The COVID-19 crisis has sharpened the debate between China and the United States over future leadership of the global order that has been dominated by the US since the end of the Second World War. Global Asia looks at China’s vision for a world order that could displace that of the US.

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China’s Challenge to the UN and Global Order
By Rosemary Foot

After decades of economic growth have catapulted China onto the world stage, Beijing has an increasing interest in having a say in changes to a global order that the United States has led since the end of the Second World War. With the US under President Donald Trump pulling away from past commitments to the existing world order, China is uniquely positioned to step into the breach. But China’s focus on the United Nations as a vehicle to shape a new global order is not without inherent challenges, notes Rosemary Foot.

WE MIGHT NOT AGREE easily on the meaning of the term “global order,” but a key component includes the degree to which there is acceptance of collective arrangements for solving or managing the world’s problems. This is important because, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has decided to pursue a more active role in global governance. As Xi has put it in his various writings and speeches, changes in the balance of power have prompted China to take on new global responsibilities. In a more ambitious formulation, presented in 2018 at an official domestic conference on foreign affairs, Xi urged that China “take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system.” The Chinese leadership believes that China has a good story to tell, represents a politico-economic model of interest to developing countries and should be confident enough to offer “Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.” This contrasts markedly with Beijing’s view of the current Western-led governance system, which China claims has “malfunctioned” and is “beyond redemption.”

Among the many global governance mechanisms that exist in world politics, the United Nations holds a central position. The UN also holds a special place for China. Chinese official statements have regularly described the UN as the “most universal, representative, authoritative inter-governmental international organization” and the multilateral body best placed to deal collectively with various global threats and challenges. Xi has claimed a special status for China as the first country to sign the UN Charter, failing to note that it was the Nationalist Government of China at that time. He has said that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China not only has special responsibilities for the maintenance of world order, but also now has the capabilities to fulfill those responsibilities.

In a landmark speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015, Xi put significant amounts of meat on the bones of that idea. He announced, among other things, a 10-year, US$1 billion China-UN Peace and Development Trust Fund; that China would join the new UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System; and to that end would establish a Chinese peacekeeping standby force of 8,000 troops. Beijing also offered a US$100 million grant to the African Union over five years to support the establishment of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis Unit.

Even before these additional commitments, for several years China had been providing more peacekeeping troops than the four other permanent Security Council members put together. From late 2012, these included combat forces, though Beijing prefers to call them guard teams. From 2016, it became the second-largest contributor to the UN’s peacekeeping budget, and Beijing now stands as the second-largest contributor to the overall UN budget, with the US in both cases still number one. Chinese nationals currently hold three high-level posts in the UN Secretariat (Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region, continuing head of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Assistant Secretary-General in the Bureau of Policy and Program Support within the UN Development Program). Chinese nationals hold three high-level posts in the UN Secretariat (Special Envoy to the Great Lakes Region, continuing head of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Assistant Secretary-General in the Bureau of Policy and Program Support within the UN Development Program). Chinese nationals hold four executive positions in UN specialized agencies (the International Civil Aviation Organization, the Industrial Development Organization, the International Telecommunications Union and the Food and Agricultural Organization.)

THE UN IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA
China’s more active engagement with the UN is surprising in some respects because it comes at a time when the body has taken on responsibilities that challenge Beijing’s state-centric Westphalian vision of world order. From the start of the post-Cold War period, the UN Security Council appeared to move into a post-Westphalian era and to privilege the UN’s role in providing human protection: that is, it accepted a broadening of the concept of security, and acknowledged that internal breakdowns of a state’s security as well as large-scale violence directed at individuals pose potential challenges to international peace and security.

The security council has since mandated more complex peace operations involving a range of tasks that can be viewed as domestically intrusive. It has vowed that the UN has a core obligation to protect civilians caught up in armed conflict, and especially so for women and children, who suffer particularly egregious forms of abuse in wartime. Organizational and budgetary transformations have come on the heels of these conceptual changes including the establishment within the UN Secretariat of an Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the creation of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. In 2005, a World Summit of Heads of State and Government agreed to endorse a “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) populations from war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, together with their incitement. In September 1999, then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan interpreted the scope of the UN Charter to mean that members are “more than ever conscious that its aim is to protect individual human beings, not to protect those who abuse them.” Annan regularly reminded UN member states that the causes of peace and security, development and human
rights had to be advanced together, otherwise no one part of this three-pillar structure would succeed in its aims. Grounded in the UN Charter, the UN’s commitment to this structure has been firmly articulated by other UN secretaries-general and in UN documents. **CHINA’S RESPONSE**

How has China coped with this broader conception of security and a more conditional understanding of state sovereignty within the UN? And how is it using its new-found material and political influence in service of the UN’s agenda and its own beliefs? More broadly, how do its positions relate to concerns among international relations scholars and the policy world with establishing whether China should be looked upon as either a revisionist or status quo state in global governance? And more particularly, to what extent do its positions challenge the liberal view, the advancement of international peace and security and the associated advancement of human protection? More broadly, Beijing has been working to restrain UN ambition. China does not deny outright the UN’s need to contribute to human protection, but has raised questions about how that can best be achieved. In China’s view, the advancement of international peace and security and the associated advancement of human protection should be based on a triadic model that ac- cords a central role to the government in power, promotes stability at the domestic social level and focuses on long-term economic development in order to build effective domestic governance structures. This model draws directly on what Beijing projects as its own experience since its turn toward “Reform and Opening” in late 1978 under Deng Xiaoping. In earlier times, Beijing argued that its economic successes and domestic stability were enough of a contribution to world order and human protection. But in the contemporary era, the Chinese leadership is more likely to suggest that emulating China’s experience in some form might be a valuable way to deal with threats to humankind. As is apparent, China’s model downgrades the human rights leg of the UN’s three-pillar structure. It also neglects reflection on its own instances of domestic governance failure, frequent uses of repressive measures, and regular occurrences of social instability. In addition, it constrains the contribution to be made by an independent civil society, and elevates the role of the state and economic development. It is an argument that appears to favor long-term structural change within states as the main route to conflict prevention and resolution, rather than a position that responds swiftly to contain the early stages of conflict, to prevent a conflict that appears imminent or that treats breaches in international humanitarian law as international crimes.

In service of state-centrism, China’s articulated positions show a desire to narrow the concept of what might be a genuine threat to international peace and security, and therefore to narrow the range of items that make it onto the Security Council agenda. In Beijing’s view, the balance of UN concern should tip toward supporting the government in power and away from the emphasis on protecting civilians. It urges the international community to provide a state under stress with constructive assistance, but that government should decide on the forms of assistance that it requires. National ownership is also paramount with respect to accountability, with domestic judicial institutions taking the lead role in instances where there have been wide-scale atrocities committed against civilians.

The development arm of China’s triadic model finds expression in the often-expressed view that conflict prevention and conflict resolution are basically dependent on reductions in poverty levels and in the promotion of higher levels of development. In Beijing’s view, underdevelopment is the root cause of violence. Thus, the UN’s Women, Peace and Security agenda basically becomes a question of empowering women by increasing economic opportunities. Capacity building for fragile states unable or unwilling to prevent atrocities similarly becomes a development rather than a reform issue, with the UN offering the assistance that the state in question determines is needed.

The official Chinese perspective on human rights also needs to be interpreted through the lens of its triadic model. In China’s view, sovereign equality is the most important norm governing state-to-state relations and is vital to the protection of human rights. At the UN Human Rights Council, Beijing has introduced resolutions to emphasize development as a fundamental human right from which other rights (might) eventually flow. China’s attachment to its notion of social stability manifests itself in statements indicating that it is the duty of governments to maintain public order; that the use of social media inside a state needs to be controlled; and that non-governmental actors need to be guided in their work by the government in...
power. Beijing works to constrain the space allocated by the UN to human rights defenders and it casts doubt on the value of what China terms their “confrontational” approach, and the allegedly biased nature of their reporting.

A RECEPIEVE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT?
A number of international developments have improved China’s ability to promote these arguments. Obviously, there has been an increase in the numbers of governments and other political actors that have come to regard a solid relationship with China as important, mostly because of China’s economic power. This includes the UN itself, especially as a result of China’s largesse at a time of economic strain. In addition, the UN Secretariat recognizes that Beijing’s relatively positive relations with African governments — the continent where most of the UN’s peace operations take place — is beneficial to the legitimate enactment of key parts of the UN’s protection policies.

Many of those self-same governments share elements of China’s post-colonial identity and similarly fear a more interventionist UN. Debates over the “Responsibility to Protect” illustrate this concern, with a number of states only supporting dimensions of R2P that stress the state’s responsibility to protect its people from mass atrocities. From this perspective, the international community should focus on encouraging and assisting states to fulfill their own protection function.

In addition, the UN itself and its related agencies have produced numerous reports that demonstrate the relationship between a lack of development, the outbreak of civil war and consequent failures in human protection. Moreover, the UN’s complex human protection agenda has experienced some spectacular failures that have prompted criticism of peace operations that have so-called Christmas-tree mandates laden with ever-growing mandates that are said to illustrate the expansion of ambition over resources.

There is little doubt, too, that the relative decline in Western influence at the UN, not least because of the diminution of the West’s troop presence in UN peace operations in the last few years, has benefited a more active China. This decline in influence has been accelerated in the era of President Donald Trump. The Trump administration’s cutbacks in funding for the overall UN budget, and recent suspension of funding for the World Health Organization and then withdrawal from it, together with withdrawal from such bodies as the Human Rights Council and UNESCO is indicative of its dismissive attitude. The US nationalist response to the devastating impact of Covid-19 similarly shows America’s unwillingness to use the UN and its related agencies to play a global leadership role.

A THREAT TO LIBERAL ORDER?
Assessing the depth of China’s challenge to liberal order via a focus on the United Nations is a difficult undertaking. This is in part because there is a level of receptivity toward China’s arguments made in UN bodies, although the UN’s overall attachment to the human rights pillar remains strong. The UN is made up of several different constituencies: the international secretariat or bureaucracy located in New York, Geneva, and other regional offices; and a UN made up of almost all of the world’s states. Within those member states, there are governments that support a Secretariat with some independent autonomy; states that are close to some of the ideas that the Secretariat has promoted in the search for human protection; and states that clearly prefer a less-ambitious UN that reflects America’s unwillingness to use the UN and its related agencies to play a global leadership role.

CONCLUSION
This mixed picture suggests that China’s UN behavior cannot be captured using binary analytical categories, such as “revisionist” versus “status quo.” Beijing is both aided and constrained because the UN itself represents more than one kind of order — within the secretariat, among its membership, its charter, and everyday behavior. Undoubtedly, the Chinese leadership has tried to shift the discourse on how best to promote the UN’s human protection agenda. It has elevated its model of development linked to a strong and socially stable state above that of the UN’s structure connecting development with peace and security, and human rights.

Were China to acquire the increased authority within the UN that it seeks, including the acquisition of several high-level positions within the Secretariat, we are likely to see a swifter return to a UN that is involved in fewer, less complex, and less intrusive peace operations; that gives less emphasis overall to human protection; and places more emphasis on the development arm of the UN. The UN Human Rights Council could evolve into a body that avoids accountability for abuses and gives overwhelming emphasis to collective rights and the right to development. This kind of UN would be, even more than is the case today, an inter-state governance mechanism where individual governments requiring assistance decide on priorities, and the international community acts as an enabler of the governments in power. Privileging the state in this way reflects a minimalist and pluralist conception of world order.

That hardly sounds like an adequate role in an era that has seen the continuation of high levels of atrocity crimes, the eruption of destructive civil wars, a devastating global health pandemic and an explosion in refugee numbers. Climate change is likely to exacerbate most, if not all, of these concerns. All these challenges would seem to require collective global responses rather than individual state action. Beijing overplays the notion that positive outcomes rely on privileging the demands of national authorities, with the UN in a reduced role of resource provider rather than as leader or partner.

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