

China and the United Nations: The Stakeholder Spectrum

In December 2009, representatives of 192 nations—not to mention thousands of journalists, activists, and business executives—assembled in Copenhagen for the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The goal was to strike a new international agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol, due to expire in 2012—one that would lead to meaningful reductions of greenhouse gas emissions.¹ Expectations were great, and it was evident that one of the key players would be the People's Republic of China. After all, China—the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases²—has taken huge strides in the past decade, toughening up its environment protection laws, fighting pollution, planting forests, and investing aggressively in renewables and energy efficiency. In the lead-up to Copenhagen, China announced it would cut its carbon intensity by 40–45 percent below 2005 levels by 2020.³

In the end, Copenhagen was a flop. No binding treaty covering both developed and developing countries was established, nor was a deadline set for reaching such an agreement. No global target for 2050 was created. Major emitters reached an accord that committed the world to halting the rise in global temperatures to two degrees Celsius, but the measures it contained were insufficient to deliver that outcome.

There were many reasons for the disappointment of Copenhagen, but in the public mind at least, China bore a good deal of responsibility. Beijing's aversion

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to quantifiable commitments led it to oppose one that didn't even apply to China directly, namely the critical pledge that by 2050 rich countries would cut emissions by 80 percent compared to 1990 levels. China and other high-emitting developing states opposed the principle of international verification, agreeing only to "international consultations and analysis." The Chinese argued for removing references to Copenhagen as a way-stage on the path to a legally binding treaty. China's representatives hardly acquitted themselves well in the conference venue either, with Premier Wen Jiabao dodging important meetings with U.S. President Barack Obama and sending a more junior official instead.⁴ Britain's then-Climate Change Minister, Ed Miliband, called China out on its behavior, leading China's Foreign Ministry to reply: "The remarks against China by an individual British politician contained obvious political schemes to shirk responsibilities toward the developing countries and provoke discord among the developing countries."⁵ That politician is now Britain's alternative Prime Minister. A widely-cited article in *The Guardian* was headed: "How do I know China wrecked the Copenhagen deal? I was in the room."⁶

China's predicament in Copenhagen illustrated in miniature many of the features of China's awkward relationship with the United Nations: the high hopes; the genuine, often startling, progress; the continuing disconnect between China's weight and its strategy; the conflicting desires to be seen as a great power and a poor country; the tacking between arrogance and uncertainty; and the hurt feelings on both sides when expectations are crushed. Copenhagen put the following question in front of the international community: how far has China progressed toward achieving the status of a "responsible stakeholder," urged on it by then-U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in 2005?⁷ Examining China's approach to the UN could help answer that question. The research for this article, which was supported by the Australia–China Council, included two dozen confidential interviews conducted in 2009–2010 in Beijing, New York and Washington, D.C.

Is China a Power or a Player?

Any account of recent shifts in Beijing's foreign policy behavior has to begin with its deeply impressive economic performance. In three decades, China has remade its economy, driven extraordinary productivity increases, and in so doing raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Now this country of 1.3 billion people is achieving an economic weight befitting its huge size. In 2009, its gross domestic product (GDP) was the third largest in the world in dollar terms; if measured in terms of purchasing power parity, it was the second largest. Annual GDP growth in the last five years has averaged more than 11 percent. China is the third largest importer and second largest exporter in

world merchandise trade. The country is laying roads and high-speed rail, building airports, and expanding shipping at a frenetic pace. In 2011, its hoard of foreign exchange reserves passed the \$3 trillion mark—more than double the amount of second-placed Japan. The historian Paul Kennedy has predicted that by the time the UN celebrates its centenary in 2045, “China could well constitute the largest economic and productive force in the world, bigger even than the United States.”⁸

China’s economic strength is mirrored in its growing military capabilities. The United States’ 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review recorded that “China is developing and fielding large numbers of advanced medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles, new attack submarines equipped with advanced weapons, increasingly capable long-range air defense systems, electronic warfare and computer network attack capabilities, advanced fighter aircraft, and counter-space systems.” These developments boost China’s ability to project power within East Asia and around the world.⁹

While China has arrived as a great power, that does not necessarily mean that it is destined for global or even regional hegemony, as some enthusiasts maintain. China’s façade conceals some worrying divisions, including those between rich and poor as well as between the coast and interior. As German strategist Josef Joffe observes, China needs to resolve “the pernicious dynamics of authoritarian modernization—war, revolution, and upheaval—that eventually befell imperial Germany, Japan, and Russia.” It also needs to manage two awkward demographic realities: the country has become powerful while many of its people remain poor, and it will get old before it gets rich. Still, even if we don’t credit straight-line projections, one thing is clear: China is a global player, with vast implications for the international system.¹⁰

China has a strong hand; how it will play that hand in the future is not so obvious. There is a notable dualism to China’s approach. On one hand, Deng Xiaoping bade his countrymen to keep their heads down and their eyes on the prize of economic development. Deng’s 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.” Even as this approach has given way to the newer Chinese foreign policy doctrines of “peaceful rise” and “harmonious world,” the Chinese leadership remains overwhelmingly focused on domestic issues.¹¹ One Chinese interviewee told the author: “Beijing is not psychologically ready to be an active global player.”¹²

In their recent paper *Global Governance 2025*, the U.S. National Intelligence Council and the EU Institute of Strategic Studies reported: “Many of our Chinese interlocutors see mounting global challenges and fundamental defects in the international system but emphasize the need for China to deal with its

internal problems.”¹³ The Chinese Communist Party’s first priority is regime continuity, which rests on a stable society, a viable economy, and GDP growth sufficient to keep unemployment down. One Beijing observer even asserted to this author that “all of the leadership’s top ten issues are domestic.”¹⁴ For much of the time, China’s external preoccupations are to prevent other powers from trespassing on what it regards as its domestic issues—such as Taiwan and Tibet—and to secure the energy and other resources necessary to power growth. Chinese foreign policy is neither expansionist nor extreme; in many ways, China has been slow to claim the influence it clearly deserves.

On the other hand, it is impossible to miss China’s rising confidence and international ambition, even if they sit alongside strains of caution and insecurity. In the past decade, China has expanded its clout in Southeast Asia; thickened its ties with U.S. treaty allies such as South Korea and Australia; and extended its influence in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and in new Asian institutions such as the East Asia Summit and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. One American China-watcher observed to this author that global issues such as international architecture and the world economy have moved to the center of discussions between Washington and Beijing.¹⁵ This may now be the most important bilateral relationship in the world.

Sometimes, Chinese assertiveness spills over into bluster. Some long-time observers are pessimistic about the direction of Chinese foreign policy. Scholar David Shambaugh has noted that in 2010, frictions manifested in many of China’s relationships: with Europe and India, with countries in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa—even with Russia. The U.S. relationship has proven bumpy. Beijing stage-managed President Obama’s 2009 visit to China in a way that minimized Obama’s effect on his Chinese audience and complicated things for him with his American audience. China snubbed Defense Secretary Robert Gates and arced up over relatively routine matters such as the president’s meeting with the Dalai Lama and Taiwan arms sales. Meanwhile, the relationship with Tokyo suffered a significant setback after Japan’s Coast Guard detained a Chinese trawler captain in the East China Sea near the disputed Senkaku / Diaoyu Islands. China’s uncompromising response, including the suspension of ministerial talks and (reportedly) halting rare earth exports, elevated a third-order issue to a matter that had to be resolved by the heads of government.¹⁶

The explanations for this passage of behavior are diverse, including the ongoing leadership transition, Chinese nationalism, and the country’s successful navigation of the global financial crisis. A recent Stockholm International Peace

Research Institute (SIPRI) policy paper by Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox makes a powerful argument for the increasing pluralization of Chinese foreign policy, as authority over the policymaking process fractures and the leadership is required to accommodate various institutions, factions, and ideologies. Certainly, there is an uneven quality to China's present foreign policy: usually quiet but occasionally strident; usually cautious but occasionally combative; always prickly; and never entirely predictable.¹⁷

China and the United Nations

The same ambivalence is evident in China's relations with the international organization. China has quickened the pace of its interactions with the UN in recent decades, exerting increasing influence in UN forums on matters it cares about. Yet, it has so far refused to assume the responsibilities incumbent upon a global power, and to nurture the international system it hopes to help to lead.

The clashes between Chinese and UN forces in the Korean War and the occupation of the China seat at the UN by Taiwan aroused a great deal of hostility in the People's Republic toward the UN. Since Beijing acquired the seat in 1971, however, the acrimony has faded and it has steadily joined specialist organs and acceded to treaties. Samuel Kim charted the progression of its approaches, from "system-transforming" prior to 1971 to "system-reforming" in the 1980s to "system-maintaining" in the 1990s. From the mid-1990s, this progression has accelerated.¹⁸

The Chinese began to appreciate two particular advantages the UN offers them as an arena for power politics. First, the UN's structural design tends to mitigate unipolarity: in the General Assembly, the United States is one of a multitude; even in the Security Council, it is at best first among equals. Second, the UN is hierarchical—and China is on the top rung of the hierarchy. Professor Rosemary Foot notes that Beijing "values the status benefits it derives from permanent membership of the Security Council, and especially the influence that comes with the privilege of the veto."¹⁹

The Stakeholder Spectrum

How should we assess China's current mode of engagement with the UN? The approach differs depending on the issue. One can draw a continuum of China's UN behavior, on which the position of a policy or tool is determined by the degree of openness to, engagement with, and burden-sharing on behalf of the international organization. Let's call it China's "stakeholder spectrum."



Diplomats

At the end of the spectrum denoting maximum engagement, we can place the issue of the caliber of China's UN diplomats. There is no question that the quality of people China sends to New York, both as diplomats and officials, has improved markedly. Thirty years ago, argues Shambaugh, "China's representatives rarely said a word—and when they did speak it was pure propagandistic rhetoric carefully prepared in Beijing. No press conferences were offered to foreign media, at home or abroad." Kim quoted one UN representative describing the old approach like this: "They come. They smile. They leave."²⁰ Five years ago, a UN insider told this author: "Beijing's representatives used to be woefully unqualified, faceless apparatchiks. Now they are very sharp. China used to take a prophylactic approach to placing people in the UN, asking 'how can we protect our people from outside influence?' Now they want to spread their influence." This year, another remarked that China's diplomats are "extraordinarily sophisticated and capable," with "a clear strategic vision." A diplomat from a Permanent Five (P5) country told this author "they will ride their instructions from Beijing" in order to strike deals they believe are in the Chinese interest.²¹

Elements of the old mentality still persist. In September 2010, China's most senior UN official, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Sha Zukang, was forced to apologize after a toast he offered to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at an alpine retreat descended into a drunken tirade against the UN, Americans, and Ban himself.²² Yet Sha's behavior was the exception that

proved the rule. In general, China's representatives have become much more skillful at promoting their country's interests at headquarters and contributing to the organization's work.

Whether the newer generations have noticeably different views on foreign policy is another question, and one on which interviewees differed. Several think-tankers expressed the view that younger officials are less orthodox in their thinking and more likely to recognize "the legitimacy quotient" in being a global power. But P5 officials interviewed by this author thought otherwise. One volunteered that "a generational divide does not show up in meetings. Junior and mid-level Chinese diplomats are often franker than their elders but they are also well-trained and obedient."²³

Peacekeeping

Also toward the engagement end of the spectrum is China's contribution to UN peacekeeping. This may be the field in which Beijing has moved the furthest toward engagement with the organization. Prior to admission and even into the 1970s, Beijing was apt to characterize peacekeeping operations as imperialist adventures. A government publication claimed that the establishment of the Special Committee for Peacekeeping Operations, for example, aimed to turn the UN into a "U.S.-controlled headquarters of international gendarmes to suppress and stamp out the revolutionary struggles of the world's people."²⁴ The ice began to crack in the 1980s, as Deng Xiaoping led China to work toward peaceful relations with the West, including through participation in international organizations. China first voted for peacekeeping operations, then began to support them financially, then joined the Special Committee, and finally deployed its first personnel to peacekeeping operations, in Africa and the Middle East.²⁵ In the past two decades, the Chinese contribution has grown further, notwithstanding China's traditionally rock-solid commitment to the concept of state sovereignty and the norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

Pacekeeping may be the field in which Beijing has moved the furthest.

Beijing's support for UN peace missions has not been limited to traditional peacekeeping operations. It has included post-conflict multi-dimensional peacekeeping—such as in Darfur, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—and transitional administrations such as in Cambodia (despite China's association with the Khmer Rouge) and East Timor. Beijing has traditionally referred to three principles, derived from UN peacekeeping history and its own

foreign policy theories, when deciding whether to authorize and participate in peacekeeping operations: host-country consent; use of force only in self-defense; and the involvement of regional actors. However, these are being applied flexibly and pragmatically, rather than uniformly. For example, China has voted for resolutions authorizing the use of military force and participated in peacekeeping missions involving the use of force.²⁶ China has also partly overcome its allergy toward peacekeeping missions in countries that recognize Taiwan. In the 1990s, for instance, China vetoed or threatened to veto proposed missions in Haiti, Guatemala, and Macedonia on this basis; now China supports the current UN operation in Haiti despite that country's continuing diplomatic ties with Taipei.²⁷

Beyond generally supporting peace missions, China has begun to staff them, and in increasing numbers. Over the past two decades, Chinese supporters have overcome internal objections based on history, ideology, and concerns from some Chinese military officers about casualties. China now deploys more military and police personnel to UN peacekeeping operations than any other permanent member of the Security Council, and it is the 15th-largest contributor overall. Furthermore, China has invested substantially in training facilities for its peacekeepers who are, according to SIPRI, "among the most professional, well-trained, effective and disciplined contingents in UN peacekeeping operations."²⁸ This increase—achieved in the absence of external pressure—was an adroit move. Peacekeeping is a prominent UN activity and China's preparedness to take on more of it has added to its prestige within the organization.

Nevertheless, progress made in Chinese peacekeeping should not be overstated. China's Security Council votes on peacekeeping are still conditioned by its traditional regard for state sovereignty and, to some extent, the principles of host-country consent, minimum use of force, and regional involvement. Although the number of Chinese personnel deployed in UN missions is high relative to the past and to other P5 countries, it remains small in absolute terms: 1,995 people as of September 2010. (There are well over two million personnel in the Chinese armed forces.) Finally, rather than deploying combat troops, Beijing has so far focused on enablers, military observers, and police.²⁹ Nevertheless, the shift is important.

Responsibility to Protect

A little further down the continuum is China's treatment of the concept of "the responsibility to protect" (R2P). R2P is the emerging norm that after Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Kosovo, a collective international responsibility exists in cases of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and widespread violations of human rights. The idea is that while states retain the primary

responsibility for protecting their citizens, in the event that states are unwilling or unable to protect their people, then sovereignty must yield to the international responsibility to protect them.

Given R2P's potential to violate the traditional concept of state sovereignty, China has exhibited discomfort about some of its ramifications, but it has not opposed it outright. Former foreign minister Qian Qichen sat on the UN panel that endorsed R2P, and China supported the concept at the 2005 World Summit and in Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1674 (2006). However, Beijing has taken a very limited view of its application, emphasizing the importance of building capacity within states to prevent atrocities. It is, says analyst Sarah Teitt, "wary of competing interpretations of R2P, and resists attempts to expand R2P and initiatives to 'invoke' R2P in Council proceedings." Beijing regularly stresses the need for the Council to act "prudently" in the case of emerging crises, and comments that "states must refrain from using R2P as a diplomatic tool to exert pressure on others."³⁰

China has exhibited discomfort about R2P, but it has not opposed it outright.

Many believed that, in light of the imbroglios in Afghanistan and Iraq, the high-water mark for humanitarian intervention had passed. Nevertheless, the occurrence of significant popular protests and armed resistance this year against the Qaddafi regime in Libya, and the regime's violent response, has brought the concept of R2P back to the fore in New York. In February, China joined the rest of the Security Council in adopting SCR 1970 (2011), which imposed an arms embargo on Libya as well as a travel ban and assets freeze on the Libyan leadership, while referring the situation to the International Criminal Court. The following month, China abstained from voting on SCR 1973 (2011), which imposed a no-fly zone over Libya's territory and tightened sanctions against the regime. Both resolutions invoked the responsibility to protect civilians.

China's willingness to support the first resolution and not to veto the second represents, on the face of it, a significant advance. This is, as Alex J. Bellamy has noted, the first time in history that the Council has "authorized force against a functioning government to protect civilians." On the other hand, China's behavior was the product of very particular circumstances. The support of the Arab League and African Union for a no-fly zone was plainly critical to China's willingness not to block SCR 1973. Indeed its permanent representative Li Baodong stated that China "attached great importance" to the positions of the two regional organizations. The resolutions had broad international, as well as regional, support, which made them harder to veto.³¹ We can also speculate that China was reluctant to be isolated on the Libya issue in a way that would draw attention to

the heavy hand it applies to its own citizens. The Arab Spring has proven to be highly infectious. To stand with Qaddafi against international sanctions might have had unpredictable consequences. Far better to present a small target internationally and get on with the business of keeping a lid on any unrest at home.

It would be wrong, then, to see China's recent performance as indicating a significant change of heart on R2P. (Indeed, Beijing has gone out of its way to criticize Western-led air strikes against Libyan government targets.)³² China was boxed in on this occasion, but its essentially skeptical approach remains. Whether the passage of these two resolutions has created a lasting precedent, with repercussions for China as well as the rest of the world, will depend in large part on the outcome of the conflict in Libya.

Security Council Behavior

The extent and limits of China's shift toward UN engagement can be discerned in its general behavior on the Security Council, on which it is the only Asian member of the P5, as well as the only developing country. Historically, China was a passive Council member, rarely seeking to shape the agenda. China used its veto significantly less than any other permanent member, casting only four between 1971 and 2002, for example, compared to the United States' 75. It generally abstained from or did not participate in voting unless the issue touched on sovereignty questions, especially if they might influence Taiwan or Tibet. Votes that were registered were usually preceded by a *pro forma* statement that no precedent was thereby established. In the past decade and a half, however, Beijing's representatives have displayed much greater confidence in the Council chamber. China is increasingly willing to take the lead on issues and behave more like a normal great power.³³

China is increasingly willing to take the lead on issues and behave more like a great power.

The PRC is adamant about the "One China" policy. But at the UN, there are now two Chinas: General Assembly China, which is more rigid and doctrinaire; and Security Council China, which is more pragmatic and flexible. P5 diplomats and UN officials observe that China's Security Council diplomacy is smarter and more subtle than the Russians', and that "the Chinese are more reliable in sticking to deals they have struck."³⁴

China has developed a good working relationship in the Council with the United States, although it is far from the vaunted "P2" (the P2 being the UN version of the much-discussed "G2"). Day-to-day diplomacy in the Security Council is still coordinated between China and Russia on one hand and among the United States, the United Kingdom, and France on the other. China has

partly overcome its instinctive opposition to resolutions passed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which empowers the Council to take measures to maintain international peace and security. For example, China voted for resolutions to support the Australian-led INTERFET force in East Timor in 1999 and to establish the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor later that year.³⁵ On September 12, 2001, it joined with the rest of the Council to condemn the 9/11 attacks as a threat to international peace and security and recognize the right of self-defense against such attacks (SCR 1368 (2001)).

On the other hand, China remains disengaged from many issues of importance where they do not trespass directly on its core interests. Notwithstanding its support for SCR 1368, for instance, it is not active on Afghanistan, being mainly concerned to keep Pakistan happy with the Council's deliberations. To the relief of Sri Lanka, China refused to allow the Security Council to discuss the bloody denouement of that government's operations against the Tamil Tigers in 2009.³⁶ The majority of the action on the most difficult issues comes from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. China is as uncomfortable as ever at being isolated (except on sovereignty issues), which limits its negotiating power. In other words, it is occupied largely with protecting its interests and those of its allies rather than projecting its influence—much less doing too much to strengthen the international system. In the words of a P5 diplomat, "China is mostly in defensive mode, intent on preventing things that hurt it, rather than achieving things that help it."³⁷

China has a mixed record on the treatment of so-called "pariah" states in the Council, as analysts Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Andrew Small have previously chronicled.³⁸ After the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 and the Soviet Union's fall two years later, Beijing strengthened its relationships with dictatorships. The connections with energy-rich outcasts such as Sudan and Burma further deepened in the 1990s, as China's growth surged and its appetite for resources grew. "By late 2004 and early 2005," argue Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small, "China's support for pariah regimes had taken a defensive—even ideological—turn."³⁹ In 2005, Beijing praised Uzbekistan's violent handling of anti-government protests and welcomed President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe for a state visit in the middle of his government's campaign to demolish the homes of opposition supporters. In the Security Council, it consistently resisted, diluted, or abstained from supporting resolutions that threatened real consequences for the government of Sudan over the horrors occurring in the Darfur region.

Since then, however, concerned about the fragility of some of the regimes it supports and conscious of its international reputation, China has begun to condition its support in some cases. During its 2007 Security Council Presidency, for example, it prodded Khartoum into accepting a joint UN–African Union

mission to support the implementation of the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement. No doubt China was keen to polish its international reputation in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics, as well as to prevent the spread of instability in a region in which it had substantial investments.⁴⁰ Yet its record remains patchy, as demonstrated by the October 2010 draft report of an expert panel which revealed that Chinese bullets had been used in attacks on UN peacekeepers in Darfur. (Chinese diplomats in New York reportedly threatened to veto the renewal of the panel's mandate unless the language of the report was modified.)⁴¹

In the Security Council, China has edged up the spectrum in the direction of engagement with the international community. Yet it has not gone far enough. China's larger interests should dictate a more pronounced move. Beijing's economic and political interests with pariah states are significant, but they are dwarfed by its ties with Western countries and the reputational cost of cozying up to the Mugabes and Than Shwes of the world. P5 diplomats see little evidence that their Chinese colleagues share this view, especially in relation to the country's reputation. One told this author that "there is a certain amount of fatigue at always being the defender of unpleasant regimes—but it should not be overstated and it is rarely decisive."⁴²

A senior UN official characterized shifts in China's Security Council behavior as important, but "incremental, not tectonic."⁴³ China has become a more skillful and effective player, but it has not developed a policy that is consonant with its expanded interests. This tension is evident in its approach to the two critical issues of the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs.

Iran

There is no definitive proof that Iran is engaged in a program to develop nuclear weapons. However, there is widespread international concern that Tehran's effort to gain mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle through its civilian nuclear program will put it within easy technical reach of a nuclear weapon at some point in the future. Because Iran has been caught lying about the full extent of its nuclear effort, there are also real concerns about the existence of parallel, covert programs to produce such weapons.⁴⁴

China's performance on this issue has been unimpressive; one senior UN official, otherwise complimentary about Beijing, says "the Chinese think they can play fast and loose on Iran."⁴⁵ Under sustained pressure from Western powers, China supported three rounds of Security Council resolutions in 2006–2008 imposing sanctions on Iran for violating its obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN, but only after working with Russia to dilute the sanctions and drain them of effect. The two countries pursue what the Crisis Group has called "a delay-and-weaken" strategy.⁴⁶

The latest iteration of this took place in 2009–2010, after the revelation of Iran’s underground uranium enrichment facility near Qom. In June 2010, after months of haggling, China and Russia signed on to the most comprehensive Security Council sanctions package yet, targeting Iran’s financial system in particular. Analyst Michael Swaine argues that China surprised many observers by agreeing to the latest resolution, but it did so only after receiving various incentives and assurances, and to avoid isolation in light of Russia’s anticipated shift to support the sanctions.⁴⁷ The financial sanctions appear to be having a greater effect on the regime in Tehran than anticipated. That has not stopped the wrangling, however. In October 2010, the Obama administration concluded that Chinese firms were assisting Iran to develop its missile technology and nuclear weapons, and asked Beijing to get the companies to desist.⁴⁸

Beijing’s interests on the Iranian nuclear issue are not, of course, identical to Western ones. China is a significant consumer of Iranian energy, receiving 11 percent of its crude oil from Iran (its third-largest supplier after Saudi Arabia and Angola) and taking a keen interest in the country’s oil and gas reserves. It sees Iran as an important partner in the Middle East and something of a counterweight to U.S. dominance in the region, as well as a potential partner in Central and Southwest Asia. With its strong historical attachment to the principle of state sovereignty, China is more prone to rest on Iran’s right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Given China’s own experiences as the target of sanctions—especially the Western sanctions imposed after Tiananmen Square and the revelations of missile sales to Pakistan—it is most reluctant to agree to sanctions and far more inclined to the diplomatic track.⁴⁹ (Almost every Chinese interviewee reminded this author of the history of sanctions directed against China.)

However, this approach seems short-sighted given what is at stake for the world, and for China, as a key player in the international system. An Iranian bomb would embolden a regime with links to Hezbollah and other terrorist groups, endanger strategic waterways, threaten regional states (including, importantly, other key suppliers of energy to China in the Persian Gulf), and contribute to regional and global nuclear proliferation. The idea of a powerful state balancing the United States in the Middle East may seem superficially attractive to Beijing, but as one Chinese strategist commented to this author, “a nuclear-armed stronghold of anti-Americanism in the region would presage a bleak future for China, not least because of rising oil prices.”⁵⁰ Swaine notes it would also degrade “China’s status as one of only a handful of nuclear powers,

Human rights is the issue on which China is most disengaged.

undermine the NPT, and (perhaps most importantly) add to the number of nuclear armed powers in close proximity to China. . . This would reduce China's relative influence as a major power, worsen its immediate threat environment, and arguably destabilize the larger global security environment."⁵¹

In the long term, China's approach is risky; in the short term, it is undermining its relationships with the West and its international reputation. Surely, if it is opposed to the development of Iranian nuclear weapons and also keen to minimize the use of force to this end by the United States or Israel, then it should maximize its diplomatic solidarity with Western powers in the Security Council. China has legitimate national interests to protect, but it could take a larger view of those interests.

North Korea

The North Korean nuclear weapons program is, in the words of a UN official, "much more dangerous for the Chinese" than the Iranian program.⁵² During the

Cold War, China was North Korea's chief protector and quartermaster, in an alliance that was said to be as "close as lips and teeth."⁵³ Much of the ideological camaraderie has evaporated since Deng's reforms, but history and personal ties remain—as a Chinese interviewee told this author, "many Chinese lost their lives in the Korean War, and most Chinese people would be reluctant to give up their old friends."⁵⁴

**The last five years
have defined more
clearly the limits of
Beijing's conversion.**

Political and security interests are, naturally, dominant. China is loath to see a collapsed state on the Korean peninsula—with resulting refugee flows and security implications—or reunification with South Korea that would mean China had to suffer American GIs on its eastern border. On the other hand, how comforting is it to suffer a highly unpredictable, not to say unhinged, family-owned regime on your eastern border? There is also the question of the thickness of China's economic ties with the two Koreas: there are 25 times as many commercial flights between China and South Korea as between China and North Korea, and 50 times as much total trade.⁵⁵

Chinese frustration with North Korea emerged at the time of Pyongyang's 2006 nuclear test, which President Hu Jintao was reportedly notified about only 20 minutes in advance. Publicly, Beijing criticized the move as "brazen"; in the Council, it supported sanctions against the hermit kingdom.⁵⁶ In 2009, Pyongyang mounted another series of provocations, launching a rocket, walking out of the Six-Party Talks, and testing a second nuclear device. Again Beijing was critical of its ally, yet this time it was determined not to damage its

bilateral relationship (or, perhaps, expose its own lack of influence over Pyongyang) with the kind of overt rhetoric it had employed three years earlier. The Crisis Group reports that there is an unusually public debate in Beijing over ties with North Korea between “traditionalists,” who propose the continued provision of support to North Korea, and “strategists,” who propose a harder line.⁵⁷ Strategists even go so far as to say (as one did to this author): “North Korea is the bad guy and South Korea is the good guy. China has to be on the right side of history.”⁵⁸

This debate became more prominent in 2010, against the backdrop of an awkward political transition in Pyongyang and North Korea’s sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in March, with 46 fatalities. China’s response—that North Korea’s role was unproven—lacked credibility and was characterized by President Obama as “willful blindness.”⁵⁹ U.S. and South Korean naval maneuvers off the Korean peninsula followed, but Chinese diplomatic maneuvers in New York confined the Security Council’s response to a weak statement from its president. Thus, the international organization’s response to the unprovoked sinking of a warship with substantial loss of life—a clear threat to international peace and security, one would have thought—was a presidential statement that did not name the attacker and was labeled by *The New York Times* as “absurdly, dangerously lame.”⁶⁰ Similarly, China refused to allow the Council to condemn North Korea’s further provocations in late 2010, when it revealed the existence of a new uranium enrichment facility and launched a deadly artillery barrage at South Korea.⁶¹

China continues to define its national interests narrowly.

Human rights

The issue at the very end of China’s stakeholder spectrum, on which it is the most disengaged, is human rights. Beijing is largely hostile to independent international scrutiny of its own deeply flawed human rights record, as seen in its reaction to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to dissident Liu Xiaobo. China is a member of the UN’s Human Rights Council (HRC), and it allows itself to be subjected to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism, by which the HRC assesses the human rights records of all member–states every four years. China’s participation in the UPR is to be welcomed, and it is right that the resulting reports praise the country’s remarkable achievements in poverty reduction. However, human rights groups note that China takes a high-handed and defensive approach to the process.⁶²

China wants respect, but not responsibility.

Beijing is equally obstructionist when it comes to the scrutiny of other countries' human rights records, especially its friends and allies. In 2007, for instance, China was the strongest advocate of proposals to curtail the ability of the HRC to monitor human rights in individual countries, only relenting in exchange for the withdrawal of its special rapporteurs on

Belarus and Cuba. In the Security Council, China usually works with Russia to prevent the consideration of human rights violations in places such as Zimbabwe and Darfur. Burma is a good example: in 2007, Beijing and Moscow vetoed a draft Security Council resolution critical of the military junta; in the last few months of 2010, China mounted "a high-octane, Western-style diplomatic effort" to oppose U.S. moves to pressure the country's leaders by launching a commission of inquiry into possible war crimes they may have committed.⁶³

Through the approach it has taken in the HRC, the old Commission on Human Rights, the Security Council, and the General Assembly, China has played a critical role in wearing down Western capitals on human rights issues and pushing human rights further to the periphery of UN debate.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

In Western countries, there is sometimes a tendency to lay the blame for any friction in the China relationship on our own politicians. No doubt this is sometimes justified. But China, too, has a choice as to how it comports itself. Its behavior helps determine how other states react to it. Its approach to the international organization helps determine its influence over the organization—and in the world.

In the past quarter-century, China has become a far more active and effective player in the UN, sometimes even outperforming the United States. It has changed the way it does business (through its diplomats and on the Security Council) and the business it does (for example, in the areas of peacekeeping and the responsibility to protect). Yet, the last five years have defined more clearly the limits of Beijing's conversion. Some of the items on China's UN agenda (for example North Korea), that were previously moving up the stakeholder spectrum have now stabilized and even slipped down a little. China continues to define its national interests narrowly and pursue them with an uncompromising resolve. China wants respect, but not responsibility. It is reluctant to bind its own freedom of movement and subsume it within international institutions in the way the United States did after the Second World War, even though Washington's relative power was far greater then than Beijing's is now.

Some analysts will say that a rising China will want to reshape the UN in coming years. It may well. However, one should not underestimate either the extent to which the structures and practices of the organization already accord with China's interests, or the difficulty of altering those structures and practices to favor China further over the certain objections of the rest of the P5, other important powers such as Japan and India, and other member states.

There are debates in China over these issues, and in some ways they mirror Western debates: there are "idealists" who study and promote the UN, and "realists" who scold them for neglecting Chinese power or compromising Chinese values.⁶⁴ But the Chinese debate is heavily tilted toward UN skeptics and away from UN groupies—"there are not many John Ikenberrys in China," observed one academic to this author.⁶⁵ Many foreign policy actors in Beijing regard the West's "responsibility" agenda as an attempt to retard China's rise. In the aftermath of the Copenhagen debacle, for example, the debate in China was less about whether Wen Jiabao's concessions went far enough and more about whether they went too far.

None of this is to say that China's interests coincide exactly with Western interests. They do not, and we should not expect China to act exactly as the West does. Nor should we ask China to advance global interests at the expense of its national interests. But as China's wealth and power grow, so will its interests expand. A middle-power foreign policy is inadequate for a great power.

Beijing may put forward its own, quite different, stakeholder spectrum.

If China is to help run the international system, then it has a stake in strengthening it. Beijing needs to strike a new balance between its traditional economic as well as security concerns and the broader imperatives it must now satisfy, including stable great-power relations, non-proliferation, and developing its international prestige. China's UN performance has largely escaped scrutiny in the last two decades, with the world's head turned first by U.S. power and then by U.S. overreach. That pattern will not hold. The old principle—that with power comes responsibility—requires China to move up the stakeholder spectrum.

On the other hand, the West needs to be careful what it wishes for. Western countries want Beijing to be more responsible and active, but they don't like it when Beijing is more assertive. China's version of "stepping up" is not necessarily the same as the West's. Professor Pang Zhongying has argued that a stronger China may be less anxious about external powers intervening in China's domestic affairs, but also less fussy about observing the principle of non-interference in *other* states' domestic affairs.⁶⁶ How would the West feel about

China involving itself in the Middle East peace process, for example, or participating in “coalitions of the willing” that intervened in other countries?

In other words, the responsibilities—and prerogatives—of a stakeholder are open to interpretation. In the future, Beijing may put forward its own, quite different, stakeholder spectrum.

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