

**Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission:
Hearing on “A ‘China Model?’ Beijing’s Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and
Standards”**

Beijing’s Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards in the U.N. System

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Beijing is leveraging China’s growing economic, diplomatic, and military capabilities to shape the global order in ways that benefit Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interests. For Chinese President Xi Jinping, the global governance system—the set of norms, rules, and institutions that guide cooperation and dispute resolution among nations—is a particular focus. In June 2018 President Xi called for China to “lead the reform of the global governance system.”¹ The current global governance system is rules-based, and it privileges liberal democratic norms and standards, including universal rights. The United States played a critical role in establishing this system, and it is a problem for the CCP. In the Chinese political system, there is no authority higher than the CCP. The party is above the law, and it bestows (or denies) individual rights as it sees fit. As long as the prevailing global governance system privileges liberal democratic values and universal rights, China will fail to meet the highest global standards. Beijing is seeking to change that by exporting elements of the China model to the global governance system, thus bringing the global order more in line with China’s authoritarian governance principles.

The United Nations (U.N.) system is both the primary target and the primary platform for Beijing’s global governance reform drive. In September 2019, the State Council, China’s national cabinet, issued a foreign policy white paper that explicitly states: “The U.N. is at the core of the global governance system.”² Thus, President Xi Jinping’s call for global governance reform is a call for China to reform the U.N. System. That campaign is already underway, and China is making significant gains. Unfortunately, as China ramps up its efforts to undermine liberal democratic principles across the U.N. system and augment or replace them with authoritarian ones, the United States is leaning back, ceding the ground and providing maximum maneuvering room for China to achieve its objectives. That must change. This testimony will cover five key points:

1. China is working to undermine existing U.N. human rights standards to create more maneuvering room for authoritarian regimes.
2. China is promoting “state sovereignty” internet governance norms that enable censorship and other forms of digital information-control.
3. China is leveraging the International Telecommunications Union (ITU)—a U.N. specialized agency—to support its techno-nationalist industrial policies.
4. When Chinese nationals occupy leadership positions in U.N. specialized agencies, they leverage those positions to pursue Chinese foreign policy objectives that other nations may not share, potentially undermining U.N. functionality.
5. The United States is currently disengaging from the U.N., creating maximum maneuvering room for China to achieve these objectives. The United States must change course and shift from disengagement to full-spectrum competition.

China is working to undermine existing U.N. human rights standards to create more maneuvering room for authoritarian regimes.

The U.N. follows a common human rights standard first established via the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³ That standard is a problem for China. It defines human rights as both universal and inalienable, it incorporates traditional liberal democratic values such as freedom of expression, and it applies equally to all member states. Beijing is working to undermine that standard and replace it with a new principle that includes both “universality and particularity.”

China prefers a human rights principle in which the state is the final arbiter: the state defines the nation's collective interests and, based on that definition, bestows or denies individual rights as it sees fit. Chinese leaders are also seeking to expand the definition of human rights to include national economic development so they can claim to be protecting human rights as long as their domestic economy is growing.

China is deploying a three-part strategy to push elements of this authoritarian-friendly approach into U.N. doctrine.

First, China is convening its own human rights forums to build plurilateral support for China’s human rights principles. China’s 2017 South-South Human Rights Forum produced the Beijing Declaration on human rights, which lays out the China standard in detail. Instead of a common standard that applies equally to all nations, the declaration states that “the realization of human rights must take into account regional and national contexts, and political, economic, social, cultural, historical and religious backgrounds.”⁴ In other words, different standards should apply to different nations. It also declares that states can restrict human rights as long as those restrictions “meet the legitimate needs of national security, public order, public health, public safety, public morals and the general welfare of the people.”⁵ In other words, ruling regimes can restrict human rights as they see fit. This is a direct contradiction of universally recognized human rights principles currently enshrined by international law.

Second, China is revising U.N. doctrine to incorporate elements of Chinese-style human rights principles. China has thus far succeeded in passing two resolutions through the U.N. Human Rights Council: a June 2017 resolution suggesting that human rights must be balanced with economic development needs and a March 2018 resolution that calls for the international community to address human rights problems through “mutually beneficial cooperation” and to take “national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds” into account when determining what human rights standard a particular nation should meet.⁶ Both resolutions provide maneuvering room for China and other authoritarian regimes to take actions that infringe on fundamental human rights.⁷

Third, China is now the second largest donor to the U.N. (accounting for 12 percent of the total U.N. budget), and Beijing is seeking to leverage that role—and the Trump administration's call to reduce the overall U.N. budget—to restrict U.N. funding for human rights operations. During the 2017 U.N. budget negotiations, China joined forces with Russia to push for the U.N. to eliminate human rights officers across multiple U.N. peacekeeping missions.⁸ In 2018, China and Russia again called for the U.N. to eliminate 37 human rights positions across U.N. peacekeeping missions.⁹ In part due to U.S.-led pressure to reduce U.N. budgets, funding for some mechanisms, like treaty bodies that monitor human rights compliance around the world, were significantly cut last year.¹⁰

China is promoting “state sovereignty” internet governance norms that enable censorship and other forms of digital information-control.

Internet governance is still a contested space – there are no established global norms. In Beijing’s view, that provides an opportunity for China to impose its approach to internet governance on the global system. Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party controls China’s information environment. At a global level, Chinese leaders want the global governance system to provide maximum maneuvering room for Beijing to maintain and operate those controls. This level of control conflicts with universally recognized principles including freedom of speech and freedom of information.

Xi Jinping outlined a “four principles and five proposals” approach to internet governance at China’s second World Internet Conference in December 2015.¹¹ In that speech—delivered to an international audience—President Xi was careful to avoid providing too much detail on exactly what China’s approach would entail. “Respect for cyber sovereignty” is the first principle, and maintaining order is a prominent theme throughout. Both are code for state control over internet activity. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) is more straightforward when it conveys President Xi’s instructions to a domestic Chinese audience. According to the CAC, China’s internet governance goals include making sure “the Party's ideas always become the strongest voice in cyberspace” and using the internet to “steadily control all kinds of major public opinion.”¹² Those are not goals the United States shares.

In contrast, the United States supports a “free and open internet” approach, based on universal principles, and Beijing is working to counter U.S.-backed norm-building efforts to make China’s

approach the dominant global norm. According to the CAC, in Beijing's view: "cyberspace has become a new field of competition for global governance, and [China] must comprehensively strengthen international exchanges and cooperation in cyberspace to push China's proposition of Internet governance toward becoming an international consensus."¹³ The U.N. is a key focus for that effort.

Beijing's 2017 International Strategy of Cooperation in Cyberspace states that "the United Nations, as an important channel, should play a leading role in coordinating positions of various parties and building international consensus" on internet governance.¹⁴ China is playing both offense and defense within the U.N.: it is putting forward its own proposals as well as blocking liberal democratic efforts. On the offensive side, China is leveraging the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to gain plurilateral support for its own internet governance proposals. China, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan jointly submitted an "International Code of Conduct for Information Security" to the U.N. General Assembly in 2011; China submitted an updated version with a larger group of SCO nations in 2015. Both versions aim to legitimize Chinese-style internet controls.¹⁵

On the defensive side, China participated in all five rounds of a U.N. Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) process established to study cyberspace—the latter rounds of which the U.N. General Assembly directed to determine how international law should apply to nation-state behavior in cyberspace.¹⁶ In the fourth round, China added "state sovereignty" to the GGE list of governance principles, a move that effectively blocked the group's ability to establish how international law should apply in the cyber domain.¹⁷ The fifth round failed to produce a report, reportedly because China—along with Russia and Cuba—objected to principles put forward by other nations, including the right to respond to internationally wrongful acts.¹⁸ After this logjam, the process split into two groups: one spearheaded by the United States and other democracies that will continue to focus on international law, and another, organized by authoritarian regimes such as China, Russia, North Korea, and Venezuela, that describes itself as an alternative "open-ended working group acting on a consensus basis."¹⁹

China is leveraging the International Telecommunications Union (ITU)—a U.N. specialized agency—to support its techno-nationalist industrial policies.

The ITU is the specialized U.N. agency that sets international standards and protocols for information and communication technologies (ICT). The ITU is designed to function as a neutral arbiter that formulates technology standards (such as 5G wireless communication standards) based on merit. When entirely new communication technologies are emerging—i.e., when wireless phones and networks began to develop the capability to transmit not only voice calls but also data and video—the companies driving those innovations send technical experts to the ITU to present their individual technical contributions for a potential new standard. ITU members jointly assess all of those contributions, select the solutions that best meet global demand needs, and anoint those solutions as the new global standard.

Beijing views the ITU as a platform China can leverage to reduce its dependence on foreign intellectual property and increase the royalties other nations pay to China. That, in turn, can

increase China's global market dominance. Wireless communication technology is a particular focus. In the fifth-generation (5G) era, Beijing appears to be leveraging state resources to promote Huawei technology within 3GPP, which is the ITU sub-group developing global 5G standards.

The Chinese government is channeling state financial support to help Huawei and other Chinese firms send personnel to attend 3GPP meetings and flood the process with Chinese technical contributions. It is difficult for private companies from other nations to match that level of activity because sending engineers overseas to participate in 3GPP meetings and devoting R&D resources to develop 3GPP technical contributions are costly activities. Huawei has thus far submitted over 19,000 technical contributions and dispatched over 3,000 engineers to participate in the 5G standard-setting process.²⁰ Among U.S. companies, Qualcomm and Intel are the U.S. firms with the largest 3GPP presence: Qualcomm has made 5,994 technical contributions and dispatched 1,701 engineers to attend 3GPP meetings; Intel has made 3,656 technical contributions and dispatched 1,259 engineers to attend. Huawei is also leading in approved technical contributions. 3GPP members have approved 5,855 Huawei contributions (making them part of the official 5G standard), 1,994 Qualcomm contributions, and 962 Intel contributions. Thus far, Chinese firms own an estimated 36% of the patents essential for the global 5G standard; U.S. firms hold roughly 14%.²¹

China's growing IP portfolio in the global 5G standard will give Chinese companies—particularly Huawei—a price advantage in global market competition. The firms who own the essential patents in the global 5G standard will not need to pay royalties to other firms when manufacturing and selling 5G equipment; instead, other firms will pay royalties to them. That will give Chinese manufactures a cost advantage that they can use to further expand China's 5G market dominance.

When Chinese nationals occupy leadership positions in U.N. specialized agencies, they leverage those positions to pursue Chinese foreign policy objectives that other nations may not share, potentially undermining U.N. functionality.

There are 15 specialized U.N. agencies, and Chinese nationals currently lead 4 of them: the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the U.N. Industrial Development Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization. Chinese nationals also hold leadership positions below the secretary general level. For example, current ITU Secretary General ZHAO Houlin previously served as the ITU Deputy Secretary-General and Director of the ITU's Telecommunication Standardization Bureau.²² At the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Ren Minghui (who spent 30 years working for China's Ministry of Health and the nation's National Health and Family Planning Commission) currently serves as WHO Assistant Director-General for Communicable Diseases and for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases.²³

The Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service provide common guidelines for individuals who serve as leaders or staff in international institutions. Those guidelines state that

international civil servants must serve their organizations independently, and “in keeping with their oath of office, they should not seek nor should they accept instructions from any Government, person or entity external to the organization.”²⁴ China frequently violates these standards. When Chinese nationals occupy leadership positions in international organizations, Beijing leverages those individuals to co-opt the institution and push narrow Chinese political objectives, particularly on the issue of Taiwan.

During Fang Liu’s term as ICAO secretary general, the organization stopped inviting Taiwan to attend its assembly; ICAO Communications Chief Anthony Philbin reportedly told Reuters that “ICAO follows the United Nations’ ‘One China’ policy.”²⁵ After Taiwan elected Tsai Ing-wen as President—signaling a shift away from Beijing—China leveraged its influence at the WHO to block Taiwan from attending the World Health Assembly, where Taiwan had previously held observer status.²⁶ The WHO has also excluded Taiwan from emergency meetings on the current COVID-19 crisis, a move that makes it harder for Taiwanese officials to effectively manage the crisis and share information about local outbreak patterns in Taiwan with the global community.²⁷

Chinese nationals are carrying out Beijing’s foreign policy directives on other issues as well. Mr. WU Hongbo—a P.R.C. Ministry of Foreign Affairs official who has served across multiple top posts, including Ambassador to the Philippines—served as U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs from 2012 to 2017.²⁸ In 2017, when Uighur activist Dolkun Isa was slated to represent a German NGO at a U.N. forum, Mr. Wu blocked Mr. Isa’s attendance, later bragging on Chinese state television that “We have to strongly defend the motherland’s interests.”²⁹ American and German diplomats protested and successfully reversed the move. When Mr. Wu’s term ended in 2017 he was replaced with Mr. LIU Zhenmin, another Chinese national. Just like his predecessor, Mr. Liu is a senior Chinese diplomat—he most recently served as P.R.C. Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs.³⁰ Mr. Liu is leveraging his position to push the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) to support China’s Belt and Road Initiative and incorporate Xi Jinping rhetoric into U.N. doctrine.³¹

Beijing’s influence is also undermining public trust in U.N. organizations. In the early weeks of the COVID-19 Coronavirus crisis, WHO leadership criticized the travel bans the United States and other nations put in place to restrict travel to/from China but refrained from criticizing China’s attempted cover-up—which magnified Chinese casualty rates and cross-border contagion risks—and China’s refusal to allow international disease experts to visit Wuhan.³² At a moment when Chinese citizens were in an uproar over Beijing’s attempts to censor information about the outbreak, WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised Beijing’s response, including its “transparency.”³³ Given that the WHO has already demonstrated that it is acting as an instrument of Chinese national policy on Taiwan, the WHO’s apparent deference to Beijing on COVID-19 raise concerns about WHO independence and have undermined public trust in WHO decision-making throughout the COVID-19 crisis.³⁴

The United States is currently disengaging from the U.N., creating maximum maneuvering room for China to achieve these objectives. The United States must change course and shift from disengagement to full-spectrum competition.

The Trump administration is disengaging the United States from the U.N., arguing at times that the institution is too bloated or inefficient and the U.S. provides too much funding compared to other state contributions. Proponents of cutting U.S. contributions often overlook or minimize the significant savings the U.S. gets from investing in global peacekeeping, health, and development efforts that the U.N. tackles in coordination with the global community.³⁵ President Trump's repeated efforts to cut the U.N. budget—his presidential budgets have proposed zeroing out funds for some entities—create a vacuum of influence and leadership in the global body and create opportunities for other states to push their own budget priorities.

That is a mistake. U.S. disengagement has been a boon to Beijing, as it creates opportunities for China to double down on its global governance reform objectives. China is using every lever it has to reform the U.N. system because Beijing recognizes the power this system has to shape nation-state behavior. China has already made massive gains. Those gains—as outlined above—directly undermine U.S. national interests. To turn this around, the United States must pivot to full-spectrum global governance competition. Instead of leaning back, the United States must show up across the U.N. system and deploy every lever in its arsenal to protect and strengthen the rules, norms, and standards that foster global prosperity and security. Those rules, norms and standards directly benefit the United States. That is why Beijing is so keen to undermine them.

The Trump administration recently established a new special envoy with a mandate to stall China's growing influence at the United Nations and other international organizations.³⁶ That approach is not effective. At best, the administration is playing small-ball propaganda defense with no real firepower. This strategy is also likely to alienate partners and allies who have no interest in choosing sides between Washington and Beijing. It also hands Beijing easy wins, as China can claim U.S. opposition to Chinese U.N. proposals is simply one element in a desperate U.S. attempt to block Chinese actions across every domain.

The U.S. must shift from small-ball defense to full-spectrum offense. That will require the U.S. to resume leadership across the U.N. system and provide a positive and inclusive agenda that rallies other nations around common objectives. Specifically:

- **The United States should make U.N. funding a priority in U.S.-China competition.** The Trump administration has made cutting the U.N. budget a major priority and has touted its budget-cutting success. That is a mistake. U.S.-led efforts to cut the budget create a vacuum of influence for China—and other authoritarian actors like Russia—to fill. Beijing will soon gain yet another lever to exert influence over the U.N. budget: a Chinese government official is slated to occupy one of the three membership positions on the U.N. board of auditors starting July 1, 2020.³⁷ The United States cannot effectively

counter China's rising influence at the U.N. if it does not fully fund U.S. dues and push back against efforts to use budget cuts as an excuse to eliminate positions and budget items that promote human rights protections and advance the liberal democratic order.

- **The United States should maintain a strong presence across all key U.N. organizations.** Disengaging or leaving UN institutions – such as the Human Rights Council – creates a void that China and other authoritarian states are eager to fill. U.S. absence makes it too easy for authoritarian nations to revise the U.N. system in ways that directly undermine U.S. national interests. The United States cannot compete effectively if it does not send its own diplomats out onto the field.
- **The United States should provide targeted funding support for U.S. nationals to develop specialized expertise and move into leadership positions across the U.N. system.** Beijing is already working to train a new generation of Chinese-national U.N. experts and deploy them across the U.N. system.³⁸ The United States should do the same. For example, the United States can provide fellowships to encourage American students to participate in the U.N. internship program. That program provides an opportunity for students to get a first-hand look at U.N. operations, but the internships are unpaid, and students are responsible for their own travel and living expenses, making those opportunities out of reach for most Americans.³⁹ The United States should also establish government fellowships to bring rising American foreign policy talent into the U.S. Mission to the U.N.⁴⁰ The U.S. State Department currently runs fellowship programs to bring a more diverse pool of Americans into the Foreign Service.⁴¹ The United States should dramatically expand those programs to reach a much wider array of Americans and create specific tracks focused on training American diplomats to serve at the U.S. Mission to the U.N.
- **Congress should require the executive branch to report annually on the tactics China is deploying to advance its reform objectives across the U.N. system, what the U.S. is doing to compete, and where the U.S. is making gains and facing losses.** This approach will help establish a regular reporting and tracking mechanism and hold the executive branch accountable for its policy approach at the U.N. It will also provide a valuable resource for U.S. allies and partners and help the United States track and respond to shifting Chinese global governance reform strategies.

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