

# CHINA'S GROWING CLOUT AT THE UN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

In June, the Indian government quietly withdrew the candidate it had nominated for the post of Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization. As NITI Aayog member Ramesh Chand was facing certain defeat by China's Qu Dongyu, New Delhi seemed keen to soften its humiliation at the multilateral forum. In the first week of October, when President Xi Jinping led China's biggest-ever military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of Communist rule, for the first time a contingent from the country's 8,000-strong UN peacekeeping standby force participated.

Whether through specialised UN agencies or peacekeeping, China is racing to fill the vacuum in international leadership left by the withdrawal of the U.S. from multilateral fora under President Donald Trump, and taking advantage of the lack of convergence among the permanent members of the Security Council on many global issues.

Unlike India whose UN outreach is largely limited to a customary reiteration of its decades-old advocacy for the expansion of the Security Council, China is aggressively seeking more positions in the UN Secretariat hierarchy. It also aims to play a bigger role in peacekeeping operations.

For much of the Cold War era and beyond, China's role at the UN was largely that of a disruptor aimed at thwarting attempts by Western democracies to impose a liberal vision on the world. But today Beijing is trying to reverse that role and is actively seeking to use the UN platform to legitimise — and spread — its ideology.

China has increased its monetary contributions to the UN fivefold in the past decade. President Xi is keen to project his country as a "champion of multilateralism," even as Mr. Trump is busy disbanding multilateral agreements and engaging in trade wars. Last year, as tensions with the U.S. were rising over trade disputes, Mr. Xi called for the country to take "an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system".

With increased financial contributions and concomitant clout, China has been able to get Communist Party officials to head more than a quarter of UN's specialised agencies including the FAO, the Industrial Development Organization, the International Civil Aviation Administration and the International Telecommunication Union.

With its increasing influence at the UN, China is eager to push its ideological stance through the global body. It argues that each country may choose its own human rights protection in the context of "national circumstances". Ironically, through the body tasked with bringing human rights violators to account — the Human Rights Council, which the U.S. abandoned — China is diluting the concept of universal values and promoting its world view on the subject. "In 2017, Human Rights Watch exposed Beijing's efforts to silence UN human rights experts and staff, to prevent critical voices from China from participating in UN processes, and to manipulate rules and procedures to ensure more favourable reviews," the human rights group said in a report.

With no one to stand up to China in the absence of U.S. leadership at the UN, Beijing is actively promoting its foreign policy initiatives, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, through the global body. BRI serves "the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations," according to Liu Zhenmin, formerly of China's Foreign Ministry and currently UN's Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social affairs.

For some time now, there is speculation of a coordinated Sino-Russian front at the UN. The two countries seem to frequently align their positions, especially when human rights issues come up. The prevailing lack of strategic unity among the Western members of the Security Council is ripe for the duo to advance their interests, and China seems keen to take advantage of the opportunities this disarray presents to enhance its hold on the UN.

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