

FROM NON-PARTICIPATION TO “SHARED FUTURE” VISION – CHINA’S INVOLVEMENT IN THE UNITED NATIONS

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Abstract: China has been one of the founding state parties of the United Nations (UN), the biggest and most important international organisation since the end of the Second World War. China is also one of the five permanent members of the Security Council. The purpose of this paper is to give a historical overview of China in the United Nations. This paper will address China’s involvement in the UN establishment, its re-entry into the organisation, and its work within the United Nations. As opposed to the previous decades, when China decided to abstain from most of the UN business and act silently, China’s influence is rising. Even so, China declared itself the leader of the *Global South* and promoted itself as a world peace and stability builder. Its influence in the UN is viewed through the rise of peacekeeping funding and sending personnel to peacekeeping operations. It is also noticeable in the overall funding of the United Nations since China is now the second-biggest donor after the United States of America. The expected result of this paper is an overall picture of China in the United Nations and a better understanding of its diplomacy and future goals, such as a *shared future* vision and governance that China is pursuing.

Keywords: China, United Nations, Shared Future, Security Council, international relations.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) has been the biggest and most important international organisation since its foundation in the aftermath of the Second World War. It is also the centre where multilateral diplomacy takes place. If

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we desire to study how a particular state is perceived in the international arena, it would be wise to examine its actions within this international organisation. The purpose of this paper is to introduce China's position in the United Nations, since it has drastically changed in the previous decades.

We must keep in mind that there are reasons why China is such an important country. Geographically, it spreads over a major part of the Asian continent, and nearly one-quarter of the entire world population lives there. China is one of the world leaders in the technology field and several other industries. As academics in the area of international relations, we often judge the strength, power, and impact of a state by its relations and status with the biggest and most important international organisation—the United Nations. That is why it is important to discuss China at the United Nations. It can answer many questions and show us the potential and interests of a certain state. It is also important to address the fact that China is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, which means that it has veto power. The permanent seat status symbolises the “great power” status (McDougal & Goodman, 1966, p. 672).

Before the United Nations, the League of Nations represented the international community. It showed the mutual efforts of states to promote world peace and overall prosperity. At that time, before the Second World War, the attitude of Chinese communists was extremely negative towards the League of Nations. Proof of that was found in one of the telegrams that the Chinese Soviet Government sent in 1932, stating that the League of Nations was a “League of Robbers” and that imperialism wanted to dismember China (Kim, 1979, p. 99). On the other hand, after the San Francisco Conference, which was the conference where the United Nations Charter was drafted, the attitude changed.

FIRST DECADES OF CHINA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED NATIONS

China was involved in the United Nations establishment. It was one of the founding countries that gathered at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference in 1944, along with the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Russia. They were working on the draft proposal, adopted at the San Francisco Conference in 1945. China was actually the first signatory to the United Nations Charter (Lei, 2014, p. 3). The delegation that China sent to this conference had twelve members. Four of them represented the ruling Nationalist Party of China; three were from minority parties, the State Socialist

Party, the Nationalist Youth Party, and the Communist Party; and three of them represented civil and educational institutions, as Chai (1970, p. 397) pointed out. All of them also participated in the signing of the Charter, which the Republic of China ratified (Chai, 1970, p. 398).

The representation issue in the case of China arose a few years after the UN's founding. Namely, the government of the Republic of China (so-called Nationalist China) has held the seat since the founding of the United Nations. However, the People's Republic of China (Communist China) commanded the resources and claimed participation (McDougal & Goodman, 1966, p. 671).

Namely, on October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In November of the same year, the Chinese Foreign Minister asked the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations to change the legal status of the delegate of the Government of the Republic of China. More precisely, to deny him his delegate status. Later that year, the Soviet delegate to the Security Council asked for an official debate in the Security Council regarding Chinese participation. He proposed that the delegate of Nationalist China be expelled. He did not win, and he boycotted the United Nations by walking out of the Security Council. Even though he later returned, he continued to declare that the Nationalist Chinese Delegation was not the representative of China. In 1949 and 1950, the Soviet delegation continued to declare that Communist China should be seated in the UN, but without much success. This issue and the debates about it caused some developments in international law. For example, there was a debate at the *ad hoc* Political Committee on the topic of *Recognition by the United Nations of the Representation of a Member State*. During that debate, two theories emerged. The first was the *subjective* one, which Cuba proposed. It said that the representation is based on "the ability and willingness to achieve the purposes of the Charter, to observe its principles, and to fulfil the international obligations of the State" (McDougal & Goodman, 1966, p. 679) and on respect for human rights and freedoms. On the other hand, the *objective* proposal was the British one, and it states that the representative is the delegation that "exercises effective control and authority over all or nearly all the national territory" (McDougal & Goodman, 1966, p. 680). These proposals had no effect; the only answer was the postponement (McDougal & Goodman, 1966, pp. 677-680). The PRC was founded in 1949, but the General Assembly of the

United Nations had already approved the delegation of Nationalist China. During the 1950s, the United States proposed the postponement or forestalling of the question of China's representation. In the 1960s, the United States suggested that the question of representation should be seen as an *important* one and that it should not be viewed as a preliminary one but as a main one, which meant that it needed to have two-thirds of the Member States present and voting. There was even a two-seat proposal that both the People's Republic and Nationalist China should represent China at the United Nations (Bailey, 1971, pp. 366-368). Some authors perceived this proposal as the closest to the ideal, arguing that "the state of Taiwan has established its identity" (Chai, 1970, p. 408) and is separate from China. On the other hand, most of them agreed that this proposal was both politically and legally complicated and perhaps unattainable. The solution to this issue, according to Chai (1970, p. 409), should be to have one vote and a delegation that includes representatives of both Nationalist and Communist China.

During all these years of unresolved issues of representation, both Chinese governments considered that there should be only one China in the United Nations, and each of them had support from a large number of countries. In different aspects, both governments supported the Charter of the United Nations. For example, the Constitution of Nationalist China has an article stating that it shall respect the Charter of the United Nations, and the Constitution of Communist China lists the principles from Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations and cites the Charter in several bilateral treaties (Chai, 1970, pp. 406-407).

It was not until October 25, 1971, when the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 2758, that the PRC finally took the seat at the United Nations. The resolution was titled *Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*.¹ It stated that the General Assembly considered that the restoration of the lawful rights of the PRC is essential when it comes to the preservation of the United Nations Charter and the goals of the United Nations. It also recognised that the PRC representatives are the only lawful ones and that the PRC is one of the five permanent

¹ UN General Assembly. Resolution 2758, Restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations, A/RES/2758(XXVI). October 25, 1971. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/192054?v=pdf>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

members of the Security Council. Therefore, the General Assembly decided to restore all the rights to the PRC and government representatives. With this decision, the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek were expelled from the United Nations and its related organisations.

After this decision, multilateralism in China began to evolve. It changed the perception of China from being an “outlier” to a “perceived victim” to a “system maintaining power” (Anant, 2015, pp. 131-132). China still used its powers in the United Nations in a very limited way during the 1970s, due to the influence of Mao Zedong. From the 1980s onwards, its power rapidly increased.

After the People’s Republic of China replaced the Republic of China (Taiwan), several developing countries joined the United Nations. Most of them became part of a coalition named *the Group of 77 and China* (G77). This coalition nowadays has 134 members and makes up the majority of the UN member states, which is usually used as a mechanism for China to spread its influence in the UN (Okano-Heijmans & van der Putten, 2018, p. 2).

In the following years, China aimed to achieve economic development. One of the people dedicated to this goal was Deng Xiaoping. His famous sentence, the so-called 24-character strategy, was: “Observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership” (Fullilove, 2011, p. 65). This sentence perfectly describes the PRC’s behaviour at the United Nations during these decades.

Author Samuel Kim (1979) described the progression of the PRC’s approach at the United Nations in several phases. The first was *system-transforming* before 1971; in the 1980s, it was *system-reforming*; and in the 1990s, it was *system-maintaining*. Since the middle of the last decade of the 20th century, the progression of China in this organisation has accelerated (Fullilove, 2011, p. 67).

THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA TODAY

With the governance of President Xi Jinping, which started in 2013, China has begun its global rise. As opposed to its previous performance in the international arena, nowadays, the PRC is trying to contribute to mankind by starting a new era where China will be closer to the centre and “take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system” (Lee and Sullivan,

2019, p. 3). Unlike previously described decades, when China was either absent from the United Nations or abstained from it, in the last decade, China began to emphasise the importance of the United Nations. Proof of that is the speech of President Xi at the UN Geneva office. On that occasion, he addressed the fact that China is one of the founding members of this organisation and that it will strongly support the international system in which the UN is its core and all the norms and principles that derive from the UN Charter (Okano-Heijmans & van der Putten, 2018, p. 2). Today, China uses the United Nations to demonstrate its “responsible great power” behaviour and as an “anchor” for development in international relations (Anant, 2015, p. 135). In the following part, we will describe how China manages to do it and give examples of how it demonstrates its power.

Talking about China nowadays, we cannot bypass the ongoing discourse that the PRC uses, which is that it is the leader of the *Global South*. In the last two decades, China has expanded its South-South cooperation with other developing countries (Haug & Waisbich, 2024, p. 65). Also, in several speeches, the PRC imposed itself as a “builder of world peace, contributor to global development, defender of the international order, and provider of public goods” (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 5) and is simultaneously trying to make its views a global consensus. China also began using the words “shared future” in the UN documents, which we will discuss later.

The most significant way the PRC influences the international community today is through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Besides this initiative, there are two more interconnected with the PRC’s conduct within the United Nations. These are the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI). The GDI was introduced in September 2021 at the United Nations General Assembly when President Xi gave a speech about more effective ways of achieving the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. On the other hand, the GSI was introduced in April 2022 in another one of his speeches. This Global Security Initiative has its foundation in non-interference and, above all, in the rejection of any politics based on power. This initiative was also promoted during the UN Security Council rotating presidency that China had in 2022 by declaring it a “vision for common security” (Fung & Lam, 2022, pp. 11-13). Stekić (2023, p. 212) views the GDI as an illustration of how much the PRC is committed to the UN and its principles; in this case, the GDI can significantly contribute to the 2030

Agenda. Considering the Belt and Road Initiative, China tried to endorse it as a way of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. In that sense, it attempted to promote the initiative and the country itself at the UN. Western states did not like the kind of pressure that the PRC put on them. After the US threatened to withdraw from giving any voluntary contributions to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the UNDP finally stopped supporting the BRI in 2021 (Baumann, Haug & Weinlich, 2024, p. 54).

Since 2022, the PRC has been the second-biggest donor to the United Nations, the first being the United States of America. China is second when it comes to regular and peacekeeping budget contributions (Feltman, 2020, p. 1). Since 2022, the PRC has contributed more than 15 per cent of the United Nations' regular budget. That is certainly a way of promoting its voice when discussing budgets and their use. This data may indicate the importance of member states and how proportionate the amount of money given is to the power that that state has in the UN. Another way of influencing the UN is through the staff, or more specifically, the leadership positions at the UN bodies and agencies. Citizens of China are the heads of the Senior Management Group and the Chief Executives Board at UN agencies. The PRC is the leader of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Telecommunication Union, and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. But, between 1971 and 2022, China had the lowest number of executive leadership posts out of all the members of the Security Council, together with Russia (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 23). On the other hand, it is important to point out that in 2015, China held five leadership positions, a record number so far. These agencies were the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), the World Health Organisation, and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (Baumann, Haug & Weinlich, 2024, p. 55). In 2019, Qu Dongyu was elected the General Secretary of the Food and Agriculture Organisation. It is also important to mention that China has failed to achieve some leadership positions it aspired to. For example, in 2017, the PRC failed to bid to be the head of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). In 2020, the PRC lost to Singapore for the lead of the World Intellectual Property Organisation. In 2019, the PRC also tried to win a leadership position at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 24). Later on, in 2021, a China-backed candidate for the leadership did not get enough votes at the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) (Baumann, Haug & Weinlich, 2024, p. 54).

When determining how each member state behaves in the United Nations, we usually look at how it conducts itself in the main bodies and organs. The PRC voting practice in the General Assembly and the Security Council was explored by Fung and Lam (2022). In the General Assembly, the PRC has mostly voted opposite to the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, and similarly to Russia. It is noticeable that China votes similarly to the members of the *Group of 77 plus China* (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 26). When it comes to the Security Council, the matter of voting is actually a matter of using the veto power that permanent members of the Security Council have. China did not veto any resolution between 2000 and 2006, but since 2007, it has begun to use its veto power. It was about the intervention in Myanmar, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, North Korea, and Syria, where it voted together with Russia (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 29). China usually agrees with Russia regarding the actions of certain governments and possible human rights abuses, and the main argument was based on the non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. It is interesting to mention that China and Russia have not always been on the same side. The first time that China used its veto power was in 1972, only a year after Beijing finally replaced Taipei in the United Nations, which we discussed earlier in the paper. On that occasion, China blocked Bangladesh from becoming a member of the United Nations, explaining that it was a matter of a lost world based on “Soviet social imperialism, aggression, and hegemony” (Feltman, 2020, p. 2). There were two more occasions when China used its veto without Russia. It was in 1997 that China vetoed a resolution about sending observers to Guatemala, whose government and rebels had signed a ceasefire agreement in the previous year. However, China changed its mind when Guatemalan officials assured Beijing they would not advocate for Taiwan’s membership in the UN. The second time was when China did not agree to extend the mandate for the UN peacekeeping force (UNPREDEP) in the Republic of North Macedonia (then the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), which ended with the liquidation of the peacekeeping force. Also, China is closely linked to the African states and usually relies on them to vote as China (Feltman, 2020, p. 3).

Speaking of China in the United Nations system, it is evident that it has risen and shown its power more in the 21st century. To put it more precisely, 2013 is the year that marks China’s rise in this arena. That means that over the past ten years, we have observed more confident and materially powerful PRC behaviour within the United Nations (Haug, Foot & Baumann, 2024, p. 6).

The concept of a *shared future* was presented by President Xi Jinping in his speech during the general debate at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in 2015, titled *Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind*. That was the first time it was presented at the United Nations, while President Xi had introduced it at the National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. After that, in 2017, he gave a work report to the Communist Party of China National Congress, where he explained key concepts of Chinese diplomacy in this new era, as Xiaochun pointed out (Xiaochun, 2018, p. 24). But what is truly meant by the concept of a *shared future*? It certainly is a concept that reaffirms the long Chinese tradition of seeking peace and represents the pursuit of common interests and universal values. The purpose is to create a sovereign and equally-based world where all disputes will be settled through dialogue and partnerships. It suggests that each state should have relations with other states based on mutual respect for interests and concerns. The world is meant to be globalised, and the United Nations is intended to be an impartial initiator of peace negotiations (Xiaochun, 2018, pp. 26-29). This *shared future* concept is actually a logical continuum of the progress China has shown in its strategic thinking and the change it wants to show in the international community. Also, it is the result of the integration that the PRC is making in the global economy and the fact that it tries to position itself as the global leader. Actually, Fung and Lam (2022) say that China holds the UN as a headstone for an international order that is state-led, but also that China is working on the UN reform so that it can use its bodies and institutions to better execute the so-called *shared future* vision of President Xi's, also known as a vision of a *community of common destiny*. This *shared future* concept means China wants to promote itself as a global leader and key partner in building international peace and security. In this system, China has partners and works with them through dialogue, non-confrontation, and non-alliance. It is a vision of democracy in international relations based on mutual benefit for all states (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 10).

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the paper, we discussed the importance of researching and observing a particular state within the United Nations. We emphasised the relevance of the United Nations, concluding that it is crucial to examine

China's performance to understand its diplomatic and political goals. After the 1940s, when China signed and ratified the United Nations Charter and was involved in the founding conferences, the problems began to rise. As we discussed, in 1949, the government was held by Communist China, but the United Nations representative would not accept or support it. In the following decades, the communist states, Russia being the leader, tried to put this question on the agenda, but without any success. These were the years when China abstained from the United Nations, and we could barely see any initiative. We could say that it kept to itself.

In 1971, the People's Republic of China took its seat as a representative of China at the United Nations. In the following decades, its performance in this organisation began to change and rapidly grow. China started expanding allies and states that would support it in the voting. We can say that a new era for China started when the new President, Xi Jinping, took office in 2013. China now often emphasises its relationship with the United Nations and how it plans to use this organisation to achieve its overall goals. Three important areas in which China shows its interest in the United Nations are budgeting, leadership positions, and peacekeeping personnel. In all of them, China has significantly improved. It is in second place when it comes to donations to the budget and sending personnel to the peacekeeping missions. Also, a certain number of leadership positions in UN bodies and agencies belong to China. These are all ways in which China is using its diplomacy skills to show its rising power. Also, the *shared future* discourse is one great example of Chinese diplomacy skills. China is using its own preferred language and slowly building it at the United Nations. The *shared future* is a concept that President Xi introduced, and he often mentions it at the United Nations. It is an idea based on the notion that all states ought to be equal and sovereign and that conflicts need to be settled amicably. It adheres to the global governance model that China is attempting to establish.

In this paper, it has been presented that a massive change happened in China's participation at the United Nations—from abstaining to imposing itself as a global, or at least for now, *Global South leader*. This analysis showcased China's relations with the UN for almost nine decades, and we saw its rise in power. It is expected that this rise will continue in the following years.

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