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THE G2 AT THE UN

THE UNITED STATES AND THE PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC OF CHINA AT THE UNITED
NATIONS BEFORE COVID-19

DAVID WHINERAY
SENIOR VISITING FELLOW

The analysis presented in this paper is based on the research of the author and views of those interviewed – and was undertaken prior to the advent of COVID-19. These views are not those of United Nations University, nor are the reported views those of the author. United Nations University was formally established on 6 December 1973 when the United Nations General Assembly formally adopted the University's Charter, which endows it with academic freedom.

David Whineray was a Senior Visiting Fellow at United Nations University Centre for Policy Research in New York until 18 May 2020. He is also as a Senior Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley; a Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC; a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University in New York; and a Visiting Assistant Professor of Global Affairs at New York University.

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Introduction

Events surrounding the COVID-19 crisis have brought into focus the extent to which multilateralism generally, and the United Nations specifically, will be a central theatre for engagement between the United States and China in the years ahead. The role and powers of the World Health Organization (WHO), for example, have emerged as a canvas onto which a variety of actors have projected their visions of the future of multilateralism. However, to see how these engagements will play out, it is important to first have an understanding of the deeper, longer-term trendlines regarding US-China engagement at the UN before COVID-19 hit. This study aims to assist in providing that context.

The US and China are the world's two biggest economies and geopolitical powers.¹ The US has the world's largest military budget. By personnel, China has the world's largest military.² Washington and Beijing are also two of the UN's most important stakeholders. The UN was created at the initiative of the US after World War II. The UN Security Council sits at the apex of a 75-year old Rules-Based International Order heavily devised and underwritten by Washington.³ The US and China are the two largest financial contributors to both the UN general budget and the UN peacekeeping budget.

China provides more troops to UN peacekeeping operations than any other P5 country. Chinese nationals head more UN specialist agencies than nationals of any other UN Member State.

Even before the advent of COVID-19, the traditional foreign policies of both the US and China had been evolving over recent years. Under the Trump Administration, the US' global outlook has become more transactional, mercantile, nationalist and unpredictable – with a greater emphasis on sovereignty and a reduced focus on alliances.⁴ Under President Xi, China's foreign policy has similarly become more assertive and nationalist, with Deng Xiaoping's dictum that the country's strength should be hidden and time bided, no longer always followed. Beijing's growing influence has been most evident in Asia – for example in the South China Sea and through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, China's global footprint has been expanding too – for example, with the recent deployment of the Chinese navy in European waters and the reach of the BRI into European Union Member States.

US policy towards China has also shifted over the last few years. The Obama Administration's approach of seeking to manage and guide China's rise within the Rules-Based International Order as a responsible stakeholder has been replaced – partly as a product of Republican ideology and partly in response to growing Chinese assertiveness towards the US – by a more confrontational approach under the Trump Administration aimed at constraint and decoupling. This shift has been echoed by Democrats. Even before the advent of the COVID-19, geopolitical and economic tensions between Washington and Beijing were rising, including over trade, technology, currency valuation and human rights (particularly the treatment of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in China's Xinjiang region). Some, such as Professor Niall Ferguson, now talk openly of a new, second Cold War.⁵

Against this backdrop, this paper looks at US and Chinese policy and diplomacy towards the UN – and each other – in New York. It addresses four issues. First, US policy and diplomacy at the UN during the Trump Administration – and how this differs from previous administrations, in particular the Obama Administration. Second, Chinese policy and diplomacy at the UN, including how this has evolved over the past ten years since 2010. Third, how the US and China are engaging with each other at the UN, and how other UN Member States privately view this 'G2' dynamic. Fourth, how US-China relations in New York could develop over the next five years to 2025.

The paper's focus is the policies and diplomacy of China and the US at the UN. It does not examine wider US and Chinese foreign policy or China-US bilateral relations. The paper was written – and the research it is based on was conducted – between November 2019 and January 2020. As such, the analysis in this paper is based on the period before the COVID-19 crisis, although the final section includes some brief tentative reflections for what that crisis may mean for these deeper dynamics.

The paper is structured in four main sections:

Part 1 - US policy and diplomacy towards the UN under the Trump Administration:

This section considers US policy and diplomacy at the UN in New York under the Trump Administration, including drawing comparisons with the Obama Administration.

Part 2 - Chinese policy and diplomacy towards the UN:

This section considers China's current policy and diplomacy at the UN in New York, including by looking at how this has evolved over the last ten years since 2010.

Part 3 - Analysis of current US-China relations at the UN in New York:

This section looks at the relations and engagement between the US and China at the UN in New York, as well as how other UN Member States and the UN Secretariat are responding to G2 dynamics

Part 4 - Scenarios for how US-China relations in New York could develop by 2025:

This section looks at some tentative scenarios for how Chinese and US policy towards – and diplomacy at – the UN could develop over the next five years through to 2025. This includes some brief, initial reflections on the meaning of the COVID-19 crisis for US-China relations at the UN in the years ahead.

The analysis and recommendations in this paper are based on a series of interviews conducted by the author, including with former senior diplomats, former senior UN officials (including at the Under-Secretary-General level), current Ambassadors to the UN in New York and experts and scholars on the US and China. All interviews were conducted on an off-the-record and non-attributable basis: those interviewed are not disclosed. This paper reflects the views expressed by interviewees. No opinion or judgement is made or presented on US or Chinese domestic politics, internal affairs, foreign policy or diplomacy.



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

PART 1

US policy and diplomacy towards the UN under the Trump Administration

US policy towards the UN under the Trump Administration has broken away from 75 years of previous cross-Beltway consensus on the value of multilateralism.⁶ From 1945 to 2016, US President, from Truman to Obama, saw US power and geostrategic interests as being generally advanced by the US supporting, anchoring, underpinning and leading both the Rules-Based International Order in general, and at the UN in particular.⁷ In contrast, the Trump Administration holds a more Hobbesian global outlook of a power-based international system where global rules and multilateral structures often constrain, rather than advance, US power and interests. President Trump has described this approach to the UN General Assembly as 'Principled Realism.'⁸ Within this overall approach, US policy towards the UN under the Trump Administration is characterized by interviewees as having five main themes.

I Sovereignty, confrontation and neglect

The Trump Administration has emphasized national sovereignty and sought to reduce the limits placed on this by the UN and other international institutions. The Administration has cut funding to the UN Secretariat, UN agencies and UN field missions, pulled-back from the US' traditional role of providing leadership in New York, and displayed an increased tendency (also apparent, to an extent, under previous US administrations) to see the UN as a platform for making political positions and to advance domestic political objectives, rather than as a mechanism to deliver global goods or advance US interests globally. The Trump Administration's recent decision to halt US funding to the WHO is given as an example of this approach. Interviewees note a reduction in US influence at the UN over the last three years as a result of this US stance.

II Money

Over the last three years, US policy at the UN has placed greater emphasis on constraining and reducing financial costs. The Trump Administration has pushed for reductions to both the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets and sometimes made US funding conditional on UN agencies and operations supporting US policy objectives, for example on the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) or the WHO.⁹ One UN Ambassador interviewed bluntly described US policy at the UN as being about "saving money over saving lives."

III Human rights

Reflecting a wider shift in US foreign policy since 2017, US diplomacy at the UN under the Trump Administration has placed greater emphasis on advancing immediate US political and economic interests, and less emphasis on promoting human rights and wider US values, than previous US administrations.¹⁰ The most prominent example of this was the US withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council. But European diplomats interviewed also point to the unwillingness of the US Mission to the UN under the Trump Administration, compared to under previous administrations, to push back against Chinese and Russian efforts to reduce the human rights elements of UN political and peacekeeping mandates.

IV Unilateralism

A major point of departure of the Trump Administration from previous administrations has been its withdrawal from the wider US/Western post-1945 alliance system that provided the context for the creation, and sustaining, of the UN. Interviewees report that the Trump Administration has worked more closely with Russia and China than its predecessors and side-lined US allies and the P3 more often.

V Transactional diplomacy

Finally, US diplomacy at the UN under the Trump Administration has emphasized transactional diplomacy over grand strategy. The Trump Administration has also adopted a 'cherry-picking' approach at the UN: engaging with – or side-lining – the UN depending on US interests. A recent high-profile example is US policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), where the Administration utilized the UN to advance its 'maximum pressure' and sanctions tracks while blocking UN Secretariat ambitions for a role on the political track.¹¹

Points of continuity

Despite these differences, there also remain some points of continuity between the multilateral outlooks of the current and previous US administrations. In particular, while President Trump has been the highest volume speaker of US anxieties towards multilateralism, his predecessors also often shared a belief that the value of the UN is primarily about promoting US interests, rather than the provision of global goods. Similarly, there are points of continuity between the Obama and Trump Administrations in terms of each wanting to ease global burdens on the US. Their policies for delivering this objective have greatly differed but there is some consistency in their overall objectives.



UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

PART 2

Chinese policy and diplomacy towards the UN

Chinese policy, and diplomacy, at the UN has also evolved over the past few years. Interviewees and scholars identify six main characteristics – some traditional, some more recent.

I Sovereignty

The defining theme of Chinese policy at the UN remains the sovereignty of UN Member States in general and non-interference in China's internal affairs in particular. Chinese positions in both the General Assembly and Security Council routinely start from this point. As others have noted, China's overriding objective at the UN is to "create a safe space for the Chinese Communist Party by ensuring that other countries do not criticize its rule."¹²

II Support for multilateralism and the UN

Chinese diplomacy in New York has shown, to an extent, a consistent commitment to upholding an effective multilateral system in general, and UN in particular. Both are seen as advancing Chinese interests over the long term in terms of economic development, global stability and limiting US power. President Xi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi have each publicly noted Beijing's support for both ("an effective way to safeguard peace, advance development and resolve global issues") and the UN (this "should be strengthened rather than weakened.")¹³ As Francois Godement has noted: "China values the UN ... [and] thinks of the UN as part of a continuum with some of its international efforts."¹⁴

A number of Chinese scholars, for example Han Ze, also underline China's commitment to "safeguard the authority and effectiveness of multilateral systems."¹⁵ As Xizhou Zhou notes: "far from trying to upend [the multilateral] system, China is working to strengthen it ... China has benefited immensely from and continues to participate actively in – and even ardently defend – that very order ... without the rules-based international system, China would not have become the superpower it is today."¹⁶ China's support for multilateralism has also been seen in its promotion of new mechanisms within Asia, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank.

In line with this multilateral outlook, China has invested in the UN in recent years. Beijing has increased its financial contributions to both the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets – China is now the second highest contributor to both after the US¹⁷ – and significantly expanded its political and peacekeeping commitments – China now provides more troops to UN peacekeeping operations than any other P5 member.

However, China has also shown a willingness to side-line, or ignore, UN mechanisms when it considers that these do not serve Chinese national interests or violate Chinese sovereignty. Beijing's rejection of the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the South China Sea arbitration is a frequently given example of this.¹⁸ As such, there are, to an extent, some similarities between Beijing's ideological outlook and that of the Trump Administration. Beijing provides support for multilateralism and UN action when it advances China's national interests but sidelines, or opposes it, in other instances. Consequently, China's support for the UN differs from the more ideological commitment of major European powers.

III Reforming multilateralism: adapting the rules

Whilst frequently supportive of the UN, interviewees and scholars also highlight Beijing's ambition to reform the organization so it better reflects and accommodates Chinese interests (unlike other P5 members China played no role in devising the post-1945 system).¹⁹ China has advocated for UN structures, declarations and actions to place less emphasis on "Western" political concepts – such as individual freedoms, sanctions, States' responsibility to protect their citizens and international interventions – and more emphasis on social/economic rights, State sovereignty/control within borders, political dialogue and economic development. Beijing's growing investment in the UN is aimed at increasing its ability to move the UN in this direction.

Marc Julienne has studied this with respect to China's contribution to UN peacekeeping operations. He notes that "China's role in UNPKOs has been transforming rapidly, especially since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012-2013. China is contributing in terms of troops, but it also intends to contribute in terms of norms and concepts, and it therefore tries to influence reform processes in the UN."²⁰

As part of this reorientation of the UN, China has sought a greater focus by the organization on development. Chinese Ambassadors to the UN have argued that "development is the guarantee of security."²¹ China also secured the adoption of Human Rights Council Resolution 35/21 ("Contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights") on 22 June 2017²², which directly linked development to human rights.²³ Chinese scholars have argued in favor of China building a "new global partnership for development" given imperfections in the post-1945 global model.²⁴

China's ambition to reform the UN was widely commented on in interviews. One former UN Under-Secretary-General describes China as supporting the UN but "with a different operating system: it wants to replace the Windows operating system with its own."²⁵ A UN Ambassador notes that: "China sees the Rules-Based International Order as benefitting them, which is why they defend it, but not in the areas of human rights, freedom and values."²⁶ Another interviewee points to China's attempt within UN negotiations to promote language referring to "the rule of law in international relations" instead of "the rule of law," moving the focus from the vertical relationship between State and citizens to the horizontal relationship between foreign States – and so leaving States to govern their citizens free of multilateral interference.

There is significant literature from Chinese scholars on the need for UN reform. A prominent recent example is a study by the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations Research Group on *The Future of the UN Reform and Global Governance*, edited by Wang Wenfeng.²⁷ Chinese scholars, such as Li Dongyan, have argued that changes in the global balance of power are a driver for reforming the UN.²⁸ Xizhou Zhou notes: "in China's view, the failure of existing international institutions to adjust to the growing clout of emerging and developing economies undermines the legitimacy of the entire multilateral system."²⁹

IV Assertive diplomacy

Matching the wider shift in Chinese foreign policy over the past decade, Chinese diplomacy at the UN has become more assertive. Previously, Beijing frequently advanced its interests in New York through a 'leading from behind' strategy: at the General Assembly, China positioned itself firmly as a developing country closely aligning with the G77 group; in the UN Security Council, China often sought to support and encourage other Council members to advance its views, only intervening if required. Whilst Beijing has not used its Security Council veto alone over the last 20 years, it is widely noted that Chinese "diplomats are [now] showing greater willingness to flex [China's] muscle."³⁰ In interviews, one UN Ambassador described a China that "no longer hides behind the G77: it now wants to control the multilateral system." Another Ambassador – more bluntly – said: "China first is China's endgame."

One practical example of this evolved approach is the contrast between China's tactical approach in UN Security Council negotiations on the deployment of an African Union/UN Hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in 2007, where China sought to position itself as supporting the views of the African Union and Arab League, compared with its more assertive posture in last year's UN Security Council negotiations on the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Diplomats in New York also report China's increasingly assertiveness in resisting the inclusion of human rights language in mandates for UN political mandates.

UN officials interviewed noted that China has become more assertive in its engagement with the UN Secretariat over the past decade too. One former senior UN official reported that ten years ago China would routinely agree to UN staffing appointments proposed by the Secretary-General but that now China "frequently seeks additional information" on candidates.³¹

Interviewees put this growing assertiveness down to a view in Beijing that China's economic and political rise over the last decade means its voice and interests deserve to be heard more within the UN system. Within this overall trend, there is some distinction made between the General Assembly and Security Council: interviewees note that Beijing has pressed its influence more overtly on UN economic and development issues than on international peace and security issues.

As part of this more assertive stance, China has become more willing to use – and even bend – UN policies, budgets and operations towards Chinese priorities. China frequently seeks “to insert wording into UN documents that echoes the language of the country’s leader, Xi Jinping. China is trying to ‘make Chinese policies, UN policies,’” says a diplomat on the UN Security Council, “[and] ... much of the language that Chinese officials try to insert into UN documents uses [President Xi’s] catchphrases, such as ‘win-win co-operation’ and ‘a shared community with a shared future for mankind’.”³² China has shown a particular ambition to use the UN to advance its BRI objectives. One example is its success in securing positive references in UN texts on Afghanistan. One UN Ambassador interviewed described China’s ambition as: “China wants to swallow the SDGs ... merging the SDGs with Xi’s objectives.”³³

Interviewees also highlighted the tactical effectiveness of the Chinese Mission to the UN in New York in working the UN system to China’s advantage. One former UN Under-Secretary-General commented that whilst “the US relies on calling and saying we’re the US so you should do this, the Chinese work within the system. They’ve mastered the rules.”³⁴

V Financial statecraft

As its economy has grown, China has followed some other powers in increasingly linking its overseas aid and developmental spending in other UN Member States to their support for Chinese interests and positions at the UN. A recent in-depth study in *International Studies Quarterly* on “the motivations that guide China’s growing overseas development program” found that “the allocation of Chinese [Overseas Developmental Assistance] is driven primarily by foreign policy considerations,” and that “governments that support China’s foreign policy positions in the UN General Assembly also receive more Chinese ODA.”³⁵ One UN Ambassador interviewed put it more bluntly: that China “weaponizes votes with cash.”³⁶

VI Chinese nationals in the UN

The final strand of China’s influencing strategy in New York has been a concerted effort to secure more senior and influential UN roles for Chinese nationals. Whilst many significant contributors to UN budgets, and other P5 members, often expect senior UN positions for their nationals (and many are *de facto* set aside for the P5), China has asserted itself much more within this space in recent years. Chinese citizens now head four of the 15 UN specialized agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN Industrial Development Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). In addition, Chinese nationals reportedly hold the number two posts in seven agencies. China will also shortly hold one of the three slots on the UN Board of Auditors monitoring the UN’s accounts.³⁷

China has particularly targeted agencies relevant to its economic interests and used these positions to exert influence. As one diplomat notes: “the senior jobs being taken by China’s diplomats are mostly boring ones in institutions that few countries care much about. But each post gives China control of tiny leavers of bureaucratic power as well as the ability to dispense favours. Each one of these slots has influence with somebody somewhere.”³⁸ Interviewees expected China to begin to seek more high-profile political roles too. There was particular speculation that Beijing would try to secure a Chinese national for the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and/or the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) when these vacancies open.



PART 3

Analysis of current US-China relations at the UN in New York

This section looks at engagement between the US and China at the UN, as well as the response of other UN Member States and the UN Secretariat. The unanimous view of those interviewed was that “G2 competition” was now the defining theme of diplomacy at the UN. China was exerting its muscle more, with the US reacting. As others have noted: “not since the Cold War has the organization become such a battleground for competing visions of the international order.”³⁹ Specifically, US-China engagement at the UN in New York before COVID-19 was identified as having three broad themes.

Growing support for China amongst the wider UN membership

First, interviewees felt China's strategy (detailed above) of expanding its influence at the UN was effective. "When votes are taken on matters China regards as important, its diplomats often use a blunt transactional approach – offering financing for projects or threatening to turn off the tap. This buys China clout, if not affection, other diplomats say."⁴⁰

One prominent recent example was a UK statement in October 2019 – signed by 22 other UN Member States including the US, France and Germany – calling on China to refrain from "the arbitrary detention of Uighurs and members of other Muslim communities," and noting Chinese "efforts to restrict cultural and religious practices, mass surveillance disproportionately targeting ethnic Uighurs, and other human rights violations and abuses in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region."⁴¹ The UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN publicly acknowledged how difficult it had been to secure support for the statement because "a lot of countries came under a lot of pressure" from China.⁴² Beijing's influence was further shown through its ability to secure support for a counter statement from 54 countries – including Russia, Pakistan and Egypt – commending "China's remarkable achievements in the field of human rights" and noting that "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism has caused enormous damage to people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang, which has seriously infringed upon human rights, including the right to life, health and development."⁴³

There are a range of views within the UN membership regarding China's growing leverage. Western powers are concerned. One Ambassador commented: "we worry about Russia breaking the rules and China changing the rules: " whilst Russia is "only able to put together ragtag groups of countries to attempt to block Western initiatives," but China is able to "build coalitions through cash and coercion."⁴⁴ Another Ambassador expressed concern that China would "soon it will have the votes to change the UN rules" themselves.⁴⁵

Some G77 members are more comfortable about China asserting itself. "Smaller States in Africa and the Middle East ... resent America's post-Cold War dominance of the UN ... Countries may be subject to pressure from China when it wants something, but that America, albeit not as blunt, can also be transactional. Some smaller countries may welcome having two great powers competing for their favour again."⁴⁶

However, all of those interviewed, including representatives of US allies, privately accepted that China had a legitimate case to have its voice heard more within the UN system and that the UN needed to adapt to growing Chinese power and a developing G2 landscape. As one Ambassador said: "our instinct is to reach out to China and to accept that China has a position that it didn't shape the rules, unlike the other P5 members. An objective diplomat would accept that China has a case." Another interviewee said: "the Chinese have a reasonable expectation that their voice should matter more in the UN today than 10 years ago. We all have to accept that." Significantly, many interviewees added that China's case to have its voice heard more was dependent on Beijing acting as a responsible stakeholder.

The impact of COVID-19 on China's standing at the UN has yet to fully evolve. It is possible there will be a counter-reaction to growing Chinese influence. Even before COVID-19, there have been some possible signs of this, for example the failure of Beijing's candidate to secure the role of Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization. It is also possible that an upward trajectory in Chinese influence continues over the longer-term.

II The US opening up the landscape for China

Second, interviewees noted that the US' withdrawal from its traditional leadership position in New York under the Trump Administration had opened up the UN landscape for China at a time when Beijing was seeking to increase its influence. As a former UN Under-Secretary-General commented, the "ability of the Chinese to fulfil what they have wanted to do has been made possible by the US pulling back." Another expert noted that "the United States has inadvertently helped pave the way for China's rapid ascent at the UN and other world bodies by retreating from its leadership position in multilateral organizations."⁴⁷ One UN Ambassador went further: China's growing influence in New York had been facilitated not only by "the absence of the US [but the] fact the US is [also] undermining UN Principles."⁴⁸

Whilst interviewees pointed to an acceleration in the relative decline of US power at the UN under the Trump Administration, they also noted that this downward trajectory was highlighted as a longer-term phenomenon following the unipolar world of the 1990s and early 2000s. Other powers were now less willing to provide automatic deference to Washington. The impact of China's rise was that US leadership in New York was no longer automatic. Washington now needed to compete for influence within the multilateral system in a way it did not have to before.

The contradiction between US bilateral policy on China – aiming to constrain Beijing's power – and US multilateral policy – which has laid a platform for China to grow its influence was also widely noted in interviews. One UN Ambassador bluntly described the US as having been "asleep at the wheel." Another referred to it as "shooting itself in the foot."

III Washington wakes

Third, interviewees reported some initial signs that the Trump Administration had begun to recognize and, to an extent, respond to China's growing influence at the UN. As an Ambassador of a US ally put it, Washington was finally "waking up" to China "taking control at the UN."⁴⁹

Specifically, the US has taken two steps. First, the State Department has appointed "a new special envoy with a mandate to stall China's growing influence at the UN and other international organizations."⁵⁰ Peter Navarro, Assistant to President Trump, has noted that the role reflects the fact that "the United States has become increasingly alarmed at China's success at rallying the UN behind key foreign policy initiatives ... and securing top positions of influence in international organizations."⁵¹

Second, Washington has begun to push back on Chinese influence within UN agencies, including linking US financial support for UN agencies to their engagement with, and attitude towards, China. The Administration's announcement of the halting of US funding to the WHO in April is the most recent and prominent example of this approach. President Trump has commented that the WHO is "very China centric."⁵² The decision has been widely seen as being "part of a broader push to curtail China's growing influence."⁵³ The US and US allies have also supported an international investigation into COVID-19.⁵⁴

However, Washington's strategy to push back pre-dates COVID-19. On 23 February 2020, Peter Navarro, Assistant to President Trump, wrote a piece in the Financial Times on this, noting that China putting forward a candidate to head the World Intellectual Property Organization was "part of a broader strategy to gain control over the 15 specialized agencies of the UN." Navarro also acknowledges the success of China's financial statecraft, writing that "China is likely to seek and receive support from countries where it has become a major donor or source of aid."⁵⁵ As noted above, China's failure to secure WIPO could indicate the beginning of a push-back within the wider UN membership over growing Chinese power.



PART 4

Tentative reflections on COVID-19 and three scenarios for US-China relations in New York from 2020 to 2025

This section looks at some tentative scenarios for how Chinese and US policy towards – and diplomacy at – the UN could develop over the next five years through to 2025. This includes some brief, initial reflections on the meaning of the COVID-19 crisis for US-China relations at the UN in the years ahead.

Though the research for this paper was completed before the COVID-19 crisis, so far US and Chinese diplomacy at the UN on the pandemic have been broadly consistent with their evolving multilateral postures over the past few years. As of publication, the main impact of the pandemic has been to accelerate existing geopolitical trend lines rather than create new ones, with US and Chinese action at the UN in line with the findings detailed above. Neither the status quo power (the US) or challenging power (China) have shown a willingness, or ability, to lead – individually or jointly – a UN/global response. Instead, with nationalism prevalent, each has sought to blame the other. Washington’s stance is particularly significant. COVID-19 is the first major global crisis since 1945 where US leadership in New York has been absent. The Trump Administration’s engagement with the UN has been widely reported as being driven by a domestic political strategy to blame China and avoid criticism.⁵⁶ Two examples of this are its decision to suspend US funding to the WHO and the Administration’s blocking of statements at the G7 and UN over the absence of references to “Wuhan Flu”⁵⁷

This absence of US or Chinese leadership has seen smaller and medium-sized powers seek to fill the vacuum. French President Emmanuel Macron initiated the idea of a P5 leaders’ virtual summit on COVID-19. The first (virtual) meeting of the Security Council on COVID-19 was organized at the request of nine elected members of the Security Council. On 23 March, a global cease-fire in response to the pandemic was called for by the UN Secretary-General. On 2 April, six countries—Ghana, Indonesia, Liechtenstein, Norway, Singapore and Switzerland—secured support for a nonbinding resolution in the General Assembly calling for “intensified international cooperation to contain, mitigate and defeat” COVID-19.

However, the difficulty in advancing each of these initiatives has shown the challenge for the UN “to function effectively with a declining American superpower unwilling, and seemingly unable, to guide the world through the health calamity.”⁵⁸ If it wanted to take advantage, COVID-19 has provided an opening for Washington to reboot the post-1945 multilateral system on predominantly American terms and lead new UN work on evolving transnational threats – such as pandemics, AI and climate change.

Looking further ahead, interviewees identified three scenarios for how the relationship between China and the US could develop over the next five years through to 2025.⁵⁹ Each scenario assumes a long-term trend of continued Chinese economic growth and growing global influence over the next five years.⁶⁰

| Competition and confrontation

Under the first scenario, China broadly rides out the fallout from the COVID-19 crisis, there is growing international respect for Chinese and Asian technocratic States’ managerial competence in handling the outbreak, and Beijing continues to become more assertive in international relations as China feels it has the right for its views and interests to be taken more into account by multilateral structures – and for them to be reformed along Chinese lines. Bolstered by hostility towards China over COVID-19, Washington continues to view Beijing as hostile towards US interests and failing to act as a responsible international stakeholder. The US remains unwilling to accommodate China within the global political order, seeks to decouple it from the global economic order and continues with a policy of confrontation and containment. G2 tensions continue to grow, spilling over into, and increasingly paralysing, the multilateral system. The UN becomes polarized, side-lined and less effective.

II The UN utilized by the Great Powers

Under the second scenario, despite (growing) bilateral tensions, both Washington and Beijing nevertheless recognize the value of the UN's irreducible core as a forum for addressing issues of international peace and security and agree that their mutual interests lie in some form of pragmatic multilateral engagement to advance shared national interests (such as on non-proliferation). The UN in general – and the Security Council in particular – plays an important role, acting as an off-ramp for international crisis resolution. This approach would – in some respects – echo the multilateral engagement between the US and Russia during the Cold War, for example in establishing the International Atomic Energy Agency.

III Rising power accommodated by the status quo power

Under the third scenario, Washington reengages in New York, reasserts US leadership and takes advantage of the COVID-19 to revitalize and reboot the post-1945 multilateral system and lead new UN work on new transnational threats – such as pandemics, AI and climate change. A more chastened China, post-COVID-19, evolves its behavior and US-China relations improve as Washington judges that – in some areas – Beijing is acting as a sufficiently responsible global stakeholder. The US and China adopt a compartmentalized relationship, competing in some areas (such as cyber and trade) but cooperating more in others (such as climate change and pandemics) as Washington successfully channels growing Chinese power and accommodates this within a reformed international order. This approach requires Washington to consider which aspects of the UN system that matter most to China it would be willing to deemphasize in order to maintain other, core elements of the UN that are central to US national interests.

Views of other UN Member States

The majority of those interviewed, including representatives of US allies, hoped to see the realization of the third scenario: this would serve the national interests of small and medium-size powers more than a scenario of growing Great Power rivalry and marginalization of global multilateral architectures. They privately expressed a hope that the US would reengage at the UN, provide greater multilateral leadership, “expose China’s behaviour,” “object to its policies” but “channel the rise of China as a responsible international stakeholder, not to block it.” One Ambassador commented, China’s growing influence “could not [be] roll[ed] back.”⁶¹ A second said: “the US must share power more with China and accept it must negotiate more.” A third said: “a new paradigm” needed to be developed for the UN in a new G2 world.⁶²

However, interviewees also recognized that the willingness – and ability – of any US administration to work with China in this way would also depend on Washington being satisfied that Beijing was acting as a sufficiently responsible international stakeholder. Many felt recent Chinese actions, such as in the South China Sea, in fact showed Beijing was moving in the opposite direction. As a result, appetite for the third scenario was declining amongst Republicans and Democrats.

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cpr.unu.edu
@UNUCPR

767 Third Avenue, Suite 35B
New York, NY 10017, USA

