

Gaining influence in the United Nations and China's Global Aspirations

Introduction

As China gained more influence in terms of its economic power, the political ambitions of Beijing have dramatically grown. These tendencies are reminiscent of the continuing centralization of authority that commenced subsequent to the 19th Party Congress in 2017. Over the last ten years, China has actively promoted its own vision of the international order but also, by introducing particular issues

In order to gain support for China-led global initiatives, the authorities in Beijing use a variety of means to influence the third part preferences: informal networks through "circle of friends", party-to-party relations, negative messaging about the West and the United States in particular,

to the international resolution, promoted its own industrial cycles. On March 18, 2022, Chairman Xi Jinping introduced the fourth China worldwide initiative: Global Civilization Initiative. The initiative, as the fourth after the Global Data Security Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Development Initiative, signalled China's readiness to build its political influence in the international forums through three forms of reshaping the current global order. In order to gain more prominence and position itself as the leader, China has influenced current international organisations like the United Nations and its agenda, secondly proposed co-produced initiatives with emerging markets (emerging developing countries) like Shanghai Cooperation Organization or BRICS and thirdly introduced China-led multilateral forums like FOCAC¹ or China-CELAC². Apart from this

¹ FOCAC – Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. A multilateral cooperation mechanism was established in 2000 between the People's Republic of China and all the states from the African continent apart from the Kingdom of Eswatini. It was one of the first regional organisations established by China outside its territorial periphery. Ministerial-level meetings that alternate locations between Beijing and African countries are held every three years.

institutional dimension, the authorities in Beijing cultivate informal networks through "circle of friends", party-to-party relations, and promoting the negative messaging about the West and the United States in particular, shaping China's position in the current context as a peace broker and the future model for development for the Global South community.

China's gaining influence in the UN: HRC and WHO cases

Since 2012 and along with the centralization of power by Xi Jinping, China has become more assertive in promoting its own vision of human rights and internationalisation of its domestic norms through activities at UN General Assembly, World Health Organization and Human Right Council (HRC) resolutions and other international bodies. In this regard, we need to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic highly contributed to China's global activities. First of all, China was supported by dozens of developing countries and positioned itself as the leader of the Global South community. At the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, Cuba made a joint statement at the UN General Assembly to support China for developing its own pattern of human rights that fits its conditions and oppose other countries' interference in China's internal affairs under the "banner of human rights".¹

Moreover, China utilised the pandemic to promote its own achievements in curbing the virus. Based on the resolutions co-sponsored and sponsored by China, it can be observed that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced China's perception as a superior model compared to that of the West. Nevertheless, it can be seen that China carefully crafted the content of these resolutions. For example, the Human Rights Universal Group database analysis shows that the major themes of Chinese resolutions shifted during the first two years of the pandemic. In 2020, the focus was on health, medicines, research and development, and developing countries, while in 2021, sustainable development and capacity building took an essential part of China's narratives. In 2022, the focus shifted to social and cultural rights, addressing inequalities, and mitigating the negative

² The Clean Network was a project launched by the Donald Trump administration in 2020. Its main objectives covered the protection of data privacy, security and human rights of the United States and its allies from the digital threats posed mainly by the actions of the Chinese Communist Party as well as other authoritarian actors. The project formed a coalition of countries to exclude untrusted vendors and applications from their telecommunications networks and services.

consequences of the pandemic. In this context China utilised the turbulences created by the global virus to introduce its own concepts in the international organisations. The decision to discuss COVID-19 in the Human Rights Council resolutions during the first year of the pandemic was avoided as opponents may have raised questions regarding the virus's origin.²

In the HRC, China uses a dual-track strategy to block international criticism of its repressive human rights record and promote orthodox interpretations of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs that weaken international human rights norms, transparency, and accountability. But recently, China became more assertive in promoting its own developmental rights and internationalised its domestic slogans. China's narrative is based on changing the meanings of existing norms but also creating new concepts. For instance, the resolution adopted in March 2020, "Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights", was an attempt to reconstruct the understanding of the concept of human rights as a right of individuals into collective rights, according to the Chinese model.³

In collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), China published a special report on the pandemic's origins, released on March 30, 2021.⁴ It should be noted, however, that WHO Director General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, did not rule out further research and stated that "all hypotheses are on the table and warrant complete and further studies". On the day the WHO-China report was released, a statement from the "US+13" group, signed by the governments of the US, Australia, Canada, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom was published. They stated that the WHO report did not meet expectations. It emphasised how important it was to know the real causes of the pandemic in order to fight effectively against its consequences. Thus, the group of countries led by the United States questioned the process of research conducted by experts: its effectiveness, scientific basis, transparency, and independence. The action taken by the American diplomacy illustrated the United States' ability to form a coalition to accuse China of being a "virus spreader", as appeared in the Joint Statement of the United States and 13 countries.⁵

Moreover, one of the main COVID-related controversies has been the question of Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly (WHA), the decision-making body of

the World Health Organization (WHO). Taiwan, which is not a member of the United Nations due to political reasons, has been excluded from the WHA since 2016.⁶ During the early stages of COVID-19, it has received widespread praise for handling the pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, Taiwan was again excluded from the WHA, with some accusing China of pressuring the WHO to exclude Taiwan.⁷

Supporting tobacco and pharmaceutical industries

Apart from limiting Taiwan's access to an international organisation, China's activities in the United Nations support its industry as well as its global interests. In this regard, the significant actions of China's diplomacy within WHO include works on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). China is considered the world's largest producer and consumer of tobacco products and has been accused of using its influence within the FCTC to protect its own interests. As FCTC was the first use of the WHO's constitutional treaty-making power to negotiate a legally binding international convention, China had to ensure its delegation would remain strong to secure Beijing's interests. For some time, in the initial stage, China's interests were represented by the State Tobacco Monopoly Administration (STMA). It is important to note that STMA shared its management staff with the China National Tobacco Corporation (CNTC), a state-owned manufacturer and the world's largest cigarette maker.⁸ This situation led to an apparent conflict of interest, as FCTC aims to promote public health. However, the STMA's goal was to protect the interests of the Chinese tobacco industry. The Chinese approach was profit-oriented, not health-oriented. Thus, it is worth noting that some of the FCTC-adopted arrangements in China were counterproductive. In 2009, the ad valorem tax rates for tobacco were increased at the producer price level, and an additional ad valorem tax was imposed at the wholesale price level. Although this change raised government revenue, it did not increase consumer prices since STMA decreased wholesale profits. As a result, cigarette sales remained unaffected. In 2015, the tobacco tax was reformed again, with ad valorem tax rates raised and specific taxes imposed at wholesale prices. This led to a slight increase in the average retail price of cigarettes by 11% and a 7.8% decrease in annual cigarette sales. However, cigarette sales began to increase again in 2017. While some progress has been made towards fulfilling FCTC obligations in China over the two decades, significant gaps in implementation still exist. These gaps can be attributed to the tobacco industry's obstacles and the significant tax incomes from the industry for the central government.

China's tobacco industry is state-owned and has a centralised management system, with the STMA and CNTC jointly responsible. The STMA remains a member of the Leading Group for Inter-Ministerial Coordination for the Implementation of the WHO FCTC, which presents an opportunity for the domestic tobacco industry to reshape effectively global tobacco control policy development and implementation.⁹

In 2022, the tobacco products in China generated total operating revenue of 287.69bn USD compared to 279.46bn in 2021, indicating a growth of almost 3% y-o-y. China's tobacco products industry is estimated to generate 313.1bn USD in revenue by 2027.¹⁰ China National Tobacco Company remains the biggest company in China, dominating the domestic market. Its revenue in 2021 amounted to approximately 200bn USD. The company employs half a million Chinese and is one of China's largest tax generators. Its products are sold almost exclusively within China.¹¹

Although China is the world's biggest tobacco producer, it does not export much due to its high domestic demand. Nevertheless, in 2021 the biggest importers of Chinese tobacco are Indonesia (202.7m USD), Hong Kong (71.7m USD), UAE (69.2m USD), Belgium (67m USD) and Vietnam (66.3m USD). In 2021, China exported approximately 710.84m USD worth of tobacco and tobacco products. In 2021, China imported tobacco and tobacco substitutes mainly from Zimbabwe (519.4m USD), Brazil (301.1m USD), the United States (181.2m USD), Argentina (79.5m USD) and Singapore (50.2m USD). In 2021, China imported approximately 1.46bn USD worth of tobacco and tobacco products. As tax revenues from tobacco sales are one of the largest donors to the state budget, the Chinese delegation responsible for working at the WHO's FCTC might continuously try to obstruct the implementation of significant tobacco restrictions on the international agenda. In addition, the current national legislation indicates the tightening of anti-tobacco policy in selected cities or provinces. Still, the only effective action seems to be introducing a national anti-smoking policy. In this regard, the delay in developing and implementing the national policy is intentional and intended to generate taxable profits. The above leads to tensions between the Chinese Ministry of Health, the business environment, and the tobacco lobby.

The second important premise of placing together medicines and health as one category in the Human Rights resolutions was to promote Chinese medicine solutions and secure a market for the Chinese pharmaceutical industry. China sees the opportunity for the

research and development project, but only in the pharmaceutical industry, as in the resolution 43/21.¹² In 2021, the pharmaceutical industry in China generated total operating revenue of more than 3.3 trillion yuan, indicating a growth of almost 20 per cent from the previous year. The leading company is Shanghai, with an annual revenue of 21bn yuan in 2021. China Resources Pharmaceutical Group's second position with 196.55bn yuan in annual revenue also highlights its noteworthy performance in the market. It is worth noting that Guangzhou Baiyunshan Pharmaceutical is still a significant player in the industry despite the wide margin in revenue compared to the top two companies.¹³ These three companies are considered national champions in China, capable of dominating the domestic market, outcompeting foreign rivals, and expanding their market share globally.

In 2021, China's primary destinations for pharmaceutical product exports were Germany, the United States, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, and Pakistan, with respective values of 3.54bn USD, 3.11bn USD, 2.14bn USD, 1.91bn USD, and 1.57bn USD.¹⁴ Despite this, China's inclusion of "affordable access to medicine and healthcare" in the HRC resolution signals its intentions to diversify markets and prioritise the Global South. Moreover, the resolution "Access to medicines, vaccines and other health products in the context of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" was co-sponsored by China, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Senegal, South Africa, and Thailand.¹⁵ The resolution expressed concerns that "the supply of health products and technologies depends on manufacturing facilities concentrated in few countries". This highlights China's clear intention to assume a major role in the global pharmaceutical market, with the co-sponsored countries serving as a key market for China's pharmaceutical champions. But it is not chatter with no action. Amidst the pandemic, China implemented a massive mask and vaccine diplomacy program, primarily targeting the Global South. This policy was supported by extensive publicity and resulted in a growing role of export markets in the developing world. For instance, the Indonesian market experienced a growth of 983% between 2020 and 2021, while Pakistan's growth was 1,860%. During the pandemic, the role of the American market drastically declined from 19.1% of the total share in 2019 to 8.62% in 2021. Meanwhile, the roles of Indonesia, Germany, Pakistan, and Brazil as export destinations for China's pharmaceutical products gained importance and accounted for 5.95%, 4.83%, 4.35%, and 3.99%, respectively, in 2021.¹⁶

Beyond promoting industries: China's global ambitions

Apart from promoting selected industries through influencing international organisations, Beijing signals its readiness to reshape the global political landscape. Since September 2020, the Chinese authorities have introduced four global initiatives: Global Data Security Initiative, Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative.

Influencing digital space in the global arena

Global Data Security Initiative was introduced by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (September 2020).¹⁷ This is a framework for dealing with security in data storage and digital commerce. The initiative involves eight tenets, which include China's concerns over being cut off from access to Western markets and technology. China also outlined three principles that should be followed in international cooperation as part of its proposal. These include multilateralism, safe development, and fairness and justice.

As the conflict with the United States intensified, the People's Republic of China became more assertive in promoting its own alternative initiatives. The first global initiative announced by the PRC under the label of the Global Digital Security Initiative (GDSI) touched on the future of digital governance. In this regard, as perceived by many, the GDSI was a response to the Trump administration's Clean Network³ program.¹⁸ Furthermore, the GDSI is an attempt to address concerns regarding China's technology solutions, which, according to the United States, create a direct threat to the cybersecurity of other countries. This initiative aimed to depict Chinese technology as malicious and untrustworthy, thereby excluding it from global internet infrastructure. The GDSI's core objective is to promote the development of a secure and reliable digital economy, which

³ China-CELAC – China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum. The multilateral cooperation mechanism was established in 2014 and covers China's cooperation with the Latin American and Caribbean regions. It focuses on various fields such as politics, economy, trade, culture, education, science and technology and social development. The mechanism has three levels of institutional arrangements: the ministerial meeting, the senior officials meeting and the coordination meeting. The ministerial meeting is the highest decision-making body of the mechanism and is held every three years. The senior officials meeting is responsible for implementing the decisions of the ministerial meeting and is held annually.

necessitates multilateral cooperation, inclusive development, and adherence to international norms and regulations. The initiative's guiding principles are rooted in eight tenets presented by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.¹⁹

The above-mentioned principles emphasise the importance of open and stable supply chains, the absence of restrictions on the use of information technologies in critical infrastructure, the intention to use information technologies that protect privacy and personal data, and the lack of so-called "backdoors" for illegally obtaining information. These principles indirectly address allegations made by the American administration against Chinese technology corporations and the Chinese government. Beijing aims to diminish negative perceptions of its implementation of information technologies in third countries, such as Serbia or Ethiopia, just to name a few. Tenets are underpinned by three overarching principles that define the GDSI's ethos: multilateralism, secure development, fairness, and justice. These principles are aligned with international norms and regulations and reflect the initiative's commitment to promoting a secure and reliable digital economy that benefits all countries and people. The GDSI, like many other Chinese initiatives, contains very little information, mainly to facilitate gaining international support for the framework itself. In order to gain support for the GDSI, China initiated diplomatic outreach efforts to secure support from countries in Central Asia, Africa, and Europe. Russia, Tanzania, Pakistan, Ecuador, the Arab League, and ASEAN countries have supported the initiative. More than this, China organised the GDSI's first regional implementation platform, the China-Arab Data Security Cooperation, signed by Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu and the Arab League in March 2021.²⁰

China as the peace broker?

Global Security Initiative was introduced in April 2021.²¹ This framework comprises three sections: basic concepts and principles, cooperation priorities, and platforms and mechanisms. Regarding international cooperation, China maintains that the UN should occupy the central coordinating position. However, Beijing is actively promoting China-led platforms such as China-Africa Peace and Security Forum, the Middle East Security Forum, the Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, and the World Security Cooperation Forum public in Lianyungang as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS.

The GSI aims to expand China's global influence and ensure long-term security and prosperity. The following initiative includes various aspects such as military modernization, maritime security, and economic investments in multiple regions worldwide.²² The GSI aims to promote China's cultural and ideological influence by expanding its media presence. On top of that, introducing China's GSI concept has been followed by setting up an International Mediation Institute in Hong Kong.²³ China is most likely trying to position itself as a mediator for international crises, as demonstrated by its involvement in brokering the recent agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The effectiveness of China's role as a mediator will depend on its neutrality, impartiality, and track record of resolving disputes, as well as its interest in settling the conflict. The publication of "China's position on the political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis" showed the Chinese intention to take as little risk as possible.²⁴ Therefore, China will continue to avoid direct mediation between Moscow and Kyiv, in line with its position presented during the UN Security Council gatherings, where Beijing has called for the creation of appropriate conditions for a negotiation process between the parties of the conflict, thereby negating any attempts by third parties to join direct talks.

However, considering the case of the Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement, China's economic and political ties with both countries likely facilitated its involvement.²⁵ Recently Chinese diplomats have also been active in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, promoting a "two-state solution".²⁶ For years China's leaders have pointed out their country's "peaceful" and non-confrontational rise, suggesting they could act as honest brokers in talks between Israelis and Palestinians. While some developing countries have welcomed China's mediation role as a contribution to regional stability, the US views it as a challenge to its interests and influence. Nevertheless, China sees this as an opportunity to expand its reach in various domains, such as economy, diplomacy, and culture, particularly as the US shifts its focus to the Indo-Pacific and moves away from the Middle East. In summary, China's growing interest in playing an active role and maintaining global security aims to expand its influence in various areas, including economy, diplomacy, and culture.

Promoting China-style modernization in the Global South

Xi Jinping unveiled the Global Development Initiative in September 2021 during a speech at the UN General Assembly. This initiative aims to support the accomplishment of all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development by reviving global development partnerships and fostering stronger, greener, and healthier global development. The goal of GDI is to address "unbalanced and inadequate development among and within countries" by moving away from the model of unchecked growth linked to socio-economic inequality and environmental deterioration. The above characterised the Chinese economy and much of the developing world in the past decades. China's development plan is allegedly "people-centred," "high-quality," "green," and "innovation-driven". The third important initiative touched down on the issues of development. In this regard, China positioned itself as the leader of "like-minded" countries that share concerns over the future of development rather than political freedom rights. Placing the development agenda within the United Nations framework allows the Beijing-based government to bypass controversies over the intentions of being the dominant power in the Global South community. Moreover, it prepared the ground for China to form the coalition based on the "alignment of belief" that is of particular importance in the context of growing tensions with the United States. The second important feature of positioning the Global Development Initiative within the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development allows China to promote its vision of human rights. According to the Chinese narratives and experiences, the priority should be given to the second and third generations of human rights: social and economic development rather than the political rights of the first generation of human rights.²⁷ In this regard, China can promote its China-style modernization through a more nuanced approach that allows Beijing to bypass controversies.²⁸

The abovementioned promotion of China's solutions goes through, e.g., the Group of Friends of the GDI at the UN, with over 60 countries joining the group. It is worth mentioning that the Group has a close relationship with Secretary-General António Guterres, who praised the GDI during the inaugural conference in October 2022. In the long term, the Chinese authorities will gain more influence to reshape standards for the industrial sector through informal "circles of friends" in the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).²⁹ Apart from shaping a positive image of China as the vanguard for development, an important part of China's agenda is to blame the United States for "all wrongdoings". The Chinese usually referred to racial discrimination, the situation in Afghanistan with the United States' "double standards" and its "selective blindness", as well as utilising the human rights concept as a tool for interference. In the context of

developmental rights, the American approach is seen as the clear way for politicisation and interference, illustrated by its policy towards Syria and South Sudan.³⁰

Civilization dialogue for "participation" of bilateral relations

Xi Jinping introduced the Global Civilization Initiative during the political parties' conference in March 2023.³¹ It proposes four initiatives, namely respecting the diversity of civilizations, advocating common human values, valuing the inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and promoting international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. The initiative emphasises the need for different civilizations to coexist and tolerate each other, promoting true equality and inclusion among civilizations to achieve global peace and development. The initiative complements the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative and together forms the key components of a human community with a shared future.

As Xi Jinping introduced the GCI during the Communist Party of China High-Level Dialogue with the Political Parties, the Chinese authorities signalled that GCI would be an umbrella organisation for party-to-party relations. The basic features of the GCI are outlined as follows: respecting the diversity of civilizations, advocating the common values of humanity, valuing the inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and strengthening international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. Along with the centralization of power in China and the "participation" of the governmental apparatus, the CPC has become more important in China's external relations.³² During the meeting in March 2023, party leaders and heads of state or prime ministers from "fraternal parties" like the Serbian Progressive Party, the African National Congress, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement or the Mongolian People's Party took part in the videoconference.

The Chinese leader called "for leveraging the strength of a new type of party-to-party relations for building a new type of international relations and expanding global partnerships by fostering stronger partners with world political parties". On the one hand, solid party-to-party relations guarantee support for China's global initiative, e.g., at the United Nations forums, and on the other, cemented authoritarian tendencies in the selected countries. Apart from the institutionalisation of inter-party relations under the framework of civilization, emphasis was placed on the timing of an event in anticipation of Joe Biden's proposal for a second Summit for Democracy, which involved the

governments of Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Zambia.³³ This step was previously taken by China before the First Summit for Democracy in December 2021, organising CPC and World Political Parties Summit. The third major feature of GCI is to introduce China's position on the global stage from the civilization's long-term perspective. This approach rhymes with the high criticism of the United States and its "less developed and exclusive model for development".³⁴

Conclusions

1. China's global initiatives preceded by the Belt and Road Initiative depict changes in the PRC's understanding of its role in international relations.
2. All introduced China-led global initiatives, regardless of the domains, from security to digital, are based on the concept of sovereignty and independence perceived in a dogmatic way. With the major goal of gaining more global attention, the Chinese authorities decided to rebrand the old, constantly repeating China's initiative with new slogans.
3. In order to gain support for China-led global initiatives, the authorities in Beijing use a variety of means to influence the third part preferences: informal networks through "circle of friends", party-to-party relations, negative messaging about the West and the United States in particular, shaping China's position in the current context as a peace broker and the future model for development for the Global South community.
4. Apart from China's normative agenda and shaping standards in the United Nations, Beijing signals its global ambitions to expand the sectors of its industry like high-tech, tobacco or pharmaceutical industry.
5. As the United States shifted its global agenda to Indo-Pacific, leaving aside the Middle East region, China bridged the gap and offered Middle East countries a reconciliation plan between Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as a regional forum for data protection and the future model of digital governance known as China-Arab Data Security Cooperation.

Recommendations

1. Considering China's more assertive tone about the West, the European Union should be more pragmatic and offer more practical incentives to the Global South community.

2. The Western narratives should be constructed of positive examples of checks and balances mechanisms as more effective and long-lasting and should be addressed to governments and social societies simultaneously.

3. To counter China-led global initiatives that, to a high degree, mirror the UN agenda, the European Union should strengthen decoding the real meaning of the Beijing-based authorities' plans.

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