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## What Does China Want?

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## ***Abstract***

*What does China want? It has been an age-old question. Generally, countries are forthcoming about their motives through policy statements and strategies. However, China remains an anomaly. Due to restrictions on academic freedom and media, what China wants is not always clear. This paper tries to deduce what China wants by analyzing the statements of Xi Jinping and other Senior leaders and how media and civilian academics interpret them.*

*This paper makes two arguments. The first argument is how China is a threat to Liberal International Institutions and how it wants to mould them according to their needs. The paper finds that China does not want to change the international economic institutions like the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the World Trade Organisation (WTO). To prove the first argument, the author analyses Xi Jinping's statements and uses two case studies on China taking control of multilateral International Organizations (especially UN Organizations) and using them for its benefit.*

*The paper's second argument addresses the question: what is China's endgame? Xi Jinping asserts in his speeches that he aims to "Turn China into a modern, prosperous country. (CCP, 2017)" However, the author argues that China's endgame is not just to turn itself into a modern, prosperous country, but it goes beyond that. China wants to assert dominance in at least the western Pacific region. China wants to integrate Taiwan with the mainland, exhibit dominance in the South China Sea, probably occupy the Senkaku Islands and settle the Line-of-Actual Control (LAC) with India on its terms.*

**Keywords :** China, UN, International Organisations, World Bank, IMF, South China Sea

## ***China and International Institutions***

China's Foreign Policy strategy is embedded in realism. One can make a case that Chinese foreign policy is Machiavellian (Kai, 2015). China believes that powerful nations design international institutions, laws, and norms, and they often reflect their interests.

According to Chinese thinking, the United States has been a hegemon since the Second World War and an absolute hegemon after the end of the Cold War. They believe that the United States has used such status to mould international institutions as an extension of its domestic policies.

The United States has moulded international institutions according to its interests. Whereas, US believes that its interest pertains to free trade, individual rights, political rights, human rights, freedom of navigation, self-determination, and democracy as enshrined in the Atlantic Charter.

On the other hand, a system moulded by a hegemonic China could aim to take most of those rights away. China does not believe in individual rights. It believes in the so-called rights of mankind, which the party brings forward, since it believes that authoritarian leadership (or China's style of democracy) works better. In contrast, democracies consider individual interests that lead to policy fragmentation and implementation. Regarding this, Zhang Weiwei from China Institute at Fudan University argues that:

“The biggest difference between the institutional arrangements of China and Western countries is that the former has a political force representing people's collective interest, and the latter do not. In the West, different political parties represent the interest of different social groups. As a result, national policies are constantly wavering, political parties and interest groups are frequently engaged in bigger conflict with each other, and national development easily loses direction. In contrast, the CPC is a political party dedicated to serving the people wholeheartedly, and one that has played the larger role of leader, regulator, and coordinator throughout China's modernization drive (Weiwei, 2017).”

### ***China and Economic Order***

China ascended to the WTO in 2001 (WTO, 2001). The Republic of China was a founding member of the International Monetary Fund, but the People's Republic of China established formal ties to the IMF in 1980.

Joining the WTO was a major boost for China's economy. After joining the WTO, China liberalized its banking, service, telecommunications, financial services, and insurance sectors. China had to further pull-down restrictions on retail and wholesale. Although these conditions were seen to be harsh at that time, they brought in a lot of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and ultimately led to the rapid development of the Chinese economy (Branstetter, 2018).

Since opening up, China has also become an economic power in Asia. China's economy owes its rise to the current international financial institutions. Therefore, it is less likely to try

to effect a change in them. China is the largest trading partner of countries like Japan (Statista, 2022), the Republic of Korea (Santander, 2022), and the ASEAN nations (Global Times, 2021). China not only wants the financial institutions to operate the same way they are operating now, but it also actively seeks participation in them. Even Xi Jinping defended the system at Davos, saying:

“It is true that economic globalization has created new problems. But this is no justification to write off economic globalization altogether. Rather we should adapt to and guide globalization, cushion its negative impact, and deliver its benefits to all countries and all nations (Jinping, 2017).”

China was one of the leading proponents of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that became effective on 1 January 2022 (ASEAN, 2022). RCEP includes ten ASEAN countries, with China, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. China is also actively seeking membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a Japanese-led free trade Agreement (Solis, 2021). If accepted in CPTPP, China will become the dominant economic player in the region with the rest of the world's fastest developing economies.

### ***America's Withdrawal and China's Ambitions (From Deng to Xi)***

China views international governance in a hierarchical order (Joshi, 2020), where countries at the top of the ladder decide on laws and norms for the remainder. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed in his speeches that during the ‘Century of humiliation’, ‘the Western countries imposed “*unfair treaties*” and made a system that benefits them at the expense of China.’

Deng Xiaoping unveiled the “*24-Character Strategy*” in the wake Tiananmen Square Massacre as it faced global backlash. The strategy translates to:

“Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capabilities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership (Whiting, 1995).”

While the succeeding leaders followed Deng Xiaoping's principles, the first signs of change came in 2009 at China's 11<sup>th</sup> Ambassadorial Conference. President Hu Jintao said, “China needs to actively achieve something (Blanchette, 2021).” Further, Xi Jinping completely broke away from Deng Xiaoping's principles through the so-called Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and asserting active leadership of multilateral international institutions.



The question that arises is: what brought about a change in China's policy of 'never claim leadership'? A case can be made for the 2008-09 global financial crisis and thereafter due to 'neo-isolationism' during the Trump presidency.

The 2008-2009 global financial crisis wreaked havoc across the world, especially the United States. However, China's state-managed economy weathered the crisis better than the United States. This made China believe that its governance model was better than the United States, which they perceived to be in decline (Blanchette, 2021). Cui Liru at the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations wrote in 2016, "The United States is no longer able to easily exercise hegemonic authority like it did in the post-Cold War era." He further stated that the balance of power is in flux, with "different power centres competing and cooperating at different levels according to their own superiority and characteristics (Hart, 2017)."

This view was also reflected in the leadership's thinking. Xi Jinping, as soon as 2014, started calling for the reform of the global international system. Speaking at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, Xi said:

"We should promote the reform of the International System and global governance and increase the representation and voice of China (Jinping, 2014)."

Xi did call for a change in international institutions but was still careful not to explicitly call for China to play a leadership role in the system.

China's aims were further emboldened when Donald Trump became President of the United States. The Trump administration withdrew from various international institutions, treaties, and trade pacts. United States' neo-isolationism meant that the leadership was up for grabs and for China to take. Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2016 (Taylor, 2018); Paris Climate Deal in 2017 (Austin, 2019); UNESCO in October 2017 (Adamson, 2019); Iran Nuclear Deal or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 (Mulligan, 2018); stopped funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in August 2018 (George, 2018) and the World Health Organization in May 2020 (Press, 2020). Apart from pullback from International Organizations, President Trump also withdrew from arms control treaties like the 'Open Skies Treaty' and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces with Russia. He further made the WTO virtually defunct by blocking the appointment of judges to the dispute redressal mechanism (Swanson, 2019) and pulled back from the negotiations of the Global Compact for Migration in August 2017 (Gladstone, 2017).

Chinese scholars and leadership saw Trump's actions as the impending American decline that would only go downhill. The deputy director of the Institute of World Politics at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Chen Xiangyang, described

Trump's actions as selfishness that was "causing the world to turn to China to play a greater role." He stated that:

"US withdrawal has led to greater confidence in and respect for China's role, enabling China to move closer to the center of the world through participating in global governance and expanding its clout and voice in the world (Xiangyang, 2018)."

Xi Jinping also supported this assertion in his speech at the Central Conference on Work relating to Foreign Affairs in June 2018. Xi said:

"China needs to take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system (Jinping, Xi urges breaking new ground in major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, 2018)." Officially this was the first time any Chinese leader called to lead the global governance system. However, China's attempts at leading the system predate the announcement.

### ***China's Control of International Institutions: Through the Lens of case studies***

As enunciated earlier, China believes in a power hierarchy, and the one at the top makes' rules and norms according to their interest. This thinking was also validated by President Trump in an address to the UN General Assembly when he said:

"As the President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your country first (Trump, 2019)."

China has been trying to control UN Organizations according to their goals. It has asserted control over organizations like the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs for promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the UN Human Rights Council for its human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong.

The following case studies trace China's control over and how it uses the above-mentioned UN agencies.

1. ***Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)***: DESA is the frontline development organization of the UN It is guided by the UN charter and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Since its inception, DESA has primarily been headed by the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, but China has held the position of Under Secretary-General of DESA since July 2007. From the period starting in 2007, the Under Secretary-General position has been held by a Chinese diplomat.

China has used its position in DESA to promote the Belt and Road Initiative. In his remarks at the “Belt and Road Davos Forum-Interregional Cooperation for a New Globalization” gathering, organized by the WEF, Liu Zhenmin, former Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs for China and Under-Secretary-General for DESA stressed the importance of BRI in globalization and sustainability. He said, “BRI has emerged as a new and inclusive model of International Development Cooperation,” and it promoted “globalization that is more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable (Zhenmin, 2018)”. Speaking again in June 2018 at the High-level symposium on the BRI and 2030 agenda, Zhenmin spoke of the similarity between the BRI and U.N. Agenda 2030, terming them both a global and equitable good source. He said: “Both of them aim to promote win-win cooperation, shared development and prosperity, peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, and mutual understanding and trust (Zhenmin, 2018).”

China, using the DESA, has launched a program named “Jointly Building Belt and Road towards SDGs”. The program’s stated goal is to “implement a multi-country, multi-year project to strengthen national capacities for jointly building the Belt and Road towards Sustainable Development Goals.” China’s actions have come in the wake of reports regarding the Unsustainability (ANI, 2021) and environmental impact of BRI (SPIEGEL, 2020).

Incidentally, the UN fully embraced BRI, as evidenced by the remarks of U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the Opening of the BRI forum in May 2017. Guterres hailed the BRI as a project for deepening “connectivity across countries and regions: connectivity in infrastructure, trade, finance, policies and, perhaps most important of all among people,”

The secretary-general even stated China’s win-win slogan, saying BRI and Agenda 2030 “strive to create opportunities, global public goods, and win-win cooperation (Guterres, 2017).”

2. **United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC):** China’s violation of human rights starts right after the formation of the People’s Republic of China. Mao’s policy of Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) allegedly killed an estimated 80 million people (Strauss, 1994). Mao’s actions led to famines and disappearances. China has also indulged in human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang, severely restricting the freedom of movement, assembly, speech, and religious freedom of citizens in these regions (HRW, 2018). The latest of China’s

Human Rights violations have occurred in Hong Kong, where the new National Security Law has led to arbitrary arrests, detention, restriction of press and free expression, and rights of peaceful assembly (US State Department, 2021).

China has its definitions of human rights; as Le Yucheng said at the U.N. in 2018: “more than just one path towards modernization and every country may choose its own path of development and model of human rights protection in the context of its national circumstances and its people’s needs (United Nations, 2018).”

China has been engaging actively with UNHRC since its inception but has more often than not shown hostility against any criticism of its human rights record. For example, when the United States, during the 2018 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), brought attention towards China’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang, China vehemently pushed back, stating that the United States was trying to question China’s territorial integrity and politicizing the issue of human rights (Mantesso, 2021). China also benefits from the membership of other authoritarian countries with dismal human rights records, who vote in its favour and vice-versa.

Apart from these two, China has considerable influence in organizations like the U.N. Accreditation for Non-Governmental Organizations, the U.N. International Telecommunication Union, and the WHO. China has so much influence over WHO that it stopped Taiwan from attending the WHO’s briefing and meetings even during the Covid-19 pandemic (AlJazeera, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

After discussing China’s role in International Institutions, one might wonder what China’s endgame is. Speaking at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Xi Jinping declared that the party has realized the “first centenary goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects” and he further outlined the second centenary goal of “building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects (Xi Jinping, 2021).” This was not the first time Xi Jinping declared the goal of making China a modern socialist country. Chinese scholars and media have reiterated this goal since Xi Jinping first declared it.

Does China only want economic modernization? Despite time and again stressing the importance of globalization and economic growth, it is only a means to an end for China. China’s endgame is the complete reunification of their motherland. What does reunification mean? For China, reunification means unification of Taiwan with the mainland, asserting



dominance in the South China Sea, gaining control of the Senkaku Islands, and the least talked about territorial disputes with India, including China's claims over Arunachal Pradesh.

These claims are not without evidence as Xi Jinping, in a speech in October 2021, asserted that:

“The historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled and will definitely be fulfilled (BBC, 2021).” Regarding Taiwan, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi Jinping stated that the

“unification with Taiwan was one of the 14 must-do items necessary to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Bush, 2017).”

China's actions in the last three years speak enough about its dispute with India. To assert its territorial claims, China started offensive actions in the Galwan Valley that led to the highest number of military casualties between the two nations in over four decades. Since then, India and China have had 19 rounds of talks between the two sides with little outcome. Similarly, China's actions in the South China Sea are belligerent with China regularly using grey-zone tactics against the littoral states.

China is in land and maritime disputes in the South China Sea with the Southeast Asian nations of Brunei, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. China asserts historical claims over the waters, against international law enunciated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Despite being a signatory of the UNCLOS, China refused to honour the ruling by UNCLOS in 2016, which stated that ‘China had no legal claims on everything within the “Nine-Dash Line (Chaudhury, 2021)”’. To assert its claims, China has indulged in the aggressive building of artificial islands (BBC, 2020) in South China Sea and continues to regularly violate the territorial sovereignty of countries to assert its dominance using non-state actors.

In conclusion, despite China's rhetoric about developing China into a modern society, its endgame is the so-called “reunification of the motherland” that it strives to achieve through dominating and subverting international order and institutions.

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