

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Power shifts in international organisations: China at the United Nations

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China is central to current debates about power shifts in international organisations, but a systematic and comprehensive assessment of China-related shifts has been missing. As Special Issue introduction, this article contributes to addressing this gap and examines whether, how and to what extent China-related power shifts have unfolded at the United Nations (UN) over the last two decades or so. We define power shifts as changes in the ability of actors to shape others' capacities to act and outline a framework that builds on Barnett and Duvall's four power types of compulsory, institutional, structural and productive power. Drawing from Special Issue contributions, our analysis covers empirical insights from the UN's three main pillars – peace and security, development and human rights – and paints an uneven picture. Despite continuing Western dominance, China is mobilising more compulsory power means than two decades ago. Chinese attempts to enact institutional power have also increased but mostly unfold in multilateral niches and remain cautious. While China's structural power position has expanded, China-related effects in productive power have so far remained limited and scattered. We conclude with a combined assessment of changes across power types and discuss research and policy implications.

1 | CHINA, THE UN AND SHIFTS IN POWER: AN INTRODUCTION

Changing power constellations among states have been an integral feature of academic research and policy discussions on international organisations and global politics (Acharya, 2018; Gilpin, 1981; Goddard, 2018; Hurrell, 2013; Tammen et al., 2000). A major cause of the renewed attention to international shifts in power has been the resurgence of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC was one of the poorest among developing states until the 1970s, and well into the first decade of the 2000s, Beijing was viewed essentially as a cautious global actor preoccupied with its own economic development (Gill, 2007; Shambaugh, 2013). Today, however, China has evolved to become the second largest economy in the world with the world's second largest defence budget, taking it well beyond

the category of “emerging power” (Breslin, 2021). Commentators have been divided over the implications of China's rise for the international system. Some argue that its challenge to global order remains partial (Johnston, 2019; Tang, 2018) while others have highlighted that China's greater activism is in service of making the world “safe for diversity” (Zhang, 2022) or “safe for autocracy” (Weiss, 2019), diminishing the space for liberal democratic principles to thrive (Doshi, 2021; Kroenig, 2020).

The United Nations (UN) has played a particularly prominent role in China's expanding engagement with global governance, with China itself projecting the UN as at the core of world politics and stating its commitment to “safeguarding the U.N.-centred global governance system” (PRC, 2020, part IV, para. 4). As the world's foremost inter-governmental organisation with close to universal membership and broad competences,

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the UN provides a framework for the formal equality of sovereign member states across most of its venues. Yet, power constellations at the UN are shaped by considerable asymmetries (Dutt & Mukhopadhyay, 2009). While some of these – notably the *de facto* dominance of Western states¹ through funding and other means (Weinlich et al., 2020) – put the PRC at a disadvantage, other aspects of UN hierarchies provide it with a privileged position, such as its permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

In the last 10 years or so, a more confident and materially powerful China has raised concerns, particularly across Western circles, that the PRC might “take over” (Cheng-Chia & Yang, 2020) or “remake” (Lee, 2020) the UN. Decisions by Western states to reduce multilateral funding or, in the case of the United States under Donald Trump (2017–2021), withdraw from UN processes have provided openings for China’s expanding engagement and additionally increased attention to its actions (Fehl & Thimm, 2019). The rise in China’s assessed contributions to the UN regular budget as well as the peacekeeping budget – a function of its sustained economic growth over the last decades (Haug et al., 2022) – has made China the second largest contributor in both cases. Beijing has also provided the UN with a standby peacekeeping force of 8000 personnel and more peacekeeping troops *in situ* than the other Permanent Five (P5) of the Security Council combined (Foot, 2020, pp. 84–85). It has set up a well-financed China-UN Peace and Development Trust Fund and associated the Belt and Road and Global Development Initiatives with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (Foot, 2020, p. 85; Haug, 2024). Chinese nationals have been executive heads of the UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) since 2007, and in 2021 China held elected leadership positions in four UN Specialised Agencies (Baumann et al., 2022; Cheng-Chia & Yang, 2020). Its broad intention to increase PRC representation in the UN’s international secretariat has similarly been identified as one of Beijing’s important longer-term goals, even though results have been mixed (Fung & Lam, 2021; Parizek & Stephen, 2021). Yet, despite the importance of these insights, comprehensive and fine-grained assessments of these changes have been rare, and a systematic consideration of China-related power shifts across the UN has been missing.

This Introduction to the Special Issue takes the growing academic engagement with changes in inter-state power constellations and China’s global role as a starting point to examine whether, how and to what extent China-related power shifts have unfolded at the UN. Our work builds on and benefits from foundational studies on China and the UN (Kim, 1979), as well as some recent contributions that discuss China’s approach to intervention (Fung, 2019), human protection (Foot, 2020), peacekeeping (Zürcher, 2019) and Security Council

diplomacy (Gowan, 2020; Wuthnow, 2015). We bring together insights from all UN pillars and selected cross-cutting issue areas to advance a nuanced approach that allows us to probe more precisely, over time, whether actual power shifts occasioned by China’s resurgence are taking place.

We understand and analyse the UN system predominantly as a set of intergovernmental fora in which member states compete and cooperate, together with a plethora of entities, international bureaucracies and third parties that aid, implement and often co-shape intergovernmental decision-making (Weiss & Carayannis, 2021). In terms of conceptualising power, we follow a relational understanding that conceives of power as the “production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 42). Power shifts, then, we define as changes in the ability of actors to shape – in direct or more diffuse ways – others’ capacities to act. While some argue that China’s power at the UN has not only increased but also translated into power shifts that favour PRC interests, our analysis is open towards changes that are unintentional as well as those that might lead to a diminution in China’s power.

In what follows, we first outline a conceptual framework for the analysis of power shifts in international organisations. Through this lens, we then provide a combined assessment of evidence and arguments presented throughout the Special Issue and finally discuss research and policy implications for engaging with China, the UN, and questions about power shifts.

2 | CONCEPTUALISING POWER SHIFTS IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Scholarship on the evolution of power in international affairs has long centred on the relationship between incumbents and challengers. Traditional power transition theories assume that powerful states create international institutions that reflect their interests and challengers question the legitimacy of these institutions and demand adjustments (Gilpin, 1981; Kahler, 2013; Tammen et al., 2000). While emerging powers are expected to be co-opted into the status quo, disrupt the existing order and/or set up alternative institutions, established powers are predicted to either defend the status quo and/or accommodate challengers to preserve key features of the existing system (Zangl et al., 2016). However, while much recent literature shows that the distribution of power in the international system is changing (Acharya, 2018; Goddard, 2018; Hurrell, 2013), it is also acknowledged that this may not result in a complete power transition that undermines or disables existing organisations (Kruck & Zangl, 2020).

Some analysts argue instead that the current Western-dominated order is “sticky” (Ikenberry, 2018; Layne, 2018). Others note that “rising powers are not in a position to overturn the current order completely” and “may wish to preserve some elements of it in the near and medium term” (Acharya, 2017, p. 272). Where there is a consensus in the scholarship, it is that so-called rising powers – explicitly or implicitly centring on China – aim for a greater role in relation to both the creation of order and its associated institutions. They may do so through sabotaging or disengaging from established multilateral bodies (Zangl et al., 2016) or resort to softer forms of power bargaining (Kruck & Zangl, 2020; see Kastner et al., 2019) in order to effect institutional adjustment such as formal changes to representation, voting rights, or the mandates of organisations.

What most of the literature on power shifts in international organisations lacks, however, is a subtler engagement with the phenomenon of power itself. For instance, at a well-established multilateral body like the UN, existing structures might be experiencing power shifts that are less easy to detect than institutional redesign, but with implications that are no less consequential for the interests of member states and the organisation as a whole. We thus contribute to the literature on power shifts by focusing not solely on institutional adjustments but also on the evolving, often less visible, exercise of different types of power. We find in the power framework of Barnett and Duvall (2005) a suitable concept that helps us identify and analyse these often subtle, yet no less consequential changes of power in international organisations. With Barnett and Duvall, we understand power not simply as a commodity expressed in military, economic and political capacities that actors can have or not but as the ability of an actor to shape others' capacities to determine their circumstances and fate. While this conceptualisation focuses on how material and non-material resources are used to (try to) produce intended outcomes, it acknowledges that actors only “have” power through social relations. Centring on implications for others means that power can also be at work even when actors are not aware of the effects that their actions produce, while conversely, acts of visible power politics can also prove to be ineffective.

Barnett and Duvall differentiate between four types of power – compulsory, institutional, structural and productive – that we use to outline how shifts unfold across them. While there is a wealth of scholarship on the concept of power in world politics (Guzzini, 2013; Katzenstein & Seybert, 2018; Lukes, 2005), Barnett and Duvall's four-legged power typology has been said to be “comprehensive” and “logically exhaustive” (Snidal et al., 2024, p. 7) as it brings together multi-faceted insights from different scholarly traditions through a systematic discussion of how power works. Also, their emphasis on relational power is key for our endeavour

to unpack China-related power dynamics in the context of an organisation that is a dense socio-political space. As ideal types that may each resonate with any social interaction, their four power types lend themselves well to shedding light on how actions, intentional or unintentional, with direct or more diffuse effects, lead or contribute to changes in multilateral constellations of power. We also acknowledge Barnett and Duvall's point (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 67) that, “in most social contexts all are operating simultaneously, intersecting with and reflecting off of each other.” Taken together, the four-legged approach allows for a structured analysis of power shifts as a multifaceted subject of inquiry. Across types, we take both changes over time and comparison across member states into account in order to provide a more comprehensive and fine-grained picture of shifts or their absence.

2.1 | Compulsory power shifts

Compulsory power is mobilised when actors exert direct influence to advance their interests, often against resistance (Dahl, 1957). As Barnett and Duvall (2005, p. 50) put it: “To study power in international relations is to consider how one state is able to use material resources to advance its interests in direct opposition to the interests of another state.” In a broader sense, coercion can also be exerted through symbolic means such as rhetorical action, shaming or expert knowledge (Johnstone, 2005). Not all acts of compulsory power by state A over state B need to be intentional: A may see its own behaviour in moral and altruistic rather than self-interested terms or as designed specifically to target another entity. Moreover, B may not act in reaction to coercive measures but comply in anticipation of potentially negative sanctions.

Importantly, not every attempt to mobilise compulsory power is successful since targets usually “retain at least some degree of agency” (Moon, 2019, p. 3). Some level of resistance can thus be a first indication of attempts to use compulsory power. In the context of international organisations like the UN, member state influence is closely connected to diplomatic procedures with direct effects. Formal resolutions and inter-governmental decisions are means through which member states can exercise compulsory power to shape the actions of fellow members or the organisation itself and/or mobilise them as a resource against opponents. Overall, means employed for the direct control of others – such as member states or non-state actors – include economic, political, military, symbolic/normative or expertise-related resources.

Shifts in compulsory power occur through changes in the distribution of resources actors have at their disposal to directly control actions by others. More succinctly, compulsory power shifts are *changes in the*

production of direct effects on actors' ability to act. Examples in the context of the UN include changes in how great powers make use of direct economic and political influence, such as a major drop or increase in voluntary funding. A sustained evolution in a member state's ability to exercise pressure to instal individuals of choice in key UN positions would be another example of how shifts in compulsory power unfold.

2.2 | Institutional power shifts

Institutional power is about “actors' control of others in indirect ways” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 51). By guiding, steering or constraining action, formal and informal institutions – such as rules, procedures and practices (North, 1991) – are a medium through which actors condition the existence of others, beyond direct coercion. As an integral part of social systems, these institutions usually do not belong to any given actor and are thus used in indirect ways. Access to these institutional means, however, advantage some and disadvantage others and often reflect “frozen configurations of privilege and bias” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 52).

Institutional power in international organisations can be channelled through established processes, such as the intricacies of decision-making procedures, and can also work towards changing these processes or creating new ones (Shaffer, 2005). As it is exercised in indirect ways, the identification and analysis of institutional power requires a detailed examination of empirical processes. Instead of equating the presence of resources with the actual exercise of power – what Kitchen and Cox (2019, p. 739, see Goh 2016) refer to as the “vehicle fallacy” – it is necessary to highlight how the exercise of existing capacities through indirect means contributes to outcomes. In multilateral settings like the UN, institutional power is often reflected in one-sided generalised funding practices, staff representation, networks, expertise and other forms of ties that enable member state representatives, international civil servants or non-state agents to wield indirect influence over agenda-setting and implementation processes.

Shifts in institutional power occur through changes in the indirect control of others via (in)formal institutions. In other words, they reflect *changes in the production of indirect effects on actors' ability to act.* Due to its indirect workings, and in contrast to compulsory power, changes in institutional power are likely to be of a more hidden and/or long-term nature. Examples include indirect influence over agenda-setting processes and policy priorities across UN bodies and inter-governmental fora, impacting decisions about which issues are to be included or excluded. Member states' capacity to mobilise institutional power can change through the indirect and often longer-term increases or decreases in

material resources such as their overall funding levels or staff representation, expanding or diminishing the ability to make effective use of institutional mechanisms.

2.3 | Structural power shifts

Structural power is about constellations where “the structural position, A, exists only by virtue of its relation to structural position, B” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 53). In contrast to the indirect workings of institutional power, structural power concerns the mutual constitution in direct structural relations and, contrary to compulsory power, is not about the exercise of coercive measures per se. Structures usually allocate differential capacities and identities along “hierarchical and binary relations of domination” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 56). In engrained – structural – forms of domination, most people's perceptions and preferences are shaped “in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things” (Lukes, 2005, p. 11). The roles allocated through structural relations come with rights, responsibilities, costs and benefits, and also shape thinking and beliefs, defining “what kinds of social beings actors are” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, pp. 52–53).

In international organisations, hierarchy and domination enter structural relations through the unequal distribution of privileges. What sets structural power apart from the direct control of compulsory power is that even dominant and superior roles depend on mutual constitution through external recognition (Wendt, 1999). Hegemons, for instance, need followers that accept and thereby legitimise their position and behaviour (Clark, 2011). At the UN, states are officially constituted as sovereign equals, with only the P5 enjoying a formally superior position in the peace and security field that is accepted by the entire UN membership. At the same time, structural differences between donor and recipient countries shape member state relations across multilateral bodies, including the UN (Dutt & Mukhopadhyay, 2009).

Shifts in structural power occur through changes in the mutual constitution of actors and their roles. These changes unfold through the interplay between actors redefining, claiming or instrumentalising existing roles or inventing new ones, and other actors passively accepting or actively co-shaping them. In other words, structural power shifts are constituted through *changes in the production of effects on how actors are relationally positioned* and thus how they interact. In the UN context (and elsewhere) this includes changes in the hierarchical differentiation between developing and developed countries or donors and recipients (Baumann, 2018). It also concerns changes in formal roles, such as veto powers and voting privileges (Posner & Sykes, 2014), or changes in hierarchy among member states, multilateral bodies and non-state actors.

2.4 | Productive power shifts

Productive power is about the “historically contingent and changing understandings, meanings, norms, customs, and social identities that make possible, limit, and are drawn on for action” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 56; see Hayward, 2000). While institutional power is about indirect control and structural power centres on mutually constitutive roles, productive power unfolds through discourses as systems of knowledge and meaning. In line with poststructuralist assumptions (Linstead, 2015), the analysis of productive power focuses on how the (im)possible, the natural or the normal are defined, and how identities and their capacities are produced through the allocation of meaning.

Even more so than institutional power, productive power operates in indirect ways; it “tends to be diffuse and can often work best when it hides its workings and appears *not* to be an exercise of power” (Reed, 2013, p. 203). Drawing on Foucault, Carstensen and Schmidt (2016, p. 331) argue that productive power impacts “not just what agents do but also what they think and say.” Overall, productive power wields influence over background knowledge (Kornprobst & Senn, 2016) that, often unconsciously, provides the foundation for the production or constitution of social phenomena, including institutions and identities. To examine the extent to which specific actors are able to mobilise productive power, their ability and efforts to influence broad systems of meanings – through “discourse coalitions” (Howarth, 2010, p. 318), for instance – take centre stage.

Shifts in productive power occur through changes in how actors are constituted via systems of meaning and discursive practices, i.e. *changes in the production of effects on knowledge systems*. The lens of productive power can enable us to detect and highlight evolutions in often slowly transforming systems of meaning for which a straightforward focus on actors and institutions might be unable to account. For the UN, this implies changes in how multilateral problems are constructed and redefined, including shifts in the authoritative interpretation of “peace and security,” “human rights” and “development” as central pillars of UN action.

3 | DECIPHERING CHINA-RELATED POWER SHIFTS AT THE UN

With these conceptual reflections in mind, what do we find with regard to China-related power shifts at the UN? Our four-legged heuristic provides us with a systematic approach to analyse the multi-faceted empirical evidence presented across the 12 contributions to this Special Issue. With China as our central focus, we mobilise insights from across the UN's peace and security, development and human rights pillars to identify

and unpack evolving power patterns over the last two decades.

3.1 | China's growing readiness to exercise compulsory power

A central means to exercise direct control at the UN is funding. Zhang and Jing (2024, this volume) find that China, contrary to the United States, has paid its assessed contributions in full, though with some delays, and has made use of shaming techniques to pressure the US government to pay its arrears. Beyond the regular budget, China has not followed the example of Western donors who display their global status through significant amounts of voluntary contributions, but it has used the limited amounts of voluntary resources it provides in more targeted and strategic ways (Baumann et al., 2024; Haug & Waisbich, 2024, both this volume). By earmarking most of its voluntary funding via trust funds established with UN entities, China decides not only about the geographic and thematic use of its resources (Zhang & Jing, 2024, this volume) but – through China-dominated boards and implementation structures – also how trust fund resources are implemented. These trust funds and the policy transfer schemes they sometimes finance are “an overall minor but quite effective instrument to exercise direct control over what is shared, how, and with whom” (Haug & Waisbich, 2024, p. 67, this volume).

In the UN development pillar, China remains less visible than Western donors in exercising compulsory power, but it appears more willing to challenge Western dominance than a decade ago. Beijing works behind the scenes of UN boards and negotiation meetings to secure votes, sometimes by threatening with economic consequences (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume), as it has done elsewhere across the UN system, including at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the World Heritage Committee (Langendonk & Drieskens, 2024, this volume). While there are some instances where such exercise of compulsory power has led to success – such as the election of the director-general of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 2019 – Western resistance has highlighted some real limitations to China expanding its clout, including attempts to increase the legitimacy of the Belt and Road Initiative through links with the UN (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume; see Haug, 2024).

In the human rights pillar, China has visibly increased its exercise of compulsory power over the last decade. It has directed (overall minor) earmarked contributions to Special Procedures under the Human Rights Council on issues that align with its interests, such as the right to development, and has publicly questioned the integrity of Special Procedure

mandate holders that have been critical of China (Inboden, 2024, this volume). The partial success of China's actions is reflected in instances where UN staff pre-emptively take Chinese interests into account when trying to tone down mandate holder statements. At the inter-governmental level, China has often been successful in recruiting sufficient support to make sure that resolutions going against its interests are not tabled at the Human Rights Council (Inboden, 2024, this volume; Oud, 2024, this volume). Through threats to mobilise aid and trade penalties or sending direct messages to country capitals, China seems to have been able to effectively exert direct pressure on member states and companies that criticise China's human rights record (Oud, 2024, this volume). Domestically, Chinese NGOs dealing with women's rights issues have also had their activities severely constrained, leading some – including unregistered NGOs – to mobilise transnational networks and directly engage with UN bodies to make their voices heard. However, Cai's (2024, this volume) analysis notes Chinese governmental attempts to curtail UN-related action of more independent civil society voices through travel bans or by making sure that passages are deleted from NGO shadow reports, while state-affiliated NGOs continue to put an exclusive focus on backing official Chinese positions at the UN.

In the peace and security pillar, China's exercise of compulsory power has visibly evolved over the last two decades. The use of its veto as a means to block multilateral action is a case in point. Although China was the most reluctant P5 member using its veto prior to 2011, it has since used it 13 times, in a context of overall decreased veto use (Foot, 2024, this volume). This strengthens the power of China's anticipated veto as a means to exercise control before a resolution is tabled, with Western Council members trying to avoid a Chinese veto, particularly one coordinated with Russia. While China has not vetoed alone in the Security Council since 1999, it has managed to block or redirect action that supports an expanded – liberal – definition of international security through (the anticipation of) veto use. At the same time, China has not increased its use of direct blaming in Security Council deliberations. Contrary to the “barking of Chinese wolf warrior diplomats” (Verbeek, 2024, p. 47, this volume) elsewhere, Chinese representatives continue to act with discursive restraint towards adversaries in the Council, notably when compared with the behaviour of other P5.

Over the last two decades, China's expanding economic and political might has thus allowed Beijing to mobilise compulsory power in different and often complementary ways. Although there are venues where China's direct control does not seem to have evolved substantially (Meng, 2024, this volume; Verbeek, 2024, this volume), evidence from across pillars suggests an overall increase in compulsory power. On the one hand,

China's obvious economic and political dominance offers tools – such as the promise of or the threat to revoke development funding, market access and debt relief – to push and sometimes coerce other (particularly Southern) member states into acting in line with Chinese interests (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume; Oud, 2024, this volume). On the other hand, China's expanding global clout can lead to “pre-emptive obedience” (Inboden, 2024, this volume; Oud, 2024, this volume) where China exercises control over others' behaviour without having to proactively intervene. Examples are instances where foreign leaders issue public apologies for “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people” to avoid commercial retaliation (Oud, 2024, p. 89, this volume), or where Southern partner countries agree to China-led cooperation schemes with the UN to not upset Beijing (Haug & Waisbich, 2024, this volume).

3.2 | China's cautious increases in institutional power

China's ability to set agendas and establish policy priorities has increased over the last two decades, through its ability to build on a number of institutional power resources. In terms of representation among UN staff, China's figures have continuously improved but still remain below both Beijing's expectations and the targets set by the UN based on the principle of balanced geographic representation (Lam & Fung, 2024, this volume; see Baumann et al., 2024, this volume). Numbers show that where China had held the headship of a particular Specialised Agency for some length of time, representation of PRC nationals increased to a point where Chinese were among the top three nationalities among staff (Lam & Fung, 2024, this volume). What is more, since 2014, China has had the highest number of interns working at the UN, as numbers more than doubled from the 2012–2013 to the 2018–2019 biennium. As Lam and Fung (2024, this volume) argue, Beijing has put a particular emphasis on boosting numbers of Chinese in UN positions as a strategy to increase its institutional power over the long run; but this investment in training “Chinese patriots” will take decades to bear fruit.

In terms of funding, institutional power does not manifest through the provision of (or the threat of withdrawing) voluntary earmarked resources but through combined levels of funding – including assessed contributions – that come with a general but less concrete weight at the UN. Chinese overall contributions to the UN system have markedly increased over the last two decades, mostly driven by a mandated increase in assessed contributions. China's voluntary contributions, while they remain marginal, particularly

when compared with those from key Western donors, do translate into institutional power but only through China-led governance arrangements those manage these funds (Zhang & Jing, 2024, this volume). China's engagement with the development pillar resonates with these general trends: overall voluntary funding levels have increased only to a limited extent (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume; Meng, 2024, this volume), and while the number of Chinese nationals in staff positions has grown, China currently only holds one leadership position – at FAO – in the UN development system. In entities such as DESA, FAO and, formerly, the UN Industrial Development Organisation, changes in China's institutional power – through the (re) shaping of priorities and a more proactive engagement with agenda-setting processes – have evolved incrementally (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume); whereas UNESCO seems to be a case where the increase in China's institutional power has been more pronounced. In addition to China introducing new norms into the organisation's educational work, Meng's (2024, this volume) analysis highlights that the number of Chinese domestic institutions engaged with UNESCO has increased significantly over the last two decades. Under the guidance of the government, these include both public and private Chinese entities that actively work to co-shape UNESCO's programmes.

China-led policy transfer partnerships with the UN, in turn, explicitly promote Chinese priority topics abroad drawn from domestic experiences – from infrastructure development to digitalisation or food security – and are thus contributing to changes in UN portfolios for developing countries (Haug & Waisbich, 2024, this volume). What is more, these partnerships advance an approach to collaborating with the UN that differs from Western templates by putting the provider – China's expertise, priorities and bilateral interests – centre stage. In the human rights pillar, China has arguably less institutional anchoring in the UN bureaucracy and among Special Procedure mandate holders – so far no Chinese national has ever held such a position (Inboden, 2024, this volume) – but its general approach has evolved “from a self-defensive position to active agenda-setting” (Oud, 2024, p. 88, this volume). For the time being, however, while Beijing has indicated interest in strengthening inter-governmental oversight of the Special Procedures, it has so far not engaged in meaningful action to reshape rules (Inboden, 2024, this volume).

In the peace and security pillar, a number of features enhance China's prospects for mobilising institutional power, notably its high-level contributions to the peacekeeping budget and peacekeeping forces that are larger than those of all other P5 combined. So far, however, China has hardly ever acted as penholder on a Security Council resolution and does not seem to use institutional power to full effect to set Council

agendas (Gowan, 2024, this volume). At the same time, since 2015 Beijing has become more active in using its Council presidencies to influence Council priorities. A case in point is China's emphasis on peacekeeper over civilian safety, leading to the establishment of a widely acclaimed Group of Friends on troop security (Foot, 2024, this volume). Nevertheless, although China's institutional power has increased in the peace and security pillar, changes have been modest overall. As of March 2024, China does not hold any security-related leadership position at the Secretariat, and its overall disbursement of voluntary funding across the pillar has remained limited when compared with that of Western powers (Foot, 2024, this volume).

What is more, UN structures and procedures themselves can contribute to complicating China's rise as a unitary force. Faced with mounting concerns about potential retaliation from the government, more independent Chinese NGOs have gradually turned to engaging with UN spaces via transnational civil society partners, submitting reports anonymously to UN bodies, or using online platforms to stay informed about China-related debates at the UN (Cai, 2024, this volume). Despite severe limitations, “the de facto access of Chinese NGOs to the UN system remains limited but has never been greater” (Cai, 2024, p. 155, this volume) and can thus introduce minor but visible complications into official Chinese agenda-setting strategies.

3.3 | China's increasingly dominant structural power position

As both a member of the Group of 77 (G77) and the P5, China's structural position at the UN has long been unique. At the apex of structural power in the Security Council, China is the only P5 that self-identifies as developing. From the early 2000s when it markedly stepped up the number of its peacekeeping troops, Beijing began straddling the divide between those who authorise peace operations and those who provide personnel to implement Council mandates (Foot, 2024, this volume). Given China's rise of the last decades, however, and even though Chinese particularities have not vanished, its P5 status as a “responsible major state” has arguably experienced a certain level of normalisation (Gowan, 2024, this volume). Similarly, there are other instances where China seems to have joined the group of (primarily Western) established powers at the top of de facto member state hierarchies (Langendonk & Drieskens, 2024, this volume). At the Security Council, the mutual constitution of permanent members has been a key force in keeping Council work going and – despite rising geopolitical tensions – identifying opportunities for compromise. As Gowan (2024, this volume) argues, both China and Western powers have an interest in keeping the Security Council functioning,

and both push for their respective interests while also working to accommodate each other's concerns. While China had previously remained at the margins of Security Council deliberations (Foot, 2024, this volume), its expanding clout over the last two decades is reflected in how Western powers now seek to engage with Beijing. Their engagement strategy has deepened since 2022 in attempts to make sure China does not always align with Russia, with recent US efforts to elicit a Chinese abstention on a resolution on Ukraine being a case in point (Gowan, 2024, this volume).

As Foot (2024, this volume) highlights, China-related structural shifts in the peace and security pillar do not only relate to inter-state dynamics but also to assumptions about the underlying constitutive relationship between states and individuals. China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) – announced in 2022 – puts forward a state-focused understanding of security that challenges the liberal focus on individual security, as championed by a number of Western states and UN leaders since the 1990s. So far, however, China's efforts have met with resistance from Western powers and the current Secretary-General. While the GSI has so far not become a central reference in UN circles, it is prominent in China's bilateral and group-based interactions and seems to resonate with non-Western member state groupings.

In the development pillar, the evolution in China's standing has had tangible consequences for structural power constellations. Against the backdrop of long-standing developing/developed binaries, large Southern member states – epitomised by China – contribute to blurring traditional North–South divisions (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume; Haug & Waisbich, 2024, this volume). Underlying positions have not changed fundamentally, as Western donors still provide the bulk of funding for UN work with developing countries. However, China's expanding engagement introduces alternative elements that might not be visible everywhere (Meng, 2024, this volume) but upset traditional donor-recipient models (Zhang & Jing, 2024, this volume). Given China's current standing in the UN's “funding hierarchy” (Zhang & Jing, 2024, p. 127, this volume) as second-largest provider to the regular budget, UN development entities – such as FAO – try in different ways to benefit from China's presence. They largely accept their function as platform for China-led development partnerships that have a strong focus on Chinese technologies and China's bilateral relations with partner countries. The fact that Western donors now have to engage with the reality of China's South–South cooperation indicates that a – still ongoing – shift is taking place when it comes to the relative standing of partners and schemes (Haug & Waisbich, 2024, this volume). Another recent and potentially far-reaching innovation for China's position is the Global Development Initiative (GDI) announced at the UN in 2021. The GDI

not only puts forward a Chinese-inflected sustainable development vision but also carries a claim to more visible Chinese leadership and – notably through the Group of Friends of the GDI that over 70 countries have joined – functions as a testbed for China's ability to create and sustain development alliances (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume). Moving forward, how the GDI – and similarly the GSI in the peace and security pillar (Foot, 2024, this volume) – is received at the UN will help gauge the extent to which China's structural position has actually evolved.

A less substantial evolution in China's multilateral position concerns the question whether the party-state alone speaks for China. The last two decades have seen a – very – limited pluralisation where non-governmental Chinese bodies try to make their more independent voices heard in UN circles. The hierarchical relationship with the government, however, means that their currently most confrontational action consists of presenting their own accounts to UN bodies while remaining mute on government positions and actions (Cai, 2024, this volume). Heated debates about Xinjiang and the treatment of Uyghurs, in turn, have highlighted not only that non-state voices can matter in co-shaping China's global image but also the extent to which the government in Beijing is ready to mobilise compulsory means to defend itself and/or launch counter-attacks in UN venues (Oud, 2024, this volume). Exceptions notwithstanding, the Chinese party-state continues to occupy a dominant structural position at the UN, also vis-à-vis other Chinese stakeholders.

3.4 | China's productive power challenge

Productive power through dominant meanings behind key UN concepts such as “security,” “development” and “human rights” has long been – and often remains – associated with Western voices. Over the last decade, however, China has made some inroads into co-defining the contours of UN discourses and is engaged in an ongoing attempt to re-interpret UN Resolution 2758 (United Nations, 1971) – that recognised the People's Republic as “the only legitimate representative of China” at the UN – in ways that support its position on Taiwan (see Oud, 2024, this volume). At the Security Council, China does not seem to have increased aggressive discursive attacks over the last decade (Verbeek, 2024, this volume) but it has made use of its Council presidencies since 2015 to challenge liberal understandings of the UN Charter in general and of peacekeeping in particular (Foot, 2024, this volume). Support for China's attempts to introduce alternative – or more traditional – understandings of established concepts has come through the “Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations.” Established by Venezuela in 2021, this Group builds

on a commitment to the sovereign equality of states and non-interference in internal affairs as fundamental features of UN multilateralism. China's GSI (see above) has again emphasised this challenge to the UN's liberal turn (Foot, 2024, this volume), as has its Global Civilization Initiative (Oud, 2024, this volume) – announced in 2023 – in the prominence it gives to cultural differences to undercut the universality of human rights.

In the human rights pillar, similar challenges to what China and its allies often frame as the Western-dominated status quo have become more pronounced (Inboden, 2024, this volume; Oud, 2024, this volume). It is often the very definition of “security,” “human rights” and “development” that, over the years, has moved to the centre of Chinese attempts to reshape UN systems of meaning. Certainly, China has always adopted a state-centric approach to security. However, its approach to human rights has evolved significantly over the last two decades: from a defensive attitude designed to shield China from international criticism to a proactive stance on redefining key concepts in line with Chinese party-state interests (Oud, 2024, this volume).

Although China's definitions of “security” and “human rights” have met with opposition from both (Western) member states and (parts of) the UN bureaucracy (Foot, 2024; Inboden, 2024; Oud, 2024; all this volume), China has encountered a less controversial and indeed often encouraging context in the UN development pillar. Both UN entities and developing country member states tend to welcome China's expanding engagement and accept subtle changes to the “old normal” of often Western-dominated understandings of multilateral cooperation. China's development knowledge (Haug & Waisbich, 2024, this volume) and its position and leadership as a “superpower-cum-developing-country” (Baumann et al., 2022, p. 36) have increased Beijing's influence over evolving definitions of “development” and what is seen as relevant or desirable elements in multilateral cooperation. At the same time, and contrary to the human rights pillar, China has not visibly pushed for major normative change to rights-related UN development mandates. China's efforts have mostly focused on rebalancing rather than replacing the ideational foundations of UN development work, except for the GDI which presents a specifically Chinese interpretation of sustainable development, undercutting the emphasis on human rights and the rule of law in the 2030 Agenda (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume). This might thus become the cornerstone of a more proactive challenge to Western-dominated meaning systems.

For the time being, however, all changes in China's productive power credentials discussed across this Special Issue are incipient. Certainly, there is ample evidence that China is trying to contribute to and amend certain parts of established systems of meaning. In this regard, the perceived potential of China's

productive power challenge has started reverberating across the UN system. Nevertheless, the dominance of Western-led templates remains a palpable feature of current UN realities, as a number of member states and UN bodies have repeatedly opposed China-sponsored attempts to alter UN discourses (Baumann et al., 2024; Foot, 2024; Inboden, 2024; Meng, 2024; Oud, 2024; all this volume).

4 | POWER SHIFTS, THE UN AND CHINA: PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, our analysis and insights from Special Issue contributions paint an uneven picture of China-related power shifts at the UN. Although we find changes in China's favour across all power types, more fundamental power shifts are mostly incipient, if at all, and do not manifest across all issue areas. The PRC seems to be in the process of “catching up” with major (Western) powers in playing a more dominant role across the UN system, and in specific areas that reflect Beijing's interests. At the same time, China's unique positionality that combines developing country alliances and P5 status has provided it with a toolset that Western powers do not have.

The answer to whether we can identify China-related power shifts at the UN centres, in essence, on a “yes but.” Over the last two decades, a general expansion of China's economic and political capacities has translated into an increase in China's engagement with the UN system, and we have identified a more visible shift in China-related power dynamics at the UN from the early 2010s onwards. In particular, 2013 marks the start of a more proactive vision of China's multilateral role (Baumann et al., 2024; Foot, 2024; Langendonk & Drieskens, 2024; Oud, 2024; all this volume). Across UN pillars and issue areas, there is ample evidence of the PRC mobilising more compulsory power means than two decades ago, even though – in most cases – China remains far from dominant compared with the United States and other Western states. China's institutional power resources and attempts to co-shape agendas have also increased, but these attempts mostly unfold in multilateral niches and remain cautious. China's structural power position, in turn, has expanded and is contributing to both a normalisation of its great power role and a recalibration of North–South templates. Incipient China-related effects in productive power, finally, appear across UN venues, but observing the extent of these effects will require a longer timeframe.

What our analysis also highlights is how different types of power build on each other and/or unfold in combination (see Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Johnstone, 2005). The mobilisation of compulsory means is often not only directed at wielding direct

control per se but also aims to expand other types of Beijing's power. Broader transformations in structural and productive power partly informed by China's global rise – such as the resurgence of North–South differentiations (Baumann et al., 2024; Haug & Waisbich, 2024; Langendonk & Drieskens, 2024; all this volume) – shape a context where it is easier for Beijing to exercise compulsory and institutional power in ways that combine developing country and major power templates. An expansion of institutional power resources through an increase in UN staff representation (Lam & Fung, 2024, this volume) can aid the enactment of compulsory or structural power and, over the long run, lead to increased capacity to affect the distribution of productive power. China pressuring G77 members to vote for their candidate at the FAO director-general elections (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume) or soliciting public demonstrations of support for its interests in world heritage negotiations (Langendonk & Drieskens, 2024, this volume), in turn, reflect compulsory action geared at establishing both direct and indirect control over UN proceedings. The sustained ability to secure such positions contributes to a shift in structural power and, over the long run, can provide one instrument in the productive power toolbox for reshaping broader meaning systems.

While pre-emptive obedience and overt critique of China's actions are phenomena we have identified across UN pillars (Foot, 2024; Haug & Waisbich, 2024; Inboden, 2024; Oud, 2024; all this volume), the attractiveness of and support for the PRC among considerable segments of the UN membership and the UN bureaucracy should not be underestimated. Faced with dwindling or more volatile Western support, many developing countries are keen to engage in China-led cooperation programmes because they perceive China as a role model and leader, or simply the most powerful Southern ally (Haug & Waisbich, 2024, this volume). In discussions about the international human rights regime, many non-Western UN member states are sympathetic to China calling out Western double standards and making the case for non-interference in domestic affairs (Oud, 2024, this volume). The expansion and evolution of China's power at the UN, then, is not only about compulsion but inherently linked to how others perceive and judge Chinese interests and actions relative to their own predispositions.

Overall, the multifaceted nature of our findings resonates with extant in-depth analyses of PRC engagement with specific UN issue areas (Foot, 2020; Fung, 2019; Wuthnow, 2015) and – through the combined analysis of empirical insights from across UN pillars – points to more comprehensive patterns that complicate simplistic categorisation (Fung & Lam, 2022; Johnston, 2019). The variety and evolving nature of insights into China-UN dynamics underline the extent to which China's engagement with the UN is a moving target, also in light of considerable domestic challenges

– including economic slowdown (Lubin, 2024) – that are set to impact Beijing's global strategies. Assessing China's role in international organisations needs to be put into perspective and requires ongoing and systematic assessments. As a heuristic for this purpose, the four-legged power shift framework has allowed us to map and examine a wealth of empirical evidence. Certainly, it is not always easy to determine when an observed alteration in behaviour or an increase in the availability and use of resources reflect a more sustained shift. However, in-depth engagement allows us to detect where power resources are being used to exercise influence over others (Goh, 2016).

What, then, do our findings imply for scholars and practitioners? First, the current multi-faceted nature of China's engagement across the UN system, together with its apparent shift from a low-key to a more active approach, highlights why non-Chinese stakeholders express the need to expand their levels of understanding about China and its global role.² An increase in track-two dialogues between Chinese, Western and Southern scholars may help in this regard; but so too would continuing close examination of Chinese positions across different policy areas to assess where and why the most notable advancements in power (if any) are taking place. However, we also urge nuanced understandings of any changes that might have been observed. Our dominant finding is that China-related power effects are neither increasing in a linear fashion nor evident across all issue areas. Irrespective of how China's engagement across the UN system evolves, member states should make sure that concerns about legitimate representation do not undermine the core liberal tenets associated with the UN.

Second, our analysis provides insights into the quintessential case of an international organisation deeply embroiled in geopolitical tensions. Those interested in protecting the ability of international bureaucracies to co-shape multilateral policies could usefully strengthen UN norms of accountability and transparency, advocate for the continued independence of UN staff (irrespective of nationality) and ensure sufficient levels of funding for potentially controversial areas of work. This is particularly the case for the underfunded human rights pillar, where the PRC has launched an especially overt challenge. Beyond member state reflections, the UN bureaucracy might want to consider how a broader basis of support for established UN norms can be developed and how to incentivise cooperation across the divide between China and Western member states. At the same time, however, stakeholders need to appreciate the diversity of reasons behind China's rise at the UN. Southern countries' alignment with China is not (only) the result of Chinese pressure but often reflects a broader normative alignment vis-à-vis a largely Western-dominated status quo and the hope that partnerships with China will lead to sustained economic growth.

Finally, power shifts in international organisations are not unitary phenomena. As we show throughout the pages of this Special Issue, China-related power dynamics evolve across all UN pillars but levels of effect vary. Depending on the policy area, China can be a status quo, reforming or revisionist state at the UN (Johnston, 2019). This – as well as the fact that China-related changes across all power types are incipient or take place incrementally – requires regular and in-depth attention. Scholarship on power shifts in international organisations might want to build on our framework to unpack questions of cause and effect, including how power relations among member states in a given organisational context affect and are affected by power dynamics beyond it. Also, future research could engage in more detail with the relationship between power types – e.g. whether and how an increase in one can be translated into others – and compare our China-focused findings with insights into how other major states beyond the West engage with the UN. Beyond geopolitically informed framings, we hope that this Special Issue contributes to a more nuanced and systematic discussion of China at the UN, and of how power shifts do – and do not – unfold in and through international organisations.

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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

¹ For the purpose of our discussion, Western states are those from the Western Europe and Others Group at the UN.

² Background conversations with UN and member state representatives between September 2021 and December 2023; see also Jiang (2023).

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