

REASONS FOR CHINA'S GROWING ASSERTIVENESS AND PURSUIT OF REFORMING THE UN

Przemysław Ciborek

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SUMMARY

Preliminary research of the People's Republic of China (PRC) international activities shows that China is showing growing aspirations to redefine the global order, reflecting its increasing role in international relations. These mentions are strongly supported, as in recent years, there has been a quantitative increase in explicit calls from Chinese diplomacy for reforming the United Nations (UN) in general and, most importantly, its decisive body - the Security Council (UNSC). According to Beijing, the UN should "safeguard the international system at its core." In this context, China is trying to increase its influence in shaping the global agenda by enhancing its significance in UN debates and deliberations.

KEY FINDINGS

1. China is focusing on developing its bilateral relations with Global South countries, as it is seeking partners to protect its interests and strengthen its international image in the time of confrontation with the United States.
2. Groupings such as G77 and GF-GDI are enabling China to gain support for UN reforms with shared values based on the developmental rights' agenda under the banner of „building the community of the shared future for mankind“.
3. Relationality remains the core element of China's international engagements, involving informal agreements and cultivating relationships, reflecting China's commitment to Mao Zedong's Three Worlds Theory.
4. Growing Beijing's assertiveness extends to socio-economic issues as it secured influence in various UN bodies such as UN DESA and ECOSOC, showcasing China's commitment to shaping „the new world order“ through economic and social policies.

INTRODUCTION

The PRC is actively seeking partners for "international unanimity" among developing countries. This shift towards the Global South is driven by a series of setbacks in Chinese diplomacy while conducting investments and effective diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe and in a broader context in the West. Yet, most importantly, the biggest obstacle is strained relations between Beijing and Washington. The attempt to redefine the global order, manifested in a decisive turn towards developing countries, seems to be an alternative scenario for Beijing and is realized based on relational principles deeply rooted in the international practice of the PRC. This corresponds to China's current actions within the Group of 77 (G77) and Chinese initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative Group of Friends (GoF-GDI).

IMPORTANCE OF THE G77 IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China, focusing mainly on developing relations with Global South countries, officially remains committed to protecting their wide set of interests. The G77+China Summit held in September 2023 in Havana reflected this phenomenon. During the summit, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for "creating a fairer world for countries on the path of development" [1]. At the same event, Chinese Vice Premier Li Xi warned representatives of developing countries "against threats arising from unilateralism and hegemonism by some developed countries, which impose unilateral sanctions, disrupt global supply chains, and ignore the rights and interests of developing countries" [2].

Therefore, the G77 currently plays a crucial role in China's external policy, especially within the UN. The G77 was formed to protect common economic interests, promote cooperation and solidarity, and increase the influence of Global South countries in world politics.

Despite considering itself part of the developing world, China, taking advantage of the asymmetry in bilateral relations with each of the 135 G77 developing countries, has become their largest donor in bilateral dialogues, especially in Africa and Asia. The G77+China coalition constitutes 136 out of the 193 UN member states. Within the Group, China has mastered the ability to pursue a multi-faceted policy, resulting in several advantages from a geopolitical perspective. These include incorporating Chinese discourse into the international mainstream, sharing "developmental experience" through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), improving its international image by recognizing China as a state safeguarding the interests and rights of Global South countries, exerting greater pressure on decisions related to finance, trade, and international development, advocating for UN reform that considers the growing needs of developing countries and their representation at the highest level, promoting sustainable development, supporting "social justice" within the International Labour Organization (ILO), and promoting a "Chinese interpretation" of human rights in developing countries that would better align with "national conditions." In this context, the significance of the G77 for achieving political and economic goals has been repeatedly

emphasized by leading Chinese diplomats. In 2022, during a ministerial meeting of the Group, Wang Yi emphasized that cooperation between China and the G77 is by far "the most important multilateral platform for cooperation among developing countries" [3]. Given China's focus on its own multilateral settings in this matter, especially the BRI, this statement underscores the importance of the G77 in China's foreign policy within the UN.

THE GLOBAL SOUTH "MANIFESTED SUPPORT" OF THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

In China, there is an ongoing discussion about the role of the Global South in international relations. In 2021, Zhang Yunling, an expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, pointed out that the power balance between developed and developing countries had shifted. He also noted that in the past, the "growth point of the Chinese economy" depended on developed countries, but this traditional model could no longer be sustained [4].

This statement clearly indicates that China's further growth must be achieved through relations with developing countries. For China, aspiring to be a global superpower, the issue of incorporating "Chinese developmental solutions" in other developing countries is crucial. This motivation was also emphasized by Wang Yi during the ministerial meeting, urging countries to "learn from each other."

In this regard, the concept of the "circle of friends" (pengyou quan) is particularly important. China emphasizes relationality and cultivating informal agreements as the main approach in foreign policy. This approach resulted in the creation of the Global Development Initiative Group of Friends (GoF-GDI), announced in 2021 by Xi Jinping and formally established in January 2022 at the UN headquarters in New York [5]. However, it should be noted that formally, GoF-GDI is not part of the Organization. According to China, GoF-GDI is characterized by inclusivity, and its main goal is the "exchange of views and good practices" regarding the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda [6]. Despite promises of inclusivity, it is objectively fair to say that representatives of the broader West are not, in principle, supposed to be a member of it. Additionally, Beijing-organized summits are chronically underrepresented, particularly concerning representatives from Central and Western Europe. This partly

applies to representatives of Global South countries, as evidenced by the Belt and Road Forum in October 2023. The previous Forum in 2019 gathered 37 heads of state and high government officials, which, compared to this year's outcome of 23 high-level representatives (including Xi Jinping and Li Qiang), can be considered disappointing for Beijing [7]. Importantly, apart from China, 21 out of 26 high-level representatives of the G77 participated in the Forum. This underrepresentation is a persistent issue for China. Due to underrepresentation in high-level summits, caused mostly by economic disappointment, the China-Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC) cooperation mechanism has been, if not abandoned, temporarily muted by China. However, it should not be expected that China will abandon its flagship political-economic projects initiated by Xi Jinping. China's flexibility in this regard lies in its ability to issue official invitations to heads of state from "less prestigious" geographical directions, thereby ensuring the event's quantitative and "qualitative" dimensions. During this year's summit, some of the most important guests included Russian President Vladimir Putin, Argentine President Alberto Fernandez, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, and Indonesian President Joko Widodo. The latter presence at the Forum was combined with an official state visit.

RELATIONALITY AS A CORE STRATEGY ELEMENT

Expanding the characteristics of relationality mentioned above, it can be unequivocally stated that China's contemporary international activity, resulting in the implementation of various "global initiatives," confirms Beijing's commitment to the principles of relationality [8]. According to Qin Yaqing, relationality is a key concept abstracted from the interrelated world. Therefore, the logic of relationality is that an actor is making certain decisions with accordance to the degrees of intimacy and/or importance of relationship to specific others [9]. The Global Development Initiative reflects pragmatism and a flexible approach to foreign policy, characterized by the development of economic relations in the name of economic rationality. The introduction of the Global Security Initiative directly relates to Beijing's increasing importance and public calls for dialogue and negotiations. Moreover, China has shown readiness to assume the role of a mediator in international conflicts. The characteristics of relationality regarding different value

systems and cultures are reflected in the emergence of the Global Civilizational Initiative. In the context of strengthening its international capabilities, Chinese diplomacy once again implements the deeply rooted concept of foreign policy related to Mao Zedong's Three Worlds Theory, as the PRC remains to be portrayed as a representative and the leader of the "poor South." [10].

Moreover, China has been engaged in building its own "network of relations" for years. In principle, the main motivation is to represent and protect the interests of "Third World" countries, a group with which China still identifies despite its international status as a global power.

Essentially, Beijing pursues its own political goals, thanks to growing support from "underrepresented states" on the international stage. There are numerous examples of mobilizing potential participants for "networking" with China by engaging them in various multilateral mechanisms (e.g., FOCAC, China-CELAC, 16+1, C+5), initiatives (e.g., BRI), or international organizations (e.g., UN, BRICS), as well as with more "loose" forms like GoF-GDI and G77. Thus, the People's Republic of China consistently seeks to increase its role in the United Nations and tries to promote its interests on the international stage by developing relations with Global South countries. This is partly due to the failures of Chinese diplomacy in the political-economic sphere with Western, Central, and Southern European countries, as well as tensions in relations with Washington [11]. Therefore, to attract developing countries, China uses relationality, emphasizing the importance of relationships, culture, and tradition in international relations. In practice, this translates into the use of relationality principles in its international activities, especially within initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilizational Initiative.

CHINA'S AGILE POLICY REGARDING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES AT THE UN FORUM

It is no secret that China is using its economic, political, and institutional statecraft to change the global governance system from within. On the one hand, in recent years, Beijing has been actively promoting its economic and social policies through UNSC. It became possible through agile and flexible interpretation of the topics important to China's growth and supporting their interests. For example, China is underscoring the

importance of food security within the UNSC, as it creates a security dilemma for developing countries. On the other hand, China is trying to eliminate topics such as human rights from the UNSC agenda, arguing that this issue is not security-related and, thus, should have been undertaken solely by other special agendas, such as the UN Human Rights Council. This, however, has been argued with China's different understanding of the basic terms used within the UN forums. For example, above mentioned long-established and widely accepted human rights regarding civil and political rights are now being confronted with economic and social dimensions of human rights, rhetorically supported by cultural relativism. On top of that, Beijing is arguing that multilateralism is essential for the international rule of law, which basically replicates the Western narrative. However, Chinese diplomacy is going further, stating that rules-based international order reflects "selective multilateralism" [12]. This, in turn, allows China to introduce terms such as "true multilateralism", effectively undermining the already existing multilateral setting.

China's growing assertiveness is not only justified by growing economic and political capabilities in overall terms but is especially reflecting their growing position in socio-economic issues under the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA) and growing China-led coalition within United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Under UN DESA, China's influence is reflected by the fact that the current positions of the Under-Secretary-General for Economic Affairs, the Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Analysis and Coordination, and the Director of the Division for Sustainable Development are being occupied by Chinese nationals [13]. Moreover, China's commitment to represent most - if not all - of the ECOSOC's functional commissions, standing committees and expert bodies has been known for years (ISHR 2021) [14].

CONCLUSIONS

China seeks to gain influence over Global South countries by creating a "network of relations" and participating in numerous multilateral mechanisms sometimes overlapping. In this context relationality has become a key element of China's foreign policy. In this context, the analysis of China's engagement with the G77 and the creation

of the Global Development Initiative Group of Friends, which nominally serves to protect the interests of developing countries but primarily serves Chinese interests, is particularly important. Taking advantage of the political and economic asymmetry and increasingly playing the role of a donor in the Belt and Road Initiative, under the umbrella of promoting sustainable development goals, China will seek to pursue its own foreign policy ambitions. However, there is a growing problem, as some of China's initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Forum, are becoming underrepresented, affecting their effectiveness and negatively impacting the efficiency of China's foreign policy. Chinese authorities must take this into account. In the context of relationality, China's activities are translating to strengthening close and trusted relations between Global South countries based on common values, interests, and goals. The Chinese foreign policy, nominally respecting sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, as well as promoting dialogue and cooperation on equal terms, focuses precisely on building "friendly relations." This is particularly evident in the case of developing countries, especially within the G77 group, where China engages in developing bilateral relations, strengthening them through numerous strategic partnerships. Despite the existing - favorable for China - asymmetry with each of the Global South partners, such "shortening of the distance" encourages China to promote its own values, which would be accepted by G77 members in the pursuit of common interests. In this context, it is worth recalling the speech by Chinese Vice Premier Li Xi during the G77 summit in Havana, where he praised Xi Jinping's vision "to build a community with a shared future for mankind" and three global initiatives (GDI, GSI, GCI), which are supposedly offering a "Chinese approach to lasting peace, greater development, and closer cooperation in the world, as well as an important platform for deepening South-South cooperation."

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