

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

# CHINA'S EXPANDING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PILLAR

The Selective Long-term Approach of a Programme Country Superpower

**Max-Otto Baumann, Sebastian Haug and Silke Weinlich**  
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China has become an increasingly visible player in UN development work. In light of the financial and political resources at its disposal, however, China's engagement has largely remained moderate and selective.



China is taking an increasingly assertive and long-term approach towards changing some of the traditional contours of UN development work, with the Global Development Initiative as the most recent example.



Contrary to Western Member States, China can capitalise on the combination of its roles as a superpower and a UN programme country to expand ties with the UN, notably through South-South cooperation.





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## 1

# INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The People's Republic of China's<sup>2</sup> expanding influence in the United Nations (UN) has become a defining feature of today's world politics. Observers watch with keen interest, in some cases also with concern, as the world's new superpower intensifies its engagement with the UN's development pillar. Since around 2015, a number of events and initiatives have signalled China's readiness to significantly step up its support for and interest in the UN development system.<sup>3</sup> During the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Summit, where the 2030 Agenda was adopted, Chinese leader Xi Jinping delivered a landmark speech, asking the UN to take on a "leading role" and pledging an "initial" 2 billion US dollars for South-South cooperation (MOFA 2015). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), set up in 2013, soon evolved into a major platform for seeking closer cooperation with UN agencies (Haug 2022a). In 2016, China initiated the UN Peace and Development Fund (UNPDF), established in the UN Secretariat, with 200 million US dollars pledged over ten years. The UNPDF channels resources for projects through the UN (Mao 2020). In 2019, a Chinese national became Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the fifth leadership position occupied by a Chinese national in the UN development system.<sup>4</sup> Among the most recent steps was the announcement of the "Global Development Initiative" (GDI) at the UN General Assembly in 2021, a global complement to the BRI, which was connected with the pledge to "strengthen cooperation with UN development agencies, enhance strategic coordination, and jointly promote work in priority areas" (People's Republic of China 2021a).

Despite this remarkable Chinese outreach, there has been relatively little scholarly engagement with China's evolving role in UN development work. The literature has mostly focused on other aspects of China's approach to the broader UN system: China's role in the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (ISHR 2021; see Taskinen 2020), in particular with regard to the UN's human rights pillar (Inboden 2019; Okano-Heijmans and van der Putten 2018; Piccone 2018; Zhang and Buzan 2019); the UN Security Council and peacekeeping (Fung 2018; Lagon and Lou 2018; Lanteigne 2019; Primiano 2019); and global governance more generally (Beeson and Li 2016; Mao 2019). The lack of attention to development-related matters at the UN surprises, given that China has marked development as a key policy field through its more advanced involvement with international development banks and high-powered bilateral initiatives such as BRI. Academic work that addresses China's role in the UN development system mostly focuses on funding (Mao 2020; Morris et al. 2021) and staffing issues (Fung and Lam 2021) that are amenable to quantitative analysis but cover only a section of China's rising engagement with the UN development work (for an exception, see Chen et al. 2020).

For many observers, and in particular those from the Western world,<sup>5</sup> China's engagement with the UN development system is inherently ambiguous. In recent years, China has sent mixed signals about its intentions, giving rise to two diverging narratives about its growing role in UN development work. On the one hand, China has publicly declared its commitment to UN multilateralism and the 2030 Agenda. It has made considerable and diverse efforts to bring in its expertise in poverty alleviation and other development-related issues to help implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Key Chinese policy documents, such as the 2021 white paper "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" or the advertisement of the GDI, further nourish the expectation that China aspires to fulfil the role of a 'good international citizen', and

1 We would like to thank all interviewees and colleagues who supported the drafting process with their insights and critical feedback. All errors remain our own.

2 In this study, "China" refers to the People's Republic's government. While we are aware that China's foreign policy – like that of other states – is not necessarily fully coherent and is subject to domestic power struggles, we focus on China as a member state in the UN context and thus do not differentiate between different entities or voices within the Chinese government.

3 There is no authoritative definition of the UN development system. For the purpose of this study, the term refers to the ensemble of entities belonging to the UN Sustainable Development Group.

4 In addition to the FAO, entities that have had Chinese leadership include the World Health Organisation (WHO), the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). ICAO has also been headed by a Chinese national but does not belong to the UN Sustainable Development Group.

5 When we refer to "Western world", "Western countries" or "West", we broadly mean members of the Western European and Others Group (WEOG), which is one of five regional groups at the UN. It brings together 28 members, some of which share a geographic background in Europe and all of which self-identify as democracies. It includes *inter alia* members of the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

that it embraces the UN as a forum and vehicle for that purpose. The expansion of its influence in terms of leadership positions, funding, and policy initiatives can be regarded as a positive signal that China is engaging in the existing multilateral system instead of circumventing it and initiating new structures.

On the other hand, and from a more geopolitical point of view, China has been increasingly open and even confrontational about its desire to see a “transformation of the global governance architecture and world order” come to fruition, as articulated in the China-Russia-Statement from February 2022. The main features of the “new era” demanded by China (along with Russia, for that matter) can be read as nothing less than a dismissal of what they perceive to be the key features of the current world order. The joint statement addresses Western proponents of the current order by saying that: “they [i.e., Western powers] interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontation, thus hampering the development and progress of mankind, against the opposition from the international community” (Russian Federation and People’s Republic of China 2022). These sentiments, which were also palpable earlier, such as in Xi’s 2015 speech at the UN in New York (MOFA 2015), indicate that China’s expanding footprint in UN development work can also be read through the broader question of geopolitical rivalry and the conflict over domestic political systems. China’s ambiguous stance on Russia’s war on Ukraine has raised the stakes even further, as have events related to a recent report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights that found serious human rights violations in Xinjiang, one of China’s autonomous regions (OHCHR 2022). UN officials reported strong pressure from both China and Western Member States concerning the report’s eventual publication. Overall, the quest for power and influence within and over the global governance system is in full swing; this is also playing out in the field of UN development.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the ambiguous nature of China’s involvement in the UN development system. For instance, China quickly provided substantial support to developing countries, an indication that China might be growing into the role of “a responsible shareholder” (Lagon and Lou 2018, 239). Meanwhile, there were also severe disruptions to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) crisis response caused by China’s refusal to share data, facilitate research on the origin of the virus, and include Taiwan (Feldwisch-Drentrup 2020). Another example of friction between the two narratives was China’s successful attempt to install its own candidate as leader of FAO. For some, this was understood as China bringing its undisputed experience in agricultural development to the UN. Meanwhile, (Western) public commentary focused on the robust diplomatic campaign, reading it as a direct challenge to Western power at the UN (see Jaura 2019). Such critical assessments are arguably also inspired by China’s well-documented stance on human rights in the UN Human Rights Council and Chinese efforts to fundamentally reshape UN

norms and governance processes (Foot 2020). Many (Western) observers contribute these efforts to a broader pattern across areas including international law, trade, and internet governance (Gomez Martos 2019; Ginsburg 2020). Many states in the Global South, in contrast, appear to have a more benign view of China’s rise, not free of concerns but certainly informed by the expectation that it heralds a more balanced world order that will open up political and economic opportunities and allow for new intellectual currents.<sup>6</sup>

It is against this backdrop and the debate about China’s global rise, also and particularly among Western countries, that the study at hand examines China’s role in UN development work. The research question addressed here is: *How has China’s engagement expanded throughout the UN development pillar, and what are the implications of this expansion?* The study’s main objective is to provide systematic evidence on China’s growing engagement with UN development pillar. It puts an explicit focus on power dynamics that can be observed at the UN, also highlighting reactions by Western countries and others.<sup>7</sup> The study contains two parts: The first is a systematic overview of China’s funding to the UN and the representation of Chinese nationals among UN staff. The second section is a more in-depth examination of select dimensions of Chinese engagement, which enables us to pin down key characteristics of China’s ambiguous role in the UN development system. Reference points for analysing and assessing China’s role include UN norms and rules, some of them explicit, like UN Charter stipulations on the neutrality of international civil servants, and others more implicit, such as the practice of consensus-driven decisions. This study also compares and contrasts China’s engagement practices with those of other Member States, particularly Western powers.

As researchers at a Germany-based research institute, our positionalities influence our research, also and maybe particularly on questions related to global power shifts.<sup>8</sup> They condition how our interlocutors perceive us and answer our questions, as well as our own understanding of multilateralism and the UN. We have sought to productively engage with this issue by jointly and critically reflecting on how our positionalities might subconsciously impact our research, discussing this study and its findings with colleagues from different backgrounds, and providing transparency concerning the sources and criteria we use to make sense of China’s engagement.

The study is structured as follows. In the next chapter, we provide a quantitative overview of China’s engagement with the UN development system, focusing on financial contributions, the representation of Chinese nationals in UN staff

<sup>6</sup> On China-Africa relations, for instance, see Ryder 2021; Alden and Large 2019.

<sup>7</sup> We also draw on accounts that deal with Chinese domestic discussions but do not engage with them in detail.

<sup>8</sup> On the relevance of positionalities in research on international development politics, see Haug 2019.

across different levels, and changes over time. The description of these two aspects, which can be considered key sources of power at the UN, provides an indication of how China's engagement has evolved in recent years. The third chapter supplements and builds on the quantitative approach with a qualitative analysis that takes a closer look at key dimensions of China's engagement with the UN development system, notably (i) the promotion of China-led initiatives, (ii) attempts to integrate Chinese normative concepts ("Chinese language" in diplomatic terms) into UN proceedings, (iii) the leadership style as it plays out in conference settings and within individual UN bodies, and (iv) diplomacy and alliance practices. These four dimensions can be considered typical avenues for Member States to exert influence at the UN. While we focus on general patterns that can be observed across different organizations, we are also keen to provide a nuanced picture that shows how Chinese activities and behaviour can vary across sites and contexts. Aggregating findings from the second and third chapters, the fourth chapter identifies and discusses four cross-cutting features that characterise China's approach to UN development work. We find that, by and large, China's engagement with the UN development system has increased. Nevertheless, it is still moderate considering the financial and political resources China has at its disposal. At the same time, China's engagement puts a strong emphasis on selected arenas and specific topics and reflects a long-term commitment to changing features of the UN development system that have been particularly dear to Western countries. More generally, China's engagement cultivates a dual position as both a programme country and an increasingly assertive superpower shaping the UN development work. The fifth chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings and some recommendations.

Our study does not intend to cover the entire multifaceted UN development pillar. That said, we do analyse changes in personnel and funding across UN entities and choose several entry points across the system to gain a more extensive picture. For a more in-depth analysis, we focus specifically on the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in the UN Secretariat in New York, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) with headquarters in Rome, the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) with headquarters in Vienna, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) based in New York. The first three were selected because they are, or were until recently, led by a Chinese national. In addition, the UNDP was selected for contrast and because of its central role in UN development work, which results from its broad mandate, financial resources, and relevance for both developing and developed countries. The UNDP's strong suit is operational activities. While the FAO and UNIDO also serve normative functions, they too focus on operational activities. The situation is different with DESA, which has a strong normative mandate and supports member-state negotiations on economic and social concerns, and less of a focus on operational activities.

In addition to the in-depth analysis of these UN bodies, we also analysed a selection of decision-making processes rele-

vant to UN development work at the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Our period of investigation is 2015–2022, although some data reaches further back in time. The study builds on and triangulates both quantitative and qualitative data. The former stems from UN databases and statistical material, while the latter is mostly based on insights from UN reports and resolutions, academic work, grey literature, as well as semi-structured interviews and background conversations. Between December 2021 and July 2022, we conducted 40 interviews with UN staff, Member State representatives, and experts at various levels. Experts ranged from technical staff to ambassadors at UN duty stations (New York, Rome, Geneva, Vienna and Beijing) as well as political or regional groupings (notably Western and Southern Member States). Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, interview data is presented anonymously.

# 2

## DRAWING THE CONTOURS: MONEY AND PEOPLE

This chapter offers a systematic overview of China’s growing engagement across the UN development pillar through the funding it provides (2.1) and the representation of Chinese nationals among UN staff (2.2). The mostly quantitative approach taken here is descriptive and provides a foundation for the analysis in the subsequent chapters. While the focus is on China’s current financial and staff footprint in the UN, the chapter also provides select historical timelines to highlight the evolution of China’s engagement with UN development work. It also compares China’s funding and staff data to that of other Member States, particularly Western powers that have traditionally been the largest contributors to the UN development system (see Baumann/Weinlich 2020).

### 2.1 CHINA’S FUNDING

Conventional “follow the money” wisdom suggests that financial contributions are an appropriate starting point for examining China’s engagement with the UN development system. The numerical nature of financial contributions al-

lows for the identification of financial engagement patterns over time and across UN entities and for a comparison of China’s contributions to those of other Member States (Mao 2020; Mao and Weinlich 2021; Morris et al. 2021). Financial contributions to multilateral bodies can be linked to both direct and indirect political influence. The Bretton Woods Institutions, for instance, give countries with large contributions a greater say. Voluntary earmarked contributions, in turn, allow states to fund an (often selective) part of a multilateral agenda (see Sridhar and Woods 2013; Reinsberg 2017). The UN General Assembly formally operates on the “one seat, one vote” principle, which makes the link between financial contributions and influence less obvious. An analysis of China’s engagement with the UN development system through the lens of political influence therefore requires a careful differentiation between the UN’s different funding modalities and their specific political implications (see Weinlich et al. 2020). Building on the overview provided in Table 1, this chapter first presents data on the evolution of China’s contributions to the UN development system. It then discusses the main funding modalities before

Table 1  
**The main funding modalities and their implications on power and influence in the UN**

Funding modality	Definition & Characteristics	Relevance for power and influence
<b>Assessed contributions</b>	“Fixed amount contributions calculated based on [an] agreed formula that UN Member States undertake to pay when signing a treaty.” The UN Secretariat and the Specialized Agencies receive assessed contributions. The formula is primarily based on a state’s share of the global economy.	This modality aims to decouple contributions from influence, as both the amounts owed and their use are collectively decided, typically by consensus. However, a larger share can translate into general influence in collective decision-making.
<b>Voluntary core contributions</b>	“Voluntary untied contributions.” These are general contributions to the budget of UN entities. No legal or political obligation exists to provide such resources. They mostly go to Funds and Programmes. Being unrestricted, they support the autonomy and flexibility of recipient entities.	Because they are voluntary and unrestricted, the amount of these resources signals general support to recipient UN entities and trust in them. They provide contributors with leverage proportional to their volume, as funding depends on contributors’ discretion.
<b>Voluntary non-core (i.e., earmarked) contributions</b>	“Grants earmarked by the contributor to [a] specific programme or project.” UN Funds, Programmes and, to a lesser extent, Specialized Agencies have come to rely on these voluntary grants. “Local resources”, defined as “contributions from programme countries [...] for use in support of their own development framework,” are a relevant subcategory.	These grants buy direct influence over the specific activities of recipient entities, which are accountable to the respective contributor for their implementation.

Source: Authors’ own elaboration, based on definitions in UN CEB 2022.

finally turning to the allocation of Chinese contributions across the UN development system and China's financial position in individual organizations.

## EVOLUTION AND SIZE OF CHINA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE UN DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

As Figure 1 shows, China's contributions to the UN development system have grown significantly over the last decade. Its total contributions of roughly 451 million US dollars in 2020 (the last year for which there are system-wide figures) are more than four times the size of its contributions in 2010. During the same period, the total revenue of the UN development system 'only' approximately doubled, rising from 23.5 billion US dollars in 2010 to 41.2 billion US dollars in 2020 (numbers in constant 2019 US dollars). Comparing these figures with funding provided by other Member States allows China's contributions to be put into perspective. With the amount of 451 million US dollars, China ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in the list of largest contributors in 2020 (see Table 2), before Australia and France but far behind smaller Western countries such as the Netherlands and Switzerland. In terms of global burden sharing, China's contribution translates into 1.5 percent of the Member State contribution total. The United States and Germany, in turn, account for 28.1 and 16.3 percent, respectively. In relative terms, China's contributions are rather small. Compared with Western heavy-

weights, China seems to break with the assumption that the status of an economic and political superpower should be reflected in funding for the UN development system.

China's contributions to the UN development system also appear rather modest when compared to its bilateral expenses for international development. It is estimated that from 2013 to 2017 (i.e., the first five years of the Belt and Road Initiative), China's overseas development finance programme amounted to 85,4 billion US dollars a year on average, significantly more than the United States spent on foreign aid, at 37 billion US dollars annually (AidData 2021: 11). The level of UN development contributions has also been considerably lower than China's investments in multilateral development banks. At the World Bank, for example, China's percentage of International Development Association votes reached 2.42 percent in 2022, translating into the rank of 9<sup>th</sup> among Member States and positioning China in the group of largest stakeholders (World Bank n.d.).

## CHINA'S FUNDING MIX

As Figure 1 indicates, China's funding profile is dominated by assessed contributions, i.e. obligatory membership fees. In 2020, these made up approximately two-thirds (US\$ 302.7 million, or 67 percent) of its contributions. Germany's share of assessed funding is a mere 3.1 percent, while the United States' share is 6.4 percent. This relatively high

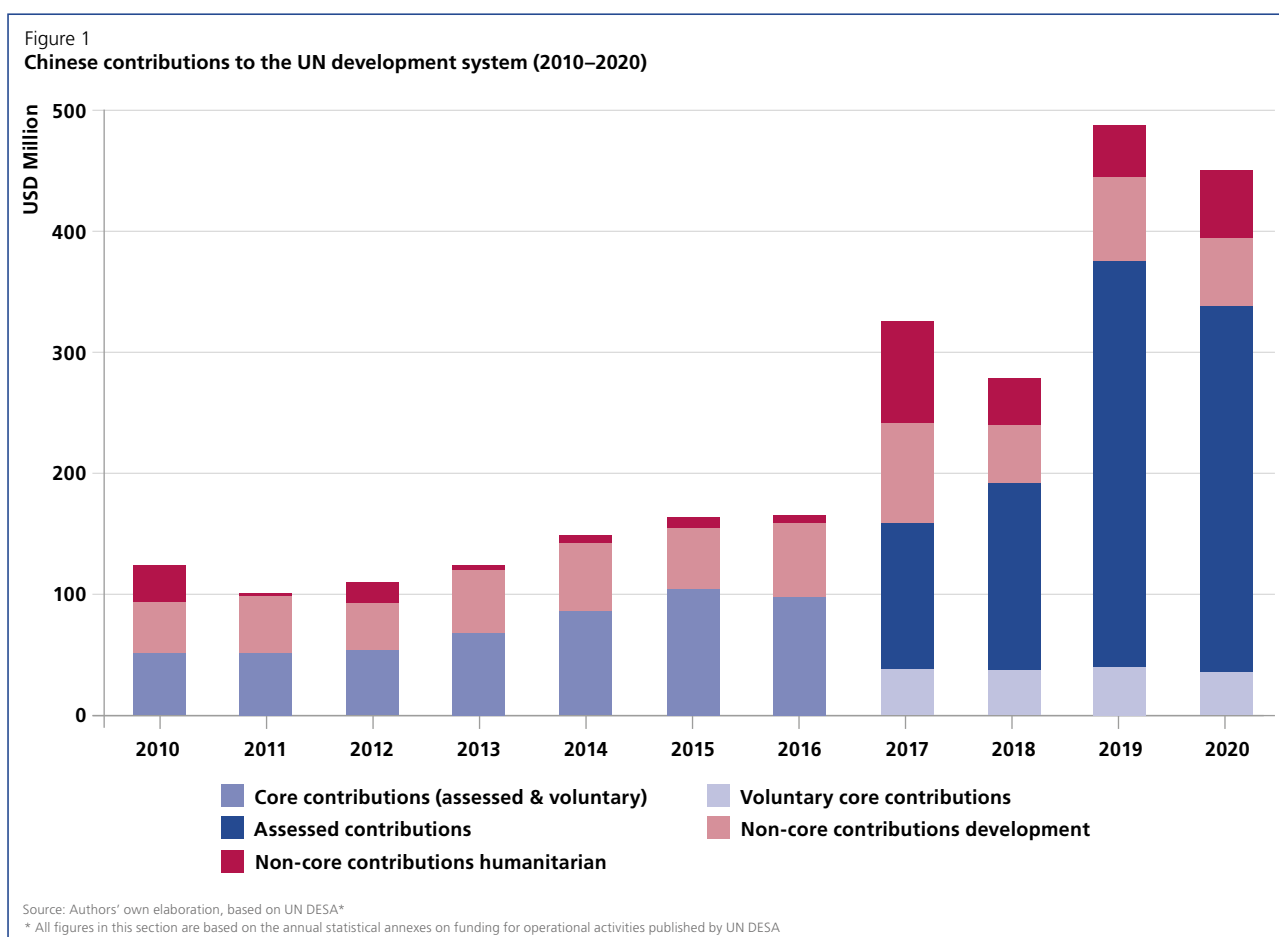




Table 2  
**Ranking of total contributions for operational activities to the UN development system by Member State (2020)**

Rank	Country	Assessed contributions (US\$ in millions)	Voluntary contribution (US\$ in millions)	Total (US\$ in millions)	Share of total Member State contributions (%)
1	United States	550	8,044	8,594	28.1
2	Germany	156	4,840	4,996	16.3
3	United Kingdom	111	2,230	2,341	7.7
4	Sweden	23	1,666	1,689	5.5
5	Japan	219	1,173	1,392	4.6
6	Norway	20	1,088	1,108	3.6
7	Canada	76	847	923	3.0
8	Netherlands	35	858	893	2.9
9	Denmark	14	569	583	1.9
10	Switzerland	30	527	557	1.8
11	Saudi Arabia	29	491	520	1.7
12	Italy	86	414	499	1.6
13	Korea (Republic of)	57	421	478	1.6
14	China	303	148	451	1.5
15	Australia	54	382	436	1.4
16	France	108	306	414	1.4
17	Belgium	20	301	321	1.0
18	Finland	11	259	270	0.9
19	Dominican Republic	2	249	251	0.8
20	Russian Federation	61	173	234	0.8
<b>Total of all Member State contributions</b>		<b>2,553</b>	<b>28,037</b>	<b>30,590</b>	

Notes: Operational activities can be development-related or humanitarian aid. The table does not include collective donors such as the European Commission or the global vertical funds, which are largely funded by Western Member States. The table includes local resources, which, in the case of China, amount to 30.5 million US dollars (China would drop by three ranks if local resources were not considered). All numbers are for 2020. Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on UN DESA 2022

share of assessed contributions has implications for making sense of China's engagement with the UN development system. The following subsections analyse the three main funding modalities more closely.

### Assessed contributions

As the formula used to calculate assessed contributions relies heavily on Member States' economic performance, the dominant role of assessed contributions in China's funding mix means that China's growing financial engagement with the UN development system has mainly been a corollary of its economic growth trajectory.<sup>9</sup> While Chinese diplomats have not objected to the gradual increase in the share allotted to them by means of the intergovernmentally agreed-upon scale of assessments, the rise in assessed contributions can hardly be taken to reflect a strategic decision to em-

brace UN development work. The overall formula behind calculating assessed contributions has not changed since 2000 (see Haug et al. 2022) and, over the last 20 years, has resulted in substantially growing assessments for China. The Chinese share increased from slightly less than 1 percent in 2000 to 3.2 percent in 2010 before skyrocketing to 15 percent for the 2022–2024 period. Now, China is the second largest contributor to the UN's regular budget behind the United States, whose assessment is fixed at 22 percent. While China's future economic growth is difficult to predict, some observers estimate that the country's regular budget share at the UN will match the United States as soon as 2028 (Mir 2019).

The dominance of obligatory contributions in China's funding mix also means that its growing financial footprint in the UN has been felt mostly in the UN Secretariat and some Specialized Agencies that rely to a significant degree on assessed contributions. In 2020, the main recipients of China's assessed contributions were the UN Secretariat (US\$ 121.5 mil-

<sup>9</sup> China's GDP (PPP) increased from roughly \$4,000 in 1999 to more than \$16,000 in 2019. For an overview and graphic illustration, see Ghosh 2019.

lion), FAO (47.5), ILO (41.4), WHO (36.2), UNESCO (29.4), and UNIDO (17.4), with minor amounts going to IOM (6.1), WMO (1.7), and other smaller entities. The position as the second largest contributor adds to China's political weight, notably in budget negotiations, where China has joined other large contributors in demanding more cost-effectiveness and limits on further spending increases. In the Specialized Agencies, the influence that comes with assessed contributions may be diminished by the voluntary funding they also receive. At the FAO, for instance, China's 12 percent share in assessed contributions translated into only 3.1 percent of total revenue; voluntary contributions accounted for 74 percent of the FAO's total income in 2021. In this context, a considerable increase in assessed contributions is of limited relevance (FAO 2022a).

### Voluntary core contributions

Voluntary core contributions are also referred to as "multilateral contributions" (Weinlich et al. 2020: 26) as they support the autonomy of entities and, thus, their ability to implement their mandates. They are similar to assessed contributions but give donors more leverage. China's voluntary core contributions have only been reported on separately since 2017; between 2017 and 2020, they grew modestly from 36.3 million to 38.8 million US dollars (Figure 1). The more notable finding is that this category remains rather small in China's funding mix, accounting for only 8.4 percent of China's total contributions for operational activities. However, as it is mainly the UN Funds and Programmes (such as UNDP, UNICEF, and UNFPA) that rely on these resources, the finding may also indicate that China has so far avoided investing significantly in the UN entities in which Western providers play dominant roles, making only symbolic contributions instead. As Figure 2 shows, the bulk of China's voluntary core contributions goes to the IFAD, a Rome-based international financing institution that receives funding *inter alia* through replenishments. China has a heightened interest in IFAD because of the organization's focus on poverty reduction and food security in rural areas (Mao 2020).<sup>10</sup> In addition, the IFAD is the only UN entity that links financial contributions and voting shares. In comparison to its contributions to the IFAD, Chinese core contributions to other UN entities are minuscule (Figure 2).

### Voluntary earmarked contributions

Similar to voluntary core contributions, China has also only expanded the use of earmarked resources from 42.2 million US dollars in 2010 to 55.8 in 2020, with ups and downs in between. The UN's overall budget almost doubled over the same period. So far, China has not embraced earmarking as a key funding modality in contrast to established Western contributors in either Funds and Programmes, which traditionally rely on voluntary contributions almost exclusively, or in Specialized Agencies, where earmarked contributions also often make up the majority of income. In 2020, only 17.4 percent (US\$ 78.4 million) of Chinese funds were provided as earmarked contributions (UN DESA 2022). For other major donors, such as the United States and Germany, earmarked con-

tributions typically represent a much higher share of their overall UN spending (75 percent and 73 percent, respectively). As a heavy reliance on earmarked funding reduces the autonomy and flexibility of UN organizations, this trend among Western Member States has been identified as a key problem for the UN development system (Weinlich et al. 2020).

China has not been a proponent of this trend but has used voluntary non-core contributions for its own purposes. The peak in China's earmarked funding to the UN development system in 2017 can be attributed to China's focus on the BRI. At the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in 2017, China's government pledged a total of RMB 2 billion (approximately US\$ 283.7 million) in emergency food aid to countries within the BRI, channelling it through the World Food Programme (WFP) (Mao 2020).<sup>11</sup> According to UN DESA figures, WFP received 73.8 million US dollars in earmarked contributions from China in that year. Allocations in 2020, in turn, reflect China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in exceptionally high contributions to the WHO (Figure 3). China may also have stepped up its funding to WHO in reaction to the Trump administration's threat to withhold funding from the organization over its handling of the pandemic. It is also not surprising to see that the FAO and UNIDO, both headed by a Chinese national in that year, are major recipients of Chinese contributions, although absolute numbers have remained modest.

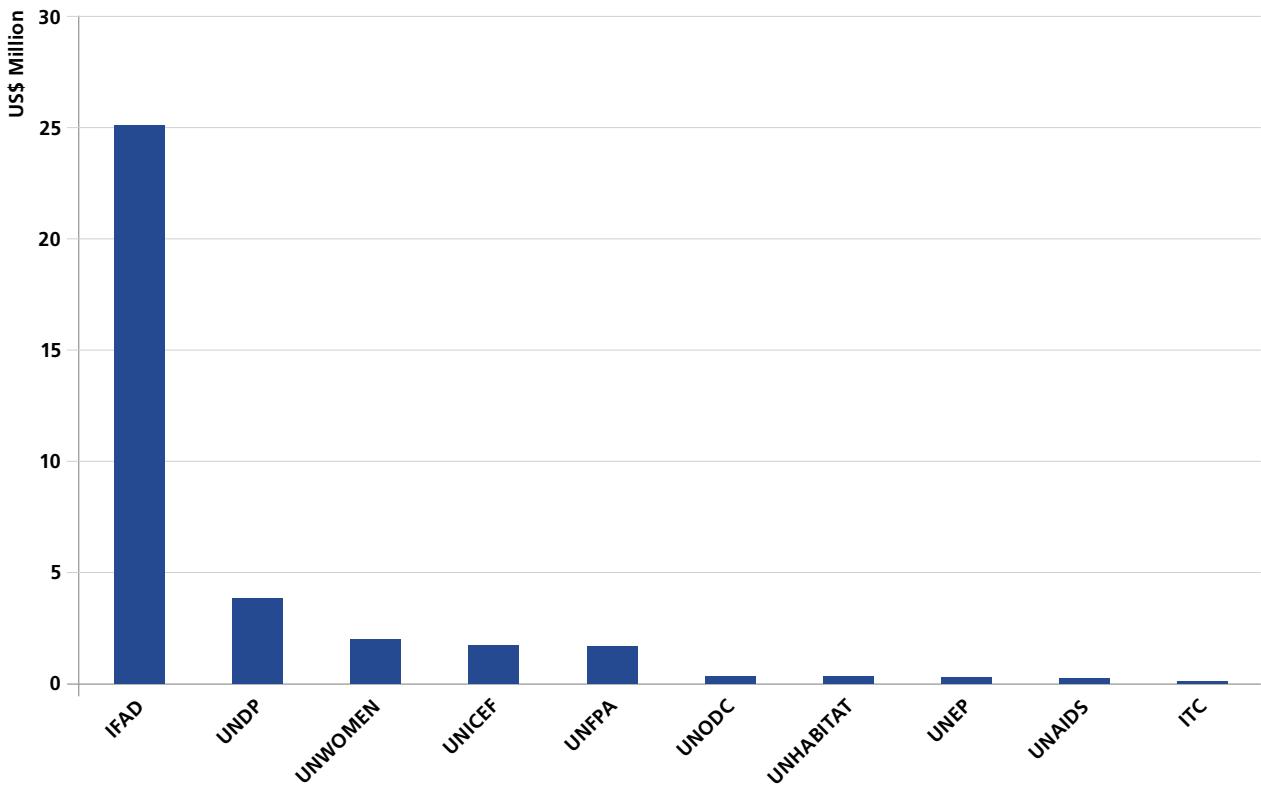
Interestingly, China contributes comparatively few earmarked resources to the smaller entities in the Secretariat that perform functions for the entire UN development system, such as the Development Coordination Office. While these entities are generally covered by the UN's regular budget, Western donors support some of them with voluntary contributions. Out of 14 such entities,<sup>12</sup> China contributed only to the budgets of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (US\$ 1.7 million in 2020) and UN DESA (US\$ 4.0 million); the former focuses on the world region that China belongs to and the latter being led by a Chinese national. In comparison, overall contributions to UN DESA were 77.3 million US dollars in 2020, mostly coming from Western donors, with Germany alone contributing 7.9 million US dollars. When it comes to the UN Development Cooperation Office and the UN Resident Coordinator system to which this office provides managerial and substantive support, China made a singular contribution of 2 million US dollars in 2019 when the new system was put in place (UNSDG n.d.) but so far has not provided any additional resources. Western Member States, in turn, have invested more heavily. In 2021 alone, Germany provided 11.7 million US dollars and the United States 21.5 million US dollars. During negotiations on UN development system reform, countries negotiated about how to bal-

<sup>10</sup> IFAD also hosts the China-IFAD South-South and Triangular Cooperation Facility.

<sup>11</sup> Chinese funding explicitly dedicated to BRI-related processes does not seem to have continued at these initial levels, arguably also because of geopolitical tensions over UN engagement with the BRI; see section 3.1.

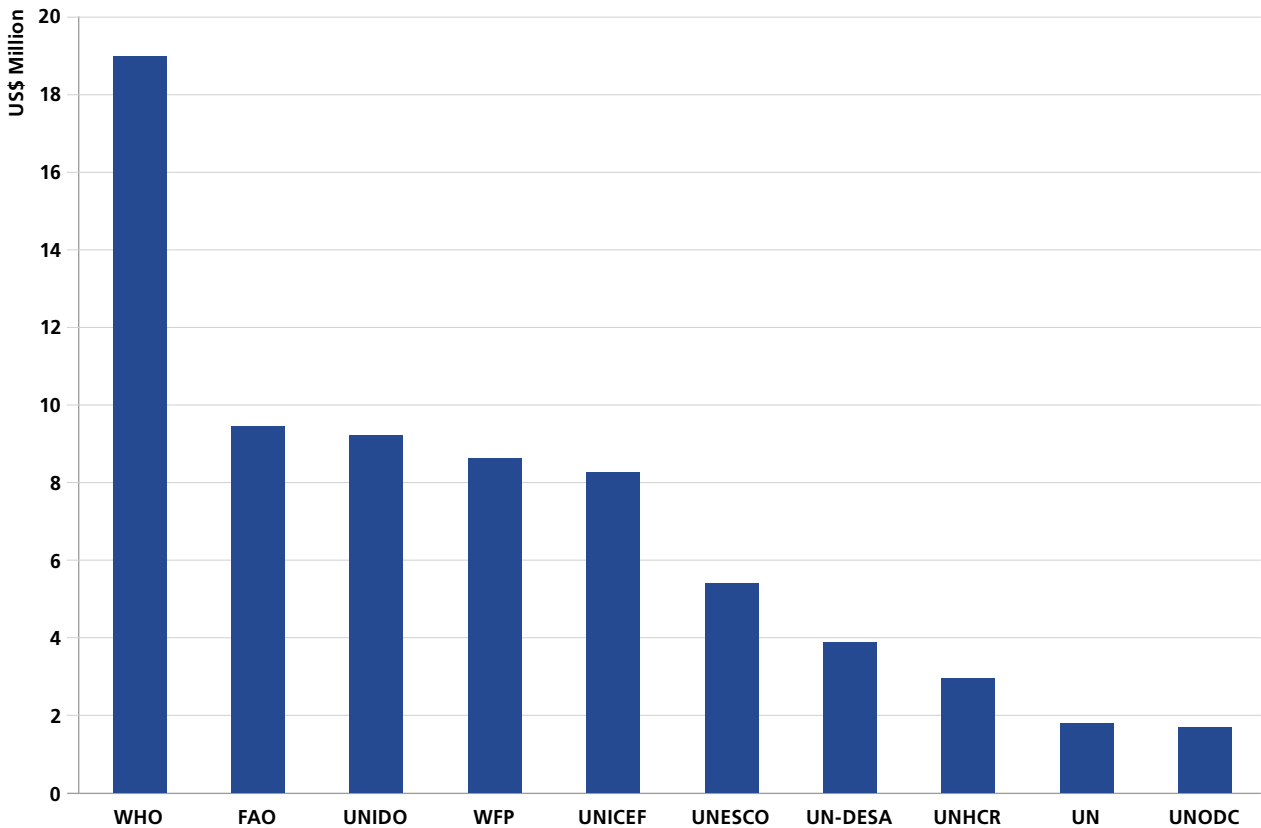
<sup>12</sup> This includes: UN-ECE, UN-ECA, UN-ECLAC, UN-ESCAP, UN-ESCWA, UN-DOS, UN-DCO, UN DESA, UN-DRR, UN-DMSPC, UN-DGC, UN-RISD, UNSSC, and UNOPS.

Figure 2  
Allocation of Chinese voluntary core contributions to UN entities for operational activities (2020)



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on UN DESA 2022.

Figure 3  
Allocation of Chinese non-core contributions, excluding local resources (2020)



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on UN DESA 2022.

ance the Resident Coordinators' multiple functions. Some favored a more political role, while others did not. China sided with many global South countries that expressed opposition to the more political and normative role of Resident Coordinators (Chen et al. 2020).

China provided another seven percent (US\$ 30.5 million) of earmarked resources in 2020 that were earmarked for operational UN activities within Chinese borders; these are "local resources" dedicated to domestic purposes. The bulk of these contributions went to the UNDP country office (US\$ 25 million), followed by WFP (US\$ 2.9 million) and UNFPA (US\$ 2.0 million) at considerably lower amounts. It is also noteworthy that China has contributed very little to UN pooled funds in recent years, an earmarked funding modality that the UN promotes as a better alternative to tightly earmarked project and programme funding. In the UN funding compact adopted in 2019, Member States agreed on a collective target of 16 percent of earmarked funding for development-related resources to be channelled through pooled funds (UNSG 2019). The UN funding statistics for 2020 record no Chinese contributions to pooled funds for development-related activities and only payments of 0.5 million US dollars to humanitarian pooled funds.

## CHINA'S POSITION AMONG THE TOP-TEN CONTRIBUTORS TO INDIVIDUAL UN ENTITIES

China is among the top 10 donors in eleven UN entities (Table 3). This list results from a combination of China's high levels of assessed contributions, its targeted use of an overall modest amount of voluntary contributions, as well as context-specific factors (such as the absence of Western donors

in certain UN entities).<sup>13</sup> China's first rank at UNESCO is a result of the United States leaving the organization in 2018. The United States had traditionally been UNESCO's largest contributor. Relative to the funding share of other Member States, China is financially most dominant at UNIDO, another UN entity where major Western states, including the US, the UK and France, have given up their membership because of the perceived irrelevance and ineffectiveness of the organization, while China has invested a comparatively sizeable amount of voluntary contributions. UNIDO is also among those entities that have been led by Chinese nationals. China's financial attention to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific also stands out, as it is the only Regional Commission China provided voluntary financial contributions to in 2020. Chinese nationals have obtained three out of 25 leading posts in the Commission's senior management team, notably heading the divisions for transport and energy, two crucial aspects of BRI, as well as the Centre for Sustainable Agricultural Mechanisation, a regional institution of the Commission based in Beijing. UN DESA is somewhat of a contradiction to the previously described pattern wherein China chooses smaller entities with fewer resources and less Western presence and entities with Chinese officials in leadership positions (see also Mao 2020) for its targeted investments. Although Chinese nationals have headed the department in the UN Secretariat for the last 13 years, it only ranked eighth for voluntary contribu-

<sup>13</sup> These figures do not represent all funding flows to these entities, only the subset that is spent on development-related and humanitarian activities. Using different data sources that count overall contributions, Morris et al. (2021: 40) list ITU, UN HABITAT, and the UN Capital Fund as additional organizations where China was among the top 10 donors in 2019. Please note that this study uses numbers for 2020.

Table 3

**UN entities in receipt of funding for operational activities where China ranks among the top-ten contributors (2020)**

	Total contribution (US\$ million)	Voluntary contributions (US\$ million)	Share of total entity income (%)	Share of voluntary contributions (government donors only) (%)	China's rank
<b>UNESCO</b>	34.8	5.5	9.9	3.4	1
<b>UNIDO</b>	26.7	9.3	16.6	12.2	1
<b>WMO</b>	2.0	0.3	11.2	8.4	2
<b>ILO</b>	41.9	0.5	8.2	0.3	3
<b>ESCAP</b>	1.7	1.7	7.5	7.5	3
<b>FAO</b>	57.1	9.6	3.9	1.7	4
<b>WHO</b>	55.2	19.0	3.5	1.5	6
<b>ITC</b>	0.8	0.8	2.4	2.4	6
<b>IFAD</b>	25.7	25.7	6.9	6.9	6
<b>UN DESA</b>	4.0	4.0	5.1	5.1	8
<b>UNCTAD</b>	1.0	1.0	3.3	3.3	9

Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on UN DESA 2022.

tions in 2020.<sup>14</sup> While UNESCO, UNIDO, and UN DESA are comparatively small entities within the UN development system, it is noteworthy that China, mostly on account of its assessed contributions, has risen to rank fourth and sixth at the FAO and WHO, respectively, two financially large and politically central UN organizations.

## UN ENTITY EXPENSES IN CHINA

China’s engagement in the UN cannot be separated from the UN’s engagement in China. At the domestic level, the UN maintains a considerable financial presence in China, which makes China different from Western countries. As a UN programme country, China hosts a UN Resident Coordinator that represents all UN entities present on the ground. In 2020, the 21 UN entities currently part of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for China collectively spent 144.9 million US dollars in China. This figure means that China ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> among the largest UN programme countries, after Ecuador (42<sup>nd</sup>) and before Honduras (44<sup>th</sup>). In middle-income countries, including China, the UN typically relies almost entirely on non-core contributions and local resources contributed by the host government it-

self. As China has not recently faced any large-scale humanitarian crises and has the capacity to deal with smaller crises itself, the overall pattern for UN expenses in China shows a clear and unsurprising focus on development-related activities. Furthermore, there is a sizeable share of local resources (21 percent) that has significantly grown over the last five years and an extraordinarily high share of core resources (39.2 percent), given that China has been an upper-middle-income country since 2012 (Figure 4). Normally, core allocations to middle-income countries are reduced over time to the minimum required to institutionally run the country offices. However, they have significantly grown in China since 2015 and appear to also fund programmatic activities.

Regarding the financial footprint of individual UN entities in China, the list is topped by UNDP and UNICEF, two organizations that globally receive only small voluntary contributions from China (Figure 5). Financially speaking, China has remained a net recipient programme country for both entities. The same is true for the other UN Funds and Programmes (UNFPA, UNHCR, UN-Habitat, UN-Women) except for the WFP and UNRWA. Together, the Funds and Programmes received 38.8 million US dollars in voluntary contributions from China and spent 96.1 million US dollars in China in 2020, not including local resources. The relatively substantial expenses by UNIDO and, to a lesser extent, ILO are also noteworthy. With relatively small budgets, these two entities are not in the group of the largest (financially speaking) UN country offices in most programme countries.

<sup>14</sup> At the time of writing, it was unclear to what extent Chinese contributions to trust funds such as the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (\$200 million over 10 years to advance peace and development objectives, pledged in 2016) are included in the present dataset.

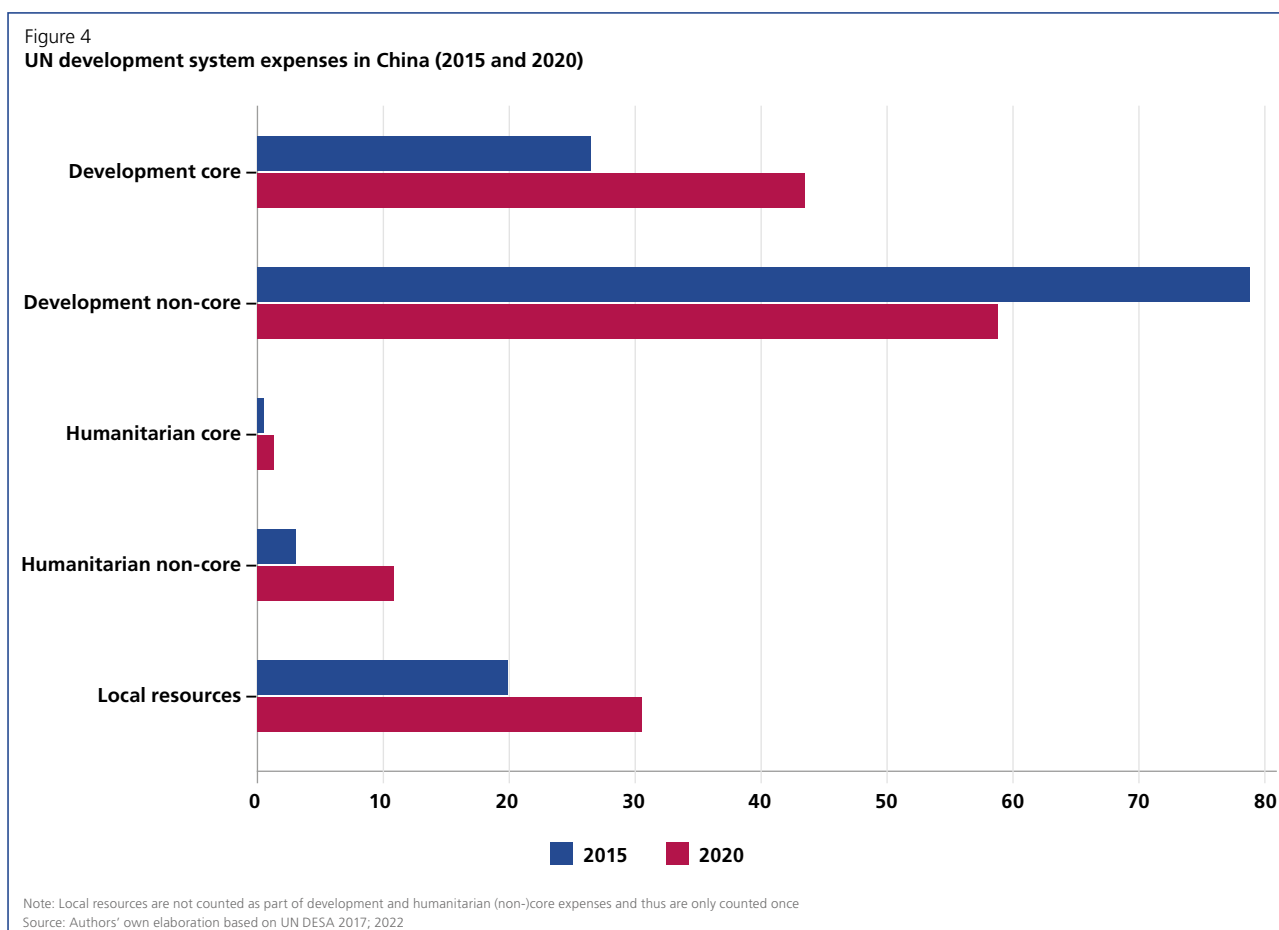
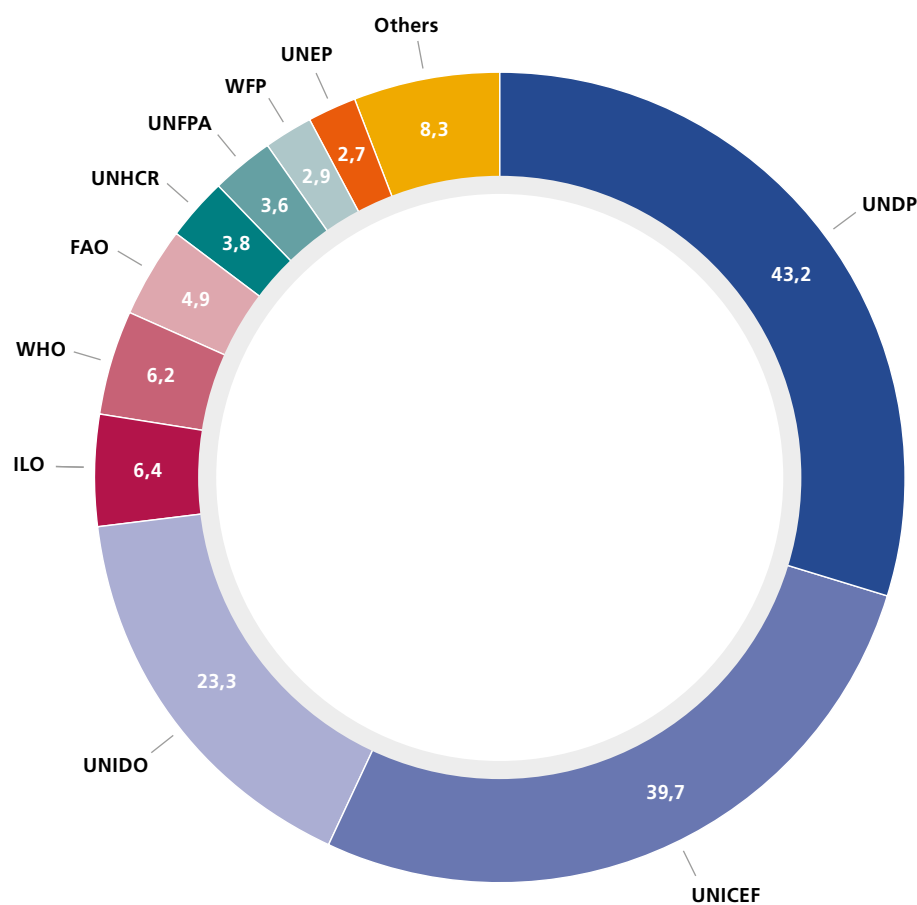


Figure 5  
Expenses of UN entities in China, focus on the top 10 entities (2020)



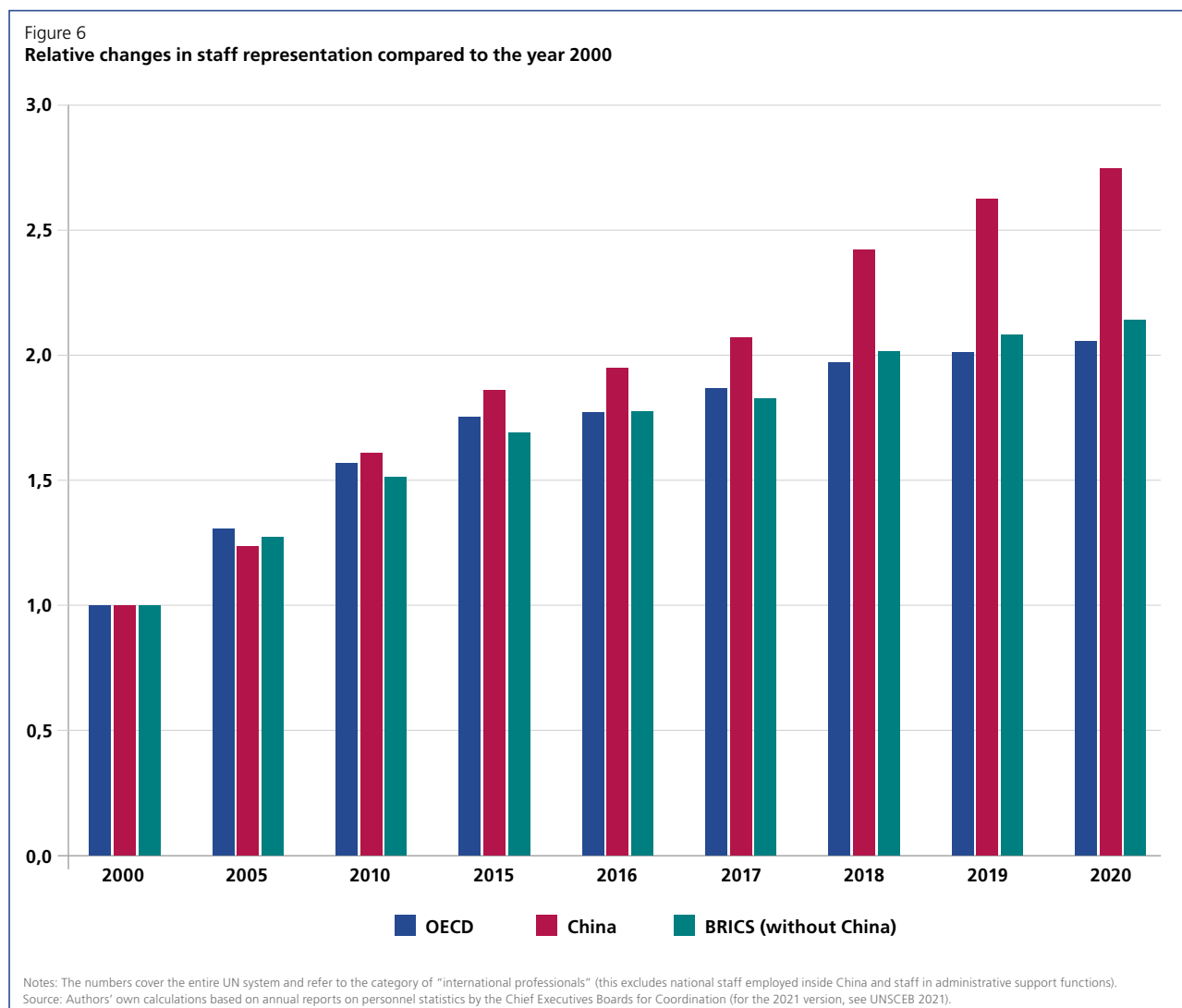
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on UN DESA 2022.

## 2.2 CHINESE STAFF

Few issues in the UN have been as persistently contested as the representation of Member States in the UN body of civil servants. The UN Charter explicitly states that the guiding principle for filling UN positions should be individual performance: "The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity" (UN 1945, art. 101 §3). The founders of the UN also deemed it necessary to soften the principle of merit-based nominations by a vague provision for geographical balance: "[D]ue regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible" (UN 1945, art. 101 §3). Geographic balance can serve to bring a broad spectrum of perspectives to the UN, ideally generating the type of supranational outlook required to act on global interests. The multinational composition of the international civil service may enable the flow of information in both directions, from Member States' governments to the UN and the other way around. It can, however, also enable Member States to further bilateral interests (Weiss 1982). Representation can be sought as a tool to "exercise control, gain prestige and secure resources"

(Parizek and Stephen 2021: 205). In particular, larger states may realistically aim to achieve a critical mass in terms of staff representation and/or key positions to exercise considerable informal influence over agendas and policies.

Recent academic literature has focused on how the emerging powers of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS states) have aimed to gain greater representation in international organizations (Parizek and Stephen 2021). Moreover, a recent study examining China in the UN analysed how staff politics is employed by Beijing as a means to strengthen its "discursive powers" to promote a global governance system more attuned to Chinese interests (Fung and Lam 2021). However, even if representation is linked to power, it may not always be a direct function of it. Start-up costs for newcomers and social networking effects can make it difficult for emerging powers to achieve greater representation in line with their economic power (Parizek and Stephen 2021). Representation, and the means employed to promote candidates, can also come with reputational risk. International organizations, in turn, might attempt to co-opt powerful Member States and access their resources, networks, and political influence by recruiting their nationals.



## THE BIGGER PICTURE: CHINESE NATIONALS IN THE UN SYSTEM<sup>15</sup>

China's staff representation in the UN system has changed considerably in recent years, also in comparison to other Member States and members of the OECD and other BRICS countries in particular. Overall, China has seen a continuous and significant increase in its share of UN staff over the last decade. As Figure 6 shows, Chinese staff at the UN has grown at a faster pace than staff from OECD and other BRICS countries for the last decade. In absolute numbers, Chinese nationals in the UN category "international professionals" went up from 316 in 2000 to 867 in 2020 out of a total of 41,420, meaning that China almost

tripled its footprint in 20 years. In contrast, US nationals in the same category grew only by a factor of 1.8 in the same period (from 1,914 to 3,452). As a result, while still small compared to its main geopolitical counterpart, China has increased its share of UN staff both in relative and absolute terms.

While staff increases are an important parameter for recent change, it is also necessary to look at the share of total staff in order to understand China's current position and its trajectory towards catching up with other great powers. As mentioned above, the UN Charter places the principle of merit-based appointments over the principle of geographic representation, arguably because the latter can reinforce the influence of national interests within the organization (Weiss 1982). Throughout the UN's history, however, staff composition has been a highly political issue. Faced with an increasing number of Member States from different world regions in the wake of decolonization processes, the UN General Assembly defined a norm for geographic representation early on. The formula used to define staff representation targets is mainly based on Member States' contributions to the regular budget (primarily based on Member States' economic capacity) with

<sup>15</sup> The data presented in this section covers the entire UN system which is larger than the UN development system. The system-wide reporting of UN personnel statistics by the UN Chief Executives Boards does not allow us to focus specifically on UN entities, because the UN Secretariat is reported as one entity even though it encompasses multiple departments, only some of which belong to the UN development system. Yet, the 'error' should be small. The bulk of the 41,420 staff in the category "international professional" (2020) work in the UN development system (CEB 2021, 138). Furthermore, this category does not include the UN's considerable number of peacekeeping personnel.



adjustments for population size, ensuring both a minimum representation for small states and greater representation for larger populations (UNSG 2018: 6). The ideal staff representation put forward through this formula reflects a compromise of the principles of financial power and “one seat, one vote”.

The formula only applies to the UN Secretariat and UN entities attached to it. It also covers only those positions marked as “geographic positions”; it currently applies to 3,126 out of 5,444 positions funded through the regular budget. The total staff of the UN Secretariat stood at 36,827 in 2020 (UNSG 2021a: 17). While the formula thus applies only to a fraction of UN staff, it reflects the accepted norm for geographic representation. Applying it to the entire UN system allows us to get a sense of how balanced the geographic representation of UN staff is and what role China occupies in the larger picture. Figure 7 compares four large Western Member States (United States, Japan, Germany, and United Kingdom) with China and other Southern powers (Brazil, India, and South Africa). Of these countries, China is the most underrepresented. If recent years can serve as an indicator for the medium-term future, this gap might actually widen if China's economy continues to grow at rates that push up the staff target, making it increasingly unrealistic for staff increases to keep pace.

## CHINESE STAFF AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Focusing on the representation of Chinese nationals at different levels of seniority offers a more detailed picture of China's position in the composition of UN staff. There has been a notable change in the last decade related to *executive leadership positions*. Reflecting Deng Xiaoping's mantra of “keeping a low profile”, China did not hold any executive leadership position during the first decades of its UN membership. This somewhat changed in 2006 when Margaret Chan of Hong Kong, who held both Chinese and Canadian citizenship, became the Director-General of the WHO.<sup>16</sup> The number of Chinese UN executive leaders subsequently grew to two in 2007 (when Sha Zukang became head of DESA, a position that Chinese nationals have continued to hold until today), three in 2013 (when Li Yong assumed the leadership of UNIDO), and five in 2015 (with Haolin Zhao becoming Secretary-General of ITU and Fang Liu taking the lead at the ICAO). In 2019, Qu Dongyu was elected Director-General of the FAO, returning the number of Chinese UN executive leaders to five (out of a total of around 40) after Margaret Chan had left office in 2017. In that year, China held more leadership positions in UN Specialized Agencies than any other Member State, leading to the first wave of debates – notably in the United States – about China wanting to take over the UN (Whineray 2020; see also Lynch 2020; The Economist

2019). In contrast to working-level staff, the candidacy of executive leaders often receives substantial political support from their respective countries. In the case of Qu Dongyu, Chinese influence behind the scenes appears to have been extraordinarily robust (Jaura 2019; see also Lynch and Gramer 2019). The fact that China has held the UN DESA leadership position over four consecutive terms has raised eyebrows. However, having successive leaders from the same country is not uncommon: the first five UNDP Administrators were all US nationals, and all eight Executive Directors of UNICEF to this day have also hailed from the United States. Besides, the Western members of the UN Security Council's permanent five (P5) have all had their strongholds within the UN Secretariat, with US nationals in charge of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (previously the Department for Political Affairs) since 2007; UK nationals heading the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs since 2007; and French nationals leading the UN Department of Peace Operations (previously the Department of Peacekeeping Operations) since 1997.<sup>17</sup> With its successful consecutive claims to the leadership position at UN DESA, China thus seems to have embraced a key feature of Western powers' staff practices at the UN.

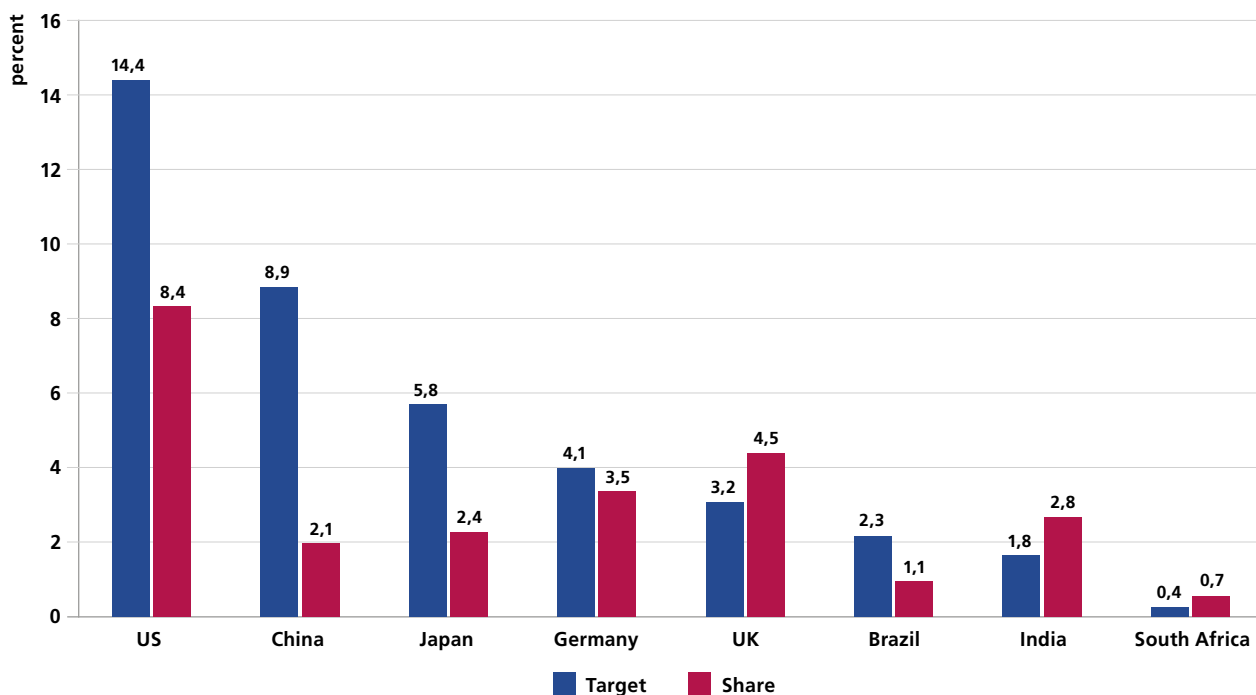
Executive leaders are part of the wider UN category of *senior staff* that includes the Deputy Secretary-General (currently Amina Mohammed), the ranks of Under-Secretary-General (USG) and Assistant Secretary-General (ASG), as well as “officers of equivalent rank”. Senior staff appointments other than the head of agencies receive less media attention but are often equally political. National representation in this category is another indicator of informal power in the UN. While there is no comprehensive system-wide overview of senior staff data, two available datasets provide helpful insights (see Figure 8). An internal UN compilation of senior staff that includes UN Funds and Programmes (notably UNDP, UNFPA, and UNICEF) shows that, as of February 2022, China with four senior staff positions is broadly on the same level as other large Member States; however, it is considerably behind the US, which has 23 such positions (UN 2022). The other dataset is based on UN press releases and contains information on senior appointments across the UN system. It is of particular interest to this study because the rate of appointments indicates either change or perpetuation of the senior staff composition. When looking at appointments in the period 2015–2020, a noteworthy finding is that the United States and the United Kingdom, both strongly represented or even overrepresented in terms of overall staff, have also secured a comparatively high number of senior staff positions. China, as an emerging superpower and the UN's most populous Member State, in turn, has gained fewer positions of this type than other BRICS countries, with the exception of Brazil. This suggests that China has, until recently, not been on a trajectory of catching up with other large UN Member States.

<sup>16</sup> On Margret Chan's election and a discussion of identity-related questions, see Shen 2008.

<sup>17</sup> For details on different parts of the UN Secretariat, see UN n.d.-a.



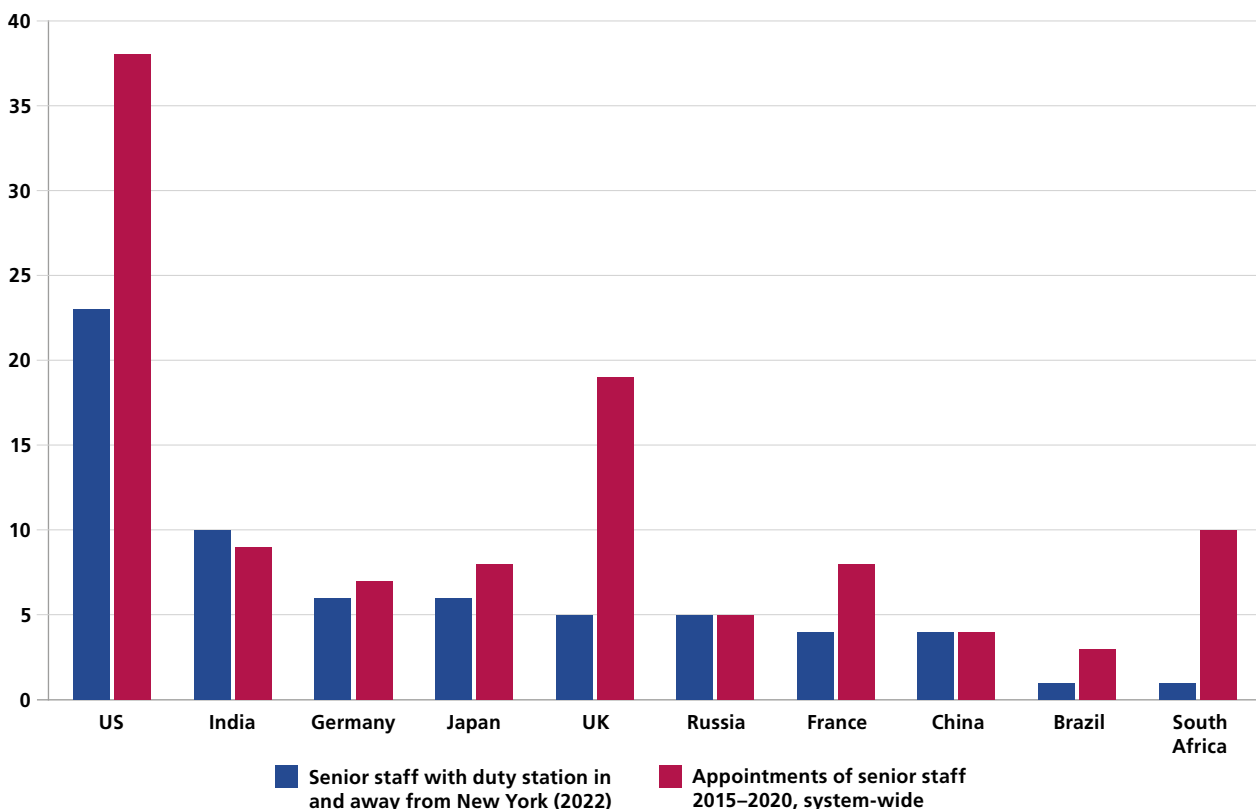
Figure 7

**Geographical representation of selected Member States in the UN system (2020, in percent)\***

\* The norm for the targets was reconstructed from the absolute numbers presented in the UN's 2021 report on staff composition of the Secretariat, referring to "geographical staff" only (3,126 in total). Importantly, the UN does not define precise targets, only "desirable ranges" of +/- 15 percent around an unspecified target. The "target" in the diagram is the middle of the higher and lower end of the ranges. The actual share refers to the representation in the category "international professional" of a given country across the UN system according to the UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) personnel statistics (with a total of 41,270 in 2020). The United States' target is significantly higher than that of China despite the size of China's economy and the fact that it has approximately four times the United States population. This is due to the gap in the assessed contributions, the main factor for determining the desirable ranges. In 2020, the United States' assessment was 22 percent of the regular budget, whereas China's assessment was 12 percent.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on annual reports on personnel statistics by the Chief Executives Boards for Coordination (for the 2021 version, see UNSCEB 2021) and UNSG 2021 (Table 2).

Figure 8

**Senior staff by nationality**

Source: authors' own elaboration, based on information from the United Nations University (n. d.) and UN 2022.\*

\* The coverage of this compilation is rather idiosyncratic; it includes Special Representatives that lead political missions but not Resident Coordinators.

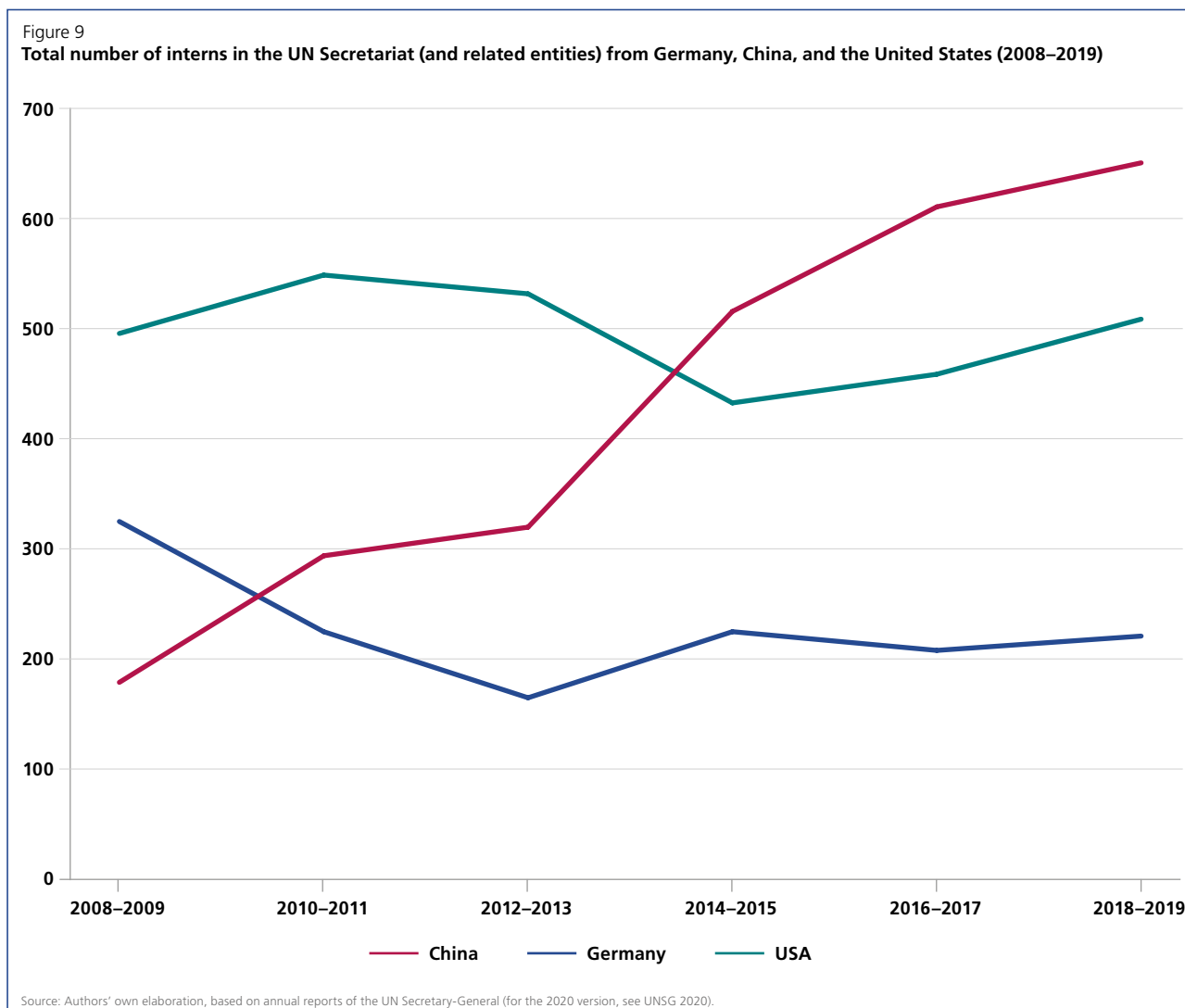
At the lowest end and, formally, on the outside of staff hierarchies are *interns*. As Figure 9 shows, the number of Chinese interns in the UN Secretariat and the entities directly linked to it has more than tripled from 2008 to 2019.<sup>18</sup> Interns often join the pool from which the future international workforce is recruited; they have also acquired valuable knowledge of how international organisations work and bring networks with them upon their return. Interns constitute the fastest-growing category of Chinese nationals in the UN. Given the considerable costs connected with interns' extended stays in New York and other UN locations, this significant increase might simply reflect recently expanded capacity as a result of China's economic growth. However, the Chinese government also appears to engage in efforts to systematically increase the number of interns, including through scholarship programmes and agreements with UN organizations (Fung and Lam 2021: 1154). In 2018, there were more Chinese interns (652) in the UN Secretariat and its related entities than interns from the United States (510) or Germany (222) (UNSG 2020).

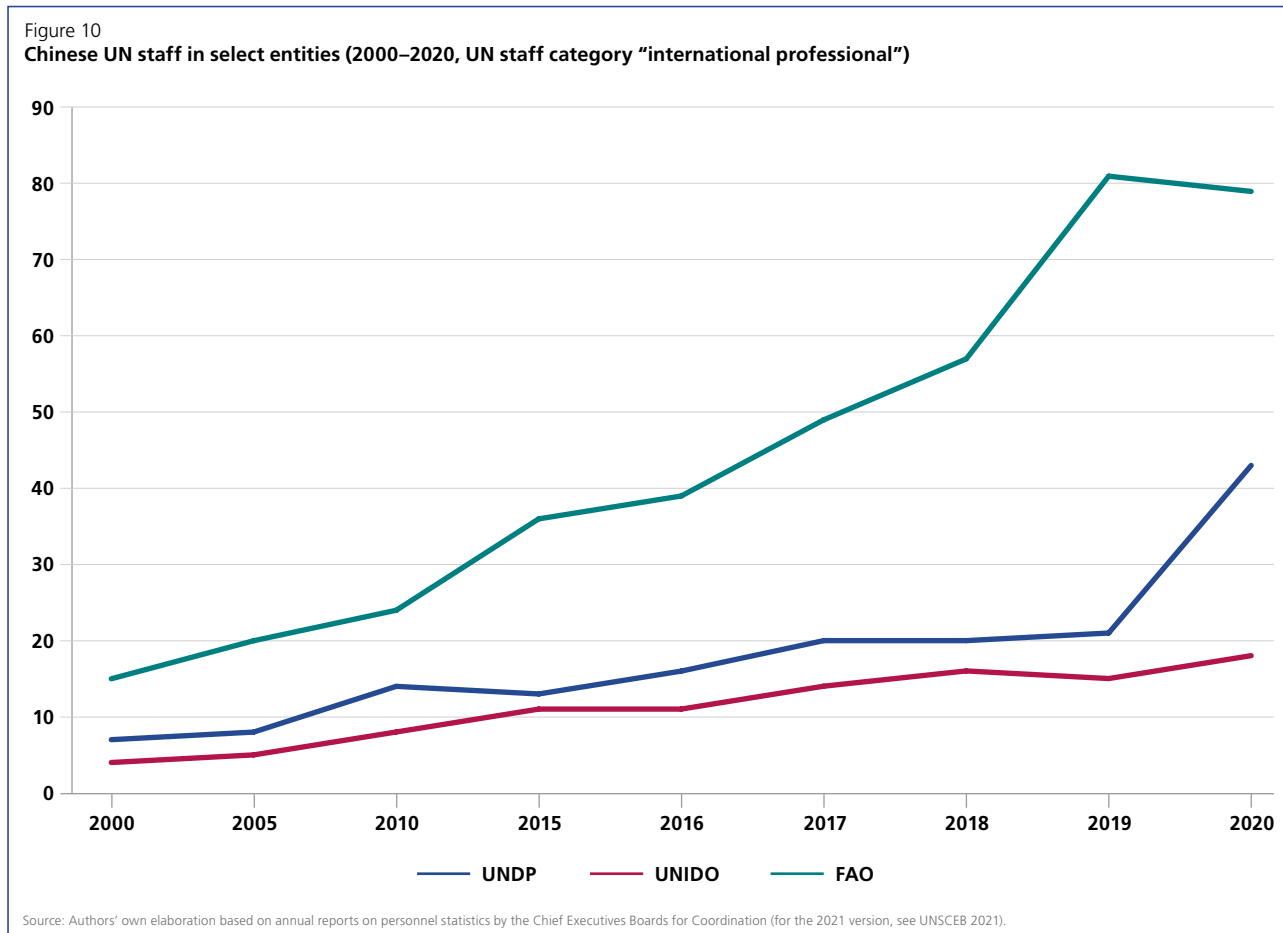
## CHINESE NATIONALS IN THE UN DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

The general trend of increasing Chinese staff numbers is also reflected in the UN development system, including the entities that are the focus of this paper.<sup>19</sup> The FAO, UNDP, and UNIDO have all seen a significant increase in Chinese nationals (Figure 10). In all three organizations, the absolute number of Chinese nationals increased approximately by a factor of five between 2000 and 2020. This is significantly more than the growth in Chinese staff across the UN system, where representation grew by a factor of three over the same period. It is only in the case of the FAO that there appears to be a link between the onset of Chinese leadership in 2019 and an increase in Chinese staff: In the first year of Director-General Qu Dongyu's tenure, the number of Chinese staff jumped from 57 to 81. The increase at the UNDP in 2020 goes back to an incoming cohort of Chinese Junior Professional Officers (JPOs). In relative terms, the number of Chinese nationals in 2020 remained limited: At

<sup>18</sup> Numbers here do not include interns in funds, programmes, and specialized agencies.

<sup>19</sup> No data is available for the UN DESA specifically, as it belongs to the UN Secretariat; see footnote 14.





the UNDP, they accounted for 1.8 percent, at the FAO for 4.7 percent, and at UNIDO for 6.7 percent (for Germany, the numbers are 2.8 percent, 4.0 percent, and 9.3 percent respectively).

The increase in staff is less apparent with regard to a key function of the recently reformed UN development system, namely Resident Coordinators. Resident Coordinators lead UN country teams and are direct representatives of the UN Secretary-General in a programme country. At the time of writing in August 2022, there was only one Chinese national serving as Resident Coordinator out of 112 positions, whereas French nationals hold 8, the United States 6, the United Kingdom 5, Germany 4, India 3, and Brazil 1 such position(s). Japan is not represented, nor are Russia or South Africa (UNINFO n.d.).

## 3

## COLOURING THE PICTURE: KEY DIMENSIONS OF CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT

Funding and staff composition are obvious categories for examining and comparing Member States' standing at the UN, as relevant data is readily available. The third chapter builds on this numerical analysis by focusing on the examination of mostly qualitative data, including reports, resolutions, and interview accounts, to take a closer look at key dimensions of China's engagement with the UN development system. More specifically, we analyse the promotion of China-led initiatives (3.1), attempts to integrate "Chinese language" into UN proceedings (3.2), Chinese leadership style as it plays out in conference settings and within individual UN bodies (3.3), and Chinese diplomacy and alliance practices (3.4). These dimensions bring together different ways Member States seek influence at the UN and empower comprehensive insight into the characteristics and particularities of China's engagement. While this study focuses on key patterns, we are also keen to provide a nuanced picture that shows how Chinese behaviour can vary across sites and contexts.

### 3.1 CHINA-LED INITIATIVES

A central feature of China's engagement with the UN development system is the promotion of China-led initiatives. While a number of Member States across the board have set up initiatives with UN entities – in the form of trust funds, for instance – China has been particularly active in designing its own set of cooperation mechanisms. By doing so, it has built on and benefitted from its particular position within the UN development architecture. Most UN entities with development-related mandates have long operated a two-pronged approach to Member States by implementing operational activities in programme countries, on the one hand, and having donor countries, on the other hand, provide the bulk of funding for these activities. China is arguably the foremost example of an expanding group of Member States that falls outside this pattern. Against the backdrop of rising income levels, an increasing number of countries have outgrown or graduated from typical UN development support structures.<sup>20</sup> Like most upper middle-in-

come countries, China still has a sizable UN in-country presence that increasingly engages with Chinese initiatives abroad. Being both a UN programme country and an influential international cooperation provider allows China to combine these roles to further its interests. While Western donors approach UN entities mostly as project implementers while also supporting their semi-autonomous operational work, normative function, and advocacy efforts through voluntary core contributions from afar, China can make use of UN entities with offices in Beijing as facilitators or brokers that bring together developing countries, providers, and other stakeholders in line with Chinese foreign policy concerns.

### ENTITY-SPECIFIC INITIATIVES

UN entities led by a Chinese national have set up numerous initiatives focused on thematic issues, modalities, and/or geographic areas of particular relevance to China. In some cases, these initiatives are tailored towards the work of and are developed through the UN entity in question, with China's footprint being of a more indirect nature. They are not necessarily targeted at China as such; instead, these initiatives focus on knowledge transfer or capacity building and often serve to connect traditional donors with developing countries. In UNIDO, for instance, the Programme for Country Partnership aims at building "multi-stakeholder partnerships" and serves to "facilitate the mobilization of partners and resources" (UNIDO n.d.-a). Set up under the leadership of Li Yong (2013–2021), it has been an open secret within the organization that the Programme builds on Chinese experience with special economic zones and is geared towards China's bilateral partners, including Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Kyrgyzstan (UNIDO n.d.-a). Although Chinese financial contributions have been comparatively small, China was the only international partner engaged in all ten Programme for Country Partnership (PCP) countries in 2020.<sup>21</sup>

At the FAO, the Hand-in-Hand Initiative and its key "match-making" component are a cornerstone of Qu Dongyu's reform agenda. This initiative offers tools to provide capacity

<sup>20</sup> When UNDP was set to close its country office in the Republic of Korea, for instance, the Korean government initiated a new partnership framework with the UNDP. Together, they opened the UNDP Seoul Policy Centre; this is a concrete example of how a high-income country can continue in-country collaboration with a UN development entity.

<sup>21</sup> UNIDO-related dynamics discussed in this study reflect the situation under Li Yong's leadership which lasted until November 2021.

Table 4  
Selected UN trust funds established by China\*

Title	Amounts
<b>UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (PDTF)</b>	US\$ 200 million pledged over 10 years in 2016 US\$ 100 million received by 2020 Extended to 2030
<b>PDTF Sub-Fund: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development</b>	Expenditures between 2016 and 2020 at about US\$ 41 million
<b>China-FAO South-South Cooperation Trust Fund</b>	Phase 1 (2009–2015): US\$ 30 million (contributed) Phase 2 (2015–2020): US\$ 50 million (contributed) Phase 3 (2020– ): US\$ 50 million (pledged)
<b>UNEP China Trust Fund</b>	Since 2013: annual pledges of US\$ 2 million
<b>UNESCO-China Funds-in-Trust</b>	Since 2012: annual contributions of US\$ 2 million

\* In 2015, China established its own South-South Cooperation Assistance fund through which it also funds cooperation with UN entities. Initially, \$2 billion were pledged. In 2022, the fund was rebranded as Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund and linked with the Global Development Initiative (MOFA 2015; 2022c). Sources: FAO 2020b; UN n.d.-b; UNEP n.d.-a; MOFA 2021

building to some of the world's poorest countries, including Ethiopia, Haiti and Yemen (FAO n.d.), and has a strong focus on big data. Hand-in-Hand's Geospatial Platform has integrated a substantial number of databases. Strengthening the UN's capacities and functions regarding data is in line with agreed-upon UN policies and part of Secretary-General Guterres' "Quintet of Change" reforms to better equip the UN for ongoing and future crises (UNSG 2022b). A cause for concern, however, is that key positions related to data at the FAO have been filled by Chinese nationals<sup>22</sup> and that the FAO management appears to be eager to shield the area of data policy from intergovernmental oversight (Baumann 2022). China has also bolstered data initiatives with funds for South-South Cooperation at FAO, among others (see Table 3). The FAO has been collaborating closely with DESA, which is another UN entity headed by a Chinese national, on data-related processes. Notably, they have collaborated by aligning FAO efforts with the DESA-led UN Global Platform dedicated to providing data for SDG monitoring.<sup>23</sup> With its overall responsibility for supporting the advancement of the global statistical system, DESA has taken up the topic of geospatial information under Chinese leadership. China hosted the first UN World Geospatial Information Congress in 2018 and was particularly keen on hosting one of DESA's four Regional Hubs for Big Data.<sup>24</sup> For some Western observers, this cooperation through Chinese-led UN entities is part of a broader but implicit Chinese strategy to initiate re-

search and knowledge centres that focus on the use of big data for global strategic concerns.<sup>25</sup> Others highlight that China's resources, contacts, and knowledge were instrumental for the UN to engage on new digital topics.<sup>26</sup>

## SOUTH-SOUTH AND TRIANGULAR COOPERATION

The UN development system has long been engaged in supporting cooperation among developing countries, often termed South-South cooperation, in various ways. Most UN development entities have established structures to engage with and mainstream their support for South-South and triangular cooperation (Haug 2022a). China has been a key partner for the expansion of different entities' South-South portfolios. In line with the framing of China as the world's largest developing country, China's government has made use of references to the South and South-South cooperation to promote its developing partnerships, often to highlight its links with Asian, African, or Latin American partners (see Kohlenberg and Godehardt 2021; Haug and Kamwengo 2022). The UN's presence in China proper has often played a central facilitating role, and this growing engagement with China's development cooperation abroad has also changed funding and partnership structures.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Interview with member state representative, May 2022.

<sup>23</sup> ITU, which is also a Chinese-led UN entity, has been engaged with the FAO on data-related issues as well, see FAO 2020a.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022; see also UN-CEBD n.d.-a and UN-CEBD n.d.-b.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and May 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>27</sup> In China, the UN country team currently consists of 21 members, most of which belong to the UN Sustainable Development Group; see UN-SDG 2021. UN development offices in upper middle-income countries

UNDP China was one of the early actors working to set up triangular pilot projects with the Chinese government in African countries (including Zambia and Ghana), supported by funding from Western donors such as Denmark or the United Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> Over time, these South-South support projects laid the foundation for a programmatic area within the UNDP country office in Beijing. The Centres of Excellence established by China are another mechanism the country has used in its collaboration with UN entities to promote the Chinese development experience abroad.<sup>29</sup> One of the earliest of its kind was the International Poverty Reduction Centre in China, set up with the support of UNDP (IPRC n.d.). The UNIDO Centre for South-South Industrial Cooperation (UNIDO n.d.-b), in turn, is only a centre by name. As a project set up between UNIDO and different Chinese government entities, it does not have any major resources of its own and has mostly been supporting travel and study tours for Chinese officials and their foreign guests.<sup>30</sup> At the FAO, in turn, China has long been hailed as “the major participator, supporter and promoter of the SSC Programme” (FAO 2015: 2). While China has been actively involved in FAO’s South-South cooperation support schemes since the 1990s, it was with the establishment of the China-FAO South-South Cooperation Trust Fund in 2008 that collaboration took off in a more substantive way. Activities implemented with Trust Fund resources in collaboration with the FAO have been almost exclusively dedicated to supporting Chinese bilateral cooperation with African countries, mostly on agricultural technologies (FAO 2015).

China has arguably become the most visible South-South cooperation provider at the UN as well as elsewhere. In numerical terms, there is a positive correlation between the level of funding individual UN entities receive from the Chinese government and the extent to which they engage with South-South cooperation support (Haug 2021a: 32). At the same time, a substantial and growing number of UN entities have witnessed China-related controversies connected to their South-South work (Haug 2022a). In the context of rising geopolitical tensions, some entities have reduced (the visibility of) their engagement with Chinese programmatic instruments and/or have dismantled their South-South cooperation unit in order to avoid the creation of separate lines of work that might cause Western suspicion.<sup>31</sup> At a programmatic level, Executive Board discussions at UNDP and elsewhere have led to heated debates about

the extent to which UN cooperation with China-the-programme-country should be funded through core resources<sup>32</sup> and include support for activities ostensibly related to China-the-international-cooperation-provider.<sup>33</sup> For many Western representatives, the increasingly substantial focus on South-South cooperation support provided by UN country offices in Beijing is at odds with traditional UN in-country work (see Haug 2022a; 2022b). For the UN, in turn, South-South cooperation offers a growing field of engagement contributing to an alternative business model for UN work in low and middle-income countries (see Haug 2021a).<sup>34</sup> Overall, UN entities have seen a considerable expansion of their South-South cooperation engagement with and for China. That line of work, however, has been increasingly and visibly politicized and contested through pushbacks from Western Member States.<sup>35</sup> It is mainly due to China that South-South cooperation is no longer a minor niche topic at the UN but, in many ways, has moved to the centre of sometimes heated debates about multilateral cooperation.

## BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

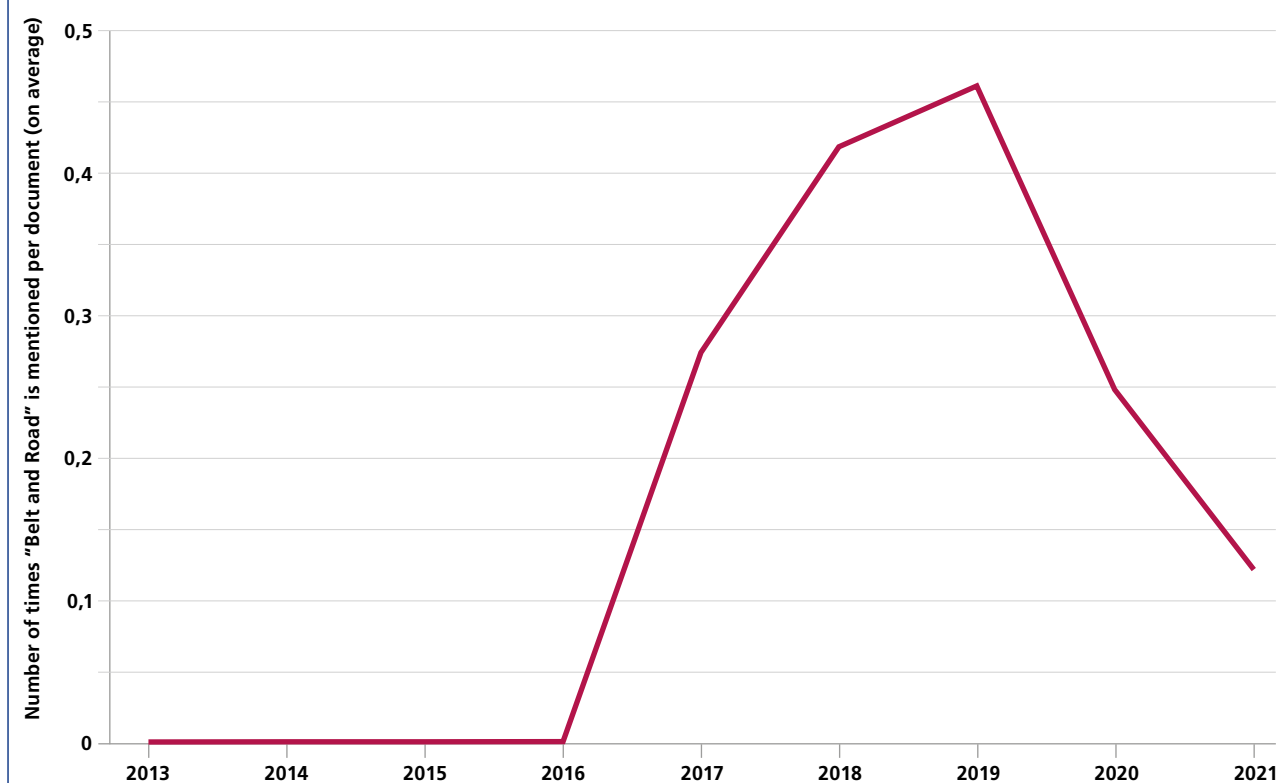
Building on and often in addition to UN support for South-South cooperation, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a more recent framework for UN collaboration with China. Since its proclamation by Xi Jinping in 2013, BRI has been a broad, and many say purposefully vague, umbrella or platform for infrastructure-related engagement abroad that is part of a geo-economic strategy to strengthen China’s global connectivity. It’s initial focus was on establishing land transport and trade linkages across Eurasia to reduce China’s dependence on maritime shipping routes. To date, around 140 countries (more than two thirds of UN membership) have reportedly signed BRI-related agreements with the Chinese government.<sup>36</sup> In China itself, different segments of society from state-owned companies to academics know that they are expected to contribute to BRI as a major endeavour aimed at positioning China as a global economic heavyweight.<sup>37</sup> Out of the 36 entities that comprise the UN Sustainable Development Group, 31 (over 85 percent) have had some level of visible engagement with BRI-related processes through projects or participation in high-level meetings. 20 of them (over 50 percent) have also signed an MoU on the BRI with Chinese government entities.<sup>38</sup> As far as pub-

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such as China receive less core funding from headquarters and rely more on local resources, i.e. funding directly provided by host governments. This means that, in these settings, UN country offices have a stronger link with and arguably less independence from their hosts, as certain funding streams depend directly on government counterparts that are also the main interlocutors for designing and implementing UN projects and programmes.

- <sup>28</sup> For a detailed project assessment, see UNDP 2019.
- <sup>29</sup> For a detailed analysis of how China engages with UN entities for transferring development-related policies to other locales, see Waisbich and Haug 2022.
- <sup>30</sup> Interviews with UN officials, March 2022.
- <sup>31</sup> For the case of the UN Environment Programme, see Haug 2022a, 28.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with independent expert, March 2022; interview with member state representative, March 2022.
- <sup>33</sup> Interviews with UN official, April 2022; interview with independent expert, April 2022.
- <sup>34</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February 2022.
- <sup>35</sup> While Western Member States often cite a lack of transparency in South-South cooperation or support processes as a major concern, many have perceived the rise of China as a South-South cooperation provider as a serious challenge to their traditionally dominant assistance provider positions (see Haug 2021; 2022).
- <sup>36</sup> For details, see Nedopil 2022.
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with independent expert, February 2022.
- <sup>38</sup> For details, see Haug 2022b; see also UNSDG 2020.

Figure 11  
 "Belt and Road" in selected UN documents (2013–2021)



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on a review of 17 sources published in regular intervals by the UN, including six resolutions regularly debated in the Second Committee and ten flagship reports and documents regularly published by individual UN entities (including DESA, FAO, UNDP, and UNIDO).

licly available evidence is concerned, the UNDP, UNIDO, DESA, and FAO have all been among the strongest UN entity BRI supporters.<sup>39</sup>

The concrete roles UN entities are supposed to play in supporting the BRI have been far from clear-cut. Given the vague character of the BRI as an umbrella covering a range of infrastructure-related economic development processes, the potential options for engagement are varied. The UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, of which China is the sole contributor and decisive force of the steering committee (UNPDF n.d.-a), offers a central tool for steering funding towards projects and programmes in line with BRI objectives (UNPDF n.d.-b; see also Tang and Siu-fung 2020; Mao 2020, 25–28). Some UN entities have joined Chinese attempts to contribute to the "greening" of the BRI, i.e. focusing on the ecological footprint of China-led infrastructure projects.<sup>40</sup> Other agencies have been asked to provide operational support similar to the UN's engagement with South-South cooperation. Beyond concrete work on the ground, however, UN engagement arguably serves a more general purpose: In a context of rising geopolitical tensions, the UN's visible role in projects and MoUs is supposed to buttress the legitimacy of BRI-related processes; for UN entities, in turn, BRI has provided another reference for expanding their partnership

with China as an increasingly active geo-economic player, and with the substantial number of Member States that have signed BRI-related agreements (Haug 2022b; see Deng 2021). While attempts to make use of the UN-BRI relationship to strengthen cooperation profiles have gone both ways, they have also been watched suspiciously by Member States outside the BRI community. Western Member States, in particular, as well as India and Japan, have raised concerns about how UN entities engage with the BRI.<sup>41</sup> They have highlighted that UN support for China's infrastructure initiative is at odds with multilateral good practices and have repeatedly tried to make sure references to the BRI do not make it into official UN documents.<sup>42</sup>

Due to the above-described pressure, and in an increasingly polarised environment, UN entities have recently become more cautious in their engagement with the BRI. A review of major UN documents between 2013 and 2021 – including development-related resolutions and flagship reports – shows that references to BRI peaked in 2019 and since declined (Figure 11). Due to Western criticism, many UN entities that initially signed an MoU or set up a project with explicit reference to the BRI have become more reluctant to engage. UNIDO is a case in point. Under the leadership of Li Yong

<sup>39</sup> For a more comprehensive overview, see Haug 2022b.

<sup>40</sup> On UNEP's engagement, see UNEP n.d.-b

<sup>41</sup> For details, see Haug 2022b.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022; interview with UN official, November 2021.



(2013-2021), and given the absence of the United States and other major Western powers, UNIDO would have been an ideal platform for expanding BRI-related engagement. Moreover, UNIDO's mandate to promote sustainable industrial development could arguably be a perfect complement to the BRI focus on large economic infrastructure projects. However, UNIDO's proactive and visible engagement with BRI remained limited. In addition, UNIDO leadership decided to remove ostentatious references to the BRI, reportedly to not provoke Western Member States.<sup>43</sup> The Bridge for Cities initiative that UNIDO then set up to carry on China-focused work may have had "BRI(dge)" in its name but soon expanded its focus to include stakeholders from Member States unconnected to the BRI.<sup>44</sup> At the UNDP, in turn, the change in the organisation's stance towards the BRI followed more explicit pressure. While they had set up a team at the regional level to work on BRI-related topics with countries in the Asia Pacific region, interviews confirmed that US representatives threatened to withdraw voluntary contributions from the organization if the UNDP continued to work on BRI-related initiatives. As a result, the position of BRI advisor was abolished in 2021. The UNDP, a traditional stronghold of Western donors within the UN development system, has discontinued its support for BRI-related activities.<sup>45</sup> All of this shows that UN development entities that were initially eager to work with China are now caught between two poles. They have to navigate carefully so as not to upset Western powers, who are demanding that they reject China's advances, or offend China itself, which expects its ideas on how to implement multilateral agendas to be taken into account and promoted.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.2 "CHINESE LANGUAGE"

Language at the UN matters. Diplomats spend countless hours debating words and sentences of inter-governmentally agreed-upon texts, be it at the General Assembly and ECOSOC, or, to a lesser degree, in governing bodies of UN entities. While the effects of each individual decision might not be immediately apparent, taken together, they form a recognised body of international agreements and express formulations and ideas that underpin the international order. In recent years, a controversy has emerged in UN diplomacy around the advent of "Chinese language" in texts and development-related processes. The term "Chinese language" is slightly misleading as the dispute is entirely about English-language terms. At the heart of the matter are attempts by China and its allies to introduce terms like "a community of shared future for mankind", "people-centred development", "win-win", or "mutually beneficial cooperation" into UN resolutions and other documents. While some of these phrases build on a long trajectory of South-South solidarity, they have become central to China's more recent ef-

forts to strengthen its discursive power at the UN, raising concerns among Western Member States. Some have compiled lists of key Chinese terms and their variations in order to help their diplomats identify and push back against "Chinese language".<sup>47</sup>

For external observers, the diplomatic attention given to the seemingly inconspicuous terms promoted by China may feel entirely misplaced. On its face, nothing appears to be wrong. How language can turn into a battleground can be best understood by looking at two levels: When China uses specific terms, it claims validity for these terminologies and asks others to accept what it stands for. At the same time, the content of these terms is understood to signify a new world order based on a set of norms and values that differs from the current normative architecture (see Table 5). The crucial term "a community of shared future for mankind" encapsulates Xi Jinping's key foreign policy doctrine, first articulated in 2013 and presented globally in the UN General Assembly in 2015 under the vision of "a new kind of international relations with win-win cooperation at its core" (UN General Assembly 2015a: 19). As highlighted in the introduction, there are two interpretations of this proposition. First, the doctrine can be read as positioning China as a responsible global citizen that identifies itself as part of a larger community whose welfare is critical to China's destiny – an agenda of advancing common interests (Nathan and Zhang 2022). In the geopolitical reading, however, the new doctrine is seen as an effort to advance China's interests and power globally:

*[T]his 'shared future' promotes China at the centre of a global partnership network, guiding states to achieve peace and prosperity, with international recognition that China's authoritarian governance system is preferable to democratic systems. Therefore, achieving this 'shared future' means creating an international political environment that is more hospitable to China's domestic governance model, while also facilitating China's global leadership.*

*(Fung and Lam 2021: 1152; see Yang 2021; Eisenman 2021)*

The emphasis leader Xi Jinping puts on "a new model of relations" (Xi 2017) makes clear that, in a geopolitical reading, the intention is to replace or at least fundamentally alter the current model. Importantly, Western notions of democracy and human rights are fundamentally at odds with China's political system and the norms on which it is based (Yang 2021: 309) and have no credibility in the eyes of the Chinese government, which sees them as "pretext" for interferences in the internal affairs of other states which "incite divisions and confrontation in the world" (Russian Federation and People's Republic of China 2022; see Rolland 2020). By putting forward language linked to the new model, China is working towards an alternative strategic narrative for global governance while simultaneously requesting and testing the support of other Member States. Looking at the language used is, therefore, a way to examine change in global power

<sup>43</sup> Interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with UN official, November 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with UN officials, February and July 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.



Table 5  
Chinese diplomatic "language" and its interpretations

Term or phrase	Meaning
<p><i>"community of/with shared future for mankind" (or "humankind"), also "community of common destiny for mankind"</i></p>	<p>As Xi's central foreign policy frame and "strategic narrative" (Yang 2021), this phrase comes with various interpretations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is a frame for China's engagement in the global governance of various policy fields, in particular the environment, to advance common global interests (see Xi in UNGA 2015; Xi 2017; Yang 2021: 306; Zhang 2018: 198).</li> <li>• It serves to ensure partners, both regionally and globally, of China's peaceful intentions, offering a "new type of international relationship" to maintain a favorable international environment for China's development (see Russian Federation and People's Republic of China 2022; Zhang 2018: 198, 201).</li> <li>• It carries Chinese discontent with the Western-dominated, liberal international order and advances an alternative vision of a better, more democratic and harmonious global order (see People's Republic of China 2021b; Eisenman 2021: 5; Russian Federation and People's Republic of China 2022; Yang 2021: 306; Xi in UNGA 2015).</li> <li>• It is frame for creating regional spheres of influence and for promoting and measuring China's global leadership ambitions (see Eisenman 2021: 6; Russian Federation and People's Republic of China 2022; Xi 2017; Xu and Guo 2016; Yang 2021: 306; Yu 2018).</li> <li>• It reflects a Sino-centric world order that echoes the historic Chinese tributary state system and the notion of a superior Chinese culture (see Zhao 2017: 293; Zhang 2018: 198)</li> </ul>
<p><i>"win-win / mutually beneficial cooperation"</i></p>	<p>This term is key to China's vision of a new global order:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It presents an alternative to the "old" form of state relations, rejecting Cold War politics and promising equal relationships among all states (see People's Republic of China 2021b: 48; Rudyak 2021: 11).</li> <li>• It carries the Chinese understanding of human rights as a matter to be dealt with through amicable state cooperation, in contrast to international accountability and individual rights (see Oud 2021: 36).</li> <li>• It comes with the expectation that beneficiaries of Chinese support reciprocate by showing political support (see Danzhi 2019; Eisenman 2021: 1–2; Rudyak 2021: 11; Xu and Guo 2016).</li> <li>• From the perspective of Western Member States, it is seen as emphasizing economic benefits (of the state) over sustainable development needs (of the individual) and as a tool to create political dependence (see Germany and UK in UNGA 2020a; internal government documents).</li> </ul>
<p><i>"people-centred"</i></p>	<p>This term originates from the field of human rights. It is at the center of the ideological differences between China and Western powers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It presents China's concept of human rights according to which development as the improvement of living standards is the basis and vehicle for advancing human rights (see Amnesty International n.d.; People's Republic of China 2021a: 46; Xu in Xinhua 2022; He 2020).</li> <li>• It reflects a concept of governance that emphasizes the control by the Chinese Communist Party, or the state more generally, as steward of national development (see People's Republic of China 2021b: 8 and 41; He 2020).</li> <li>• For the Chinese Communist Party, it marks the ideological differences to Western concepts of governance, democracy and human rights which are seen as a threat to Communist Party rule (see People's Republic of China 2013; 2021a; 2021b).</li> <li>• In the UN context, Western Member States see this term as undermining the universality of human rights and the human-rights based approach that anchors the 2030 Agenda (see Germany in UNGA 2020a; internal government documents).</li> </ul>
<p><i>"leave no country behind"</i></p>	<p>This phrase is often used together with* (or instead of) "leaving no one behind", a key principle of the 2030 Agenda:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It highlights the development needs, and in fact rights, of states as a condition for leaving no individuals behind (see UN DESA 2021; MOFA 2022a and 2022b; Xinhua 2022).</li> <li>• From a Western state perspective, it puts the state at the center and is therefore a threat to the 2030 Agenda's focus on individuals (internal government documents).</li> </ul>

\* For examples of the combination of "no individual" and "no country", see Permanent Mission 2021 and Xi 2022.  
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

(Yang 2021). While language has long been used as an instrument of control in China domestically (Schoenhals 1992), the UN's more recent endorsements of Chinese concepts are interpreted as global acknowledgements of China's contribution to global governance and serve as international legitimation in domestic debates (Rolland 2020: 46).

## PUSH FOR "CHINESE LANGUAGE" IN INTERGOVERNMENTAL NEGOTIATIONS

The push for inserting "Chinese language" in development-related UN resolutions can be characterized as persistent, selective, not overly forceful, and (for now) largely unsuccessful. It appears that early on in China's new phase of engagement with the UN development system around 2015, China was able to make some inroads. This might be attributed to the vague nature of these phrases, leaving diplomats of other Member States wondering about their meaning.<sup>48</sup> In more recent years, however, Western Member States have mounted a principled resistance, making only a few tactical concessions. The 2030 Agenda (UNGA 2015b) contains more terms generally associated with "Chinese language" than most succeeding resolutions, including key terms like "people-centred", "shared prosperity", and "win-win cooperation". Another General Assembly resolution stands out with regard to Chinese language: In 2019, China introduced a resolution on rural poverty at the Second Committee, which seems to be the only General Assembly resolution that contains the slogan "shared future for humankind"; it also features the phrase "win-win cooperation" (UNGA 2019). In addition, the resolution's 2020 version contains the phrase "shared prosperity" (UNGA 2020b). A Western diplomat described this resolution as a potential vehicle for introducing "Chinese language" into UN resolutions, the assumption being that if just one resolution contains these terms, they can be referenced as 'agreed language' elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> Western Member States voted against the resolution, while the majority of the UN's membership has supported it. The United States noted the "unnecessary inclusion of politicized language" and criticized that the "text reflected the domestic policies and political ideology of a single member State" (UNGA 2020a). Other Western members issued similar statements. With regard to an ECOSOC resolution on financing for development adopted with the formulation "... to ensure that no country or person is left behind" (UN ECOSOC 2021), Western diplomats said they accepted the formulation in this resolution in exchange for keeping "Chinese language" out elsewhere.<sup>50</sup>

The insertion of "Chinese language" into UN resolutions has been fended off by Western and other Member States on many occasions. A broader analysis of other recurring

resolutions<sup>51</sup> at the Second Committee shows that "Chinese language" has made almost no inroads into General Assembly resolutions. Only the term "people-centred", which can be considered agreed language from the 2030 Agenda resolution, appears three to six times a year across all resolutions (starting in 2015). Incidentally, China has not often been the one to introduce this language; instead, it has come from other Group of 77 (G77) states.<sup>52</sup> Other terms and phrases like "win-win", "shared future for humankind", and "shared prosperity" do not appear at all in this set of General Assembly resolutions. The last two Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review resolutions from 2016 and 2020 both contain the term "people-centred" but only in a relatively vague formulation ("people-centred set of universal and transformative Sustainable Development Goals").<sup>53</sup>

The finding is the same for documents adopted in the governing boards of individual UN entities. At the UNIDO, China has not pushed for "Chinese language" in resolutions in recent years,<sup>54</sup> although there have been controversies around references to the BRI and GDI (see sections 3.1. and 3.4). China has recently become more active on the UNDP board but has neither advocated for the insertion of new language – an exception is China's advertisement of the BRI (see section 3.1) – nor opposed existing language that reflects the UN's human rights framework.<sup>55</sup> Regarding the FAO, interview data and a systematic review of council and conference verbatim records produced no data indicating that "Chinese language" was promoted or even used by either Qu Dongyu or Member State diplomats since 2019.

## "CHINESE LANGUAGE" IN UN ENTITY DOCUMENTS

Given the limited endorsement of "Chinese language" in intergovernmental resolutions, one might assume that UN entities studiously avoid using contested language. Conversely, entities might increasingly employ some of these terms to reflect China's expanding influence as part of attempts to balance the perspectives of their various global constituencies. While it is difficult to prove a negative, our systematic review

<sup>48</sup> Interview with member state representatives, January 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022

<sup>50</sup> Interview with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>51</sup> GA resolutions on „International trade and development,“ „Follow-up to and implementation of the outcomes of the International Conferences on Financing for Development“, „Promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, building on Agenda 21“; „Operational activities for development of the United Nations system“, „South-South cooperation“, „Development cooperation with middle-income countries.“

<sup>52</sup> Interview with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>53</sup> The pandemic might have played an additional role in limiting the scope of the debate over language. Given that the diplomats were not able to meet in person, Member States agreed to limit the number of paragraphs under negotiation, thus reducing opportunities (interview with member states representatives, February 2022).

<sup>54</sup> Interviews with UN officials, March 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, January and February 2022.

of recurring UN flagship reports over the last decade<sup>56</sup> suggests that the UN development system has not (yet) adopted “Chinese language” to any meaningful extent. The term “shared future for humankind” does not appear in any organizational document we reviewed. The “Global Sustainable Development Report” from 2019 uses the words “people-centred” 14 times. The “Industrial Development Reports”, a UNIDO publication series, has used the term “win-win” 17 times and “shared prosperity” 11 times since 2011. However, these two publications appear to be outliers. Considering the wider body of reports analysed for this study, it would be a stretch to report a trend in the frequency of “Chinese language” in UN documents. The FAO’s “The State of Food and Agriculture” Report used the term “win-win” twice in 2020 but had also used it occasionally before Qu Dongyu became Director-General of the FAO.

Overall, it appears that even the UN entities that are or have been led by Chinese nationals have not become vehicles for the dissemination of these terms. At DESA, there seems to have been no major push for it, and attempts to change language from within the organization would likely be unsuccessful because DESA’s work is often closely linked to inter-governmental processes that usually undergo detailed member-state negotiations.<sup>57</sup> Even in the FAO and UNIDO, such a push does not seem to have occurred. Documents such as strategic frameworks, newsletters, and published speeches by the respective Director-Generals do not use these terms. While concerned about China’s growing clout in the UN development system, interview partners from Western Member States did not highlight “Chinese language” as a central area of concern in these organisations.<sup>58</sup> Concomitantly, according to our interviews, there has not been a push from Chinese executive leaders to reduce their entities’ human rights commitments or the civil society approach through internal administrative processes. Admittedly, the FAO and UNIDO are not at the forefront of normative questions; nevertheless, they have organizational policies and administrative units concerned with these issues.

### CHINA-SPECIFIC UN DOCUMENTS: NO RIGHTS-BASED LANGUAGE OR REFERENCES TO CIVIL SOCIETY

If there is hardly any “Chinese language” to be found in global UN reports and documents, then something opposite to that is also true: UN documents that originate in China, such as the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) for China and the country programme documents of UN agencies operating in China, either do not

contain words that reflect the UN’s human rights framework or use them in ways that can counteract their intended meaning. In the UNSDCF, the document that defines the thematic priorities of the UN development entities active in China for the period 2021–2025, rights-based language is concentrated in only one sentence: “China shares and contributes, through its progress in implementation of the 2030 Agenda, to the vision of a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination” (UNSDG 2020b: 9). This sentence reaffirms the Chinese doctrine that human rights are contingent on development. Beyond that sentence, rights-based language such as “human rights” and “rule of law” as well as the term “civil society” are absent from the document, despite the fact that they are firmly rooted both in General Assembly resolutions and even more so in the UN’s internal guidance documents.<sup>59</sup> The UNDP country programme documents (2021–2025, UNDP 2020) and UNICEF (2021–2025, UNICEF 2020) derived from the UNSDCF do not contain rights-based language either; the UNDP document mentions the term “civil society” twice, once passing-ly in the narrative section and once in the results framework. This is significant, as these terms generally do appear in UNDP country programme documents irrespective of the country context.<sup>60</sup>

### 3.3 CHINA'S APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

Executive leaders of international organizations are tasked with ensuring the efficient and effective operations of their organizations, but they can also play an important role in setting the agenda for Member States and shaping the policies of their organizations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Schroeder 2014; Eckhard and Ege 2016; Wouters and Odermatt 2016). While leaders are accountable to the UN’s governing bodies, they possess a certain amount of discretionary autonomy, which they can, and are indeed expected to use to advance the organization’s mandates while also supporting the broader multilateral processes in which they are embedded. To encourage such responsible and multilaterally-minded leadership, the UN Charter demands that UN civil servants conduct their duties in a strictly impartial way: they “shall not seek or receive instructions from any government” and “are responsible only to the Organization” (UN 1945, art. 100 § 1). While this impartiality has always been more of an aspiration than a real-world phenomenon, the appointment of Chinese nationals to the executive leadership of DESA, UNIDO, and the FAO has once again brought the issue of neutrality to the forefront and is a reminder of the fragile nature of the platonic leadership ideal expressed in the UN Charter (Weiss 1982). The assumption often conveyed in (Western) public commentary is that Chinese na-

<sup>56</sup> Research period: 2010–2022. Reports included in the analysis: Industrial Development Report, Global Sustainable Development Report, Financing for Sustainable Development Report, SG Report on operational activities for development, SG Report on SSC, Sustainable Development Outlook, The State of Food and Agriculture, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, World Economic Situation and Prospects.

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with independent experts, March and April 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Interviews with UN officials, March 2022.

<sup>59</sup> For example, QCPR 2016 (UNGA 2016) and 2020 (UNGA 2020c). See also UNSDG 2019.

<sup>60</sup> A sample of eight UNDP country documents was analysed, covering regimes generally categorised as autocracies (Cuba, Laos, Libya, and Turkmenistan) and democracies (Costa Rica, Ghana, Malaysia, and Moldova).

tionals will use the power of their office to advance the normative, economic, and diplomatic interests of their country (see Schaefer 2019; Cheng-Chia and Yang 2020). This intent would also have implications for their internal management style. The imperative to advance specific interests seems to necessitate robust leadership focused more on aligning the organization to its leaders' priorities than accommodating a broad set of perspectives and seeking to build consensus.

Probing UN executive leaders' conduct while in office is difficult. No clear benchmarks exist for what constitutes impartial behaviour in practice and how to separate petty incidents and cultural differences from behaviour that shapes the nature of multilateral cooperation. Leaders have to integrate and balance multiple stakeholder perspectives, and not everybody will be satisfied with the resulting decisions. Furthermore, UN leaders are typically keen to be seen as formally correct, so any perceived bias will most likely take place and be felt in informal settings. While interviews are a key source for gathering data about what happens behind closed doors, interviewees are often party to the diplomatic divisions that exist around UN organizations. While we cannot present conclusive evidence for these reasons, interview accounts point to a few general features of Chinese leadership in the UN development pillar.

## CONCERNS ABOUT THE ADHERENCE TO DUE PROCESSES AND INCLUSIVENESS

Building consensus among the UN's 193 Member States or its smaller governing boards can be a highly difficult and tortuous process. This is why there are certain implicit norms in UN diplomacy to ensure the integrity of decision-making processes. Organizations and their leaders should, for example, respect Member States' role as principals, treat them equally, and not interfere in their decision-making. It is against that backdrop that Western respondents, in particular, expressed concern over Chinese executive leaders, pointing to a pattern of using improper means to limit and manipulate consultations with Member States and their decision-making. Some Western diplomats voiced frustration that pandemic-related restrictions and the need to hold meetings virtually had been used by FAO leadership to deliberately reduce consultations with and among Member States, thus empowering the FAO management.<sup>61</sup> It was also reported that FAO leaders tried to interfere with due process to manipulate governance arrangements. At least one Western diplomat reported that FAO management had provided Member States with deliberately wrong and misleading information, whereas some G77 members considered allies by FAO management had received information on proposals beforehand, giving them an advantage in negotiations.<sup>62</sup> According to another source, the FAO management, in one instance, changed language in an agreed document

to the surprise and dismay of Member States that participated in the negotiations.<sup>63</sup> One diplomat expressed the sentiment that, while Member States usually act as principals through governing boards as supreme decision-making bodies, FAO leadership appeared not to see Member States in that role.<sup>64</sup> A similar line of criticism regarding infringements of established UN diplomatic practices was brought against the Chinese government's role as host of UN conferences in China (see section 3.4).

There was also an attempt to weaken the principle of secret voting for the position of Director-General.<sup>65</sup> China had allegedly pressured developing countries to provide evidence of how they had voted in the election of Qu Dongyu.<sup>66</sup> Western Member States had already raised concern about digital devices during the voting process prior to the procedure, worried that they would render outside monitoring and potential interference more likely.<sup>67</sup> To safeguard the secret ballot (which is enshrined in the FAO constitution) and the integrity of future elections, Western Member States then initiated a voluntary code of conduct for voting (FAO 2019). They also requested a review of the rules and best practices in the wider UN system. In the WHO, for instance, states vote in front of the plenum, which makes hidden use of electronic devices impossible. For the FAO, however, China and like-minded states rejected the relevancy of such best practices and opposed stricter rules on the secrecy of ballots, arguing that it should be the sovereign right of states to photograph their ballot papers.

To put these anecdotes into perspective, there appears to be a politically charged situation in Rome where FAO leadership is pitted against Western Member States. The latter seem to harbour distrust towards the FAO management, fuelled by the feeling that FAO is an organization largely owned by G77 membership. Western diplomats expressed disappointment that Qu Dongyu did not treat all Member State groups as equals, providing examples of how Western Member States were criticized unfairly or at least undiplomatically.<sup>68</sup> While acknowledging the heated atmosphere in Rome, non-Western Member States had no issue with the FAO leadership, which they described as fair and accessible.<sup>69</sup> Also, we heard no evidence of similar inappropriate behaviour by the Chinese Director-General of UNIDO, Li Yong. DESA, in turn, was involved in controversies around the UN Global Sustainable Transport Conference that took place in China (see section 3.4). Yet, there were no reports of undue attempts to restrict

<sup>61</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022.

<sup>65</sup> While votes for resolutions are recorded, those for positions are anonymous in the UN.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022; see also Trofimov et al. 2020. This is consistent with reports that Chinese diplomats photographed and filmed civil society representatives on UN premises in violation of UN rules; see Human Rights Watch 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Interviews with member state representative, February 2022.

<sup>68</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>69</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.



decision-making in the many intergovernmental negotiation processes in the General Assembly and ECOSOC in New York. Although Western Member States often perceive DESA as biased towards the interests of developing countries, our interlocutors did not describe a specific propensity towards Chinese policies and interests, with the exception of DESA's focus on big data (see section 3.1).

## DOUBTS ABOUT THE IMPARTIAL CONDUCT OF OFFICE

In 2018, former DESA head Wu Hongbo (2012–2017) stated that “as a [Chinese] international civil servant, when it comes to Chinese national sovereignty and security, we will undoubtedly defend our country’s interests” (cited in Fung and Lam 2021: 1145). This statement, which is widely quoted in online publications, was taken as evidence that China and Chinese UN staff do not feel bound by UN norms of impartiality, and it probably had a significant effect on how Western diplomats have since looked at Chinese UN staff in general. In our interviews, Western diplomats also expressed concern about Chinese leaders’ conduct as international civil servants, also with regard to the FAO<sup>70</sup> and UNIDO<sup>71</sup>.

The following evidence for this claim was provided: seven senior positions at the FAO, allegedly all thematically related to Chinese policy interests, had been filled with Chinese nationals after Director-General Qu Dongyu took office.<sup>72</sup> One Western diplomat described an effort in which the FAO – with the unusually direct involvement of Qu Dongyu and against the advice of FAO’s own scientific board – proposed a project with three of China’s neighbouring countries; the project relied on and promoted Chinese technology. Western donors, preferring to focus on poorer countries in the Sahel, rejected the proposal.<sup>73</sup> There was a feeling that Qu Dongyu displayed open hostility towards Western Member States<sup>74</sup> who, in turn, viewed key FAO policies and initiatives such as the “Hand-in-Hand Initiative” (and its key component of “matchmaking” in particular), the “Four Betters” initiative, and the FAO-China partnership on big data with suspicion (see section 3.1). While Western diplomats have not rejected these policies in the governing bodies, often to the contrary, they see them as efforts in line with Chinese geopolitical interests to replace and undermine agreed UN frameworks.<sup>75</sup> They also complain about resistance by the FAO leadership against meaningful intergovernmental oversight over these initiatives. Others suggested that such policies might also be seen in a more benign

light, indicating that the time had come for FAO to open up to other intellectual currents and policy interests beyond those of Western donors, which still hold considerable influence via their funding.<sup>76</sup> What one observer might see as undue Chinese influence, others see as legitimate responsiveness to emerging powers or the needs of developing countries. Key Chinese priorities, such as the BRI and the GDI, have been taken up by other UN entities as well, irrespective of the nationality of their leadership.<sup>77</sup>

For DESA, it was reported that consecutive Chinese heads had sought to use their position to have the organization and individual DESA personnel promote Chinese flagship projects such as the BRI and the GDI; however, it remains unclear how successful they have been in this regard.<sup>78</sup> Chinese heads have reportedly aimed to expand the UN’s work in digital cooperation – such as geospatial data or the internet more broadly – and create ties to related Chinese initiatives.<sup>79</sup> DESA head Liu Zhenmin (2017–2022) had previously served as China’s Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs (2013–2017) and China’s Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva (2011–2013) (UN DESA n.d.). For Liu, close ties with the Chinese government remained important throughout his tenure at DESA and – in line with Wu Hongbo’s statement cited above – at times seemed to trump his commitment to the organisation he led.<sup>80</sup> Li Junhua took over as Under-Secretary-General at DESA in August 2022. He is also building upon a distinguished career in China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he was an ambassador and held senior management positions.

The Chinese government may support or incentivise its nationals in UN entity executive leadership positions by providing funds, most notably in the case of DESA through the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund that supports several projects directly linked to the BRI (Mao 2020; ISHR 2021), and by providing funding for capacity building projects on a regular basis.<sup>81</sup> The DESA executive office is staffed with a number of Chinese nationals, and the head of the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government, one of eleven second management-level positions, is also a Chinese national. The findings on UNIDO are similar. According to various sources, Li Yong, who had previously served as China’s Vice-Minister of Finance (see Vindobona 2019), always wore two hats: one of an UN executive leader and the other of a member of the Chinese party “apparatus”. However, with time, the latter appeared to become less visible.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022

<sup>74</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February, March and May 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022, see also Haug 2022b.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022; interview with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022.

<sup>80</sup> One illustration is that Liu chose to travel to the Communist Party Congress in Beijing instead of attending a major UN conference organized by DESA; interview with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022.

<sup>82</sup> His 12 business trips to China in only three years appear substantial given the busy schedule of a UN leader (interviews with UN officials, March 2022).

Interviewees also highlighted that Li Yong had received direct instructions from China and that, at some point, “every document” had gone to the Chinese permanent representation in Vienna for discussion or approval.<sup>83</sup> With regard to the FAO, there are rumours in Rome about direct links between Qu Dongyu and the Chinese diplomatic representation,<sup>84</sup> but the general sense among Western diplomats seems to be that they have more important things to worry about in the absence of clear evidence.<sup>85</sup>

## CHINA'S PROPENSITY TOWARD A HIERARCHICAL MANAGEMENT STYLE

Shortly after assuming office, UN Secretary-General Guterres introduced a management reform that involved a “greater delegation of authority” within the Secretariat with the aim to “empower managers” and create a more “decentralized” organization (UNSG 2017: 1–2). Our interviews suggest that, by and large, Chinese executive leaders of UN organisations seem to have pursued a specific vision of organizational leadership centred on centralized and top-down management. At UNIDO, one diplomat observed that “there is no doubt that in any UN organization the boss is the boss. Nothing goes without him. That was clearly the style of Li Yong as well.”<sup>86</sup> Between entities, however, there appear to be notable differences. It was generally easy for us to get staff interviews at UNDP, while it was more difficult at UNIDO and almost impossible at DESA and FAO, except for some previously established contacts. These difficulties seemed to be related to the internal management of the organizations and/or the often highly politicised contexts in New York and Rome. Insights from UNIDO, in turn, suggest that, despite pronounced leadership from the top and a style that was described as “monologuing, never interactive, town hall meeting three hours talking, no responses”<sup>87</sup>, there was nothing extraordinary about how Li Yong led the organisation.<sup>88</sup>

Diplomats offered more critical observations of the FAO. One diplomat went so far as to assert that Qu Dongyu had a “dictatorial” style towards the organisation’s management level,<sup>89</sup> while recognizing that at lower levels, Qu Dongyu positioned himself as a “people’s manager” that enjoyed mingling with lower ranks (in town hall meetings and sometimes in the canteen) for whom various employment benefits were also introduced.<sup>90</sup> When Qu Dongyu assumed office in 2019, he reformed the management structure and reduced the total number of senior leadership positions. According to

official documents and some interviewees, this served to make FAO more agile. However, others saw it as an attempt to strengthen the leadership position of the Director-General.<sup>91</sup> Qu Dongyu is said to not discuss strategic issues with his management team.<sup>92</sup> According to at least two sources, the top leadership at the FAO is gripped by a “climate of fear”. Short-term contracts are used to put pressure on senior staff, and it appears that contact with external actors is strictly monitored.<sup>93</sup> One interviewee, however, offered a more relaxed perspective, pointing out that the organizational culture at the FAO had always been more hierarchical and closed than in other UN agencies.<sup>94</sup> A leader-focused management style that is uncommon in the UN also manifests itself in videos that prominently feature if not celebrate Qu Dongyu<sup>95</sup> and the observation that for appointments he always surrounds himself with senior staff, which one diplomat suggested may be “the Chinese style of wanting to impress” and a way of “not letting doubts in on who is the boss”.<sup>96</sup>

All of this might not just be a matter of style; the concern with image can come into conflict with accountability. UN documents show that Qu Dongyu had tried to stall a review by the UN’s Joint Inspection Unit (JIU). The JIU is an independent oversight body that conducts system-wide reviews as well as management reviews of individual UN entities. With the last such review of the FAO being two decades old, Qu Dongyu initially agreed for the JIU to review the FAO in early 2020, with the expectation that findings could serve as a basis for his reform plans. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and caused a delay. “At this point, the Organization [FAO] realized that, regretfully, the [review] could not meet the original purpose agreed in 2019, namely to provide an independent lens at the beginning of the transition process” (FAO 2022b). In the meantime, the JIU had made it clear that it also wanted to focus its appraisal on Qu Dongyu’s reforms. Qu Dongyu then requested a delay until 2024 when he would either be out of office or already well into his second term. The JIU then immediately suspended the inspection (which had already begun despite resistance from FAO management) and used the opening section of its annual report to the UN General Assembly to “draw the attention of the legislative organs” (UNGA 2022, § 5) to this highly unusual and, according to one source, even “unprecedented” event.

A similar process of fending off critical review also took place at DESA. In the recent past, the reform of DESA was discussed as part of the overall reforms necessary to better position the UN for the new requirements of the 2030 Agenda (Janus and Weinlich 2018). In the end, only small changes to

<sup>83</sup> Interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2020.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022.

<sup>86</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, March and April 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with member state representative, April 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022.

<sup>90</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022; written exchange with independent expert, November 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022.

<sup>95</sup> For an example, see the video titled “FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu’s first anniversary in office”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9HsGp4NuSg>.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022.

DESA's internal structure were made instead of an overdue overhaul. Apparently, Chinese leadership did not favour a reform and managed to stall the process.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, Western Member States were not willing to pick a fight over DESA reform, which they perceived as a Chinese stronghold with good standing among developing countries,<sup>98</sup> not least because any reform would also have had funding implications.<sup>99</sup> Compared to Qu Dongyu's tenure at the FAO, we have fewer insights about Liu Zhenmin and his Chinese predecessor's leadership style at DESA. Generally, Liu was known to surround himself with trusted Chinese nationals; his willingness and/or ability to enforce decisions in DESA sub-units and interfere with their work seem to have been limited.<sup>100</sup>

### 3.4 CHINA'S DIPLOMACY AND ALLIANCES

Observers across the board agree that China's diplomatic engagement in UN fora has a rather distinct profile. The analysis of interviews and publicly available evidence points to some broad patterns. China's engagement with inter-governmental negotiations and UN platforms related to development has expanded visibly, even though the nature and level of engagement differs considerably from one context to the next. Indirect and cautious behaviour in a number of recent negotiation processes coexist with more assertive and sometimes somewhat aggressive practices. This also holds true for interactions with the international bureaucracy. As the most comprehensive developing country alliance at the UN, the G77 continues to play a central role in Chinese negotiation strategies. The GDI, in turn, is a more recent and arguably more extensive Chinese attempt to link alliance politics with the UN development agenda.

#### EXPANDING YET DIFFERENTIATED CHINESE ENGAGEMENT IN INTER-GOVERNMENTAL NEGOTIATIONS

China has visibly expanded its diplomatic activities on development over the last decade. China's presence in General Assembly and ECOSOC negotiations has increased markedly, with China often being represented by high-ranking diplomats. In the Executive Boards of UNDP, UN-WOMEN, and UNICEF, Chinese diplomats now partake more actively and in ways described as "apolitical and constructive".<sup>101</sup> Rarely do they "jump to action" and when they do, then only on matters that touch directly on China's national interest, such as

the One China principle or questions of China's reputation.<sup>102</sup> For the General Assembly's Second Committee, Taskinen (2020: 38) documents a notable increase in China (co-)sponsoring resolutions between 2013 and 2018. The Second Committee deals with economic and development matters and has been of particular importance to developing countries that, as an unwritten rule, initiate almost all resolutions (Lund 2011). In 2019, China took on a leading role by initiating and advancing the resolution on rural poverty, a topic China takes pride in based on its domestic experience and promotes in its cooperation with other developing countries (MOFA 2021).<sup>103</sup> China has successfully anchored key phrases of "Chinese language" – notably "building a shared future for humankind" – in this resolution, even though such attempts are generally met with coordinated resistance by Western Member States (see section 3.2).

Despite its expanding presence, China continues to take a back seat in many development-related negotiations, leaving the active battle over priorities to other Member States. While highlighting the influence of China's presence during negotiations and its indirect engagement through allies, several observers noted that China had not played a particularly assertive or even always visible role in recent negotiation processes on UN development system reform (2018), the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (2020), or the Resident Coordinator System Review (2021).<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, interviewees described China as an "invisible giant"<sup>105</sup> in negotiations, whose positions were not always clear but who could bring negotiations immediately to a halt. Indeed, China initially tried to safeguard and build up the position of DESA in the new Resident Coordinator System structure but could not prevail. It has also attempted to strengthen intergovernmental oversight mechanisms.<sup>106</sup>

Chinese representatives also did not visibly engage in negotiations on the content of the strategic plans of UN Funds and Programmes in 2022.<sup>107</sup> It is very unlikely that their lack of involvement stems from a limited diplomatic capacity, as is the case for many other developing countries that often struggle with following the vast variety of negotiation processes at the UN (Swart and Lund 2011). With around 80 diplomats, China maintains one of the largest diplomatic corps at the UN in New York,<sup>108</sup> coming in third after the United States (112) and Germany (94), and with around the

<sup>97</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022; written exchange with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022; interview with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022; interview with UN official, February 2022, interviews with member state representatives, January and July 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, January and February 2022; interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with member state representative, March 2022; interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>103</sup> For Chinese policy transfer with the UN, see Waisbich and Haug 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022; interview with independent expert, February 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, January and February 2022; interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Data was extracted from various editions of the Blue Book that contains information about accredited diplomatic staff at the Permanent Missions in New York. There seem to be uneven practices among Member States concerning which staff and rank they communicate to the UN. The Blue Book does not necessarily include all diplomatic and administrative staff involved with the UN.

same numbers as Russia (81). The diplomatic corps of the United Kingdom (52), France (42), Brazil (39), India (24), and South Africa (23) are considerably smaller.<sup>109</sup>

Several interlocutors reported that, despite professional working relations, there were difficulties in reaching deeper levels of understanding with Chinese diplomats. Reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies, which made face-to-face meetings impossible and led to restricted working methods in the Second Committee and elsewhere, getting to know Chinese counterparts appears to be difficult. Reportedly, they keep apart from others; one-on-one meetings with them are rare; and a hierarchical working culture makes informal exchanges more difficult.<sup>110</sup> In addition, cultural differences in communication styles also seem to have an impact.<sup>111</sup> A generally moderate and selective diplomatic profile notwithstanding, China has employed rather aggressive approaches to other countries or disregarded diplomatic practice while pursuing its objectives in development-related fora. In an apparent contrast to China's more indirect forms of diplomacy, a number of often Western interlocutors reported incidents where China breached diplomatic etiquette, using its convening of international fora on its territory to control participation, the agenda, and outcome documents.

One of the most prominent examples of this is the second UN Global Sustainable Transport Conference held in Beijing in 2021, mandated by the General Assembly. China appears to have used its leadership position in DESA and its power as the host to make sure critical voices would remain marginal.<sup>112</sup> The list of speakers was not made public before the conference and, apparently, technical problems conveniently impeded critical messages from being delivered in full, including by an Indian delegate who had started to criticise the BRI.<sup>113</sup> A Western diplomat commented that they had "never seen anything like this."<sup>114</sup> China also published a non-negotiated outcome document of the conference, the "Beijing Statement", that was allegedly not shared with conference participants before publication. It contained key "Chinese language" terms ("community of a shared future for humankind", and "people-centred approach", for example) (see UN 2021). Western Member States and the European Union officially protested with a joint letter to the UN Secretary-General. In a rather unusual move, they requested their letter be circulated among UN members as an official General Assembly document (UNGA 2021). So far, the protest seems to have been successful; the so-called Beijing statement has not yet been officially issued. Other reported incidents include the Conference of the Parties on the Convention on Biological Diversity that took place in

Kunming in 2021, where China made use of its role as host to not invite individual Member States,<sup>115</sup> and the Global Conference on Aquaculture in 2021, which was co-hosted by the FAO and where the Chinese conference leadership apparently tried to present an official outcome document, the "Shanghai Declaration", that had not been inclusively negotiated or agreed upon.<sup>116</sup>

Other reports indicate that China has also repeatedly strong-armed G77 diplomats into changing their positions on issues relevant to Chinese interests, including exercising indirect pressure on representatives in New York and Rome via their capitals (in some cases, by calling heads of state or government), or through direct transactional approaches (by offering favours, such as development assistance or trade links in exchange for diplomatic support).<sup>117</sup> The election of Qu Dongyu as Director-General of the FAO is perhaps the most prominent example of China using improper means to advance its interests.<sup>118</sup> International media reported that Cameroon benefitted from Chinese debt forgiveness weeks before the Cameroonian candidate withdrew from the FAO race and that China had threatened representatives from Latin American countries that some of their exports would be cut off if they did not support Qu Dongyu (Tang and Lau 2020). Moreover, with regard to what Western diplomats referred to as the FAO's reluctance to take a position on the war in Ukraine, China had allegedly used *démarches* in an attempt to win over G77 members to vote against a special council meeting on the matter requested by an alliance of 80 Member States, some of them in turn pressured by *démarches* from Western Member States.<sup>119</sup> While (in)direct pressure and questionable attempts to win votes are not new to the UN and are generally little talked about when it comes to Western Member States (see Swart 2011: 156), the actual increase in and apparent effectiveness of such behaviour by China is a noteworthy change that worries observers.<sup>120</sup> Its factual scope, however, is difficult to gauge.

## CHINA AND THE INTERNATIONAL BUREAUCRACY

In its attempts to take up more space in the UN development pillar, China has also approached the international bureaucracy and has requested its positions be taken into account. While information about bilateral interactions with the UN Secretariat is understandably scarce, interviewees did not assess China's attempts to exert influence on policy processes and negotiations as particularly noteworthy or differing from

<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, according to our analysis, China's diplomatic corps has not visibly increased between 2007 and 2020.

<sup>110</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, January and July 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with member state representatives, January 2022.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with member state representative, May 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Interviews with member state representative, February and May 2022.

<sup>117</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, January, February and May 2022. On the relationship between Chinese development cooperation and UN voting patterns, see Dreher et al. 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with member state representatives, May 2022; written exchange with member state representative, July 2022.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with member state representatives, February 2022.



that of other countries. China's approach was also described as that of an "immature superpower"<sup>121</sup>, coupled with the expectation (and experience) that a mature superpower takes the gloves off vis-à-vis the Secretariat. Without denying the political pressure that China is able to exert, interviewees described instances where China accepted that things did not go according to its bidding<sup>122</sup> and highlighted that China's demands not to be treated differently from Western countries were difficult to dismiss.<sup>123</sup> The international bureaucracy needs to maintain good working relations with China and often attempts to navigate between Western and Chinese demands without compromising UN norms and values. The first meeting of the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative provides an insightful example. China asked the UN to promote the initiative and invited heads of all UN agencies to the meeting. The UN bureaucracy answered in a concerted manner, arguably trying not to cross the thin line between promotion and co-optation, and had only deputy heads of entities participating, in addition to a video message by the UN Deputy Secretary-General.<sup>124</sup>

## THE GROUP OF 77 AS CHINA'S ALLIANCE FOR DEVELOPMENT-RELATED NEGOTIATIONS

In UN negotiation fora, China rarely acts alone. The bulk of Chinese engagement with UN negotiations through the G77 unfolds behind closed doors. With its 134 Member States, the G77 remains the most important alliance for China on development-related issues. While China is listed as a regular member on the G77 website (see G77 n.d.), it generally underlines its associated status. The formula "The G77 and China" reflects this special relationship, highlighting China's role as a P5 and *primus inter pares* among the group of self-identified developing countries. While China is often seen as the G77 "powerhouse"<sup>125</sup>, it appears not to be strongly involved in day-to-day activities at the G77. Instead, Chinese diplomats can be very engaged on strategic issues behind closed doors<sup>126</sup> and seek to maintain group cohesion on all development-related matters, mostly trying to accompany and steer proceedings indirectly. Similar to what has been reported for the UN Security Council, in development-related negotiations, China's "leading from behind" strategy sets out to "support and encourage other [Member States] to advance its views, only intervening if required" (Whineray 2020: 7). Observers note that it is mostly Chinese allies, and not Chinese representatives themselves, who bring forward Chinese positions in negotiations.<sup>127</sup> Suggestions to include "Chinese language" and statements on the relationship between development and human rights, for instance, are gen-

erally put forward by other G77 members, such as Pakistan.<sup>128</sup> Available evidence from the NGO Committee at ECOSOC responsible for civil society access to the UN also shows that China coordinates with other Member States to keep the number of its interventions low (Inboden 2021).

When Chinese diplomats engage visibly, they do so on topics that are strategically important for them, and usually not on behalf of the G77. In negotiations and board meetings, China's statements often refer to Chinese achievements and initiatives and seem to be directed more towards UN leadership, developing countries, and its domestic audience than Western Member States.<sup>129</sup> In the Second Committee, Chinese priority topics are aligned with G77 agendas and include not only rural development but also the promotion of South-South cooperation (see section 3.1). As with negotiations in other policy fields, the One China principle remains a key concern for Chinese representatives.

A challenge to the effective use of the G77 for China's strategic purposes has been the increasing heterogeneity among the 134 Member States, which now include countries from all income levels.<sup>130</sup> Ensuring unity on stage or behind the scenes has thus become a central concern, also because individual G77 countries do stand up to China with regard to attempts to anchor "Chinese language" in resolutions.<sup>131</sup> As mentioned above, China uses direct and indirect means to incentivise cohesion among G77 members. One respondent reported that China also directly reacts to emerging fractures among developing country positions during deliberations at the Second Committee with explicit interventions that try to promote G77 unity.<sup>132</sup> Depending on the issue at hand, China thus plays a central role as *éminence grise* and/or proactive leader of the UN's developing country alliance. At the same time, China sets itself apart from the majority of developing countries with regard to issues related to developing finance and UN funding. Given its economic power, China's positions on financial contributions seem to be more aligned with that of other major economies<sup>133</sup>. This has led to open divergences with G77 members, such as in the 2022 Financing for Development Forum or the General Assembly's Fifth Committee.

## THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE AS A TESTBED FOR CHINA'S GLOBAL POWER

The most recent and ambitious Chinese effort to shape multilateral development alliances is the Global Development Initiative (GDI). Like the BRI (see section 3.1), the contours of

<sup>121</sup> Interview with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with UN officials, February and April 2022.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with member state representatives, January 2021; interview with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022; interview with member state representative, March 2022.

<sup>127</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and April 2022.

<sup>128</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, January and February 2022; interview with independent expert, February 2022.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with independent expert, April 2022; interview with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>130</sup> For a discussion of that diversity and related challenges to the notion of the 'Global South' in multilateral processes, see Haug 2021b.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with member state representative, July 2022.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with member state representatives, January 2022.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with member state representative, July 2022

the GDI are characterised by their vagueness. According to official documents and pronouncements, the GDI sets out to support the UN's development agenda, and the 2030 Agenda in particular, by linking Chinese bilateral initiatives and regional frameworks with global multilateral processes (People's Republic of China 2021a). Both Chinese and Western interlocutors see the GDI as a multilateral complement to the BRI with a strong focus on the UN.<sup>134</sup> Western respondents, in particular, described the GDI as a "smart move".<sup>135</sup> While the BRI's strong economic focus has led to concerns by Western Member States over the UN engaging with and supporting a single Member State's foreign policy and geo-economic strategy, the GDI has been presented as an inclusive diplomatic space. As the representative of a Western Member State put it during an interview: "the GDI shows that the Chinese have learned. [...] Its vague and broad links to the UN and the 2030 Agenda [make it] difficult for us to criticise it."<sup>136</sup> However, the GDI is also understood in a distinct geopolitical frame. Noting the lack of any tangible substance, the same representative also suggested that the GDI might primarily be a move to test the loyalty of international partners (many of which share concerns about it privately) and to create a basis for efforts to weaken the UN's human rights focus in favour of China's development concept where economic and social development are seen as preconditions for political rights.<sup>137</sup>

China has also set up a Group of Friends for the GDI. A Group of Friends is an informal mechanism through which Member States at the UN gather to support and promote a specific issue or process (see Whitfield 2010). While there is no authoritative UN overview of Groups of Friends, China seems to have rarely initiated one itself. The Group of Friends for the GDI had its first meeting in early 2022. A substantial number of Member States from the G77 and high-level representatives from the UN bureaucracy answered China's invitation, with EU Member States only being represented by Malta. While still in its early stages, the GDI appears to be a more acceptable version of a Chinese initiative in UN fora. China has already shifted its focus to the GDI in an apparent coming to terms with the fact that resistance against BRI, particularly among Western Member States, has undermined attempts to introduce its infrastructure initiative into UN documents. At UNIDO, for instance, the most contentious part of negotiations for the resolution on circular economy in 2021 centred around the mentioning of the BRI and the GDI. Faced with the opposition of Western Member States, China agreed to remove references to the BRI but insisted on keeping one to the GDI. The resolution failed to overcome Western disapproval despite general agreement about its content.<sup>138</sup>

Overall, the GDI is both a reflection of China's increasing assertiveness and a testbed for the strength of Chinese convening power. It contributes to a complex picture of the current state of China's role in UN negotiations and alliance politics. On the one hand, China has had considerable success and has become more visible and assertive. With regard to the first Group of Friends meeting for the GDI, a UN staff member even stated that "it is obvious that China is set to dominate the UN; they were all there".<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, while interlocutors from the G77 were cautious in reporting any major friction with China,<sup>140</sup> observers stated that tensions within the G77 seemed to be mounting.<sup>141</sup> The election of Li Yong's successor at UNIDO in 2021 was presented by interviewees as a concrete example. China had endorsed the Ethiopian candidate and, given the strong standing of the G77 at UNIDO, seemed to assume it would easily maintain its considerable influence at the organisation after Li's departure.<sup>142</sup> However, the former German development cooperation minister managed to convince a substantial number of G77 members, particularly from Africa and Latin America, to support him instead.<sup>143</sup> Despite intensifying attempts by the Ethiopian candidate and his Chinese backers to win the race,<sup>144</sup> UNIDO's membership picked the German candidate. While this was not the first time that a Chinese or China-backed candidate has failed to make it to the helm of a UN Specialised Agency,<sup>145</sup> there is not a general observable trend towards success or failure of Chinese attempts to install individuals of their liking in key positions. However, this example highlights that China's leadership among the UN's developing country alliance is neither automatic nor unchallenged.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with independent expert, February 2022.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with member state representative, January 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with member state representative, May 2022.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with member state representative, May 2022; see also Oud and Drinhausen 2021: 22.

<sup>138</sup> Interviews with UN officials, March 2022; interviews with member state representatives, February 2022.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>140</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, March and February 2022.

<sup>141</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, January and May 2022.

<sup>142</sup> Interviews with UN officials, March 2022.

<sup>143</sup> Interviews with member states representatives, February 2022; interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022; interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>145</sup> For the case of WIPO, see Tang and Lau 2020.

## 4

## CONNECTING THE DOTS: PATTERNS IN CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT

China's engagement with the UN development pillar has differed considerably across issue areas and organisational sites and, in some ways, has diverged markedly from Western powers' engagement patterns. As the two previous chapters have shown, an in-depth analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data provides insights into the specific contours of China's expanding role. Based on the processes, entities, and issue areas analysed in this study, we have identified four cross-cutting features that characterize China's approach to UN development work. By and large, China's engagement with the UN development pillar has been moderate when assessed against its financial and political resources. It has been selectively focused on specific arenas and topics; it reflects a long-term approach to expanding its influence; and it is shaped by a dual position as both a programme country and an increasingly assertive superpower. Individually, some of these features are not unique to China, but in combination, they contribute to an engagement style that has started to leave visible traces throughout the UN development pillar.

### CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT HAS INCREASED BUT REMAINS LARGELY MODERATE

Often hesitant to directly challenge established powers, China's engagement with UN development work has largely been moderate and selective. As an emerging superpower, China can, in theory, leverage immense financial and political resources to influence the UN development system. While its growing clout has been visible in areas across the UN system – notably human rights (Piccone 2018; see Richardson 2020) – a key characteristic of Chinese development-related engagement thus far is that China restrains from investing in the UN's development pillar at a large scale, especially in areas where Western powers' interests are directly involved and China's own national interests are not at stake. China's financial support remains minuscule compared with both the development finance it provides bilaterally and funding contributed by major Western powers (see section 2.1). For the latter, both voluntary core and earmarked contributions, which offer Member States a more direct influence on multilateral work, make up a significant share of funding for the UN development system. China uses the instrument of voluntary funding to a much lesser degree and only for a limited number of UN entities. Its capi-

talisation of UN trust funds for South-South cooperation has also remained modest. When it comes to staff, the proportion of Chinese nationals among the UN workforce has been growing since 2015 at a rate faster than that of other powerful Member States. According to the UN's norm for adequate Member State representation, however, China is overall underrepresented among UN staff, including in UN development entities (see section 2.2).

### CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT PUTS A STRONG EMPHASIS ON SELECTED ARENAS AND SPECIFIC TOPICS

At present, China's more proactive engagement with the UN development system takes place within relatively small UN entities that have typically been of limited relevance to Western powers. UNIDO is a prominent example: the US, the UK, and France left the organisation in the 1990s and 2000s. The global spotlight left with them, making UNIDO a vanguard of developing country concerns. The latter also applies to the FAO, often said to be "owned by the Global South",<sup>146</sup> as well as DESA, which to date has continuously been led by developing country nationals. A significant Chinese funding footprint can also be observed at the World Maritime Organisation, the Regional Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the International Trade Centre, and the UN Conference for Trade and Development, where China was among the top ten government donors for operational activities in 2020 (see section 2.1). Conversely, China appears to still have a low profile at UNDP and other organizations where Western Member States continue to exert considerable influence via various channels, including earmarked funding and staff representation. In past years, China-related controversies at these UN bodies have only erupted regarding their operational work in and with China, including on South-South cooperation (see section 3.1), but not because China had adopted a more confrontational stance in the executive board.<sup>147</sup> If Chinese representatives speak up there, they do so to advertise the BRI or, more recently, the GDI. China also uses leadership positions held by

<sup>146</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022.

its nationals within specific UN entities to promote its flagship initiatives and attempt to control agendas, proceedings, and outcomes of intergovernmental processes, most prominently at the FAO. Interestingly, we did not find evidence that China had targeted human rights and civil society engagement in the UNDP, FAO, or UNIDO; public documents from these entities stick to the UN's official norms and values.

Substantive concerns arise in response to China's advocating for UN structures, declarations, and actions to place more emphasis on social and economic rights, state sovereignty, political dialogue, and economic development (see Chen et al. 2018). Chinese engagement has put a particularly explicit focus on issues ranging from narrow national interests (such as the One China principle or the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang) to more thematic areas such as digital cooperation, big data, rural development, or South-South and triangular cooperation. More proactive and sometimes robust Chinese diplomacy can be found along these themes, also vis-à-vis its main cooperation partners in the G77 (see sections 3.1 and 3.4). When a Chinese national interest is at stake, China can use methods that violate or come close to violating UN principles. While it can be argued that some of this is similar to the behaviour of other Member States, China's actions have occasionally gone a step further and/or come under harsher (Western) scrutiny. This is exemplified by the support for the candidacy of Qu Dongyu for the FAO Director-General position (see section 3.4). More recently, tensions between Qu and Western Member States have centred around the former's reluctance to take a clear stance on Russia's war against Ukraine (Baumann 2022).

## CHINA IS TAKING A LONG-TERM APPROACH TO EXPANDING ITS INFLUENCE IN THE UN DEVELOPMENT PILLAR

China's engagement with UN development work appears to follow the goal of expanding Chinese influence at the UN over the long run. As Chen argues, China seeks greater institutional power that translates *inter alia* into the ability to set rules and define long-term institutional arrangements, as well as to bring in governance concepts that reflect China's views (quoted in Rolland 2020: 45). China's decision to keep what many still refer to as a low profile can be consistent with, and even part of, a strategy to build the foundation for the effective implementation of long-term strategic goals. Some elements of China's engagement with the UN development system may yield little short-term gains but can be understood as efforts towards the long-term goal of shaping the system to be more aligned with Chinese national interests. While China may be actively working towards changing certain Western-dominated practices, it is also presently showing commitment to the existing system.<sup>148</sup> The significant increase in interns over the last ten years (see

section 2.2) appears to be a deliberate investment in a future international or at least internationally-versed workforce. China's efforts to impact the political and normative configuration of the UN in the intergovernmental sphere have more immediate consequences. Western representatives, in particular, have expressed fears that the GDI was intended as a mechanism to lure Member States and the UN into a paradigm that emphasizes economic development over human rights (see section 3.4). Diplomats who have been the direct recipients of China's advances and UN officials who have been asked to help implement them also have a limited understanding of the concrete forms the GDI will take. This has opened up room for suspicion that the GDI might serve purposes also beyond furthering sustainable development.<sup>149</sup> From that perspective, the GDI appears as a central tool to nudge, if not pressure, Member States and UN agencies towards revising some of the fundamental contours of UN development work in accordance with Chinese preferences.

More generally, China's means for achieving long-term goals also differ from those employed by Western powers, who have traditionally used voluntary forms of finance to shape UN development work. While China's assessed contributions to the UN system have increased significantly, its voluntary contributions to UN development entities remain comparatively small (see section 2.1). On core contributions, China ranked 18<sup>th</sup> with a total of 36 million US dollars in 2020, behind Saudi Arabia. On earmarked contributions, China ranked 26<sup>th</sup> out of all UN Member States in 2020 (spending US\$ 112 million), behind Ireland and Finland (UN DESA 2022). Even at the FAO, China only ranks 12<sup>th</sup> on earmarked resources, behind Denmark (UNSCB n.d.). As the world's second-largest economy, China could easily play a much stronger role in the UN development pillar through financial means. There are reasons, however, for China to seek influence less via voluntary funding for UN entities<sup>150</sup> and instead more through political means in its engagement with Member States: China maintains a close alliance with the G77, whose 134 members usually make for a comfortable majority in the UN General Assembly (see section 3.4). This constitutes an immense political resource, which China can mobilize to promote its interests, arguably at much lower costs and with the additional benefit of fostering bilateral and cross-regional partnerships. China has sought to strengthen this asset through attempts to expand the primacy and oversight of inter-governmental bodies, on the one hand, and to solidify bilateral ties and developing country alliance structures, on the other. While Western Member States try to secure informal influence over UN organizations and their administrations through voluntary funding, China invests in the continuing relevance of intergovernmental decision-making procedures

<sup>149</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, May and July 2022; interview with UN official, July 2022.

<sup>150</sup> This may include a distaste for the Western-style engagement with the UN, the privileges of which are resented by developing countries (Baumann 2018), but also factors related to China's self-identification as a developing country, concepts of global burden-sharing (Weinlich 2014), power struggles, and fragmented bureaucratic structures (Mao 2020).

<sup>148</sup> Interview with UN official, April 2022.

and long-term partnerships with the UN's developing country majority. Its bilateral and regional relationships with many G77 members are an additional asset that can be used to mobilise support and, in the mid to long term, change the UN from within.

## CHINA USES ITS DUAL POSITION AS A PROGRAMME COUNTRY AND INCREASINGLY ASSERTIVE SUPERPOWER TO SHAPE UN DEVELOPMENT WORK

All states can be said to pursue national interests in multilateral cooperation, understood as a constant process of interaction through which states negotiate and define the ground for joint action. By doing so, they balance their "private" interests with what is required of them as "good international citizens" that support multilateralism as a value in its own right. The Chinese government explicitly states that it sees the UN as the cornerstone of the international system. Yet, there is evidence that China does not necessarily understand multilateralism to have inherent value but rather perceives it as a means to further its own international position. While this is not surprising and reflects the practices of other powerful Member States, China's approach seems to have endorsed a particularly immediate commitment to national prerogatives. In terms of policies, UN entities that are or were led by Chinese nationals have obvious links to China's strategic interests. DESA plays a key role in shaping global development policy and closely supports inter-governmental processes that are key to how China exercises influence; food security and agricultural development provide obvious links between the FAO and China, not only because of China's domestic experience but also due to its interests on the African continent;<sup>151</sup> and UNIDO's mandate resonates with China's focus on capacity building for industrial development. All three entities stand out as particularly aligned to developing country concerns, matching China's geopolitical interest in building global partnerships.<sup>152</sup>

The strong pursuit of national interests also characterises China's approach towards positioning its nationals at the UN. While UN civil servants are expected to abide by norms of neutrality and independence, it is no secret that they are not immune to influence from their countries of origin. In the case of China, however, this influence seems to be particularly acute. Chinese executive leaders of the FAO and UNIDO have tried, often successfully, to fill senior positions that are thematically relevant for China with Chinese nationals. Across the board, respondents indicated that Chinese nationals at the UN, particularly those in leadership positions, regularly received instructions from, or at least were in

close interaction with, Beijing.<sup>153</sup> Both diplomats and UN staff highlighted that China was trying to work through what they perceived as "their" UN personnel to gain international recognition for bilateral initiatives, help build political and economic partnerships, and support Chinese investments through complementary work.<sup>154</sup> China also uses and sometimes bends UN procedures to make other states align with its interests, and it has become more assertive in its engagement with the international bureaucracy. While some of China's behaviour is unique, many of these strategies are well known from the approaches of Western powers, notably the United States.

Arguably, China is at a disadvantage in a system that has traditionally been a stronghold of Western powers in terms of funding, staff, informal working relations, and culture. Nevertheless, China can make use of an asset that Western states do not have at their disposal: The combination of its roles as an increasingly assertive superpower, on the one hand, and as a UN programme country, on the other. With a considerable number of UN entities present in China, and many others eager to engage, China has expanded its links with the UN in the context of its South-South and triangular cooperation. South-South cooperation has long offered a framework for UN entities to provide support to China in its collaboration with other developing countries, often facilitating bilateral and cross-regional links in line with Chinese strategies. The UN's brokering function has also taken centre stage in broader capacity-building or matchmaking schemes, such as the FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative and UNIDO's Programme for Country Partnership. Among other things, these initiatives target thematic issues, modalities, and/or geographic areas relevant to China while connecting developing countries with Chinese domestic actors. While many Western powers – beyond multilateral rhetoric – approach UN development organisations as project implementers, China has UN entities serve as brokers or facilitators for processes and initiatives more immediately relevant to Chinese interests. UN bodies are expected to contribute to Chinese agendas by accompanying and facilitating engagement with stakeholders across the board, from matchmaking programmes to South-South cooperation support and attempts to complement BRI-related projects.

<sup>151</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, March 2022.

<sup>152</sup> While any comparison between China and the United States is difficult due to the latter's much longer active engagement with the UN development system, it is noteworthy that US nationals have led almost every development entity at some point, irrespective of specific American national interests.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with UN official, March 2022.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with member state representative, February 2022; interview with independent expert, April 2022; interview with UN official, February 2022.



## 5

## COMING TO TERMS WITH CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has provided insights into China's expanding role in the UN development pillar over the last two decades and centres around a basic set of key findings. While Chinese engagement varies across processes and UN entities, China has become an increasingly influential player in UN development work. While this might seem obvious to those familiar with the burgeoning literature on China in world politics, in UN development circles, China had long been regarded as a rather reluctant stakeholder facing a complex set of roles as a programme-cum-developing country and increasingly vocal provider-cum-superpower. This dual position as 'programme country superpower', however, has been an integral part of China's particular path towards expanding its engagement across the UN development pillar. The combination of developing country credentials, which include the legitimacy and ownership of a programme country *vis-à-vis* UN entities and other Member States, and considerable institutional as well as financial capacity, together with a strong strategic outlook, has allowed China to position itself as a key UN development stakeholder. Nevertheless, China is still far from taking over the UN development pillar. Instead, engagement with the UN development system contributes to how China defines and shapes its role as an emerging superpower in the field of international development. This section presents key findings across the six different dimensions of engagement analysed in this study, exemplifying different ways Member States – in this case, China – seek influence at the UN. We then conclude this study with reflections on the implications of and recommendations for addressing (the increasing levels of contestation around) China's engagement.

### A SUMMARY OF CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT

Our analysis of funding data and staff numbers provides a numerical overview of key patterns in China's recent engagement with the UN development system. *Funding patterns* show that the overall level of Chinese funding for the UN development system has grown significantly over the last decade; particularly assessed contributions have increased. Overall, however, China's financial support remains limited compared to that of Western powers. This is particularly apparent with regard to voluntary contributions that, so far, have been among the most important currency

for de facto influence in UN development entities. China, however, uses this tool in a limited (but targeted) fashion. While China is also still underrepresented among *UN staff*, including in UN development entities, a growing number of Chinese nationals are entering the UN staff hierarchy at different levels. Chinese nationals at the helm of UN entities have been particularly prominent examples of this trend. The rising number of Chinese interns and JPOs also provides an important indicator for the long-term implications of China's rise in the composition of the UN's workforce.

Insights from the four UN entities selected for this study – DESA, FAO, UNIDO, and UNDP – have added to this general picture by highlighting how particularly prominent aspects of Chinese engagement unfold. The promotion of *China-led initiatives* has been a central feature of China's approach to the UN development system. Entity-specific initiatives such as the FAO's Hand-in-Hand Initiative and UNIDO's Programme for Country Partnership have been directed at thematic issues, modalities, or geographic areas relevant to China and often include capacity-building and matchmaking elements. South-South cooperation has offered a long-term framework for UN entities to provide more explicit support to China in its collaboration with and assistance to other developing countries, often facilitating bilateral and cross-regional links in line with Chinese strategies. Western powers have been increasingly wary of that line of work, challenging the ways in which UN entities have been involved with global Chinese endeavours. This has also led to major contestations, mainly from Western Member States, with regard to UN support for the BRI, which is China's most comprehensive attempt at shaping global economic and infrastructure links.

Chinese officials have also been proactive in trying to insert "*Chinese language*" into official UN documents. Phrases taken from Xi Jinping's speeches and writings that partly build on traditional terminology of developing country solidarity – including, but not limited to, "a community of shared future for humankind", "people-centred development", "win-win", and "mutually beneficial cooperation" – can now be found across different UN negotiation processes. Western diplomats fear that the inclusion of these terms will accord them the status of agreed language in UN circles, contributing to the undermining of established UN consensus such as the focus on and meaning of human

rights in development work. So far, however, these terms and phrases have made limited inroads into development-related resolutions and documents due to uneven support from the G77 and concerted Western resistance.

*China's approach to institutional and individual leadership* at the UN has raised concerns that multilateral norms are being violated. Western powers fear that the neutrality of organisations and the integrity of multilateral processes are being undermined, with implications for their influence. A lack of consultation with (Western) Member States by Chinese-led UN entities and during UN conferences hosted by China has been met with suspicion and sometimes explicit opposition. There is also evidence that Chinese leaders at the UN use their roles to promote Chinese interests and implement a rather hierarchical management style. At the FAO, in particular, the current Director-General seems to have established a tightly-knit system of control that furthers the orientation towards Chinese interests.

*China's diplomacy and alliance structures* have been shaped by a strong instrumental link with the G77, which is the most comprehensive developing country grouping at the UN. While Chinese representatives have often taken a back seat in inter-governmental negotiations and steered processes via indirect and backstage action, China has become more visibly involved in trying to ensure coherence among G77 Member States and pushing for its thematic priorities. The GDI adds to this expanding presence in inter-governmental processes and reflects both China's increasing assertiveness as well as the need to test the strength of Chinese convening power.

We also identified four cross-cutting features that characterize China's approach to UN development work across entities and processes. First, while Chinese engagement has increased, it is still moderate in light of the financial and political resources China has at its disposal. This finding contradicts the gloomier diagnosis found in public commentary, which claims China is taking over the UN. China is a constructive partner in many UN areas and on many issues, as UN practitioners can attest to. While there appears to be a sufficient overlap of policies and intentions for substantial collaboration between China and the West, there are other elements of China's engagement with the UN development pillar – such as controversies over UN support for the BRI – that reveal the kind of mounting geopolitical tensions alluded to in the introduction. Second, China's engagement puts a strong emphasis on selected arenas – including those coordinated by DESA, for instance – and specific topics, such as rural development, big data or South-South and triangular cooperation. Here, evidence discussed in this study suggests that China's involvement is much more substantial than what its generally more moderate profile might suggest. Third, China's approach appears to be committed to a long-term perspective geared towards changing key features of the UN development pillar from within. Legitimate and seemingly minor aspects of China's UN politics, such as efforts to integrate Chinese nationals into the UN's workforce, investments in fostering

global alliances, and attempts to introduce “Chinese language”, can be seen as building the basis for a much stronger Chinese role in the future while avoiding direct confrontation. Fourth, China's engagement cultivates a dual position as both a programme country and an increasingly assertive superpower with the ability to shape UN development work in line with its national interests. China appears to harbour little concern about advancing its interests in ways that can be detrimental to multilateralism's collective purpose. While this may not differ fundamentally from how other (Western) heavyweights have behaved throughout the UN's existence, China can also build on its UN programme country role as an additional key asset for expanding its influence. With a considerable number of UN entities present in China, and many others eager to engage, China has expanded its links with the UN in the context of its South-South and triangular cooperation, making use of UN entities as promoters and brokers.

## IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT

Throughout the data-gathering process, our study also revealed moments of self-reflection, caution, and uncertainty among interview partners, especially among representatives from Western Member States. Some interlocutors explicitly mentioned their own (Western) bias and lack of full understanding of China's engagement with UN development work. For some, observing China's more robust engagement offered a view in the mirror as it confronted them with problematic Western practices, past and present. For some UN staff, China's approach seemed similar to that of other large Member States, and indeed, as less aggressive than the United States when it comes to pressuring UN entities. For these staff, China is either practising a more conciliatory approach at the UN or might still be a hesitant great power, with more muscular engagement on the horizon.<sup>155</sup> While welcoming greater geopolitical multipolarity, G77 representatives were often wary of the same old practices being adopted by new actors.<sup>156</sup> What unites all of them is that they are confronted with fundamental change. They are, to various degrees, torn between the idealism they have preserved for themselves and the more pessimistic outlooks they have acquired through their (sometimes decades-long) involvement in UN politics.

Overall, the implications of China's engagement were evaluated differently across interview accounts. Perceptions can be clustered into four, sometimes simultaneously held, perspectives. First, there is suspicion and fear, notably among Western Member States, that China might do away with the UN system as we know it, in particular regarding multilateral norms (such as accountability, transparency, and neutrality), the liberal underpinnings and the orientation towards democracy and individual human rights, and

<sup>155</sup> Interview with UN official, February 2022.

<sup>156</sup> Interviews with member state representatives, February and March 2022.

the long-established Western influence over many UN entities and processes. Second, there is an acknowledgement that China has a legitimate case to make, and its voice should be heard more within UN development work. From that perspective, China's rise is updating the UN in line with ongoing power shifts in the international system. This might fuel the competition over ideas, norms, and initiatives in the area of sustainable development, which may be beneficial for developing countries in particular and the system more generally. Third, there is an expression of relief that China, the second most powerful country in the UN, is choosing to invest in the UN instead of circumventing it. This is often coupled with a hope that UN processes and structures are resilient and wariness about a superpower whose approach to the UN and vision of a Sino-centred international order might become more assertive. Finally, many highlight that there is an acute danger that existing polarisations could intensify between Western Member States and China, with the latter supported by Russia and many developing countries that see their interests betrayed by the West. This would further marginalise the UN and its development system, letting down those countries and voices that are excluded from clubs with more homogenous memberships and eroding the basis for collective action on urgent transnational challenges.

In combination, these different perspectives highlight the potential for both negative and positive implications of China's engagement with the UN development pillar. They foresee far-reaching consequences for the actual substance of UN development work and the roles and functions of UN entities, Member States' ownership of and trust towards the system, and the ability of Member State blocs to work towards consensus and compromise. Our findings show that China is indeed capable of bringing about or contributing to far-reaching changes. As a programme country superpower, it has a unique set of power resources at its disposal, combining extensive political and financial means with preferential access to UN bodies and development credibility among both developing countries and UN entities. At the same time, China has also been explicit about its unhappiness with the status quo of the UN development pillar and has shown interest in using the UN for its own purposes. At the time of writing, however, the trajectory of change can still be shaped. Much depends on how China acts in the future, how concerted its efforts will be across the system, and how many financial and political resources it is willing to invest at a time of looming global economic distress. However, the fate of the UN development pillar is forged through the interactions of all stakeholders. Will there still be attempts to find common ground beyond ideological differences? Will the appeal of multilateral norms and values be defended also through global solidarity? Will the international bureaucracy be able to navigate the demands from different sides without compromising fundamental multilateral norms and principles?

The world needs continued and strengthened international cooperation to deal with pressing global sustainable development issues, and key normative tenets of the UN sys-

tem should be preserved and reinforced. The following three recommendations are directed at Member States that share these goals.

### **1. EMBRACING COMPETITION: Strengthening alliances at the UN**

The geopolitical rivalry over the norms, principles, and practices of global development is not limited to diplomatic battles over the language of UN resolutions. Maybe more importantly, it also plays out in Member States' bi- and multilateral relations in contexts within and beyond the UN. China's own development success story, which stresses economic growth over individual rights, appeals not only to autocracies but also to democratically governed countries, some of which feel betrayed by what they perceive as Western Member States' long-term impositions and double standards. Western officials are thus not in the best position to strengthen alliances with many G77 members or successfully lobby for democracy and liberal values. More credibility in global governance is required, as well as the ability to make an appealing offer to others to compete effectively against China. Western governments should overcome their often compartmentalised approach to different UN pillars and negotiation processes. Looking forward, they should use both economic and political resources for alliance-building in concert with a more explicit focus on developing countries' contexts, needs, and links with China. Many countries in the Global South feel let down by the West when it comes to key interests related to economic and financial governance, climate finance, or, more recently, vaccine equality. Their need for cooperation at eye level has been unmet for too long, and their grievances need to be addressed. It is important that Southern Member States are not treated like pawns in the game of the great powers but as having a stake and voice in shaping the normative foundations of global development policy.

### **2. REINFORCING COOPERATION: Identifying topics of common interest for collaboration**

Interactions with China should not only be viewed through the lens of geopolitical rivalry. Looking at China's engagement with UN development work as a zero-sum game and focusing on the defence of norms and values only obfuscates the ultimate goal of multilateral cooperation. Multiple global crises are currently undoing previous development successes and threatening to make the 2030 Agenda, which is already off course, unattainable. Meanwhile, economic realities are worsening worldwide, with an emerging debt crisis and a global recession on the horizon. Constantly negotiating and articulating global norms and concepts is an integral part of UN multilateralism. China is an important stakeholder whose participation is necessary for effectively addressing many transnational threats. Against



this backdrop, Western countries should identify interests they share with Chinese counterparts and work towards solutions, and not shy away from innovation even if it is promoted by a global competitor. All Member States should work against an entrenched polarisation that undermines the UN's foundations. A potential area for collaboration through the UN is triangular cooperation, which can combine China's expertise, the interests and needs of developing partner countries, the capacity of established donors, and the multilateral mandates, processes, and assets of the UN.

### **3. BUTTRESSING INTEGRITY: Working towards universally agreed frameworks**

While interest-based approaches to the UN development pillar will always be part of the game, it is important to safeguard the integrity of multilateral institutions and the trust placed in them. As struggles for political influence in the UN increase, it is imperative to strengthen UN norms of accountability, transparency, and impartiality that apply to relations among Member States as well as their interactions with the international bureaucracy. A code of diplomatic and managerial conduct should be formulated that ensures and improves the integrity and accountability of the UN's intergovernmental decision-making processes and the management of its entities. Transparency should be improved in the area of bilateral engagement with the UN, in particular for any form of financial support as well as for other forms of collaboration between UN entities and Member States, including scientific partnerships, joint programmes, Memoranda of Understanding, and UN country-level activities. Western Member States should lead by example and confront infringements to protect UN multilateralism.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ASG</b>	Assistant-Secretary-General
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>BRICS</b>	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
<b>DESA</b>	Department of Economic and Social Affairs
<b>ECOSOC</b>	Economic and Social Council
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization
<b>G77</b>	Group of 77
<b>GDI</b>	Global Development Initiative
<b>ICAO</b>	International Civil Aviation Organization
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>ITC</b>	International Trade Centre
<b>ITU</b>	International Telecommunication Union
<b>JPO</b>	Junior Professional Officer
<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PCP</b>	Programme for Country Partnership
<b>QCPR</b>	Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SG</b>	Secretary-General
<b>SSC</b>	South-South Cooperation
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UN-ECA</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
<b>UN-ECE</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
<b>UN-ESCAP</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
<b>UN-ECLAC</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
<b>UN-ESCWA</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia
<b>UN-DCO</b>	United Nations Development Coordination Office
<b>UN-DGC</b>	United Nations Department of Global Communications
<b>UN-DMSPC</b>	United Nations Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance
<b>UN-DOS</b>	United Nations Department of Operational Support
<b>UN-DRR</b>	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
<b>UN-RISD</b>	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
<b>UNCTAD</b>	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>UNHABITAT</b>	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>UNIDO</b>	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>UNOPS</b>	United Nations Office for Project Services
<b>UNPDF</b>	United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund
<b>UNSCEB</b>	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Communication
<b>UNSDCF</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
<b>UNSDG</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Group

<b>UNSG</b>	United Nations Secretary-General
<b>UNSSC</b>	United Nations System Staff College
<b>USG</b>	Under-Secretary-General
<b>WEOG</b>	Western Europe and Others Group
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WIPO</b>	World Intellectual Property Organization
<b>WMO</b>	World Meteorological Organization
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Max-Otto Baumann** is a Senior Researcher at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). With a background in international relations, his research focuses on the United Nations development system and global governance questions.

**Sebastian Haug** is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). After working for the United Nations in Beijing and Mexico City, he has spent the last seven years investigating multilateral politics, international development cooperation, and global power shifts.

**Silke Weinlich** is a Senior Researcher at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), where she leads a project on the United Nations development system. Over the last 15 years, she has followed UN reform processes and worked on multilateral finance and global governance questions.

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Contact:  
[Meike.Adam@fes.de](mailto:Meike.Adam@fes.de)

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# CHINA'S EXPANDING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PILLAR

## The Selective Long-term Approach of a Programme Country Superpower



China has become an increasingly visible player across the UN development pillar as its funding for, staff representation in and diplomatic engagement with UN development work have expanded. In light of the financial and political resources at its disposal, however, China's engagement has largely remained moderate and selective. The thematic priorities and selected arenas China has focused on include rural development, big data and South-South and triangular cooperation.



China appears to be taking an increasingly assertive and long-term approach towards changing some of the traditional contours of UN development work. Attempts to enshrine Chinese concepts in UN resolutions and the Global Development Initiative seem to be directed at building the foundation for development multilateralism with Chinese characteristics. The significant increase in the number of Chinese interns at the UN seems to be a deliberate investment in better understanding and shaping the UN in the future.



China can make use of an asset that Western member states do not have at their disposal: the combination of its roles as a superpower and a UN programme country. China has capitalised on this duality to expand ties with the UN, notably through South-South cooperation support schemes. While many Western powers approach UN development organisations as project implementers, China has UN entities act as brokers or facilitators for processes and initiatives that are more immediately relevant to Chinese interests.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
<https://www.fes.de/referat-asien-und-pazifik>