

# A United Nations with Chinese characteristics?

Maaïke Okano-Heijmans  
Frans-Paul van der Putten

*with contributions from*  
Etienne Bécharde  
Louise van Schaik  
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Clingendael Report



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



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\* Case studies in this report were prepared by Frans-Paul van der Putten (human rights), Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Vishwesh Sundar (development finance), and Étienne Béchard and Louise van Schaik (climate).

## December 2018

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Cover photo: Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, addresses the general debate of the General Assembly's seventieth session © Source: Flickr.com, UN Photo/Cia Pak.

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# Executive Summary

As China's role as a major power in international affairs is growing, the Chinese government is becoming more active and more influential in the United Nations (UN). This is likely to have – or, in the eyes of some, already has – a significant impact on the UN's (future) functioning. Growing Chinese influence is important for all UN members, and particularly so for Western countries, including the Netherlands, which strives to maintain and strengthen the international legal order as a principal foreign policy aim.

This Clingendael Report aims to provide a better understanding of the process currently underway. It does so, first, by analysing how and in which direction China's involvement in the UN is evolving. Next, the discussion turns to the question of how China's growing involvement is relevant to the setting and the developing of norms and standards within the UN. Finally, the authors explore where European countries and China have common interests, and where their interests are conflicting.

Separate case studies address this set of issues in three thematic areas, namely human rights, development finance and climate change. More specifically, the first case study outlines China's evolving role in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). The second discusses China's involvement in three developmental agencies: the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA); the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO). China's approach to climate change in the UN is the subject of the third case study. Here, the focus is on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Security Council. China's growing interest and influence in other areas within the UN – especially the Fifth Committee (which is in charge of the UN budget), the UN Security Council, and peacekeeping operations – is certainly also of importance, but beyond the scope of this report.

Taken together, the case studies in this report show that Chinese interests clash with those of European countries when it comes to the relationship between human rights and (sustainable) development as objectives that the UN wishes to pursue. Most European governments regard human rights, including political and civil human rights, as unconditional. China, on the other hand, prefers to approach human rights as conditional on a country's level of development. Consequently, the Human Rights Council is a UN body where this contrast in interests is most visible. Through the UN's social and economic bodies, the Chinese government is showing itself as increasingly willing and able to employ the UN to internationalise and legitimise its own domestic interests as well as its economic approach to development. It does so first and foremost by 'UN-ising' its Belt and Road Initiative as a way of showcasing public recognition. Finally, in the climate-change regime that is based on the UNFCCC, the positions of European countries and China differ as well, but they also have overlapping areas.

# China and norm-setting in the United Nations

For many decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was either absent from the UN or (from 1971) it kept a low profile as a UN member country. In recent years, however, especially after Xi Jinping became China's top leader in 2012, China's approach has become more active and visible. In 2017, in his speech at the UN's Geneva office, Xi emphasised that he considers the UN to be at the core of the international system: 'China is a founding member of the United Nations and the first country to put its signature on the UN Charter.'<sup>1</sup> China will firmly uphold the international system with the UN as its core, the basic norms governing international relations embodied in the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, the authority and stature of the UN, and its core role in international affairs'.<sup>2</sup> At the most fundamental level, China has the same interests as other members of the UN, which want to maintain the UN's role as the most important international organisation.

The balance of power between Western countries and China within the UN has changed drastically since the 1950s. At that time, a group of developed, mostly Western, countries dominated both the General Assembly and the Security Council, while the PRC was not even a member of the UN. Since then, the PRC not only obtained permanent membership of the UN Security Council – replacing the Republic of China (Taiwan) as the representative of China – but a large number of developing countries also joined the UN. To strengthen their bargaining position, most developing countries became part of a coalition called 'the Group of 77 and China' (G77). Originally consisting of 77 countries, the group has expanded to 134 countries today – making for a majority of almost 70 per cent of the UN's membership. China is considered by many to wield considerable influence over more than a few members of this grouping.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike any other UN member, China thus has the advantage both of holding veto power in the Security Council and of being an influential participant in the G77. Moreover, China's influence within the UN system has increased as it has become the largest contributor of troops for peacekeeping operations among the permanent members

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1 Here Xi referred to the government of the Republic of China.

2 'Speech by President Xi Jinping at the United Nations Office at Geneva', *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Iraq*, 2017, available [online](#).

3 Authors' interviews with practitioners from several countries, March–August 2018.

of the Security Council.<sup>4</sup> Its share in financial contributions for peacekeeping rose from 6.6 per cent in 2016 to 10.3 per cent in 2018, making China the second-largest contributor to the peacekeeping budget.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, China is expected to become the second-largest contributor, at 10.8 per cent, to the overall UN budget by early 2019.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1 China’s influence in selected UN organisations**

China’s influence on norms and standards				
		Minimal	Moderate	Maximal
Chinese involvement	Minimal	OHCHR	UNDP UNSC on climate security	
	Moderate			
	Maximal		(UNSC / UNGA on human rights) UNIDO	HRC UN DESA UNFCCC and the climate frameworks

Source: adapted from Julian Gruin *et al.*, ‘Tailoring for Development: China’s Post-Crisis Influence in Global Financial Governance’, *Global Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2018, pp. 467–478.

Meanwhile, cohesion within the group of (pro-)Western members of the UN has been decreasing. This long-term process has received extra impetus since Donald Trump took office as President of the United States (US), pulling the US out of the UN Human Rights Council in June 2018 and seeking to decrease US funding of other UN agencies. All of this means that now, more than ever, European countries need to rethink their approach to how best to promote their long-term interests within the UN system.

4 Frans-Paul van der Putten, ‘China’s Evolving Role in Peacekeeping and African Security’, *Clingendael*, 2015, available [online](#).

5 ‘Is China Contributing to the United Nations’ Mission?’, *ChinaPower*, 2016, available [online](#).

6 ‘China Likely to Surpass Japan as Second Largest Contributor to the UN Budget’, *Japan Times*, 2017, available [online](#).

# Three case studies: human rights, development finance and climate governance

The case studies presented in this Clingendael Report provide an insight into how China is using its growing leverage in the UN with regard to norm and standard-setting. In the human rights' domain, the Chinese government is actively trying to influence norms in several ways. First, China wants to maintain respect for state sovereignty, rather than respect for human rights, as the main principle of international relations. Second, China attempts to direct the definition of human rights away from an emphasis on political and civil rights towards an emphasis on economic and social rights. And third, China allegedly seeks to further development as the main aim for the UN institutions, except for the Security Council. This would mean that human rights' promotion would be subordinate to developmental aims. Indeed, China has long been advocating for countries' right to choose their own development path,<sup>7</sup> implying that this right applies irrespective of how such a choice affects a country's human rights' situation. The long-term result of China's approach to human rights in the UN would be that the principle of state sovereignty and the right to economic development would be core values in the international system, and that political and civil human rights would lose this role.

In the area of development, China prefers to move away from human rights-related civil developmental goals to economic development as the main aim. The Chinese government is strengthening its influence in relevant UN bodies through investments in budgeting, staffing and agenda-setting, both within the UN Secretariat and elsewhere. In doing so, the Chinese government is showing itself to be increasingly willing and able to employ the UN to internationalise and legitimise its own domestic interests – first and foremost, by 'UN-ising' its Belt and Road Initiative. This goal is facilitated by the fact that many Western countries consider these bodies to be of limited importance and have hence retreated from these agencies – therefore sometimes referred to as 'orphan agencies'. Given the Chinese government's prioritisation of economic development as a core mission for the UN, it makes sense that China is trying to expand the role of these bodies within the UN system, in particular where China already has a high level of influence, such as in the UN DESA.

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7 Frans-Paul van der Putten, 'Harmony with Diversity: China's Preferred World Order and Weakening Western Influence in the Developing World', *Global Policy*, 2013, available [online](#).



With regard to climate change, China takes the position that developed nations – and not the current largest emitters – should accept the main burden of financing global reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The Chinese government promotes the right to economic development to be upheld as a norm also in the debate on burden sharing, in accordance with the principle of *common but differentiated responsibilities*. Until recently, Beijing was keen to keep climate change off the agenda of the UN Security Council as a generic agenda item. Since 2017, however, it has accepted that climate change features as a driver of conflict in country- or region-specific resolutions. For example, the Chinese government now recognises climate change as a non-traditional security threat with regard to the Pacific small island development states (SIDS).<sup>8</sup>

The three case studies on human rights, development finance and climate governance make up the remainder of this report. Following an assessment of China's position, role and approach, each case study addresses the question of whether Chinese involvement is evolving and how this affects (established) norms and standards in the particular field. Each case study ends with a short reflection on the increasingly pertinent question of how China's approach relates to and affects the interests of Western countries, especially in Europe. These concluding paragraphs may be read as a starting point for further research and debate on this increasingly important topic.

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8 Louise van Schaik, Stefano Sarris and Tobias von Lossow, 'Fighting an Existential Threat: Policy Brief – Small Island States Bringing Climate Change to the UN Security Council', *Clingendael Policy Brief*, March 2018, available [online](#).

# Case study 1. Human rights: breaking the Western monopoly of discourse in human rights' issues

By Frans-Paul van der Putten

The two main UN bodies responsible for human rights are the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Human Rights Council (HRC). The OHCHR is part of the UN Secretariat and answers to the UN Secretary-General, while the HRC is an inter-governmental body that reports to the General Assembly. The ability of China to exert influence within the OHCHR organisation is limited. The current High Commissioner is Jordanian, and the two top officials under him are Australian and Croatian. At the end of 2013, there were only four Chinese nationals out of 503 regular OHCHR staff in the professional or higher category.<sup>9</sup>

The role of the Chinese government in the HRC, which consists of 47 member states each serving a three-year term, is considerably larger. China has been a member of the HRC since it was created in 2006, except for one year (2013). Members are elected by secret ballot in the General Assembly, and no country can be re-elected immediately – that is, within one year – after two consecutive terms. China has been successful at getting elected as a member of the HRC each time it was a candidate, and it has not missed a single opportunity to put forward its candidacy. One of China's top diplomats, Ma Zhaoxu, who is the ambassador to the UN in New York, previously held the post of envoy to the UN office in Geneva, where he represented China on the HRC. China clearly regards being on the HRC as a priority, and it enjoys broad support in the General Assembly for its near-permanent membership of the Council. The fact that China is expected to overtake Japan as the second-largest contributor to the general UN budget in 2019 is also relevant, since this gives China greater leverage in the Administrative and Budgetary Committee (the UNGA Fifth Committee), which oversees the HRC's budget.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General.

10 *Japan Times*, 2017, available [online](#); interview with a Dutch official, 12 April 2018.

The HRC is responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights' violations and making recommendations on them. It has the ability to discuss all thematic human rights' issues and situations that require its attention throughout the year. The HRC was established to replace the Commission on Human Rights, which was created in 1946 as the main legislative body of the UN to promote and protect human rights,<sup>11</sup> and of which China became a full member in 1982. Of the HRC's 47 seats, 26 are reserved for Asian and African countries, with only thirteen seats for the West, including six seats for East European countries. Most resolutions are adopted by consensus, but for cases for which voting was required, the correlation of China's vote with that of the majority of Asian and African states has been very high.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, China's voting correlation with the West has been very low.<sup>13</sup> 'The balance of power within the Council is operating in China's favour most of the time',<sup>14</sup> and to the disadvantage of the West.

China's statements on human rights at the HRC, and more broadly in the UN, have consistently focused on the centrality of state sovereignty and development. This means that human rights should not be a cause for interference by foreign or international actors, while the right to development should not be subordinate to political and civil human rights.<sup>15</sup> In March 2018, *The Guardian* reported that during a session of the HRC, a Chinese diplomat repeatedly interrupted a speech by a prominent Chinese dissident in an apparent attempt to prevent him from addressing the Council. The dissident, Yang Jianli, who lives in the United States, had been invited by UN Watch, a UN-accredited advocacy group.<sup>16</sup>

Until recently, China's behaviour has been mostly defensive. The Chinese government focused on preventing becoming a target of human rights' criticism at the HRC, while generally keeping a low profile. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, China 'works within the UN system to undermine its ability to strengthen global compliance with international human rights norms', for instance by obstructing participation of human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the UN.<sup>17</sup> However, this is changing, as China increasingly seems to be trying to change human rights norms

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11 Brief historic overview of the Commission on Human Rights, available [online](#).

12 Sonya Sceats and Shaun Breslin, 'China and the International Human Rights System', London: Chatham House, October 2012, p. 21.

13 Sceats and Breslin, 'China and the International Human Rights System', p. 23.

14 Sceats and Breslin, 'China and the International Human Rights System', p. 24.

15 Katrin Kinzelbach, 'An Analysis of China's Statements on Human Rights at the United Nations, 2000–2010', *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, September 2012, p. 330.

16 'Chinese Dissident and Official Trade Barbs at UN Human Rights Meeting', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2018.

17 'The Costs of International Advocacy: China's Interference in United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms', *Human Rights Watch*.

themselves.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, at the time of the Arab Spring, China delivered a high-profile joint statement that emphasised the importance of sovereignty and the duty of governments to maintain domestic stability.<sup>19</sup> On two occasions during 2017, China's envoy Ma Zhaoxu delivered joint statements at the HRC on behalf of a group of 140 countries that endorsed the aim of 'building a community of shared destiny for mankind', a concept launched by Xi Jinping that China is promoting within the UN system.<sup>20</sup> An important element in the concept, as President Xi explained in his January 2017 speech at the UN office in Geneva, is that 'development is the top priority for all countries'.<sup>21</sup>

In June 2017, China's role in the Council entered a new phase, when China for the first time initiated a resolution. The resolution, named 'the contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights', was sponsored by China and co-sponsored by 48 countries, all of which (except Russia) were developing countries.<sup>22</sup> Despite resistance from the United States and the European Union (EU), the resolution was adopted after voting, with 30 countries in favour, thirteen against and three abstaining. A major objection from the United States was that the resolution contained the 'suggestion that development goals could permit countries to deviate from their human rights obligations and commitments'.<sup>23</sup> The EU likewise criticised the resolution for prioritising development above human rights.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from the OHCHR and the HRC, there are many other UN bodies where human rights-related issues play a role. These include the Security Council and the General Assembly. China has long tried to keep human rights off the agenda of the Security Council.<sup>25</sup> At the General Assembly, China's voting record on human rights-related resolutions has been generally affirmative – in fact, more so than those of the other permanent members of the Security Council. Over recent decades, China has voted in favour of the great majority of human rights resolutions that were not country-specific, and of resolutions that condemned Israel or Western countries. In the case of country-specific resolutions that criticised developing countries, China has almost never voted

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18 Sceats and Breslin, 'China and the International Human Rights System', p. 55.

19 Sceats and Breslin, 'China and the International Human Rights System', p. 29.

20 Shi Jiangtao, 'Why Ma Zhaoxu, China's New Man at the United Nations, Signals Greater Ambition on Global Stage', *South China Morning Post*, 22 January 2018.

21 Xi Jinping, 'Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind', speech, Geneva, 18 January 2017, available [online](#).

22 'The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human Rights', RES/35/21, July 2017, available [online](#).

23 US Mission to International Organisations in Geneva, 'Explanation of Position on Resolution on the Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human Rights', 22 June 2017, available [online](#).

24 Andrea Worden, 'China Pushes "Human Rights with Chinese Characteristics" at the UN', *Hong Kong Free Press*, 14 October 2017, available [online](#).

25 Sceats and Breslin, 'China and the International Human Rights System', p. 24.

in the affirmative.<sup>26</sup> Yet a study by Katrin Kinzelbach on China's statements on human rights in the UN concluded that although Chinese diplomats in the UN do not contest the frame of human rights, 'they nonetheless systematically challenge them by opposing central implications that derive from these norms'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, China gradually undermines – at least some of the – human rights norms that were originally inserted in the UN system by Western countries, without openly rejecting them. This makes it difficult for Western countries to identify instances where they might confront China.

## China's involvement in the HRC

Thanks to the support that China seemingly enjoys from a large number of developing countries, and the fact that developing countries make up the majority of members in both the General Assembly and in the HRC, China has the potential to play a highly influential role in the HRC. During the first decade or so after the HRC's establishment, China refrained from using the full potential of its influence as it remained largely passive. Only recently has China begun to leverage this potential.

China uses its position in the Council to present itself as a champion of the developing world and to undermine the legitimacy of the West as a norms' setter. Its position is shifting from a largely defensive role focused on protecting state sovereignty to a more proactive role aimed at promoting development as the main aim for the United Nations, including the HRC. At the same time, China's approach is evolving from defending the long-standing norm that state sovereignty prevails in international relations to actively promoting a relatively new norm, wherein the right to development has priority over political and civil rights.

## Consequences for European governments

China's more proactive attitude in the HRC and its vigorous support not only for state sovereignty, but also for the right to development, pose new challenges to European governments. The recent withdrawal of the United States from the HRC – on the grounds that the HRC is heavily politicised and ineffective at promoting human rights – will most likely complicate the work of European governments in the Council. Both the United States and China are known to be very active in engaging with other HRC members, both in Geneva and in their capitals, in advance of important decisions. Most other countries do not have a similar capacity for outreach. While China's Ministry of Foreign

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26 Christopher B. Primiano and Jun Xiang, 'Voting in the UN: A Second Image of China's Human Rights', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2016.

27 Kinzelbach, 'An Analysis of China's Statements on Human Rights at the United Nations, 2000–2010', p. 332.

Affairs formally expressed regret about the US withdrawal from the HRC, an agency of the Chinese central government used the occasion to state that the American image as a human rights' defender was now 'on the verge of collapse'.<sup>28</sup>

**Figure 2 China's influence in selected UN organisations in the field of human rights**

China's influence on norms and standards				
Chinese involvement		Minimal	Moderate	Maximal
	Minimal	OHCHR		
	Moderate			
	Maximal		(UNSC / UNGA)	HRC

Source: adapted from Guin *et al.*, 'Tailoring for Development'.

28 Christian Shepherd and Ben Blanchard, 'China Says it Regrets US Quitting UN Rights Council', [Reuters](#), 20 June 2018.

# Case study 2. Development finance: ‘orphan agencies’ as a tool to legitimise Chinese national objectives

By **Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Vishwesh Sundar**

While developments in the UN Security Council (UNSC), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other first-tier organisations have been the topic of study and debate for several years already, growing Chinese influence in second-tier UN agencies largely goes unnoticed. Sometimes referred to as ‘orphan agencies’ because of the lack of, or diminishing, attention that they receive from Western countries, these are mainly the institutions and programmes that focus on economic and developmental issues, rather than the political and security domains.<sup>29</sup> This case study examines the role, influence and interests of China in three such organisations, namely: the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, which is part of the UN Secretariat); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO).

Figure three (below) illustrates China’s (growing) involvement and influence in budgeting, staffing and agenda-setting in these three organisations. Analysis suggests that Chinese involvement in terms of staffing and budgeting are moderate in the UNDP and UNIDO, while maximal in the UN DESA. Meanwhile, China’s influence on rules and standards is most significant in UN DESA, while moderate in the UNDP and UNIDO. Subsequent sections of this case study present the analysis underlying these conclusions, discussing each organisation separately. The final section analyses the involvement of European countries with, and interests in, the three organisations. It also explores the potential for cooperation with and without China in order to uphold and further European interests and objectives.

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29 Colum Lynch of *Foreign Policy* magazine, 1 March 2018, telephone interview with the authors.

**Figure 3 China’s influence in selected UN organisations in the field of development finance**

China’s influence on norms and standards				
Chinese involvement		Minimal	Moderate	Maximal
	Minimal		UNDP	
	Moderate			
	Maximal		UNIDO	UN DESA

Source: adapted from Gruin *et al.*, ‘Tailoring for Development’.

### United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)

The UN DESA is part of the UN Secretariat and sometimes referred to as the ‘think tank of the UN’.<sup>30</sup> The department prepares the economic reports for several UN agencies, including the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Secretary-General of the General Assembly. Long regarded by many Western countries as a second- or third-tier agency, China has come to dominate this department – which is now sometimes referred to as a ‘Chinese enterprise’.<sup>31</sup>

UN regulations stipulate that staffing of the UN Secretariat is to be regionally diverse, so as to facilitate compromises between different national interests within the various departments and offices. In practice, however, the appointment of staff is a highly political process. This appears to be the case also for the UN DESA. China’s support for Ban Ki-moon’s candidature as the UN Secretary-General is said to have been reciprocated by Ban’s appointment in 2007 of Sha Zukang as Under-Secretary-General (USG), UN DESA’s highest position.<sup>32</sup> Notably, of the five USGs of this relatively young department – established in 1997 – the last three have been from China.<sup>33</sup> Yet Beijing’s stronghold over the institution goes further: several divisions within the UN DESA – namely the Development Policy and Analysis Division (DPAD) and the Division of

30 K. Subramanian, Retired Joint Secretary, Ministry of Finance, India, 21 April 2018, telephone interview with the authors.

31 Colum Lynch, ‘China Enlists UN to Promote Its Belt and Road Project’, *Foreign Policy*, 2018, available [online](#).

32 Stephen Olson and Clyde Prestowitz, ‘The Evolving Role of China in International Institutions’, *The Economic Strategy Institute*, 2011, available [online](#).

33 ‘Previous USGs’, *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, 2017, available [online](#).



Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – are also headed by Chinese officials.<sup>34</sup> Finally, there is a high concentration of Chinese officials also at the lower rungs of the UN DESA.<sup>35</sup>

The case of UN DESA suggests that asymmetrical representation of staff in a UN agency from a particular nationality can indeed affect the organisation's neutrality. For example, several divisions of the UN DESA work in close collaboration with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),<sup>36</sup> and in 2016, the head of the UN DESA's DPAD division, Pingfan Hong, took a scoping mission to Beijing as part of the UN DESA's capacity development project. This project was funded by the Regular Programme of Technical Cooperation (RPTC) on 'macroeconomic implications of the Belt and Road Initiative', in cooperation with the State Information Centre of China.<sup>37</sup>

China's growing influence is also illustrated by the fact that the former and current USGs of the UN DESA, both of Chinese origin, act as advisors to the UN Secretary-General on development-related issues, including financing for development and internet governance.<sup>38</sup> Utilising this authority, China is seeking to become an important player in the field of internet governance. Houlin Zhao is the head of the International Telecommunication Union and China actively advanced the candidature of Qian Tang to become the head of UNESCO, which oversees how the internet is managed.<sup>39</sup> If China manages to gain control over these agencies, it could shape and govern the internet with Chinese characteristics, which could jeopardise internet freedom.

For these reasons, China's influence in the UN DESA may be categorised as maximal. Clearly, Beijing is investing heavily in staffing and budgeting of this agency, and has shown itself both willing and able to shape the department's agenda.

## United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

The UNDP is tasked with achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Until 2019, China is a member of the 36-country Executive Board, which oversees and supports the UNDP's activities. That said, the number of Chinese representatives in

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34 The Development Policy and Analysis Division is headed by Pingfan Hong of China; and the Division of Sustainable Development Goals is headed by Juwang Zhu from China.

35 Authors' interviews with policy-makers of various countries, March–July 2018.

36 'UN Peace and Development Fund', *United Nations Economic Analysis and Policy Division*, 2018, available [online](#).

37 'DPAD Mission to Beijing', *United Nations Economic Analysis and Policy Division*, 2018, available [online](#).

38 'Previous USGs', *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, 2017, available [online](#).

39 Colum Lynch and E. Groll, 'As US Retreats from World Organisations, China Steps in to Fill the Void', *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2017, available [online](#).

the UNDP is limited. China also contributes only a small fraction of the agency's regular resources; it was the agency's nineteenth largest contributor in 2017.<sup>40</sup>

The seventeen SDGs have ambitious targets and require financial sources and financial instruments to achieve them. China's BRI has many overlapping objectives with the SDGs, and China has made available vast financial resources to further its initiative. Seen in this context, it may not be surprising that the UNDP became the first international organisation to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Chinese government on implementing the BRI.<sup>41</sup> The decision to sign the MoU came from the Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific of the UNDP, which is headed by a Chinese official, Haoliang Xu.<sup>42</sup>

China has signed similar MoUs on the BRI with many other UN institutions,<sup>43</sup> including the UNIDO and the UN DESA. Support for links between China's BRI and the UN system has come from the highest ranks: UN Secretary-General António Guterres himself has encouraged such cooperation 'in order to achieve the SDGs'.<sup>44</sup> Although mostly of little substance or direct consequence, these MoUs provide an international stamp of approval to China's domestic initiative.<sup>45</sup> They are a vehicle for showcasing public support and recognition of the BRI, which is important at a time when the initiative – notwithstanding its laudable aims of furthering development across countries and regions – is increasingly being met with resistance from both recipient and third countries alike.

Overall, Chinese involvement with the UNDP through staffing and budgeting may be regarded as minimal, while Beijing has moderate influence on agenda-setting, especially in regard to the close cooperation between the UNDP and the BRI.

## United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO)

The UNIDO aims to reduce poverty through sustainable industrial-development growth.<sup>46</sup> It promotes industrialisation and capacity-building, with a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises in particular.

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40 'Human Resources by Nationality', *United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination*, 2015, available [online](#); and 'UNDP Transparency Portal', *UNDP*, 2017, available [online](#).

41 'UNDP and China to Cooperate on Belt and Road Initiative', *UNDP*, 2016, available [online](#).

42 'China Enlists UN to Promote its Belt and Road Project', *Foreign Policy*, 2018, available [online](#).

43 This includes the UNEP, WHO, UNESCAP, FAO, UN AIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UN/HABITAT, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WIPO, ICAO and IOM.

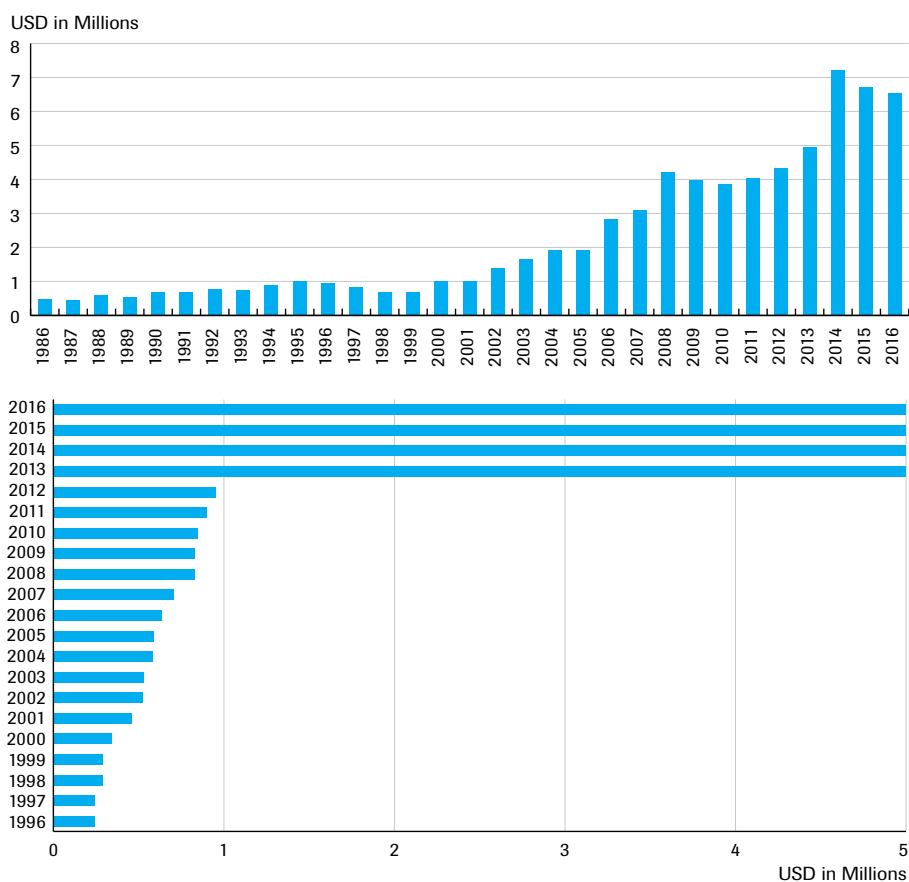
44 'UN Official Stresses Links between B&R Initiative and UN 2030 Agenda', *CGTN*, 2018, available [online](#).

45 Official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), 18 March 2018, telephone interview with the authors.

46 'Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development', *UNIDO*, 2014, available [online](#).

Like the UN DESA, the UNIDO is headed by a Chinese official: Li Yong, China's former Vice-Minister of Finance.<sup>47</sup> Li was appointed as Director-General of the agency in 2013 and was re-elected for a second term in 2017.<sup>48</sup> China's contributions to the UNIDO and to its Industrial Development Fund have surged since Li's appointment (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4** China's monetary contributions to the UNIDO and the Industrial Development Fund (IDF): Assessed contributions (to UNIDO) and Special-Purpose contributions (to the IDF), in USD



Source: 'Marking the Tenth Anniversary of UNIDO–China Cooperation', *UNIDO* (2016), available [online](#).

47 'Director-General Biography', UNIDO, 2018, available [online](#).

48 'Director-General Reappointed for Second Term as 17th UNIDO General Conference Opens', *UNIDO*, 2017, available [online](#).

Since the 1990s, many Western countries – including the United States, Canada and France – have left the UNIDO, as they perceived that other UN agencies, such as the UNDP and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), have greater impact on poverty reduction.<sup>49</sup> More countries left the UNIDO in the 2000s, considering it to be inefficiently managed.<sup>50</sup> The Netherlands, with Germany, is one of the few remaining Western members, even if the Dutch Foreign Ministry's scorecard agrees with the negative assessment of other Western countries. As a result of this exodus of Western countries, China's Li now runs an agency that is less political than others.<sup>51</sup>

The UNIDO's emphasis on basic human needs – or economic development – conforms with the Chinese and Japanese approach to development. It should therefore not come as a surprise that China and Japan have continued to invest in revitalising this agency. For the biennium 2016–2017, Japan and China were the first and third largest contributors to the agency, respectively. Along with Germany and Italy, they accounted for around 45 per cent of the total assessed contributions (see Figure 5).<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, in the eyes of one Japanese diplomat, having a Chinese Director-General and a Japanese Deputy to the Director-General at the UNIDO even provides a valuable avenue for building cooperative relations between the politically strained neighbours.<sup>53</sup> Even if UNIDO projects are relatively small in size, this may be seen as an attempt by Japan to use the UN system to work with China and thereby shape its activities through trilateral cooperation and in association with the SDGs.

Under Li Yong's leadership of the UNIDO, the agency's partnerships with Chinese ministries and other (provincial) governmental organisations, development banks and funds, universities, business associations and other institutions have grown exponentially.<sup>54</sup> China's strong links with the UNIDO are helping to advance an 'industrial path with Chinese characteristics' in other UNIDO member states as well, as suggested by Vice-Minister of Commerce Wang Shouwen in his address to the UNIDO General Conference in November 2017.<sup>55</sup>

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49 Daniel Runde, 'China's Li Yong Wins UNIDO Elections: Implications from an American Perspective', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2013, available [online](#).

50 Runde, 'China's Li Yong Wins UNIDO Elections'.

51 Runde, 'China's Li Yong Wins UNIDO Elections'.

52 'Thematic Evaluation of UNIDO's Partnerships with Donors', *Office of the Director-General, Office of Independent Evaluation and Quality Monitoring*, 2016, available [online](#).

53 MOFA official, 18 March 2018.

54 See [here](#) for a detailed list of such links. The UNIDO also works in partnership with development banks in China, for example with EXIMBANK (since 2015), China Development Bank (since 2015) and the China–Africa Development Fund (since 2015), to mention a few; 'Marking the Tenth Anniversary of UNIDO–China Cooperation', *UNIDO*, 2016.

55 'Address at the 17th General Conference of UNIDO by Vice Minister Wang Shouwen', *Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organisations in Vienna*, 2017.



Summing up, China's involvement in terms of staffing and budgeting is maximal in the UNIDO, as the agency is headed by a former Vice-Minister of China's Ministry of Finance, with a sizeable Chinese staff in the lower levels of the organisation. China had also contributed one-tenth of the UNIDO budget in 2015. However, China's influence on the functioning of the agency today appears to be only moderate. While MoUs – such as that between the UNIDO and China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) – as such are hardly a cause of much concern, care should be taken that the UNIDO's priorities are not overly aligned with those of China.

Taken together, the evidence from these three case studies on the UN DESA, UNDP and UNIDO shows that, as China becomes more politically and economically influential, it seeks greater control of UN organisations that are active in the field of economic development and development finance. This may be unsurprising, as these organisations share with the Chinese government a focus on and prioritisation of economic development. Beijing is thereby increasingly able to use these agencies to advance its own domestic interests. First and foremost, this concerns the legitimisation – or 'UN-isation' – of its Belt and Road Initiative. Consider, for example, the May 2017 statement by the UNIDO's Director-General Li Yong: 'At UNIDO, we strongly believe that the Belt and Road Initiative stands to become one of the largest and most effective platforms for international cooperation of the century'.

In the meantime, Beijing is also making efforts quietly to upgrade these agencies within the UN rankings. In a January 2018 meeting of the UN's ECOSOC on 'proposals for reform to the UN development system', UN Secretary-General Guterres proposed strengthening the UN DESA, while China asked for DESA to be the main entity in implementing the 2030 Agenda.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, China is aiming to strengthen the UN DESA, at the same time building (formal) linkages between its BRI and the UN SDGs through various UN bodies.

## Consequences for European governments

Fundamentally, the UN's social-economic agencies that are targeted by Beijing are not held in high regard by traditional Western powers. European countries have gradually decreased their financial and staffing contributions to these agencies and instead focus chiefly on the UN's politico-security domains – especially human rights and peacekeeping operations. China's growing influence in other agencies thereby often goes unnoticed or – worse, perhaps – is regarded as inconsequential.

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56 Ana Maria Lebada, 'Governments Respond to Secretary-General's Development System Reform Proposals', *IISD*, 2018, available [online](#).

Even when European countries are still represented in the UN's social-economic agencies, their core priorities clearly differ from China's. For example, democratisation, rule of law and human rights form the core of Dutch priorities in the UNDP,<sup>57</sup> while China prioritises infrastructure, disaster management and energy.<sup>58</sup> The divergent approaches of prioritising basic human needs (by China) versus basic human rights (by European governments) are a recurrent issue not only in the UN's development-finance institutions, but in the UN's human rights and climate-action institutions.

Looking at China's engagement with the UN in the field of development finance, a clear image appears of a country that is increasingly willing and able to employ the UN to internationalise and legitimise its own domestic interests. As China becomes a dominant player in the world of global politics and economics, it is only natural that its presence and influence in the international system would increase. In such a scenario, others have to adopt strategies of either jumping on China's bandwagon, or forming alternate alliances to balance China's influence.<sup>59</sup>

Unfortunately, the potential for European and EU cooperation with China (when interests do align) and pushback (on matters where interests do not align) with the three agencies appears limited. The EU does not have any regular or formal coordination in the UNDP.<sup>60</sup> There is EU coordination in the UNIDO, even if only eighteen of the 28 EU member states are still members of the organisation. Improved understanding among European governments should help to build political momentum for greater cooperation and coordination between the EU and its member states, and other countries with shared interests in this field.

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57 'UNDP and Kingdom of Netherlands Sign New Cooperation Agreement to Continue Support to Access to Justice and Rule of Law in South Sudan', *UNDP*, 2017, available [online](#).

58 'UNDP Main Page', *UNDP*, 2018, available [online](#).

59 The evidence from the case studies fits well with the Realist school of thought, which states that international institutions are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the world.

60 'Scorecard UNDP 2017', *UNDP*, 2017, available [online](#).

# Case study 3. Global governance on climate change and security

By Étienne Béchard and Louise van Schaik

In the field of climate change, China is shifting away from its long-standing reluctance to engage towards a more proactive stance, particularly in the international climate regime centring on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In 2009, Beijing was accused of derailing the negotiations and was blamed for the failure of the Copenhagen Summit.<sup>61</sup> In 2015, China played a more constructive role as one of the main shapers of the outcome of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.<sup>62</sup> As well as its more constructive contributions to international negotiations, China has developed new policies on clearing its domestic air and has taken a leading position in green technologies and finance needed in the transition to a lower-carbon economy. It uses these aspirations and successes to boost its international reputation.

Chinese reduction targets in the context of the Paris Agreement are relatively 'safe', in the sense that they do not require much domestic policy adjustment. Emissions are only to peak in 2030. Furthermore, the push to include the principle of *common but differentiated responsibilities* kept China on a good footing with the Global South. The novelty is the emphasis on the Chinese norms of *ecological civilisation* and *community of a common destiny*, which are increasingly part of Beijing's narrative.

Internationally, China sees a clear niche for itself in the global environmental governance sphere to raise its influence as the defender of the Global South. At the same time, this agenda works in sync with China's Silk Road ambitions.<sup>63</sup> Taking the lead in the climate-change regime is a powerful soft-power move that shows how China has developed into a responsible great power. This strong level of ambition is clearly amplified by two

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61 Mark Lynas, 'How Do I Know China Wrecked the Copenhagen Deal? I Was in the Room', *The Guardian*, 2009.

62 Tong Wu and Lei Liu, 'EU-China Relationship in a New Era of Global Climate Governance', European University Institute, 2017, pp. 1-16; and Charles Parker, Christer Karlsson and Mattias Hjerpe, 'Climate Change Leaders and Followers: Leadership Recognition and Selection in the UNFCCC Negotiations', *International Relations*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2015, pp. 434-454; and Radoslav Dimitrov, 'The Paris Agreement on Climate Change: Behind Closed Doors', *Global Environmental Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2016, pp. 1-11.

63 'China Flexes its Muscle as Climate Talks End with Slow Progress', *Climate Home News*, 2017, available [online](#).



key factors: China is nowadays the largest emitter in absolute numbers, which makes any climate regime irrelevant without it; and China's interest in projecting an image of reliability as opposed to the United States. China used to react to a Western-driven agenda; it now has an opportunity to become the main driver of climate-friendly policies at the UN.<sup>64</sup>

China's increasing level of ambition is not surprising coming from a rising power, but the fact that the Chinese government chooses to affirm this explicitly in the sphere of climate change is still quite remarkable in light of the challenge to reduce emissions. Indeed, Chinese political leaders have made it clear that China is keen to take a leadership position in the field of global climate governance. In 2018, Xi Jinping indicated in Davos that China will be the guardian of free trade and climate policies in reaction to the unilateral course of the Trump administration.<sup>65</sup> This is in line with previous statements, including at the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, when Xi referred to environmental policies more often than to economic (89 times against 70).<sup>66</sup> This is a strong statement coming from a nation that has been exclusively focused on economic development for the past decade.

Within the context of multilateral climate action, we do not yet know the potential meaning and impact of the Chinese preference for including the norm of *community of common destiny*. It is referred to in speeches, but it is not yet clear how it differs from the Western focus on sustainable development and collective action to address climate change. The same applies to the concept of *ecological civilisation*, which was welcomed into the UN lexicon at the UNEP Governing Council in 2013 and may become a compelling alternative narrative. It might imply more emphasis on non-interference regarding environmental policies as well, which are – according to the concept – part of a country's own struggle for civilisation. Inclusion of the concept of *ecological civilisation* received pushback from a coalition of the United States and India, which forced Chinese diplomats in the UNGA to drop it in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, since they considered it as lacking in transparency and environmental standards.<sup>67</sup>

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64 'Projects – Countries – Donor – China', *UNDP*, 2017, available [online](#); Li *et al.*, op. cit., 2017; and 'China and its Climate Leadership in a Changing World: From Passive Follower to Constructive Shaper of the Global Order', *Climate Diplomacy Discussion Paper*, 2017, pp. 1–10.

65 Emmanuel Hache and Clémence Bourcet, 'Comment et pourquoi la Chine va prendre le leadership des questions climatiques internationales?', *Asia Focus* #7, IRIS, 2016; and 'Un an après, la vision de Xi Jinping sur la gouvernance mondiale rayonne à Davos', *Centre d'Informations sur Internet de Chine*, 2018, available [online](#).

66 'Tough Tasks for China's New Environment Ministry', *The Diplomat*, 2018, available [online](#).

67 'China Faces Pushback in the UN on Belt Road Initiative, Retreats Quietly', *The Wire*, 2017, available [online](#).

## The UNFCCC and UNSC: platforms for Chinese influence?

The current Chinese position illustrates China's greater interest in assuming prominence in climate governance – a careful move in an era of diminishing US influence and enlarging Chinese influence towards the Global South. For instance, in June 2017 China hosted two key international meetings on renewable energy that were originally conceived by the US government: the 8<sup>th</sup> Clean Energy Ministerial; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mission Innovation Ministerial.<sup>68</sup> Within the UNFCCC context, China hosted a high-level forum on South–South cooperation during the COP23 conference in Bonn in 2017.

In the international climate-change regime, China argues with other developing countries (the G77) that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations are mostly responsible for the historic emissions and should therefore take the lead in the global reduction effort, since their per capita emissions are still much higher than those of China. This principle of *common but differentiated responsibilities* has also been used in the context of the SDG negotiations. However, in the run-up to the Paris Summit on Climate Change in 2015, China acknowledged the need to reduce Chinese emissions, while maintaining an official policy of *differentiated responsibilities*.<sup>69</sup> Since then, it has still emphasised the 'inclusion of historical responsibility for climate change' (for example, at Bonn in 2017), and in the Talanoa Dialogue, which aims at including non-state actors more prominently in the process, China prompted a fourth question to be added: 'Where do we come from?', thus underlining the responsibility that the OECD nations should take.

China's influence in terms of staffing within the UN framework is clearly not keeping up with its domestic aspirations.<sup>70</sup> On one hand, its ministerial staffing on climate change was boosted from 300 in 2017 to 500 employees in 2018.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, no top position is held by China in the UNFCCC, illustrating that China has not yet managed to obtain greater representation at the highest level.

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68 'China Flexes its Muscle as Climate Talks End with Slow Progress', *Climate Home News*, 2017, available [online](#); and 'Stronger China? Cop23 UN Climate Talks: Everything You Need to Know', *Climate Home News*, 2018, available [online](#).

69 Dimitrov, 'The Paris Agreement on Climate Change', pp. 1–11; and Isabel Hilton and Oliver Kerr, 'The Paris Agreement: China's "New Normal" Role in International Climate Negotiations', *Climate Policy*, 17, 2016, pp. 48–58.

70 'Status of Contribution', *UNFCCC*, 13 April 2017.

71 'Tough Tasks for China's New Environment Ministry', *The Diplomat*, 2018, available [online](#).

China is, however, flexing its economic and financial muscles. Its massive Belt and Road Initiative is considered a reason why middle-income countries and developing countries worked together at the Bonn Conference.<sup>72</sup> China made a pledge of 31 million USD to the South-South Climate Fund and 2 million USD to support South-South cooperation towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. China has even pledged 1 billion USD over the next decade to the UN Peace and Development fund, including 6 million USD for environmental projects to support its so-called 'Green BRI'. Such commitments surely foster China's informal influence towards the middle- and low-income countries.<sup>73</sup>

Despite China being underrepresented in terms of staff and only having started recently to finance intensively the UN's programmes and projects, it is clear that no credible international agreement on climate is possible without China, the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide, giving it powerful leverage and a central position at the table.

## The UNSC and climate security

When it comes to the consequences of climate change and its potentially destabilising effects on international security, China is not yet very engaged. It rather prefers to apply an (economic) development narrative towards climate change. In the words of Xie Zhenhua, lead negotiator for China in the last three UN climate-change conferences, 'climate change is an environmental problem, but eventually it is a development problem'.

It is thus no surprise that in the context of the UN Security Council, China remains lukewarm when it comes to acknowledging the security realities of climate change. China has not stopped the inclusion of climate change and related environmental stresses as driving factors of conflict in country- and region-specific resolutions, and has pointed out that it considers climate change a non-traditional security threat for small island developing states (SIDS). Yet it seemingly remains worried about such 'non-traditional' security threats entering the agenda of the UNSC, perhaps because it may also open the door for other issues. At the same time, China's hesitation to recognise climate-related security risks may also be connected to domestic stakes (for example, desertification in parts of China), Chinese investments in climate-vulnerable countries being put in danger by acknowledging such risks, and opportunities that China sees in, for instance, the Arctic region.

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72 'China Flexes its Muscle as Climate Talks End with Slow Progress', *Climate Home News*, 2017, available [online](#).

73 Li *et al.*, *Op. Cit.*

Three recent UNSC statements where climate was linked to security<sup>74</sup> were not blocked by the Chinese diplomats sitting in the UNSC. This differs from events in 2013 and 2015, when China (and Russia) blocked acknowledgement of the link between security and climate change, while maintaining that climate change is a developmental issue.<sup>75</sup>

Domestically, China has started to recognise that climate change may impact its national security. Significant steps in this direction have been made to recognise the need to expand the dimensions of national security beyond traditional threats. For example, former Chief of Staff of the People’s Liberation Army, General Xiong Guangkai, has used explicitly the term ‘climate security’ since 2007. Separately, China’s National Development and Reform Commission stated in 2017 that ecological security is an important cornerstone for national security.

**Figure 6 China’s influence in selected UN organisations in the field of global governance on climate change and security**

China’s influence on norms and standards				
Chinese involvement		Minimal	Moderate	Maximal
	Minimal		UNSC on climate security	
	Moderate			
	Maximal			UNFCCC and the climate frameworks

Source: adapted from Gruin *et al.*, ‘Tailoring for Development’.

## Consequences for European governments

The Netherlands is very ambitious when it comes to combatting climate change by reducing emissions and recognising the security implications resulting from climate change and related water and food shortages. In the early 2000s, two Executive

74 See UNSC Resolution #2408 (on the situation in Somalia), #2349 (on the situation in West Africa and the Sahel) and #2417 (on food insecurity), available [online](#).

75 See the statements made by senior officials such as Xie Zhenhua (lead negotiator for China at the last three United Nations climate change conferences) stating: ‘climate change is an environmental problem, but eventually it is a development problem’; and ‘China’s New Environment Ministry Unveiled, with Huge Staff Boost’, *China Dialogue*, 2018, available [online](#).

Secretaries of the UNFCCC were Dutch: Joke Waller-Hunter; and Yvo de Boer. From the mid-2000s until the end of 2017, the Netherlands was one of the more active and progressive EU member states, but not very outspoken. This changed with the current Dutch government, which is working on a climate agreement with industry and civil society. A new climate law is being developed, which will go beyond the emission-reduction obligations for 2030 that have been set under the EU framework. The Netherlands has also indicated that it would like to collaborate more closely with like-minded countries in Europe to speed up the transition to a low-carbon economy. The Netherlands' relationship with China on climate mitigation is largely conducted via the EU, as it is obligatory in this field to operate on the basis of a common position. The EU opposes China's emphasis on *common but differentiated responsibilities*, as this principle might result in countries such as China and India from using it as an excuse not to contribute to emission reductions and climate financing.

In general, the EU is keen to increase its collaboration with China in the field of climate change, with some (technical) support programmes already in place, for instance to set up emissions trading schemes in China. In June 2018, a meeting of the EU, China and Canada took place in Brussels to underline the commonly felt need to step up action in the field of climate change, despite the United States' announcement of its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Nevertheless, some challenges remain, such as German concerns over subsidised Chinese solar panels flooding the European market and the EU not recognising China as a market economy.

In 2018, the Netherlands has championed climate security in relation to conflict prevention as a key issue for its membership of the UNSC. The Netherlands highlighted the SIDS' perspective, for instance by bringing in speakers from the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands when climate change featured on the agenda. Backed by the Planetary Security Initiative, the Netherlands has developed a strong profile in this field since 2015. Development cooperation programmes on food and water already integrate the impacts of climate change and more attention is now devoted to making these projects more 'conflict sensitive'. Climate adaptation should help to prevent conflict in regions of concern, such as the ring around Europe. Whereas the Netherlands is a frontrunner in the field of climate-sensitive water and agricultural technology, it lags far behind in the field of renewable-energy technology.

Other EU countries, such as Sweden, Germany, the United Kingdom and France, are also championing the climate-security agenda in the context of the UNSC and more broadly. The EU's High Representative Federica Mogherini hosted a meeting on the topic in June 2018 and the Germans will organise a Ministerial on 4 June 2019. In Brussels, China's Special Climate Envoy Xie Zhenhua took part in the high-level event and his speech included references to the new concepts of *community of common destiny* and *ecological civilisation*, but it was not shared after his intervention.

In light of the sensitivities of including non-traditional security threats in the UNSC agenda, Russia's continued hard-line position of holding a generic debate on climate security in this forum and the complicated position of the United States, it is probably best to address this issue via the European P5 countries and behind the scenes of the UN institutions. A so-called mini-mechanism on climate security has thus been established in the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), UNDP and UNEP.