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**The Instrument and
the Architect: Beijing's
Campaign to Reshape
the United Nations**

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The Instrument and the Architect: Beijing's Campaign to Reshape the United Nations

Abstract

This paper examines the People's Republic of China's (PRC) coordinated campaign to reshape the United Nations (UN) from within. Moving beyond traditional defensive diplomacy, Beijing now employs a three-vector strategy to embed its national objectives into the multilateral architecture. The paper argues that China leverages financial contributions to steer institutional priorities, strategically places personnel to influence decision-making and normative language, and utilises peacekeeping operations to protect overseas economic interests under a multilateral flag. Anchored by the ideological framework of a "community with a shared future for mankind", this synchronised approach fundamentally alters the UN's institutional character.

Keywords: United Nations, Chinese Foreign Policy, Institutional Capture, Multilateralism, UN Peacekeeping

Introduction

For nearly eight decades, the United Nations has occupied a peculiar position in the international order: an organisation whose founding charter is grounded in Western liberal norms, yet whose universal membership requires it to accommodate governments that, in practice, reject those norms. For most of that period, the People's Republic of China (PRC) approached the institution on largely defensive terms—treating the UN as a venue wherein its core interests are safeguarded, primarily the "One China" position and the principle of non-interference, rather than viewing it as an instrument through which the international system could be reshaped. That posture has undergone a fundamental transformation. Since the mid-2000s, and with visibly accelerating intensity under the leadership of Xi Jinping, Beijing has pursued a coordinated strategy to convert its expanding weight within the UN into structural influence over the organisation's norms, personnel, and operations.

The central argument of this paper is that, the PRC's engagement with the UN is best understood not as ordinary great-power participation but as a three-vector campaign to embed

Chinese national objectives within a multilateral architecture whose legitimacy continues to derive from the language of neutrality and universality. Three instruments have proved central to that campaign: *first*, the strategic deployment of monetary contributions to redefine institutional norms and steer budgetary priorities; *second*, the placement of Chinese nationals in critical UN posts to shape decision-making from within; and *third*, the disciplined use of the UN peacekeeping structure to project Chinese hard power in regions of economic and strategic interest while operating under a multilateral flag. Each of these instruments, taken alone, would be an unremarkable feature of great-power diplomacy. Applied together, and with a degree of ideological coherence not previously observed among UN member states, they represent a qualitatively different mode of engagement.

The conventional view holds that China is largely “doing what other major powers have done”, filling a vacuum created by declining Western investment and assuming international responsibilities commensurate with its economic weight (Cordesman, 2023). That reading, while not without foundation, is incomplete. It obscures the extent to which Beijing has articulated an explicit ideological framework, the “community with a shared future for mankind” [人类命运共同体], for its multilateral engagement, and the extent to which its financial, personnel, and military instruments are calibrated to that framework rather than to the mission of the UN as historically conceived (MoFA China 1, 2024). The recent report of the U.S. House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), together with a growing body of investigative reporting and academic scholarship, has laid out the empirical basis for this reading in considerable detail (Select Committee on China, 2023).

The analysis proceeds in five parts. The first sets out the doctrinal and political framework within which Beijing conceives of its UN engagement. The second examines the deployment of financial contributions as a source of institutional leverage. The third addresses the placement of Chinese nationals in senior and mid-level UN posts. The fourth turns to the strategic use of UN peacekeeping operations. The fifth offers an assessment of the cumulative effect and the difficulties that any coherent response confronts.

The Doctrinal Framework: The UN as Vehicle

To understand the PRC's operational conduct at the UN, one must begin with the doctrinal framework within which Beijing itself situates that conduct. That framework is set out most systematically in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 2021 position paper on cooperation with the UN, which declares that “there is only one system in the world, namely the international system with the United Nations at its core; only one order, namely the international order based on international law; and only one set of rules, namely the basic norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter” (MoFA China, 2021). At first reading, the passage appears merely to affirm a conventional multilateralist position. On closer reading, it does something more consequential: it frames the UN as the sole legitimate source of international authority, thereby delegitimising the parallel architectures of Western alliances, coalitions, and rules-based orders that have historically operated alongside, and often within the UN system.

Central to this doctrine is the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind”, first advanced by Xi Jinping in 2013 (Kee, 2021) and subsequently elevated to what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes as “the core tenet of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy” (MoFA China, 2024). The concept has been inscribed in the UN General Assembly resolutions for six consecutive years and first appeared in a UN Security Council resolution 2344 (2017) on the mandate of the UN assistance mission in Afghanistan, in March 2017 (UN Security Council, 2017).

The insertion, however, is not incidental. When France, United Kingdom, and United States objected in November 2021 to the reference to “common effort towards a community of shared future for mankind” in a draft resolution on outer space, their statement noted that although the phrase “sounds innocuous”, it bore no relation to the substantive matter under consideration and represented an attempt to naturalise Chinese ideological terminology within UN texts (UN General Assembly, 2021). The reasoning behind the objection is instructive. Repeated over time and across resolutions, such formulations acquire the status of settled norms, permitting Beijing to argue that its preferred conception of international order is not merely a national position but an established multilateral consensus.

Two further features of the framework merits emphasis. *First*, the Party-State distinction, which retains some analytical utility elsewhere, is effaced in the design of Chinese multilateral engagement. As the 2021 Regulations on the United Front Work of the Communist Party of China [《中国共产党统一战线工作条例》] explicitly direct, “overseas United Front work” is to serve China's “national rejuvenation” and “development interests” (Xinhua, 2021); and, as scholarship on the United Front system has documented, United Front personnel are routinely assigned to diplomatic roles within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (U.S.-China Security and Economic Review Commission, 2021). *Second*, and closely related, the strategy is coordinated across instruments in a manner uncommon among other major contributors. Financial commitments, personnel decisions, and troop deployments do not merely coexist; they are calibrated to one another in service of a defined national agenda. It is the coordination, more than the scale, that distinguishes the Chinese approach.

Financial Contributions as Institutional Leverage

The most visible dimension of Beijing's growing UN footprint is fiscal. Between 2006 and 2026, the PRC's assessed share of the UN regular budget rose from 2.053 per cent to 20.004 per cent, placing it second only to the United States, whose share stands at 22 per cent (Leppert, 2025). Between 2013 and 2024 alone, China's total contributions to the UN system, encompassing assessed dues, voluntary core contributions, voluntary non-core contributions, and revenue from other activities, increased manifold. Chinese officials have framed this growth as evidence of the country's role as a ‘builder of world peace’ and a “defender of international order”, and the framing has proved rhetorically effective in a period when several Western contributors have faced domestic pressure to reduce their commitments (MoFA China, 2020). It is a fact that, in absolute terms, US contributions continue to exceed those of the PRC by a substantial margin: in 2024, the United States contributed approximately \$14.26 billion to the UN system, compared with \$2.48 billion from the PRC, a ratio of roughly 5.7 to 1 (United Nations, 2024). The strategic significance of the Chinese contribution, however, lies less in its absolute magnitude than in how it has been deployed.

Two dynamics warrant particular attention. The first is the tactical use of arrears and delayed payments. In 2023, a combination of unpaid U.S. contributions and delayed Chinese

payments precipitated a liquidity crisis that forced UN departments to impose hiring freezes and to postpone activities across several human rights mechanisms (Charbonneau, 2024). That crisis has since deepened rather than abated: by the end of 2023 the UN faced the highest level of arrears in its history, and by early 2026 the UN Human Rights Council's Special Procedures were reported to be operating at only 30 to 60 per cent of their intended capacity (International Service for Human Rights, 2026). While the United States is the largest contributor to unpaid balances, close observers have attributed a portion of the delays in Chinese payments to political calculation. The 2023 delays followed unsuccessful Chinese efforts to block funding for human rights inquiries in Sudan, Ukraine, and other jurisdictions at the General Assembly's Fifth Committee (Charbonneau, 2023). The functional effect, irrespective of intent, is that investigations to which Beijing objects are among the first activities to be suspended when cash-flow constraints tighten. Financial pressure, in short, does not need to be discussed at the negotiating table to produce results at the operational level.

The second dynamic concerns voluntary contributions. Here, the distribution is illuminating. In 2024, the PRC directed \$27.49 million, roughly eight times its second-largest voluntary core allocation to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a UN agency whose governance model, unusually within the UN system, awards voting shares in proportion to donor contributions (United Nations, 2024). As of July 2025, the PRC ranked as IFAD's sixth-largest donor and its largest among self-declared "developing countries", pledging \$87 million, or 5.54 per cent of IFAD's \$1.44 billion budget for the 2025–2027 funding period (IFAD 1, 2025). The investment, cumulative since 1981, totalled approximately to \$361.69 million in core contributions and \$12.12 million in supplementary contributions by March 2026. Over the same period, China has drawn approximately \$1.31 billion in preferential financing from IFAD, a return of roughly \$3.51 in concessional lending for every dollar contributed (IFAD, 2025). That the PRC, an upper-middle-income country since 2010 with vast domestic financial capacity, remains a leading recipient of IFAD financing illustrates a broader pattern. Beijing has cultivated the dual status of developing country for purposes of extracting concessional benefits from the international order and responsible major power for the purposes

of shaping that order. The two identities are strategically complementary rather than contradictory.

Personnel: The Long Game of Institutional Capture

Financial leverage, however substantial, works most effectively when combined with sustained personnel placement. Between 2005 and 2023, the number of Chinese nationals, employed by the UN and its agencies grew from 579 to 1,664— an increase of 187 per cent (Fang, 2026). During the same period, overall UN personnel numbers rose by 131 per cent. In parallel, Beijing has invested heavily in securing senior leadership positions. By 2019, following the election of Qu Dongyu as Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (FAO, 2019), Chinese nationals headed four of the fifteen major UN specialised agencies: the FAO, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)— a share unmatched by any other single member state (Lam & Fung, 2020). The pattern is not distributed evenly across the UN system; it is concentrated in agencies whose mandates most directly bear on the substantive priorities of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), on China's engagement with the Global South, and on the technical standard-setting domains in which normative influence compounds over time.

The manner in which several of these appointments have been contested illustrates the character of the effort. In the FAO election of June 2019, Qu Dongyu, then Vice Minister of agriculture and rural affairs, defeated the French and Georgian candidates with 108 votes out of 191 cast (FAO, 2019). In the run-up to the vote, reports from multiple sources documented alleged Chinese pressure on delegates from developing countries, including instructions to photograph their ballots to demonstrate compliance (Lynch & Gramer, 2019). Once in office, Qu requested that the Joint Inspection Unit, the UN's independent oversight body, postpone its evaluation of the FAO's reform programme from an earlier scheduled date until 2024, that is, into his second term (Wax, 2022). Qu is a documented member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), having joined in 1986. Whether or not the delay was procedurally defensible, its effect was to defer external scrutiny until such scrutiny could no longer influence his renewed

mandate. In July 2023, he was re-elected with 168 out of 182 votes, having run unopposed (Baumann, 2023).

Other cases warrant closer examination. In April 2017, Wu Hongbo, then Under-Secretary-General for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, ordered the expulsion of Dolkun Isa, a Uyghur activist accredited to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, from UN premises in New York (Minority Rights Group, 2017).

Fang Liu, who served as Secretary-General of the ICAO between 2015 and 2021, was implicated in the delayed disclosure of a 2016 cyberattack linked to Emissary Panda, a China-affiliated threat actor; the ICAO's information technology team, then led by Kuang Chi Wan, was subsequently found to have concealed the source, scale, and impact of the intrusion (Schaefer & Pletka, 2021). Wan was later arrested in 2023 by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation on charges connected to a scheme to sell \$1.54 billion in Chinese combat drones and missiles to Libyan militants—activity that overlapped with his ICAO tenure (McIntosh, 2025). Fang Liu is a documented member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a body within the United Front apparatus.

Individually, none of these cases can be treated as conclusive proof of institutional capture. Collectively, they trace a pattern. High-level Chinese nationals within the UN system have, in several documented instances, acted in ways more readily explained by loyalty to national priorities than by the impartial discharge of international duties. Beyond the conduct of individuals, personnel placement produces subtler effects. A 2024 study in the *Review of International Organisations* found a measurable correlation between the presence of Chinese-aligned leadership within UN bodies and the density of Chinese ideological terminology in those bodies' official reports (Lam & Fung, 2025). The insertion of “community with a shared future for mankind” into General Assembly resolutions on outer space in December 2017 was neither large nor consequential in isolation; it was significant as an early instance of a wider trend in which Chinese framings, once inserted, tend to recur.

Peacekeeping: The Conversion of Soft Power into Hard Power

The third instrument, the strategic deployment of UN peacekeepers, is perhaps the most consequential and the least widely appreciated. As of January 2026, the PRC had deployed 1,659 personnel to UN peacekeeping operations—largest such contribution among the P5 members of the UN Security Council (UN Peacekeeping 1, 2026). That figure alone conveys little; the significance lies in where those forces are stationed and why. Approximately 871 Chinese peacekeepers are deployed with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and a further 281 with the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) (UN Peacekeeping , 2026). Both missions cover territory in which Chinese economic interests are unusually concentrated. In 2014, roughly 70 per cent of South Sudan's oil production, dominated by the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), operating alongside Sinopec and PetroChina, was exported to China (IEA, 2020). When civil war broke out in December 2013, disrupting oil production and endangering Chinese investment and personnel, Beijing announced the deployment of approximately 350 peacekeepers to UNMISS; by 2015 this had expanded to a 700-strong infantry battalion, the first Chinese combat troops ever to serve under the UN flag (VoA, 2015). In closed negotiations that year, Chinese diplomats reportedly pressed for the UNMISS mandate to authorise the protection of “oil installations”—a demand initially opposed by Western states on grounds of neutrality, but ultimately accepted.

The pattern is not incidental. The 2015 Military Strategy White Paper [《中国的军事战略》白皮书] identified the protection of “Overseas Interest Zones” [海外利益攸关区], including “overseas energy resources, strategic corridor security, and safety of overseas institutions, personnel, and assets”, as a core mission of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) (U.S.-China Security and Economic Review Commission, 2015). The deployment of PKO personnel to the vicinity of Chinese oil operations in South Sudan is one operational expression of that doctrine; the establishment of PLA's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, along with continuous naval escort operations in the Gulf of Aden authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 1851 (2008), are others (China Military Online, 2021). In April 2026, the Ministry of National Defense reported that a Chinese peacekeeping engineering unit had rehabilitated the road connecting Tonj to Romich in Warrap State, a region bordering Unity

State, where Chinese oil operations are concentrated (Jinwen, 2026). The infrastructure work was presented as humanitarian; its principal beneficiaries were the logistical routes serving Chinese commercial assets.

The strategic logic is coherent, even elegant. As a permanent member of the Security Council, the PRC exercises influence at three sequential stages of any peacekeeping operation: policy formulation in the Security Council, budgetary determination in the General Assembly, and operational execution through the Department of Peace Operations. Its status as the largest troop contributor among the permanent members multiplies that leverage; its position as second-largest financial contributor to the peacekeeping budget adds a further layer. No other major troop contributor commands the same combination of political, budgetary, and operational levers. Where earlier great powers have relied on unilateral military deployments to protect overseas assets, with the political costs that such deployments entail, Beijing has developed a mechanism for accomplishing same objectives under multilateral cover. Analysts have termed this the conversion of “soft power into hard power”: the transformation of diplomatic capital, financial commitments, and personnel placements into the practical capacity to station combat-capable forces in regions of economic significance, without incurring the political costs of unilateral projection. PKO deployments also provide the PLA with expeditionary experience, opportunities to gather intelligence on host states and other contingents, and a legitimising narrative of Chinese contributions to global public goods. The multilateral framing is not a cover story; it is an integral feature of the strategy.

Assessment and Implications

Taken together, the three instruments described above amounts to something more than the sum of their parts. Financial contributions produce leverage that would be less effective without personnel placements to translate that leverage into policy outcomes; personnel placements are more consequential when reinforced by financial contributions that raise the cost of dissent; and peacekeeping deployments derive their political legitimacy from the diplomatic capital accumulated through both. It is the coordination, the visible calibration of

instruments to a coherent national agenda, that distinguishes the Chinese approach from that of other major contributors.

Several implications follow. *First*, the difficulty of a coherent response is not primarily technical but conceptual. Any policy that responds to Chinese multilateral engagement by treating each instrument in isolation, challenging a particular appointment, contesting a particular resolution, opposing a particular budgetary allocation, is likely to lag the coordinated approach it seeks to counter. *Second*, the conventional Western response of demanding a return to the “rules-based international order” is analytically weaker than it appears, because the PRC has taken care to frame its own engagement in the language of the UN Charter itself. When Chinese diplomats invoke sovereignty, non-interference, and the primacy of the UN system, they are invoking principles that Western governments were instrumental in establishing. This is not to concede that the invocations are made in good faith; it is to observe that the rhetorical high ground is more contested than is often supposed. *Third*, the human rights architecture of the UN viz. the Human Rights Council, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the special procedures, is particularly vulnerable to the combined effect of financial pressure and personnel placement, because its operations depend disproportionately on discretionary funding and on the political weight of the offices involved. The narrow defeat of October 2022 resolution to hold a debate on human rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region— 19 votes against, 17 in favour, 11 abstentions— is illustrative rather than aberrant.

The recent report of the U.S. House Select Committee proposes a series of policy responses, including efforts to hold the UN system accountable, to update the criteria by which “developing country” status is granted, and to develop a State Department strategy for countering Chinese exploitation of consultative status. Each of these responses has merit. None, taken individually or together, addresses the deeper conceptual problem: that the multilateral system is being reshaped from within by a member state whose national strategy is coherently articulated, patiently pursued, and effectively cloaked in the language of the system's own founding principles. The question that follows from the analysis presented here is not merely how to reduce Chinese influence at the UN, but whether the UN can remain analytically distinguishable from the national strategy of any one of its members.

Conclusion

The People's Republic of China has, over the course of roughly two decades, developed a coordinated three-vector strategy for reshaping the United Nations from within. 'Financial contributions' have furnished the leverage; 'personnel placements' have provided the instruments of internal influence; and 'peacekeeping deployments' have offered the mechanism through which soft power is converted into hard. Each vector operates in support of the others, and all three are integrated into an explicit doctrinal framework, the "community with a shared future for mankind", that Beijing has taken care to inscribe within the language of the UN system itself. Whether this constitutes "institutional capture", in the strong sense of term, or the "constructive engagement" that Chinese officials describe, is a matter on which reasonable observers may differ. What is not seriously in dispute is that the character of the UN as an institution is being altered by the coordinated action of one of its members, and that mechanisms of that alteration are neither transparent nor easily reversible.

For policymakers concerned with the future of the multilateral system, the analytical task is not merely to catalogue Chinese activities but to articulate, clearly and positively, what the UN is for, and what distinguishes a legitimate great-power engagement with the system from an effort to reshape the system in the image of any one member. That articulation has not yet been made with coherence that the moment requires. Until it is, the pattern documented in this paper is likely to continue.

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