemes are now a visible reference in multilateral development circles. Out of functional and legitimacy-related reasons, partnering with China and other Southern heavyweights through triangular arrangements has become an increasingly debated modality among traditional donors (Zoccal, 2020). Whereas funding and expertise provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan or Germany were long the gold standard of international development, traditional players now increasingly feel the need to engage with the expertise, modalities and cooperation packages provided by China (OECD, n.d.).

These ongoing shifts notwithstanding, significant parts of the South continue to struggle with entrenched challenges from poverty and hunger to economic marginalisation, and Northern donors still dominate the development cooperation portfolios in beneficiary countries (Horner & Hulme, 2019). What is more, South–South transfer processes often reflect the dominance of China vis-à-vis its Southern partners, contributing to the entrenchment of South–South hierarchies similar to

those traditionally found in North–South partnerships (Waisbich et al., 2021, p. 2089). While highly complex and far from conclusive, however, Southernisation trends in UN-endorsed transfers led by China have already been leaving a visible mark on cooperation practices, contributing to still incipient transformations in the relative standing of member states. Overall, China–UN policy transfer partnerships contribute to challenging established donor-recipient structures and thus the traditionally allocated differential roles in development-related cooperation arrangements. They are part of a trend that undermines hegemonic North–South differentiations and introduces new sets of hierarchies, thus reflecting shifts in structural power across the international cooperation landscape.

4.4 | Productive power shifts: Steps towards transforming reference frameworks

Productive power, finally, refers to influence over the constitution of actors through systems of meaning and discursive practices. As broader changes in development (cooperation) paradigms take time to manifest, the trajectories of China–UN policy transfer partnerships to date only provide tentative insights into the potential of productive power shifts. What stands out is a general evolution in widespread perceptions of China's development expertise. While two decades ago Northern templates and standards still dominated development partnerships across the board, a considerable number of Southern stakeholders now highlight that '[w]e have so much to learn from China' (Sarpong, 2021, n.p.) and no longer turn to Northern expertise by default. In addition to the specific technical knowledge shared via China–UN transfer partnerships—such as dryland rice farming techniques in a China–FAO–Madagascar initiative (FAO, 2021)—China is also seen as having the most up-to-date development expertise overall. For many across the South, China's economic growth trajectory over the last decades and its largely successful fight against poverty at home resonate with its self-description as the 'champion of the developing world' (Duggan, 2020) and seem to provide important lessons for development prospects elsewhere (Xu & Carey, 2021).

Against this backdrop, China–UN transfer partnerships are an again minor but palpable element of changes in what is perceived as natural, normal or desired when it comes to (cooperation for) 'development'. Through the growing number of Chinese policies travelling to other Southern countries, standards and reference frameworks are being reshaped. Across Southern member states, today's answers to questions about which policies should be emulated, or whose expertise counts, tend to differ from those that would have been given 20 years ago.¹⁰ While Northern countries and their

development approaches have not vanished from popular imaginaries, China now proactively ‘welcomes other countries to board the express train of its development to achieve common progress’ (SCIO-PRC, 2021, p. 18) and has become a key source of inspiration across the South (Romano & Porto de Oliveira, 2023). With a focus on agricultural productivity, industrial skills enhancement and digitalisation, China’s ‘agricultural model’ promoted through China–FAO partnerships (FAO, 2019), for instance, contrasts with other existing policy priorities, such as small-scale agroecology-based farming agendas. It arguably exemplifies how China–UN policy transfer partnerships contribute to a ‘particular discourse of development orient[ing] action in one direction and away from others’ (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 22).

While the 2030 Agenda has brought environmental and climate concerns to the centre of development-related debates, China’s transfer partnerships both promote a green transformation narrative and put a strong focus on infrastructural development and economic productivity (MFA-PRC, 2022, iv–ii; SCIO-PRC, 2021, pp. 7–8), with the latter being particularly popular among Southern partners (Lekorwe et al., 2016, p. 2). The policies China transfers also postulate a particular paradigm for how (economic) development is to be achieved. Sometimes simplistically referred to as the ‘Beijing Consensus’, this take on development puts the ‘visible hand’ of the state in the driving seat, countering or co-opting market-based solutions associated with a neoliberal ‘invisible hand’ paradigm (UNOSSC and UNDP, 2021). Taken together, China–UN policy transfer processes reflect not only institutional shifts on what issues UN initiatives focus on, or what other providers might emulate, but also more fundamental questions on what development is and how it should unfold.

Another set of incipient changes in meaning builds on this particular (re)definition of ‘development’ and concerns assumptions and practices of ‘multilateral cooperation’. In China–UN transfer partnerships, UN entities do not simply act as project implementers under a UN brand—as with most Northern-funded initiatives—but support the transfer of Chinese knowledge and technologies, thus explicitly promoting the domestic experiences of one particular member state (Baumann et al., 2022). At a time of fluctuating multilateral development support by some Northern donors, including ‘aid champions’ like the United States and the United Kingdom (Gulrajani, 2019), China–UN transfer partnerships contribute to providing alternative understandings of UN roles (see above). Although Northern donors tend to dedicate their voluntary contributions to predefined purposes, they usually provide UN entities with a considerable degree of autonomy in implementing projects and benefit through mostly indirect influence (Weinlich et al., 2020). China’s policy transfer partnerships with

the UN, in turn, reflect an understanding of multilateral support that is much more geared towards UN entities championing the export of Chinese expertise and solutions, be it the transfer of Chinese agricultural technologies with FAO (Waisbich & Haug, 2022) or the promotion of schemes reminiscent of China’s special economic zones with UNIDO (Baumann et al., 2022, p. 18). Instead of building on established UN practices that often come with a strong Northern imprint, China’s partnership approach sees the UN as promoter and facilitator for responding to (or creating) Southern demand for Chinese experiences and technologies.¹¹ By making use of UN entities to enhance the prominence of China’s domestic policies and provide them with multilateral legitimacy, these policy transfer partnerships contribute to changes in what multilateral cooperation means and what member states can expect when engaging with UN entities.

Overall, China–UN policy transfer partnerships reflect the first steps of an incipient but potentially far-reaching trend towards transforming the meanings of development and assumptions about the role of the UN in multilateral cooperation. Although more time is needed to assess the long-term impact of these transfer partnerships on broader systems of meaning, the potential shifts in productive power that available evidence points to resonate with the changes to the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of partnerships analysed above under institutional power as well as the challenges to traditional North–South binaries examined under structural power. By embodying concrete alternatives to established systems of signification, China–UN policy transfer partnerships have started to contribute to undermining elements of the traditional foundation for interaction among member states and UN bodies.

5 | COMPREHENSIVE POWER SHIFTS IN THE MAKING: TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATION OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

This paper’s examination of China–UN policy transfer partnerships through a four-legged power heuristic has identified an—uneven—increase in China’s direct and indirect ability to influence others’ actions across all four power types. Some developments are minor but more visible, such as the compulsory power elements mobilised through trust funds and the attractiveness of China as a politico-economic heavyweight. Others appear less obvious but may have far-reaching implications. This includes shifts in institutional power where China–UN transfer partnerships push multilateral procedures towards higher levels—or a different kind—of bilateral influence. The transfer partnerships analysed in this paper also contribute to and reflect changes in structural power, notably

by re-shaping the roles of developing countries that challenge established North–South hierarchies. They are, finally, also part of broader trends that have started contributing to redefining established meanings of ‘development’ and ‘multilateral cooperation’ that go to the core of UN partnerships.

Based on these findings, we suggest referring to the effects China–UN policy transfer partnerships reflect and have contributed to as comprehensive power shifts in the making. The—potential—power shifts we have discussed are *comprehensive* in the sense that changes have taken place across all four types of power, even though in different ways and to different extents. At the same time, their nascent nature suggests that they are still *in the making* and thus far from confirmed. Changes are incipient and, in theory, could see a reverse trend, but available evidence points to potentially significant long-term impact.

It is important to highlight again that the intensity of shifts varies considerably across power types. Crucial material power resources at the UN—such as the control of budgets or management staff—often remain concentrated in the hands of Northern powers, not only in the peace and security pillar (Foot, 2024, this volume) but also in the development field (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume). However, policy transfer partnerships exhibit signs that China’s ability to mobilise compulsory power resources has been increasing. While analysts often have a strong tendency to focus on funding figures to make sense of China’s multilateral standing, the evolution of Chinese financial contributions relative to those of Northern donors is only one indicator to gauge China’s increasingly confident approach. Relative to its voluntary financial contributions to UN entities, China is likely to continue to punch above its weight, also through the multifaceted venues for the exercise of power—institutional, structural and productive—its policy transfer partnerships offer. If China’s trajectory at the UN continues in line with insights from the last decade (Haug et al., 2024, this volume), Chinese influence is likely to grow on all fronts, intensifying shifts across all power types and contributing to broader changes at and beyond the UN system.

A one-sentence summary of our findings on China’s policy transfer partnerships with the UN goes as follows: An uneven but visible increase in China’s ability to mobilise financial resources and its politico-economic weight for the control of transfer decisions (compulsory power), to steer agendas and re-shape decision-making procedures (institutional power), to influence how member states are positioned across international hierarchies (structural power) and to potentially affect changes in the meanings and assumptions that shape broad reference frameworks (productive power) contributes to—overall subtle and sometimes contested—shifts in China’s capacity to (co-)shape the production of effects which condition the ability of UN entities and

other member states to act. While China’s policy transfer partnerships with the UN are a moving target for analysis, the evidence discussed in this article suggests that they contribute to redefining what UN partnerships are about and how multilateral cooperation functions.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹This article expands on data presented in Waisbich and Haug (2022).

²For a systematisation of partnership types, see Table S2 (Supplementary Information).

³While China’s rise is often discussed with reference to East/West dynamics, North/South framings resonate more with development-related debates; see Waisbich et al. (2021).

⁴On the transfer of Chinese ‘models’, see Cheng and Liu (2021); Duggan (2020); Romano and Porto de Oliveira (2023).

⁵Informal exchanges with representatives of Rome-based UN entities, 2022–2023.

⁶Interviews with diplomats and UN officials, 2017–2023.

⁷Interview, March 2017, New York City.

⁸Interview, January 2021, remote.

⁹Interview, November 2018, Beijing; Interview, March 2018, remote.

¹⁰Interviews with African and Latin American stakeholders, 2017–2022.

¹¹Interviews with UN officials, 2021–2023.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found in the Supporting Information section at the end of the online version of this article.

Table S1

Table S2

Table S3

Figure S1

Figure S2

Figure S3

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