Received: 3 May 2023 | Revised: 12 December 2023 | Accepted: 13 December 2023

DOI: 10.1111/1758-5899.13327

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Reining in a liberal UN: China, power shifts, and the UN's peace and security pillar

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Abstract

Has the deepening of China's involvement with the United Nations (UN) actually led to significant China-related shifts in power at the UN over the last three decades? This article explores this question in relation to the UN's move in the post Cold War era into a period of greater normative ambition that made the protection of the individual central to its efforts to maintain international peace and security. Conceptually, the article utilizes and adapts the four power types put forward by Barnett and Duvall (2005). Empirically, it draws on some core elements of the UN's expanded liberal normative agenda relating to the security of the individual. The article explores Beijing's attempts to revise or reverse the UN's liberal turn, assessing the extent to which China has been able, in the process, to effect a power shift. It concludes that China has had some, but as yet limited, successes. However, Beijing seems set to continue to be associated with the various types of power discussed here to press its case.

1 | APPROACHING CHANGE IN CHINA'S SHAPING OF THE PEACE AND SECURITY PILLAR

It is not unusual in the current era to find UN officials and diplomatic representatives at the United Nations (UN) observing that China has become a more powerful force within that organisation.[1] What is less clear, however, is whether the deepening of China's relationship with the UN—a deepening that provides opportunities for both agentic and structural change—has actually led to significant China-related shifts in power at the UN over the last three decades. As argued here, Beijing is motivated to revise or reverse the UN's expanded normative agenda associated with the liberal turn adopted from the late 1980s. However, it remains essential to explore how, and to what extent such power shifts have actually unfolded.

These matters are explored with respect to the UN's critical founding pillar dealing with the maintenance of international peace and security. The empirical canvas is potentially large; thus, the examples drawn upon reflect only some of the core policies that have been a part of the Security Council's (SC) expanded liberal agenda, and that particularly concern China's foreign policy elite. In broad terms, these are related to the attempt to make the individual rather than the state a more significant security referent. This includes such issues as the protection of civilians (POCs), and particularly women, caught up in armed conflict; and preventing and protecting individuals from mass atrocity crimes under the normative banner of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P).

The first section of the article, building on the Introduction to this Special Issue (Haug et al., 2024, this volume), outlines Barnett and Duvall's four types of power (2005)—compulsory, institutional, productive and structural power. Barnett and Duvall do not explicitly consider how to determine the presence of significant shifts in power—that is, outcomes that reflect an actor's ability to shape the fates of others and condition their existence. However, extrapolation from their formulation allows an analyst to make better sense of the ways in which an ascendant revisionist or reformist state may be involved in power dynamics in international organisations that effect change—suppositions that later can be empirically evaluated.[2]

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The article next describes the UN's liberal normative turn from the late 1980s, together with brief reference to difficulties in diffusing these norms into practice. The central empirical section aims to establish China's initial and subsequent responses to these normative developments over the ensuing three decades to assess how and to what extent China-related power shifts have begun to rein in some of the UN's liberal ambitions and processes. It concludes that, so far, the power shift is partial: China-related power shifts are most evident in relation to its privilege of SC veto; at other times, Beijing's efforts to effect change are contested or only partially successful; and in yet other realms its potential achievements may better be understood as a reflection of a convergence of view between China and various political actors at the UN, which China's status and power can magnify.

Policy implications

- UN bureaucratic actors need to reflect more fully on how well embedded post-Cold War era norms are, and how a broader basis of support for valued norms can be developed across geo-political divides.
- UN bureaucratic and political actors should be attentive to the forms of power that China and other major states use and that result in the 'followership' that they sometimes enjoy.
- China and other UN member states sceptical of the UN's focus on individual security should be encouraged to flesh out how the UN can more effectively deal with a member state that manifestly fails in its protective duty.
- Western and Chinese scholars should be encouraged to re-engage in track two debates on the UN's role in individual security provision to uncover potential areas of state-to-state policy cooperation.

2 | THE FOUR POWER TYPES IN THE UN CONTEXT

Barnett and Duvall's formulation (Barnett & Duvall, 2005) uncovers how power relations shape the fates and condition the existence of others to act. They argue that some forms of power place relatively more emphasis on agency, as in compulsory and to a lesser degree institutional power, and others on structure, which is the case for both structural and productive power. However, they also draw attention to the relationship between the social context and actual human action, thus underlining the presence of the "agent-structure duality" in all forms of power of analytical importance (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 49). The authors note too that while compulsory and structural power have direct effects, the effects of institutional and productive power are more diffuse. The former pairing thus entails some connection between subject and object, whereas the latter implies that power operates even where connections are mediated "at a physical, temporal, or social distance" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 47). Of particular note, is that these power types are often present simultaneously in social relations and work in tandem.

To elaborate further, compulsory power refers to an actor's exertion of direct influence to advance its interests. Its focus is on "a range of relations between actors that allow one to shape directly the circumstances or actions of another" and in ways that mostly assume a prior conflict of interest (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 49). In the context of the UN's peace and security pillar, a permanent member of the SC can exercise veto power, or signal its potential veto use, to impose constraints on certain forms of action that actors within other parts of the UN, including the SC, may desire. An actor can also use material or symbolic resources to shape SC resolutions in ways that others may feel compelled to accept—for example, by refusing to pay assessed contributions. Earmarked funding to promote projects that advance an actor's interests and values may additionally be useful. We would expect a state that is seeking change in UN priorities and policies to deploy such mechanisms in support of its aims.

Unlike compulsory power, institutional power operates indirectly in socially distant ways to shape the fate of others. Typically, institutions act as mediators between actors through rules, procedures and practices, all of which may steer or constrain action. Rather than dominating an institution, an actor, instead, possesses the diffuse capacity as a participant within an institutional setting to shift policy agendas, or re-order policy priorities. Member state representation at high levels of the UN Secretariat, or the recognized status that comes from being a core funder of UN activities represent possible indirect ways of shaping policy and the activities of the SC and could prove useful to an ascendant state intent on effecting a power shift. With respect to the drafting of resolutions, notably, the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and France (the "P3") are most often the sole or joint "pen-holders" —that is, the leading drafters of the country-specific and thematic resolutions that come before the SC. In 2023, the United States was a pen-holder for 12 such resolutions, compared with ten for the UK and six for France (SCR, 2023a). SC member states seeking change would be expected to challenge this dominant "pen-holding" role. SC members can also

typically use the rotating presidency of the Council to signal ways in which they would like to influence future SC agendas. Once again, this may form a pathway for a revisionist or reformist state indirectly to effect a power shift.

Productive power, as with institutional power, operates in diffuse ways but unlike institutional power is not associated with specific interactions. This form of power relates to the establishment and normalizing of certain systems of knowledge, via discourse, that produces, fixes and transforms meaning in ways that have the capacity to constitute all social subjects. In the post-Cold War era, the UN rethought its conception of security, based on a refreshed interpretation of the UN Charter, and leading to the idea of "responsible sovereignty," (outlined below). Where an ascendant power is wary of these developments, or believes they represent an unwarranted challenge to the UN Charter, we would expect to see regular use of *compulsory* power to persuade others of the merits of its oppositional posture. However, this is distinct from a productive power shift where dominant discourse at the UN comes to reflect that of the ascendant actor in more generalized and diffuse ways.

Finally, structural power concerns the mutual constitution of the capacities and identities of actors. It operates in direct rather than diffuse ways to constitute social relations. As Barnett and Duvall put it, this power lens acknowledges that "the structural position, A, exists only by virtue of its relation to structural position, B" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 53). The UN is involved in various ways in the co-constitution or positioning of actors—for example, as great powers versus developing states, as security providers or security subjects, with the state as security referent versus the individual as prime referent, or as troop contributing countries to UN peace operations rather than as framers of resolutions that mandate such operations. A revisionist state's actions may have the effect of disrupting one or other of these co-constitutions. Where that occurs, this would indicate a shift in structural power.

The sections that follow apply these power types to China-related empirical examples that focus on the individual as UN security referent. In the empirical exploration of the power typologies, the main aim is to demonstrate how the conceptual framework can be utilized to examine the ways in which power operates as well as to expand its use to probe whether there have been China-related power shifts at the UN over the last three decades.

The four power types are treated separately because of their value as a heuristic that allows for a systematic discussion of power typologies. However, it is important to underline that more than one of these forms of power may be operating at any one time in topic areas discussed below.

3 | THE UN'S LIBERAL TURN AS CONTEXT FOR CHINA-RELATED POWER SHIFTS

The political transformation apparent in the former Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s, followed by the ending of formal Cold War divisions between East and West, not only elevated the UN's status and role as an authoritative presence in world politics but also led to an expansion of its normative ambitions, reform of its institutional structure, and an increase in its budgetary needs.

During the Cold War, the UN's peace and security pillar had focused—rarely and only when political conditions allowed—on inter-state wars, and on keeping the peace between erstwhile warring state parties. From the late 1980s, normative developments led to a broadening in the UN concept of security acknowledging that internal breakdowns of a state's security were capable of threatening international peace and security and that mass atrocity crimes directed at individuals and groups should also be a matter of SC concern (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). One outcome in 2005 was the consensual acceptance—though often grudging on the part of, e.g., Algeria, China, Cuba, Egypt, India and Pakistan (Foot, 2020, pp. 143–45)—of a norm that every state had a "Responsibility to Protect" its populations from "war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, together with their incitement." R2P also avowed that if a state were to manifestly fail in its duty of protection, the international community, with the SC in the driving seat under Chapter VII provisions, would be prepared to take collective action (UNGA, 2005).

It seemed the UN had emerged from the restricted peace and security role it had been obliged to perform shortly after its founding. The idea that the security of the individual and individual liberties deserved to be a focus of attention had come to the fore. Sovereignty was being redefined and made conditional on the treatment that a government meted out to its population. Mass atrocity crimes as well as failures to protect civilians, and especially women, caught up in armed conflict were matters requiring SC attention. The civil wars that had become such a marked feature of the post-Cold War era were deemed threats to international peace and security.

Inevitably, fundamental change of this kind generated resistance from those governments either fearing their own records of protection would warrant international intervention, or were especially protective of the norm of sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs (see Welsh, 2013). Moreover, many of these developments proved difficult to enact, especially the ambitious mandates laid out in complex peace operations (Bellamy & Hunt, 2015). The UN's subsequent reappraisal of the scope of its ambition, reflected in a series

of UN studies, reminded member states of the core UN obligation to protect human beings but also alluded to a lack of resources to effect protection, the unrealizable levels of protection expected by those non-combatants under attack, and the apparent lack of member state consensus on when and how to use force to defend the self, a peace operations mandate, or to stop mass atrocity crimes inside states (e.g., HIPPO, 2015). One major consequence of the UN's inability decisively to penetrate security discourse and behaviour with more ambitious liberal values and practices was that it provided a rising state resistant to such changes with wider systemic support for the bases of its resistance.

4 | CHINA'S EVOLVING EXERCISE OF POWER IN THE UN PEACE AND SECURITY PILLAR

4.1 | Compulsory power shifts: Direct effects of anticipated and actual use of China's veto

The liberal turn described above provides the setting for probing whether there have been China-related power shifts in the UN's peace and security pillar since the 1990s. To begin with compulsory power, it was noted earlier that it can be exercised within the SC via the actual or anticipated use of the veto by the P5. Use of material and symbolic resources to signal or actually to promote particular values also aid influence.

Important context for China stepping up its commitment to "lead the reform of global governance," including in what Beijing has described as the most authoritative inter-state multilateral organisation in world politics, is its decision in 2015 to enhance its material contributions to the UN's peace and security pillar. In Xi Jinping's speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015, he announced the establishment of a 10-year US$1 billion China-UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (PDTF), creation of a Chinese peacekeeping standby force of 8000 troops, and funding to support African crisis response capacities (Foot, 2020, pp. 84–5; Xi, 2015). Beijing, among other UN actors, came to make frequent reference to its position as second largest funder of both the UN regular budget as well as the peace-keeping budget. As Xi reminded UN audiences, China "as a permanent member of the UN Security Council", had "heavy responsibilities to assume," underlining that Beijing had "the capability to assume them" (Xinhua, 2013).

Alongside this tangible change in China's status came Beijing's decision to exercise compulsory power through more frequent use of the veto as a method of controlling directly the actions of other SC members and the Council itself. This has included three vetoes in a single year (2019), involving Venezuela and Syria (UNSC Veto List, 2023), leading to a total of 13 vetoes between 2011 and October 2023. In the period from 1990 to 1999, China had used only two vetoes both prompted by a Taiwan recognition issue, and a further two in the early 2000s. The first related to Myanmar (UN, 2007) and the second to Zimbabwe (UN, 2008)—early indications of Beijing's desire to sustain political regimes of importance to it, and its broader desire to protect the norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of states.

In the 1990s, when resolutions were not adopted by consensus, China had chosen often to abstain even in the cases of resolutions calling for Chapter VII enforcement measures (Wuthnow, 2015, pp. 26–28). From 2004, it also stepped up its troop contributions to UN peace operations under robust mandates where there was strong regional endorsement (Huang, 2022, pp. 117–129). Russia, too, undergoing an anticipated liberal transformation and hoping to attract western aid and investment then had "no incentive to challenge" such normative developments (MacLeod, 2017, pp. 386–387).

Beijing's stepped-up use of its veto since 2011 represents a marked change in its behaviour, though Richard Gowan (2024, this volume) casts the change in less stark terms. Moreover, this has happened at a time of decreased veto use among the P3. France and the UK, for example, have not used the veto at all since 1990, and since 2011, the US has only vetoed on six occasions (two of which relate to the 2023 war in Gaza). The General Assembly has also indicated growing disapproval of veto use.

China's vetoes have overwhelmingly been exercised in support of a statist international order protective of the regime in power from external interference, even where that regime has threatened or engaged in mass atrocity crimes. The decision to deploy the veto more frequently undoubtedly has been affected by the outcome in Libya in 2011—that is, the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and his subsequent murder after a UN-authorized intervention. In the Libyan case, Beijing had eschewed veto use, instead opting for abstention on a resolution establishing a no-fly-zone in an attempt to align with regional opinion. According to China's UN ambassador, Beijing attached "great importance" to the position of regional bodies such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the African Union (AU), all of which, apart from the AU, favoured the enforcement of a no-fly-zone (Chen, 2016; UN, 2011).

Beijing came to regard that decision as a serious mistake. It reinforced China's willingness to use its veto, increased its fear that the SC would engage in regime change, and diminished its willingness to prioritize regional perspectives. As Ruan Zongze (2012) of the China Instititute of International Relations (a Ministry of Foreign Affairs related think-tank) noted at the time, the West had duped the regional organisations, adding;

> Should 'new interventionism' with use of force at every turn as well as regime change at the core be allowed to grow and spread unchecked, the basic norms governing international relations would be severely undermined and the developing countries would be deprived of their legitimate rights of development and security.

Several of China's post-2011 vetoes relate to the war in Syria and reflect Beijing's concern to prevent resolutions that might invoke R2P, the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power, or in other ways undermine his supposed sovereign control of the country.[3] Those vetoes have been perceived as consequential. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, for example, alluding to the Chinese and Russian vetoes, noted that they had emboldened the behaviour of the warring parties. Referencing their vetoes in February 2012, Ban stated that the fighting in Syria "escalated and conflict-related deaths increased dramatically … particularly as a result of the intensified aerial bombardment of populated areas by government forces" (UNSG, 2016). Notably, some Chinese commentary also referenced both the international and domestic criticism that the vetoes attracted (Qu, 2012; Ruan, 2012).

Despite this criticism, China deployed further Syria-related vetoes, as well as on other topics relating to the increased prominence of human protection issues on SC agendas. A Chinese veto came in May 2022, for example, in response to a SC resolution condemning the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) multiple launches of ballistic missiles, in violation of several earlier SC resolutions that China, until 2017, had supported (UN, 2022a). The year 2017 was an important turning point because of several attempts from then to link the DPRK's weapons testing programme with its appalling human rights record (Fung, 2021, p. 576). Beijing's 2022 decision to veto, unlike in the past, partly resulted because the resolution had made that linkage (SCR, 2023c).

The anticipatory veto is also a form of compulsory power. It is action that Beijing has used for several decades, though there is no reliable database of cases allowing us to determine whether its threat of veto has changed over time. However, three notable examples are the Gulf War in November 1990 where China eventually abstained on a resolution authorizing the UN use of force; Kosovo in June 1999 where it was not able to generate a SC resolution that it could support leading NATO forces to bypass the SC; and East Timor in October that same year, where its suggested minor amendments were accommodated (UN, 1999).

The conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) aspect of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has recently attracted China's threatened use of a veto. This example involving protection from physical harm is more telling because Beijing's position and behaviour have changed over time. In June 2008, China supported SC Resolution 1820 which noted that "rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute a war crime," (UN, 2008). In 2013, China voted for UN Resolution 2016, which included accountability for sexual crimes (Wang, 2013). However, latterly, China, with Russia, has typically indicated that it regards CRSV as an unwelcome expansion of the WPS agenda and has sought to rephrase draft resolutions that single out CRSV in countries hosting a UN peace operation (Foot, 2020, pp. 120–21). A significant attempt at a power shift came when, most unusually, Beijing and Moscow baulked at German-led attempts to pass such a resolution and circulated their own joint draft resolution that removed all reference to three issues: sexual violence in post-conflict situations, a role for the International Criminal Court as an accountability mechanism for sexual crimes, as well as the establishment of an Informal Expert Group on CRSV. Beijing and Moscow fear all three because they might dilute the primacy of the state over that of international obligations to victims of abuse.

Germany next compromised in relatively mild ways on its CRSV resolution which eventually passed in 2019, and suggests at first glance an ineffective use of China's compulsory power. However, the resultant Chinese abstention has dented the ability of the issue to make progress. It was the first time since 2000 that a WPS resolution had not been adopted unanimously. Moreover, although 2022 had seen the highest number of Council meetings on WPS matters since 2000, Chinese (and Russian) objections to phrasing in the resolutions, combined with their threatened veto use, have since generated cautious pre-emptive action on the part of other actors sympathetic to the CRSV cause. Their view is "that it is better not to have a Council product [on WPS], rather than a product that is redundant or regressive" (SCR Research Report, 2022, p. 4).

Undoubtedly, veto use—including its anticipated use—has been a relatively successful means of effecting a power shift at the SC in favour of support for the government in power and away from the protection of vulnerable individuals and groups. There are instances of preemptive moves by other SC members in order to avoid a Chinese (and Russian) veto. Such pre-emption may likely increase because China has demonstrated a greater willingness to exercise compulsory power via its veto.

4.2 | Institutional power: China and indirect influence through institutional means

China is an SC member that puts its own peacekeeping forces in harm's way in numbers larger than all other P5 members combined, pays a high-level of assessed

contributions to the regular and peacekeeping budgets (Zhang & Jing, 2024, this volume), and maintains close relations with members of the Group of 77. These factors all enhance prospects for outcomes reflective of institutional power: they indirectly offer openings to China to shape institutions that set agendas and establish policy priorities.

One potentially successful way of effecting a shift in power would be for China to improve its representation within the UN bureaucracy in the expectation that this would have a mediated impact on the peace and security pillar (Lam & Fung, 2024, this volume). China has been described as "making a concerted effort to secure executive leadership posts within the UN international civil service", (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 23). It has had some successes in the past in holding headships of non-security-related UN Specialized Agencies, holding four such positions at one stage, though it has only one such post in 2023 see (Baumann et al., 2024, this volume).

Where the peace and security pillar is concerned, however, a power shift of this kind is not strongly evident. Overall, Beijing's representation remains low compared with the P3. Despite a rumoured interest in heading high-level UN Secretariat positions in the areas of international peace and security, for example, these positions remain in the grip of France (Department of Peace Operations), the UK (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), and the US (Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs). In addition, China is stymied because of its perceived lack of operational and policy experience (Gowan, 2020).

China also has opportunities to enhance its influence via the China–UN Peace and Development Trust Fund announced in Xi's 2015 speech quoted earlier and whose management committee—unusually for such Trust Fund arrangements—is dominated by former Chinese UN ambassadors and its Foreign Ministry members. This Fund has a sub-Fund that deals explicitly with peace and security issues.

However, at present, disbursements from the Fund have been relatively modest (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 21) and not always resulting in outcomes that have met with Beijing's approval. For example, its wariness regarding use of force issues in peace operations with a POC mandate, together with unease about China's own fatalities in such missions, prompted a Trust Fund-supported report whose key recommendation Beijing viewed as unfortunate: it advocated a more robust UN response to those who set out to harm UN forces engaged in POC, leading Beijing strongly to dismiss its conclusions (Zürcher, 2019, p. 53).

Instead, one impact of the report was to strengthen Beijing's determination primarily to focus on protecting UN troops in the field neglecting improvement in understandings of how civilians can better be protected. As China stated at a debate in March 2018, held in response to Secretary-General Guterres' introduction of "Action for Peacekeeping" (A4P), the China-UN PDTF "will view building the capacity, safety and security of peacekeepers, particularly those from African countries as an important task" (UN, 2018). Beijing has further backed this approach by running over 20 international training programmes for UN peacekeepers (State Council, 2020, p. 6).

This Chinese priority of force protection, with a particular focus on the building of African state capacity, has been promoted regularly over the last few years, especially when China has held the presidency of the SC. Each SC member holds the presidency on a rotating basis for one month at a time. It is an opportunity for these states to put on the SC agenda issues they regard as important, thus to exercise power in indirect ways. Beijing has lately been particularly active in this regard on three main issues: from 2017 with respect to the building of African peacekeeping capacity, from 2015 on broader issues relating to its interpretations of the UN Charter, and the linked idea from 2018 of debating ways to strengthen support for multilateralism. (Notably, the latter two issues can be studied both as examples of institutional power in action, and as examples of productive power. They will be used solely to explore productive power shifts in the next section).

Beijing had not adopted such a forward role prior to 2013, on a number of occasions deciding not to introduce any thematic debates during its presidency at all (SCR, Monthly Forecast).[4] Regarding peacekeeper safety, in March 2020, China took the opportunity to attempt to lead on the issue, taking the rare step of drafting a resolution—that rareness indicating that it has not (yet) chosen the option of systematically challenging the "pen-holding" role of the P3. It was the first thematic SC resolution on the topic, received unanimous endorsement, and led Beijing to found in 2021 a UN "Group of Friends" on this theme, having once again placed peacekeeper safety on its agenda for its presidency in May that year (Fung, 2022, p. 10).

That China is less active in finding ways of enhancing the protection of civilians caught up in armed conflict—it underlines that the host state bears the primary responsibility—has also been demonstrated when it encountered Guterres's list of bullet points summarizing the priorities of his A4P. Privately, Beijing indicated that it viewed these bullet points as reflecting a hierarchy of concerns, rather than as points of equal standing, confirming its preference that POC be pushed further down the list.[5] Indeed, in A4P's "Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations" POC appears at paragraphs 9 and 10 out of 24 paragraphs in all, though this is just before the matter of peacekeeper safety (A4P, n.d.).

This focus on institutional power, overall, only weakly supports the idea that there has been this type of power shift in China's favour. As yet, Beijing does not hold senior level posts in the UN Secretariat in the area of peace and security, though this may change. There are

some instances of successful attempts to promote its preferences on particular issues, but it has been cautious in its choice of issue area, selecting those—such as peacekeeper safety or peacekeeping capacity building for African states—where there is a well-spring of support, especially among troop-contributing countries (Paddon Rhoads & Welsh, 2019). There is some voluntary funding available to support its security-related preferences but as yet this has only been offered in modest amounts.

4.3 | Productive power shifts: China's efforts to shape security discourse

Barnett and Duvall perceive discourse as a form of productive power that can act diffusely to produce, fix and transform meaning in ways that may come to constitute all social subjects. Beijing regards discourse as an important form of power (see Oud, 2024, this volume) so it is not surprising that China has attempted to use compulsory and institutional means in ways that may result in changes to broad patterns of meaning. Often, it will use institutional prerogatives to remind audiences of how to interpret the UN Charter placing emphasis on the UN as a multilateral state-based organisation that gives primacy to state security rather than individual security.

From 2015, for example, Beijing made use of the rotating presidency of the SC to attempt to reverse dominant liberal normative understandings of the UN Charter, of multilateralism, and UN centrality in the international system. It had never used its presidency to focus on these topics before (SCR, Monthly Forecasts), but after 2015 these themes came up again in 2018, 2021, 2022, and 2023. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon opened that 2015 debate, choosing to emphasize the Charter as a "living document" and one that was committed to conflict prevention through peaceful means and to "the protection of human rights". In Ban's view, and in obvious if indirect reference to R2P, "early action to prevent conflict and protect human rights helps to strengthen sovereignty rather than challenge or restrict it", adding it was "serious violations of human rights that weaken sovereignty" (UN, 2015, p. 3).

China's foreign minister spoke next and failed to mention human rights at all. Instead Wang Yi argued that the Charter "clearly sets forth the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference in internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity" (UN, 2015, p. 4). He focused on the need for peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for all countries' development paths and social systems, as well as for the diversity of the world's civilizations.

In this instance, China may eventually have had some limited success in effecting a productive power shift, gaining some discursive support for its 2015 argument that the UN Charter needed protection. In 2021, Venezuela initiated a "Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations". In a letter delivered on behalf of the Group in July 2023, the Venezuelan deputy permanent representative emphasized the sovereign equality of states, self-determination of peoples, constraints on the threat or use of force, and non-interference in internal affairs as the leitmotif for the group. There was no reference to conditional sovereignty as expressed by UN Secretaries-General since the 1990s. The letter also referenced R2P, advocating the "central role of States as guarantors of the safety, security and wellbeing of their respective populations." In its view, R2P was "controversial and divisive". However, for now the group only includes 19 member states (Group of Friends, 2023), many of which had long been wary of R2P. Moreover, with respect to UN Charter debates, other SC members when holding the presidency have adopted the same theme, including Vietnam (2020), and India (2022). Neither state is a member of the Group of Friends, and each has chosen to emphasize its own perspectives on defending the Charter (SCR, Monthly Forecast; SCR, 2023b). This suggests that the UN can be both an enabling but also a competitive environment for China and on the security pillar not one where a fundamental China-related productive power shift is yet evident.

Another significant Chinese attempt to shape systems of knowledge and meaning has occurred in relation to the dominant liberal principles associated with peacekeeping. The UN's "liberal peace" approach to peace operations, as it has been dubbed, is designed to create peace and stability via attention to all elements of the UN's three-pillar structure, many of which deal with human protection (Bellamy & Hunt, 2015, p. 1277; Li, 2012, p. 6).

As China has increased its participation in UN peace operations, to include combat forces since 2013, so too have its officials and scholars stepped up their arguments in ways that challenge the dominance of the "liberal peace" perspective. Many Chinese scholars emphasize instead "security plus development" or "developmental peace" as alternative models for satisfying UN peace operations mandates (e.g. He, 2017; Wang, 2018a; Xue, 2018; Zhang, 2018)—ideas that mirror those that China's leadership has been deploying.

This has not precluded some Chinese scholars recommending a merging of liberal peace and developmental peace, (He, 2017; Li, 2018). However, as yet, Chinese official statements do not reflect this hybrid perspective, with China's UN ambassador declaring development to be an "important means of addressing the root causes of conflict and achieving lasting peace" (Zhang, 2022a). Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2018, in response to Guterres' A4P, described the peacekeeper role as one of providing security, stability, and building local capacity, "thus laying the foundation for poverty alleviation, sustainable development and enduring peace in the host country" (2018). During its presidency

of the Council in November 2023, Beijing held its signature debate on "promoting sustainable peace through common development" where it reiterated once again "development holds the master key to solve all problems and constitutes the basis for promoting peace and protecting human rights" (UN SC/15501 Nov. 2023). As Zürcher (2019, p. 55) has noted, missing from Chinese conceptualizations are "references to good governance, democratic values, and the rule of law, the constitutive parts of the dominant Western paradigm of liberal peace".

Ideas that align with "developmental peace" have appeared in several official UN documents over the past 30 years or so, including Boutros Ghali's *Agenda for Peace* (1992) as well as his *Agenda for Development* (1995), Annan's, 2004 report, *A More Secure World*, and a joint UN-World Bank, 2018 report entitled *Pathways for Peace*. All argue for the importance of sustainable development as a conflict prevention and conflict resolution strategy, indicating some compatibility of views with China (see also Baumann et al., 2024; Haug & Waisbach, 2024, both in this volume). However, this does not necessarily reflect a shift in productive power. Several of these studies appeared before Beijing became more active within the UN. And, importantly—unlike China—these UN-directed studies emphasize that "growth and poverty alleviation alone will not suffice" (UN-World Bank, 2018, p. xviii), and that peace, development, and human rights protections must be inextricably linked in order to achieve UN objectives. At the November 2023 debate, Guterres reiterated that the UN has been "built on three pillars—peace, development and human rights" and that development, while essential, was not enough on its own to secure peace (UN SC/15501, Nov. 2023).

4.4 | Structural power shifts: China and the re-constitution of security-related social categories

There are various ways in which China's actions, over time, hold the potential to re-constitute structural roles associated with the UN. For example, China's increased activism has already led to some breaching of the divisions between those who authorize peace operations, and those who operate in the field to implement those demanding mandates (predominantly Asian and African states). But other social roles and social understandings may be in flux too: the security of UN troops versus the security of civilians; and the designation of aggression of all forms—against individuals as well as states—as demanding of UN collective action versus a perspective starting from the security lens of the individual state only.

One example of the latter is what China terms its "Global Security Initiative" (GSI). Unlike its Global Development Initiative (Baumann, et al, 2024, this volume), China's President has not formally introduced the GSI at the UN, but it is regularly elaborated in speeches there and elsewhere by China's foreign minister and leading Chinese diplomats (Wang, 2022). Xi explained the concept at the November 2022 Group of 20 meeting focusing on the terms indivisible, common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security (Xinhua, 2022a; Xinhua, 2022b; see also Kewalramani, 2023).

In August 2022, China's UN ambassador, Zhang (2022b) as SC president that month utilizing institutional power, initiated a debate on "common security". His goal was to more fully explain the GSI, and attempt to link it directly with the UN Charter. As he put it: "the founding mission of the United Nations is to achieve common security for all." Zhang went on indirectly to reference Beijing's understanding of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine, and to criticize a US security architecture built on alliances: "no country can ignore the legitimate security concerns of other countries nor can one build its own security based on the insecurity of others." Zhang invited all states to join the GSI which he described as Xi's "vision for common security." He offered "to build together a balanced, effective and sustainable international security architecture" based on "respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity" which is the "bedrock of contemporary international law and international relations".

Further underlining this evident state-centric underpinning of China's GSI is that it has been linked with China's own 2014 national security strategy—termed the "comprehensive national security concept." This national security concept similarly places emphasis on state security—in fact the CCP-led governing regime—rather than the security of the individual, as analysts associated with the influential China Institute of Contemporary International Relations have confirmed (Chen et al., 2022; Tian, 2022; see also Chestnut Greitens, 2022). Neither in China's national security strategy and rarely within the UN setting has China advanced obligations to protect the security of the individual. In these respects, Beijing's ideas pose a conceptual challenge to liberal contemporary understandings of the Charter-based security architecture built on the idea of a collective response to aggression or threats of aggression no matter from where such a threat comes or at whom it is directed.

At present, the GSI appears to be attracting rhetorical support in bilateral or regional diplomatic meetings between China and the Global South.[6] China's unexpected success in brokering a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 may well have boosted the initiative. However, so far within the UN, China's perspective has met resistance, notably by the Secretary-General who stated in response to Zhang's 2022 statement: "our collective security demands that we seize every moment

to forge a common understanding of the threats and challenges before us. And most importantly, to shape united responses to them." While he supported China's description of the path to peace being forged "by dialogue and cooperation," he emphasized the need "to reforge a global consensus around the cooperation required to ensure collective security." He referenced directly his "New Agenda for Peace", which includes "putting human rights first in political and financial investments that can address the root causes of conflict". Most other speakers in that August 2022 debate, apart from Russia, similarly stuck more closely to an official UN rather than a Chinese script, some mentioning common security but, unlike China, not the GSI (UN, 2022b). This suggests that any reconstitution of the relationship between individual and state security is meeting resistance.

As yet, therefore, this Chinese move involving the domain of structural power has not resulted in a fundamental shift in the UN's security referent. However, China's bilateral and regional diplomacy displays its determination to turn attention to the state's perception of its security needs, and away from the notion of a UN working collectively to fulfill its core obligations to individual as well as to state security. As evidenced in China's regional and bilateral diplomacy with Global South countries, there are some signs of support for this GSI-informed perspective, but so far not within the UN.

5 | CONCLUSION: ASSESSING CHINA-RELATED POWER SHIFTS

These empirical illustrations of the four power types—chosen because of their centrality to China's concerns about the focus on individual security provision in UN actions—provide an uneven picture of China-related shifts in power at the UN. They also illustrate how the four power types can work in tandem, and suggest temporal differences associated with them.

With respect to compulsory power, for example, there is evidence of a power shift in the short-term as a consequence of China's more frequent use and anticipated use of the veto. Discussion of cases in this section demonstrates a Chinese capacity to constrain forms of action that are in support of victims of mass atrocity crimes, including sexual violence, in conflict zones where UN action might threaten the regime in power. However, examined through a longer time frame, these uses of compulsory power are potentially corroding the UN's ability to act in support of individual security, returning it to a primary focus on state security. In these respects, both productive and structural forms of power—though not yet resulting in a demonstrable power shift—could be said to have been set in play.

Turning more directly to productive and structural power, both of which depend on long term social processes to effect a power shift, we see uncertain progress, this time predominantly as a result of liberal normative embeddedness. Members of the UN Secretariat, member states (at least rhetorically) committed to liberal democratic values, and many non-governmental actors remain attentive to an interpretation of the UN Charter that sees the security of the individual as a core component of its activities, and to the construction of peace operations that draw on all three pillars of the UN.

China has used institutional power mechanisms to introduce its interpretations of the UN Charter, of multilateralism, and of a reformed security architecture. However, Secretary-General Guterres' response to China's decision to promote "common security through dialogue and cooperation", during its August 2022 SC presidency, exemplifies the power of established meanings—that is, productive power—within the UN Secretariat. Guterres placed emphasis on genuinely collective rather than nationally determined responses to aggression, whether aggression is directed at a state or an individual's security. Similar forms of resistance have affected the potential adoption of Beijing's idea of "developmental peace" in reference to UN peace operations. While sustainable development is cast in UN documents as intimately related to conflict prevention and resolution, it has not displaced ideas of "liberal peace".

In further consideration of institutional power, the picture regarding power shifts is mixed. China has not yet been able to improve significantly its representation within the UN Secretariat and therefore cannot use Chinese staff to facilitate power shifts of other types—particularly in the area of productive power. China's use of its presidency of the SC to change institutional priorities has seen some successes, as in placing more emphasis on troop security rather than civilian protection, thus indicating some opportunity to effect a structural power shift. Here, though, it is notable that Beijing has chosen to lead on an issue that already generates a great deal of support among troop contributing countries. There is a convergence in perspectives that has provided China with an enabling environment, rather than an environment representing a fundamental China-related shift in power.

Overall, therefore, undoubtedly China is more willing to use its veto, to articulate and document its positions, and is more intent in effecting change in the UN's peace and security pillar than was generally the case in the 1990s and early 2000s. In this regard, those attached to the UN's liberal normative agenda face significant and potentially growing challenges. However, at present there remain important counter-currents at the UN relating to normative embeddedness, geo-political power dynamics, and multilateralism's ability to diffuse power.

These constrain China's own formulations of how international peace and security can best be sustained.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mai Nguyen for her expert guidance during my use of the Security Council Report's Monthly Forecast. Professor Nele Noesselt, as President of the Association for Chinese Political Studies, kindly invited me to present an early draft of this paper at the University of Duisburg-Essen in October 2023. Astute comments were also received from the co-editors of this Special Issue and other participants in the project, as well as from two anonymous reviewers of this article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest associated with this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] One senior European diplomat stated in 2022: "In the UN, China's influence is massive. They really are so powerful there … They know how to work the system to their advantage" (Yang & Foy, 2022). A former UN undersecretary general for political affairs wrote in 2020: "Especially since Xi became China's president in 2013, Beijing has raised its profile within the very heart of the UN, specifically the peace and security pillar that motivated the signing of the UN Charter," (quoted in Gill, 2022, p. 145).

[2] Evidence is drawn from Chinese and non-Chinese secondary and primary sources that include UN documentation and reports together with China's official statements and commentary through party-controlled news outlets and ministry-related think tanks. A range of interviews was conducted between 2018 and 2023.

[3] E.g., On sovereignty grounds, China has acted to restrict the number of cross-border as opposed to cross-line routes (four cross-border routes in 2014, and only one subsequently), that have provided Syrians with essential humanitarian assistance.

[4] Neither in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012, nor 2013 (SCR, Monthly Forecast 2006).

[5] Interview with representative from country mission to UN 2019; email communication, UN official, 2019.

[6] For example, the theme of the third China–Africa Peace and Security Forum held in August 2023 was "Implementing the Global Security Initiative."

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How to cite this article: Foot, R. (2024) Reining in a liberal UN: China, power shifts, and the UN's peace and security pillar. *Global Policy*, 15(Suppl. 2), 18–28. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13327