

Beyond liberal narratives: China and the international human rights order

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China's rise over the past four decades has been remarkable; it has transformed the country from a largely agrarian and isolated nation into a global economic and technological powerhouse. From 1979 until 2010, China sustained an annual average GDP growth rate of around 10 per cent. This success has made China the world's second largest economy (behind the United States) in terms of nominal GDP.¹ China displays awe-inspiring infrastructure development, technological advancement, military modernization and an ever-growing consumer market.

Along the way, China has become more confident on the world stage. As one of the world's leading trading nations, China is an indispensable partner for many countries. Furthermore, through engagement in diplomatic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and participation in—as well as creation of—international organizations, China has amassed unprecedented diplomatic clout. Indeed, in almost all areas of international interaction, including global governance and regional security, China's ascent has sparked many questions and spirited debates.

One of the most profound questions concerns the implications of a rising China for the international order. Many observers are eager to understand whether China is a status quo power or a revisionist state.² Others question whether a

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¹ World Bank Group, 'GDP (current US\$)', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD> (accessed 8 Jan. 2025).

² Steve Chan, Weixing Hu and Kai He, 'Discerning states' revisionist and status-quo orientations: comparing China and the US', *European Journal of International Relations* 25: 2, 2019, pp. 613–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066118804622>; Steve Chan, Huiyun Feng, Kai He and Weixing Hu, *Contesting revisionism: China, the United States, and the transformation of international order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Rush Doshi, *The long game: China's grand strategy to displace American order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Elizabeth C. Economy, *The world according to China* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023); Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a status quo power?', *International Security* 27: 4, 2003, pp. 5–56, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951081>; Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, 'Is China a status quo or revisionist state? Leadership travel as an empirical indicator of foreign policy priorities', *International Studies Quarterly* 56: 1, 2012, pp. 163–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00697.x>; Evan S. Medeiros, 'The changing fundamentals of US–China relations', *Washington Quarterly* 42: 3, 2019, pp. 93–119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1666355>; Jessica Chen Weiss, 'A world safe for autocracy? China's rise and the future of global

rising China seeks to challenge, undermine or replace the international order.³ Research shows that the reality is complex and cannot be captured by any single clear-cut answer.⁴ Furthermore, assessing China's challenge to the international order requires not only a rigorous empirical account of China's behaviour, but also a conceptual account of what constitutes that order.⁵

This article examines China's engagement with the international human rights order, as underpinned by global human rights treaties. China's behaviour in the area of human rights is intriguing. On the one hand, China has been recognized as an increasingly active and often constructive contributor to the United Nations. On the other hand, China's human rights record does not seem to align with many norms and principles, especially those championed by liberal democracies. There are reasons to expect that while China embraces economic integration and diplomatic engagement, it can nevertheless be reluctant to fully participate in the area of human rights, or even resist such participation.⁶ Confronted with such a dilemma, how does China actually involve itself with international human rights norms and principles? There is a wide range of potential actions that the country could take. Does it seek to overturn the work of UN human rights organizations or does it, at the other extreme, aim to uphold all human rights norms and principles? Or will it adopt a more nuanced and balanced approach, to participate in the UN human rights regime with strategic and diplomatic gains, and endorse selective norms consistent with its interests?⁷ While China's uneasy relationship with the international human rights regime has been widely discussed, its alternative narratives on human rights have only begun to receive significant attention.⁸ If China does not abandon the international order, even in issue areas where it is more often frustrated, that would be a strong indication that China does not seek to overthrow the international order. In this article, we examine when and where China engages the international order more closely, and why it does so.

politics', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-06-11/world-safe-autocracy>; Suisheng Zhao, 'A revisionist stakeholder: China and the post-World War II world order', *Journal of Contemporary China* 27: 113, 2018, pp. 643–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458029>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 3 Dec. 2024.)

³ Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, 'China challenges global governance? Chinese international development finance and the AIIB', *International Affairs* 94: 3, 2018, pp. 573–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy026>; Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, 'The new age of hybridity and clash of norms: China, BRICS, and challenges of global governance in a postliberal international order', *Alternatives* 45: 3, 2020, pp. 123–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375420921086>; Thomas Wilkins, 'Review of *China's challenges and international order transition: beyond the "Thucydides's Trap"* by Huiyun Feng and Kai He', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 21: 3, 2021, pp. 493–96, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcab001>.

⁴ Rosemary Foot, 'A world unsafe for democracy? China and the shaping of global order', *Journal of the British Academy*, vol. 9, 2021, pp. 213–22, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.213>.

⁵ Alastair Iain Johnston, 'China in a world of orders: rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's international relations', *International Security* 44: 2, 2019, pp. 9–60, https://doi.org/10.1162/isc_a_00360.

⁶ Rosemary Foot, *Rights beyond borders: the global community and the struggle over human rights in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷ Rana Siu Inboden and Titus C. Chen, 'China's response to international normative pressure: the case of human rights', *The International Spectator* 47: 2, 2012, pp. 45–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2012.683277>.

⁸ Tobias Berger, 'Human rights beyond the liberal script: a morphological approach', *International Studies Quarterly* 67: 3, 2023, pp. 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqado42>; Rana Siu Inboden, *China and the international human rights regime* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, 'China and the global reach of human rights', *China Quarterly*, vol. 241, 2020, pp. 169–90, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741019000833>.

Our study overcomes two common shortcomings in the literature. First, while scholars give greater attention to China's impact on the international order, few are sufficiently clear on what that order is. In the area of human rights, scholars in liberal democracies tend to focus on political rights. Similarly, existing human rights indices in the literature also place a heavier emphasis on states' protection of civil and political rights. However, the international human rights regime is multidimensional. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) endorses rights of access to education and voting, rights to respect irrespective of gender, ethnicity and religion, rights to development and environment, and so on.

We depart from the conventional wisdom that treats human rights as nothing more than political rights. In our study, the international institutional order as pertaining to human rights consists of rules and principles codified in international human rights law. Indeed, the key tenets of the international human rights order have been enshrined in the UDHR and global human rights treaties that have been actively promoted by various treaty organizations as well as in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

A second challenge in the literature is that systematic evidence is in short supply. To assess states' positions on the international human rights order, researchers can examine the extent to which states both commit to and comply with international human rights law. Analysts can read national constitutions, leaders' speeches, public documents, newspapers, opinion surveys and many other publications. While all sources of information can be valuable, difficulties of inference arise if sources of information are selective or otherwise incomplete. To draw reliable inferences, it is important that we rigorously analyse a comprehensive body of evidence within a well-defined scope.

We provide systematic evidence, going beyond isolated statements and instead examining recurring practices. We make use of newly available data from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)—a mechanism within the UNHRC that regularly assesses the human rights records of all UN member states. The UPR provides a valuable empirical laboratory for examining how states distil their positions on the international human rights order as they are prompted—repeatedly in evaluating each and every other state—to articulate what they take to be the most important human rights norms. We assemble a comprehensive dataset of 90,938 recommendations by all countries through the first three UPR review cycles (2008–2011, 2012–2016 and 2017–2022). We conceptualize that a state's position on the international human rights order is reliably conveyed through its recommendations for others, in aggregate and across diverse settings. We thus analyse the entirety of recommendations in the UPR to understand not only where China stands but, importantly, how its position compares with others.

Our study asks and answers two important questions. First, what does China's vision for human rights look like and how does it compare with that of other countries? Like most countries, China selectively engages with some norms but not others. China's position overlaps with that of most countries in protecting vulnerable populations and safeguarding citizens' rights to physical integrity, but

China strongly—and increasingly—champions social and economic rights and sidelines civil and political rights. While this stance contrasts strikingly with that of the members of the G7 group of countries, China's position enjoys a significant following from the global South, especially among recipients of Chinese development aid. These findings do not support the claim that China is seeking to overturn the international human rights regime. Rather, while China shares with most countries a commitment to protecting vulnerable populations and safeguarding citizens' rights to physical integrity, it champions those rights that have been sidelined by liberal democracies and on which China has made immense progress and impressed the global South.

Our second question is: how does China—with its rapid economic growth and enormous foreign aid programmes—influence the human rights narratives of the global South? We demonstrate that global South countries clearly take their cues from China's narratives in the UPR. When they review China, they seem to speak the Chinese narrative: they elevate social and economic rights above all, as China does. Furthermore, we show that Chinese aid inflows significantly influence the alignment of human rights narratives between global South countries and China, which is evident when reviewing all countries in the world and especially when reviewing G7 countries. These findings underscore the geopolitical impact of Chinese economic statecraft on global human rights discourse. While China does not explicitly attach political conditionality to its foreign aid programmes in the way that western countries do, China does influence international human rights discourse through foreign aid—not only in terms of how global South countries review China, but also how they review all countries and particularly the G7 countries. Our study thus contributes important new insights into how China effectively reshapes international norms and global governance.

Our article proceeds as follows. In the next two sections, we discuss key limitations in past research and explain how we overcome these challenges. In the second section, we address the conceptual ambiguity in the literature on the international order. We explicate the international human rights order as based on rules and principles codified in global human rights treaties. In the third section, we address the difficulties in generating systematic evidence on how China and other countries engage with international human rights. We devise a way forward by making use of comprehensive textual data to reliably depict positions of all countries in the laboratory of the UPR. In the later sections, we turn to our evidentiary approach. The fourth section describes the comprehensive dataset we gather and further discusses the text-as-data methods with which we analyse large collections of texts. The fifth section presents our empirical analysis and reports our findings. Finally, we conclude in the final section with implications of our findings.

The international human rights order

Scholars and policy-makers are increasingly eager to understand how a rising China engages with the international order. Yet reliable answers are often elusive, in part because of conceptual ambiguities in the literature. When scholars debate whether China is a challenger to the international order, it is often unclear exactly what that order is. Some think of that order essentially as the distribution of power among leading states;⁹ China's rise—or, the relative decline of the US—would destabilize that order. Others understand the international order as a complex system of norms, rules and principles.¹⁰ As Foot cautions, even among those scholars who argue against assuming a fixed and agreed international order, many accept that China represents a challenge to that order.¹¹

This conceptual ambiguity is compounded by the frequent use of two terms—the international order and the liberal international order—as if they were interchangeable. What is it about the international order that makes it liberal—the characteristics of leading states in the international system, or the content of the rules and principles upon which they have agreed? Given the myriad rules and principles that states have accepted, which of these rules and principles are part of the liberal order? Depending on the answers to these questions, China may or may not be a challenger to the liberal order. If the liberal order simply means open multilateralism, then China can reasonably be seen as cherishing, rather than undermining, that order.¹² However, if the liberal order further entails capitalism and democracy, then China—with its state capitalism and single-party system—would clash with that order.

These conceptual difficulties are particularly pronounced in relation to international human rights. Conventional wisdom treats human rights as a liberal concept and, as Berger notes, the liberal discourse that is popular in the West puts human rights at its core, along with democracy and the rule of law.¹³ In practice, when the US criticizes China for violating international human rights law, its criticism typically concerns individual liberties such as freedom of speech, religion and assembly. Scholars also tend to see human rights and democracy in symbiosis. For example, Moravcsik argues that newly democratic states in Europe committed to the European Court of Human Rights because they wanted to 'lock in' democratic reforms.¹⁴ In another example, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs prescriptively posit that the way to protect human rights is to fully democratize.¹⁵ Similarly, some of

⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail: the rise and fall of the liberal international order', *International Security* 43: 4, 2019, pp. 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00342.

¹⁰ David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, 'Challenges to the liberal order: reflections on *International Organization*', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 225–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636>.

¹¹ Rosemary Foot, 'Institutional design and rhetorical spaces: China's human rights strategies in a changing world order', *Journal of Contemporary China* 33: 150, 2024, pp. 1053–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2023.2299958>.

¹² G. John Ikenberry, 'The future of the liberal world order: internationalism after America', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 3, 2011, pp. 56–68, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/future-liberal-world-order>.

¹³ Berger, 'Human rights beyond the liberal script'.

¹⁴ Andrew Moravcsik, 'The origins of human rights regimes: democratic delegation in postwar Europe', *International Organization* 54: 2, 2000, pp. 217–52, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551163>.

¹⁵ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, 'Development and democracy', *Foreign Affairs* 84: 5, 2005, pp. 77–86, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/development-and-democracy>.

the most frequently cited human rights indices—for example, the CIRI physical integrity score,¹⁶ Fariss' latent human rights score¹⁷ and Freedom House's global freedom indicator¹⁸—all put heavy emphasis on states' protection of citizens' civil and political rights. This narrative, which dominates in the West and which sees human rights as nothing more than political rights, would deem all countries that are not fully democratic as being against human rights and accordingly devoid of any meaningful attempt to improve human rights without regime change. The narrative is problematic, not least because the perspectives of a vast number of countries in the global South do not align with it.

We depart from the dominant narrative. Building on recent studies¹⁹ and echoing China-focused studies,²⁰ we argue that international human rights go beyond the rights valued by liberal democracies; rather, they include all rights codified in global human rights treaties and buttressed by international organizations. As such, the international human rights order consists of rules and principles codified in the foundational human rights treaties in the forum of the United Nations. The UDHR codifies a wide range of norms and principles, including equality and dignity, freedom and liberty, access to education and work, respect irrespective of gender, ethnicity and religion, and the right to development and environment. Along with the UDHR, two main pillars of international human rights law are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Furthermore, the core of international human rights law consists in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), as well as various conventions aimed at protecting vulnerable populations, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Together, the international human rights order consists of a wide variety of rights. It is indeed multidimensional. The international human rights regime does

¹⁶ David L. Cingranelli and David L. Richards, 'The Cingranelli and Richards (CIRI) human rights data project', *Human Rights Quarterly* 32: 2, 2010, pp. 401–24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.0.0141>.

¹⁷ Christopher J. Fariss, 'Respect for human rights has improved over time: modeling the changing standard of accountability', *American Political Science Review* 108: 2, 2014, pp. 297–318, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000070>.

¹⁸ Kenneth Roth, 'Defending economic, social and cultural rights: practical issues faced by an international human rights organization', *Human Rights Quarterly* 26: 1, 2004, pp. 63–73; Amartya Sen, *Development as freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Berger, 'Human rights beyond the liberal script'; Rochelle Terman and Zoltán I. Búzás, 'A house divided: norm fragmentation in the international human rights regime', *International Studies Quarterly* 65: 2, 2021, pp. 488–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab019>.

²⁰ Bjorn Ahl, 'The rise of China and international human rights law', *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 37, 2016, pp. 637–61, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2830215>; Titus C. Chen and Chiahao Hsu, 'China's human rights foreign policy in the Xi Jinping era: normative revisionism shrouded in discursive moderation', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23: 2, 2021, pp. 228–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120957611>; Alexander Dukalskis, 'A fox in the henhouse: China, normative change, and the UN Human Rights Council', *Journal of Human Rights* 22: 3, 2023, pp. 334–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2023.2193971>; Foot, 'Institutional design and rhetorical spaces'; Inboden, *China and the international human rights regime*.

not simply impose a negative duty on others, particularly states, to refrain from interference or actions that would infringe upon individual liberties. Negative rights are often associated with civil and political rights and include rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from torture or cruel treatment, and the right to a fair trial: the areas within which a person can act without interference from others, and in particular from the government.²¹ Beyond that, the international human rights regime also imposes a positive obligation on states to fulfil certain needs or entitlements. Positive rights are often associated with economic, social and cultural rights and include rights such as the right to education, health care, work and an adequate standard of living.²² In short, the international human rights order reflects a nuanced balance between negative rights to refrain from state infringement and positive rights to fulfil citizens' essential needs. Beyond these two central pillars, the regime has also evolved to include new human rights norms such as women's, refugees' and migrants', and ethnic minorities' rights. This multifaceted framework underscores the complex interplay beyond civil and political rights.

How China engages with the human rights order

Assessing how China engages with the international human rights order not only requires conceptual clarity concerning that order, as discussed in the previous section, but also, as we discuss below, the collation of systematic data on its engagement. How does China engage with the international human rights order? Equally importantly, how would one capture that engagement?

One way to assess a country's engagement with the international human rights order is to examine the extent to which that country accepts the rules codified in global human rights treaties as legally binding. The Chinese government has expressed its intent to follow the UDHR. Over the years, China has endorsed and become a party to most of the global human rights treaties, demonstrating a greater commitment than, by contrast, the United States to the international human rights order. China ratified the CEDAW in 1980,²³ the ICERD in 1981,²⁴ the CAT in 1988,²⁵

²¹ Isaiah Berlin, 'Two concepts of liberty', in Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924989X.003.0004>.

²² Roth, 'Defending economic, social and cultural rights'; Sen, *Development as freedom*.

²³ The United States is one of only seven countries, along with Iran, Niue, Palau, Somalia, Sudan and Tonga, that have not yet ratified the CEDAW. For more details, see Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Ratification status for CEDAW—Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women', https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CEDAW (accessed 13 Jan. 2024).

²⁴ The ICERD is the oldest of the nine core international human rights treaties, and the principal treaty aimed at eliminating racial discrimination globally. The UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the ICERD in 1965; it took effect on 4 Jan. 1969. The United States signed the ICERD in 1966, but did not ratify it until Oct. 1994, nearly three decades later. For more details, see Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Ratification status for CERD—International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination', https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CERD.

²⁵ The US ratified the CAT in 1994.

the CRC in 1992,²⁶ the ICESCR in 2001,²⁷ the CRPD in 2008,²⁸ and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) in 2011.²⁹ Such commitment—accepting human rights treaties as legally binding—is the most direct engagement with the international human rights order, though it does not automatically ensure actual compliance with international human rights law.

Thus, another way to assess a country's engagement with the international human rights order is to examine the extent to which it complies with international human rights law. Many actors contribute to painting a picture of China's human rights practices, with the greatest concerns being about China's approach to civil and political rights. Western democracies have criticized China for, *inter alia*, censorship, suppression of political dissent and mistreatment of ethnic minorities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, China has not yet ratified the ICCPR,³⁰ which addresses issues such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and political participation. China's human rights practices have been scrutinized in prominent international forums and have attracted the attention of global public opinion. Human rights activists and researchers further contribute to raising awareness of these issues. The widely used human rights indices—with their heavy emphasis on states' protection of citizens' civil and political rights—often rank China among the more problematic states. By and large, concerns in the West over China's human rights practices reflect the tension between China's political system as an authoritarian regime and individual liberty that the West seems to hold dear when criticizing China's human rights policies.³¹ Beyond civil and political rights, comprehensive assessments are lacking, though there has been growing attention to this shortcoming in the literature. Some scholars have noted that social and economic rights have not received adequate attention in constructing human rights indicators.³² Some have begun

²⁶ The CRC entered into force in Sept. 1990, and has been ratified by 196 countries, making it the most widely ratified human rights treaty. The US is the only country that has not ratified the Convention. For details, see 'Ratification status for CRC—Convention on the Rights of the Child', https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CRC.

²⁷ The US signed but did not ratify the ICESCR.

²⁸ The US signed but did not ratify the CRPD.

²⁹ The US neither signed nor ratified the ICRMW.

³⁰ The US ratified the ICCPR in 1992.

³¹ It is important to note that there is a great deal of internal heterogeneity of human rights discourse within the global North and South respectively. Indeed, many states and especially non-state actors in the global South value individual liberties such as civil and political rights. Many civil society organizations and NGOs in the global South actively advocate for civil and political rights to hold states accountable; see Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink, eds, *The power of human rights: international norms and domestic change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For example, extensive research has documented the impact of individuals and NGOs in the global South in drawing international attention to disappearances and abuses by police and security forces: James Ron, Shannon Golden, David Crow and Archana Pandya, *Taking root: human rights and public opinion in the global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). There is also a great deal of heterogeneity in the global North. The great powers of the global North have often been hesitant to endorse the international protection of human rights through international law and institutions, in particular because they were wary of the sovereignty implications of human rights issues: Kathryn Sikkink, *Evidence for hope: making human rights work in the 21st century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). Today, there is a growing demand for social and economic rights, even in societies of advanced industrialized countries: Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating capabilities: the human development approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³² AnnJanette Rosga and Margaret L. Satterthwaite, 'The trust in indicators: measuring human rights', *Berkeley*

to construct indices, for example, for the right to education.³³ There has also been growing attention across the globe to substantive rights such as education and health care, along with efforts to enshrine these rights in national constitutions.³⁴ China is cast in a more positive light by these assessments.

The twin issues of commitment and compliance have received much scholarly attention.³⁵ Yet neither is a perfect indicator of a state's attitude towards the international human rights order. On the one hand, commitment—as a sovereign decision to be legally bound by human rights treaties—is the most formal indication of a country's attitude towards the human rights order. But it may not reflect an 'actual' or 'true' attitude if the formal declaration is not frequently invoked in practice. On the other hand, compliance—a state's actual behaviour and societal outcomes in accordance with international human rights law—would indicate substantive, if not formal, endorsement of the international human rights order. But it is incredibly difficult to attribute whatever we deem as compliance to genuine intention. Aside from the questions of which rights to spotlight and which indices to rely on, human behaviour and societal outcomes are a function of much more than intention.

In the case of China, the contrast is subject to interpretation between the good record of commitment and the not-so-good record of compliance. It is possible that China's commitment to international human rights treaties was insincere.³⁶ It is also possible that China's endorsement of international human rights norms and principles reflected a genuine aspiration to promote human rights, but the outcome fell short due to diverse reasons.³⁷ We may never know the original intentions of the complex government of a vast country that has evolved in unprecedented ways in the intervening decades. What we do know is that China has found itself in an awkward place in international human rights governance. While it professes to accept international human rights and principles, China has often been criticized as violating many of the most important ones, especially those emphasized by liberal democracies.

In this article, we go beyond the usual focus on commitment and compliance. We assess China's engagement with the international human rights order

Journal of International Law 27: 2, 2009, pp. 253–315, <http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1298540>.

³³ Gauthier de Beco, 'Human rights indicators: from theoretical debate to practical application', *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 5: 2, 2013, pp. 380–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huto03>.

³⁴ Varun Gauri and Daniel M. Brinks, eds, *Courting social justice: judicial enforcement of social and economic rights in the developing world* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁵ Beth A. Simmons, 'International law', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, eds, *Handbook of International Relations* (London: SAGE, 2013).

³⁶ Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Kiyoteru Tsutsui, 'Justice lost! The failure of international human rights law to matter where needed most', *Journal of Peace Research* 44: 4, 2007, pp. 407–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343307078942>; Heather Smith-Cannoy, *Insincere commitments: human rights treaties, abusive states, and citizen activism* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

³⁷ We can recall that China ratified many global human rights treaties in the early years as it opened to the world, pursuing economic growth but also political reform. Certainly, there was the hope that after the end of the Cold War, countries like China could become genuine endorsers of international human rights law. See more in Xinyuan Dai, *International institutions and national policies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social states: China in international institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Thomas Risse, "'Let's argue!': Communicative action in world politics', *International Organization* 54: 1, 2000, pp. 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551109>; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, *The power of human rights*; Beth A. Simmons, *Mobilizing for human rights: international law in domestic politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

by examining how China invokes international human rights norms in recurring practices when interacting with all countries in the world. How China invokes human rights norms likely reflects, to various extents, both its legal commitment and its actual practice. To the extent that we can reliably collect all stated positions that China takes when interacting with every other country in the world concerning all—rather than select—rights codified in international human rights law within a clearly defined (rather than ad hoc) scope, we can reliably capture China's position on the international human rights order. The fact that the action to state one's position is recurring and is public in front of all countries in the world further enhances the reliability of our depiction.

We now turn to this important task—to reliably capture China's position on the international human rights order—by systematically analysing a large body of textual data in the UPR. Our analyses shall provide new and systematic evidence on how China engages with the international human rights order.

Laboratory of the Universal Periodic Review

The UN human rights regime allows states to socialize through communication, reflection and action on the predominantly normative practices in human rights. In particular, the UNHRC has set up the UPR mechanism to hold member states accountable to their peers for the treatment of their domestic populations. The UPR is the comprehensive and elaborate multilateral human rights mechanism where states are the primary actors in reviewing each other's human rights practices. The formal forum-like peer review system is designed to 'give equal treatment to all the countries and allow them to exchange best practices'.³⁸

Since the inception of the UPR in 2006, three review cycles have been completed: Cycle 1 (2008–2011), Cycle 2 (2012–2016), and Cycle 3 (2017–2022). In each cycle, each of the 193 UN member states undergoes an interactive review of its human rights situation; so far, the participation rate has been 100 per cent. During each cycle, it takes about 13 sessions—three sessions each year—to review all countries exactly once. At each session, about 14 countries are reviewed. The timeline of the sessions for the ongoing cycle is publicly available, so states can anticipate when they will be under review and prepare accordingly.

At a review session, each state under review submits a comprehensive report on its human rights situation. Other countries can then ask questions, make comments and provide recommendations to the state under review.³⁹ Since reviewing states have limited space to ask questions and issue recommendations, they tend to use their monitoring power selectively for issues about which they are most concerned. They must reduce the complex reality of human rights conditions in the country

³⁸ UN News, 'Saudi Arabia, China, among 14 nations under UN human rights spotlight: what you need to know', 5 Nov. 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/11/1024852>.

³⁹ A body of information is made available to reviewing states before they issue their recommendations. It includes factual documents from a report compiled by the state under review, observations and comments compiled by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights conditions in the state under review, as well as opinions from other stakeholders including NGOs and national human rights institutions.

under review over a period of five years to a condensed statement. We can infer that recommendations in the UPR address the most important and meaningful problems in the state under review from the perspective of the reviewing state.

The UPR provides a useful laboratory for policy-makers and researchers. Policy-makers can learn how different review procedures—for example, those of the UPR versus those of most other international organizations—can influence the behaviour of participating states and the dynamics of international governance. Researchers can use the wealth of data available at the UPR to answer a range of questions, including our quest to examine how states engage with the international human rights order: that is, which rights they invoke and how consistently they invoke them. While results from one experiment are not automatically transferable to other situations, they can provide useful insights. Our findings from the UPR can be usefully compared with the votes of the UNHRC and the UN General Assembly.

Three features of the UPR help us depict states' positions reliably. First, the UPR is an inclusive mechanism where all UN member states participate and give peer reviews to each other, as opposed to where experts from non-randomly selected regions make recommendations (as is the case in other human rights institutions). Second, the UPR grants states multiple opportunities to articulate their positions in recurring interactions: in each cycle, states have one chance to be reviewed (to be a state under review) and multiple chances to give recommendations to other countries (to be a reviewing state). Third and most importantly, the UPR addresses a holistic set of human rights as codified in all core human rights treaties, heeding the multidimensional nature of the international human rights order; in this respect, it contrasts with review mechanisms in various treaty organizations that focus on select rights. Therefore, the UPR mechanism, along with the rich collection of states' statements it has produced, provides an excellent opportunity to study how states distil and communicate their principled engagement with the international human rights order in numerous iterations over a sustained period of time.

We capture states' positions on the international human rights order as emerging from their recommendations when they serve as reviewers in the UPR. Following Terman and Búzás,⁴⁰ we conceptualize states' aggregate recommendations as indicative of their relative emphasis on different human rights norms. When they make recommendations to each state under review, the recommendations may not necessarily reflect their genuine beliefs as to what constitutes right or wrong. Indeed, the topics a reviewing state chooses to highlight for a specific state under review may reflect various considerations, such as the area of human rights about which the reviewing state is most concerned, the actual human rights conditions in the state under review, geopolitical relationships between the two,⁴¹

⁴⁰ Terman and Búzás, 'A house divided'.

⁴¹ Rochelle Terman and Joshua Byun, 'Punishment and politicization in the international human rights regime', *American Political Science Review* 116: 2, 2022, pp. 385–402, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001167>. Also see James H. Lebovic and Erik Voeten, 'The politics of shame: the condemnation of country human rights practices in the UNCHR', *International Studies Quarterly* 50: 4, 2006, pp. 861–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/>

other countries' reviews of the state under review, plus additional contextual factors. However, in the aggregate, the reviewing state's recommendations reflect that state's own vision of the international human rights order. Since we aggregate a reviewing state's recommendations to all other countries in the world, the factors related to any individual state under review do not systematically bias the aggregated position. Furthermore, states can affirm and reaffirm particular human rights norms by devoting more of their recommendations towards those specific norms. Therefore, a state's recommendations, in aggregate, represent its engagement with the international human rights order. Because this representation is based on regular and recurring practices—involving different states under review and the global audience at the same time—it is more accurate and reliable than reading select official documents and hearing select official speeches.

Analysis

We analyse the UPR data compiled by UPR Info, a non-profit organization that supports access to information for all key stakeholders of the UPR.⁴² The data includes all recommendations during each of the three cycles of the UPR. For each recommendation, we have information about the time of the review session, the reviewing state, the state under review, the verb choices used in each recommendation conveying the necessary level of changes, and the specific issue(s) the recommendation addresses. Each recommendation may address one or more issues and thus be labelled with one or multiple tags. The codebook is available to justify why an issue tag is attached to the recommendation.⁴³ Researchers at UPR Info have identified 56 non-mutually exclusive issue tags. We cluster these issue tags into eight broad issue topics, largely corresponding to the core global human rights treaties. These issue topics are: 1) civil and political rights; (2) governance and public services; (3) migrants and workers; (4) physical integrity rights; (5) racial, ethnic and religious minorities; (6) social and economic rights; (7) protection of vulnerable populations;⁴⁴ and (8) general and others. In sum, the textual information in each recommendation is succinctly encapsulated through different issue topics.

After extracting the topics covered in each recommendation, we create a state–topic vector by grouping the topics from all recommendations made by a reviewing state. Each state–topic vector represents the number of times each topic is highlighted among all recommendations by a reviewing state in each cycle. This way, each reviewing state's position on all human rights norms is translated into a

j.1468-2478.2006.00429.x; Rochelle Terman and Erik Voeten, 'The relational politics of shame: evidence from the Universal Periodic Review', *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 13, 2018, pp. 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-016-9264-x>; Omer Zarpli and Huseyin Zengin, 'Shame, endorse, or remain silent?: State response to human rights violations in other countries', *Research and Politics* 9: 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680211070344>.

⁴² UPR Info, <https://www.upr-info.org/en/homepage>.

⁴³ UPR Info.

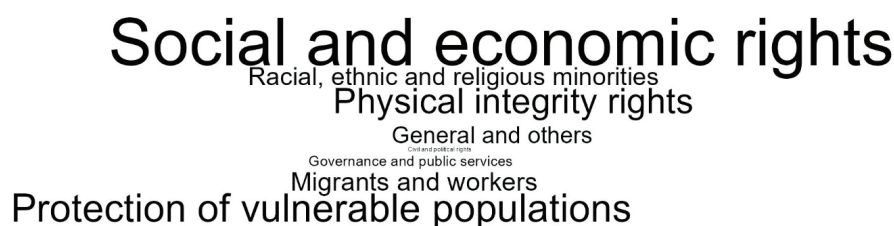
⁴⁴ Note that the group of 'vulnerable populations' refers to women, children and persons with disabilities, as codified in the CEDAW, CRC and CRPD.

state–topic vector. Accordingly, we can compare China’s position on the international human rights order with that of any other country.

China’s position on the international human rights order

What does China’s position on the international human rights order look like? Figure 1, below, is a word cloud that sums up China’s stance on international human rights. The larger the issue topic appears, the more frequently such a topic is addressed in China’s recommendations. When China provides recommendations to other countries through all three cycles, it most often addresses efforts to protect citizens’ social and economic rights. Examples of this dimension of human rights include the right to water and the right to education, thus addressing poverty or environmental issues. Next, it addresses the protection of vulnerable populations, including women, children and persons living with disabilities, and the issue of human trafficking. On the other hand, the topic which China addresses the least is that of civil and political rights: a topic that is valued as one of the most essential in western liberal democracies. In fact, China addresses this topic so rarely that ‘civil and political rights’ does not even appear in the word cloud.

Figure 1: China’s human rights script—a word cloud of topics



Note: The word cloud represents the frequency of topics in China’s recommendations to other countries across all three UPR cycles.

Source: UPR Info; authors’ elaboration.

These findings complement those by Ahl,⁴⁵ in the context of the UPR, and Dukalskis⁴⁶ in the context of the UNHRC. By focusing on one source—China’s reviews of other countries—in its entirety and across all three cycles of the UPR, our analysis quantifies the extent of China’s priority relative to each topic of rights and further sheds light on how China’s priority hardened from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3.

Table 1 presents a summary of the relative weights attached to different topics of rights in China’s recommendations over the three cycles. The top three topics of rights that China highlights most frequently are consistent across the three cycles (from left to right): social and economic rights, protection of vulnerable popula-

⁴⁵ Ahl, ‘The rise of China and international human rights law’.

⁴⁶ Dukalskis, ‘A fox in the henhouse’.

tions and physical integrity rights. Furthermore, there is a growing emphasis on social and economic rights over time; in Cycle 3, for example, the mention of this particular dimension of human rights occupies half of the space (50 per cent). In contrast, the topic of civil and political rights is barely addressed across the three cycles.

Table 1: Relative frequency of topics covered in China's recommendations to all other countries

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Topics of rights</i>	<i>Cycle 1</i>	<i>Cycle 2</i>	<i>Cycle 3</i>	<i>Total topic</i>
1	Social and economic rights	0.42	0.41	0.5	377
2	Protection of vulnerable populations	0.16	0.22	0.22	180
3	Physical integrity rights	0.13	0.11	0.12	99
4	Racial, ethnic and religious minorities	0.07	0.1	0.08	75
5	Migrants and workers	0.04	0.07	0.05	49
6	General and others	0.14	0.05	0.01	35
7	Governance and public services	0.02	0.04	0.01	21
8	Civil and political rights	0.01	0.01	0	3
Total topics		90	392	357	839
Total recommendations		78	305	315	698

China's position in comparison to others

Given its position on the international human rights order as described above, is China an outlier on the world stage? One would expect so, at least compared to western liberal democracies, which have often criticized China for its human rights policies and practices. Table 2 shows the frequency of topics highlighted by G7 countries in their recommendations over the three cycles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the topic of civil and political rights is frequently discussed, occupying a significantly larger space in G7 recommendations than in China's recommendations. Interestingly, however, it is not the most frequently mentioned topic of rights. Rather, the G7 countries address the protection of vulnerable populations and physical integrity rights more often. They devote 60 per cent of their recommendations to addressing these two topics of rights. On the other hand, the topic of social and economic rights is a low priority, occupying between 4 and 7 per cent of the total topics addressed by G7 countries. Considering that most countries in the world are developing countries, the scant attention this prominent group of developed countries gives to development issues is striking.

Table 2: Relative frequency of topics covered in G7 countries' recommendations to all other countries

Rank	Topics of rights	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total topics
1	Physical integrity rights	0.32	0.33	0.29	4,134
2	Protection of vulnerable populations	0.27	0.27	0.31	3,698
3	Civil and political rights	0.14	0.14	0.16	1,914
4	Governance and public services	0.08	0.07	0.06	938
5	Racial, ethnic and religious minorities	0.06	0.07	0.06	832
6	Social and economic rights	0.04	0.06	0.07	750
7	General and others	0.05	0.04	0.02	469
8	Migrants and workers	0.03	0.03	0.03	423
Total topics		4,288	4,989	3,881	13,158
Total recommendations		3,621	4,027	3,289	10,937

Shifting our attention from the G7 to the developing world, how does China's position resonate in the global South?⁴⁷ This study covers 151 countries in the global South that received development projects funded by Chinese governmental institutions or state-owned enterprises between 2000 and 2017, the period during which most Chinese development aid was granted, according to AidData.⁴⁸ That is, we operationalize global South countries as those developing countries that have at one point or another received development projects from China.

Table 3 shows that the collective vision of the global South with regard to rights is closer to China's than to that of the G7. Countries in the global South give the highest priority to the same three topics of rights (social and economic, protection of vulnerable populations and physical integrity rights) that China identifies as most important. However, they do not prioritize social and economic rights above all other rights as China does. They address social and economic rights in less than 20 per cent of their recommendations, while China addresses these rights in 50 per cent of its recommendations. Yet, like China, those in the global South accord the least priority to addressing civil and political rights. Across three review cycles, there is an increase in the proportion of recommendations that address social and

⁴⁷ There is no single, universally accepted definition of the global South. Rather, the term is used in at least three different ways. First, it is often used to refer to a group of countries that are characterized by lower levels of socio-economic development, income and industrialization than countries in the global North. However, the distinction between developed and developing is becoming blurred. Second, the global South is sometimes used to refer to countries primarily located in the southern hemisphere, including many nations in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. Third and finally, the global South is commonly used as a political concept to refer to the countries that belong to the Group of 77 (which is now a collation of 133 countries, however) at the UN—those considered as developing countries.

⁴⁸ AidData, 'China's public diplomacy dashboard dataset, Version 2.0', 13 Dec. 2021, <https://www.aiddata.org/data/chinas-public-diplomacy-dashboard-dataset-version-2>.

economic rights, but the topic of civil and political rights remains stable at the bottom of the list, with this topic of rights having a weighting of about 0.04 (4 per cent) across three cycles.

Table 3: Relative frequency of topics covered in recommendations made by Chinese aid-recipient countries to all other countries

Rank	Topics of rights	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total topics
1	Protection of vulnerable populations	0.26	0.29	0.33	16,582
2	Physical integrity rights	0.19	0.21	0.19	10,755
3	Social and economic rights	0.16	0.15	0.18	9,044
4	Governance and public services	0.08	0.08	0.08	4,512
5	Racial, ethnic and religious minorities	0.07	0.08	0.08	4,435
6	Migrants and workers	0.07	0.08	0.07	4,105
7	General and others	0.12	0.07	0.04	3,720
8	Civil and political rights	0.04	0.04	0.04	2,104
Total topics		10,699	22,217	22,341	55,257
Total recommendations		9,335	19,343	19,035	47,713

These findings do not yield an easy, unequivocal answer as to whether China is an outlier. First, while often neglected in the literature, a great deal of agreement exists on how countries engage with the international human rights order. Across the globe, countries converge on the importance of protecting vulnerable populations and physical integrity rights—the most frequently addressed topics by G7 countries as well as by the global South. China shares that agreement: these topics of rights are among the top three addressed most often by China in its recommendations. Second, China stands out in championing social and economic rights, devoting, on average, close to 50 per cent of its recommendations to this topic. While the G7 countries clearly do not adhere to this vision, global South states seem more inclined towards it, with this topic of rights ranking third in terms of frequency of recommendations. Third, China diverges most strikingly from G7 countries by addressing social and economic rights most frequently of any topic, and civil and political rights the least frequently. In contrast, G7 countries elevate civil and political rights and downplay social and economic rights in their recommendations. The vision of the global South is closer to that of China than it is to that of the G7 countries because—unlike the G7—the global South addresses social and economic rights much more often than civil and political rights—in 18 per cent of recommendations in Cycle 3, compared with just 4 per cent. In fact, like China, the global South gives the least attention to civil and political rights among all topics.

When does the global South mirror China's position?

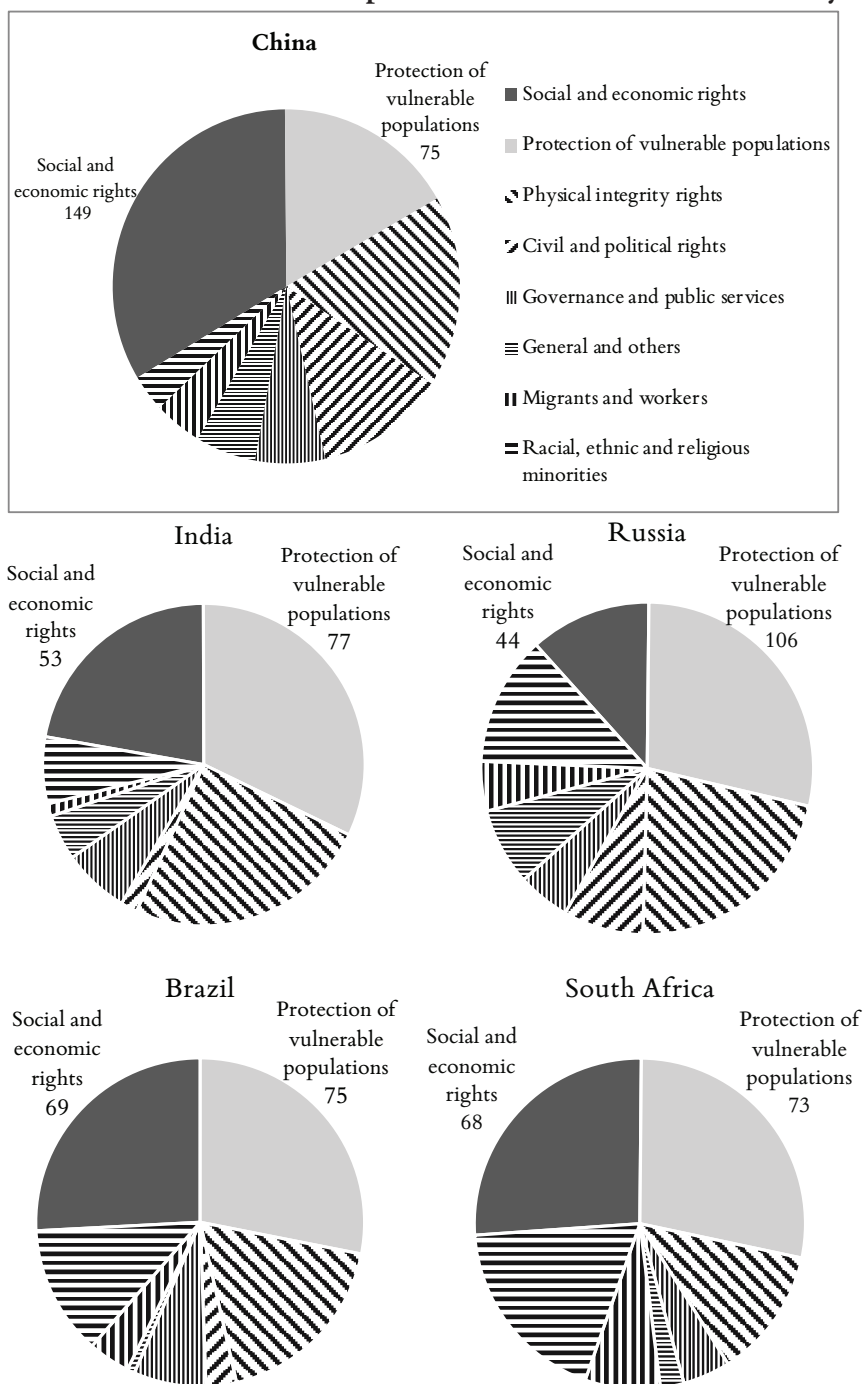
The above analysis suggests that the global South leans closer to China's position than that of the G7 on international human rights. However, the global South's position is not identical to China's. In general, countries in the global South do not prioritize social and economic rights above other topics as China does. But there is one striking exception, as we detail below.

When countries in the global South review China's human rights conditions and offer recommendations to China, they echo China's position more closely. As table 4 shows, recommendations that recipients of Chinese development aid offer to China emphasize the same three top topics of rights as in China's recommendations to all countries: social and economic rights, physical integrity rights, and the protection of vulnerable populations. Notably, they prioritize social and economic rights above all others, as China does. It is as if China's position on the international human rights order sets the tone for their conversations and interactions. When reviewing China's human rights conditions, the discussions around social and economic rights comprise more than 30 per cent of the total topics, rising from 33 per cent in Cycle 1 to 36 per cent in Cycle 3. Recipients of Chinese development aid do not completely ignore civil and political rights in China. However, they collectively devote less space to this topic compared with social and economic rights. Furthermore, their attention to civil and political rights has waned over time. The weighting attached to civil and political rights in their recommendations to China decreased dramatically from 16 per cent in Cycle 1 to just 8 per cent in Cycle 3.

Table 4: Relative frequency of topics covered in recommendations made by Chinese aid-recipient countries to China

Rank	Topics of rights	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total topics
1	Social and economic rights	0.33	0.3	0.36	149
2	Physical integrity rights	0.29	0.2	0.14	78
3	Protection of vulnerable populations	0.04	0.15	0.2	75
4	Civil and political rights	0.16	0.17	0.08	54
5	Governance and public services	0.04	0.05	0.08	29
6	General and others	0.11	0.05	0.05	25
7	Migrants and workers	0	0.03	0.06	20
8	Racial, ethnic and religious minorities	0.02	0.04	0.03	15
Total topics		45	164	236	445
Total recommendations		48	155	220	423

Figure 2: Frequency of topics covered in reviews received by BRICS countries from Chinese aid-recipient countries across all three UPR cycles



Note: The solid segments of each pie chart highlight the most mentioned topics by each country. The number associated with each highlighted segment refers to the number of recommendations mentioning the topic.

The contrast between the global South's recommendations for China versus those made for all other countries is fascinating. It reveals the potential influence China has in shaping normative discourse in global institutions: a conjecture that can be partly corroborated by examples such as, when China was up for review in the UPR, it encouraged friendly comments and recommendations.⁴⁹ Yet, how do we know the elevated attention to social and economic rights on the part of the global South is indeed driven by China?

We deepen our analysis by examining specific recommendations made by the global South states to individual countries within the BRICS grouping.⁵⁰ Figure 2 shows a nuanced picture, where countries in the global South affirm what China champions when they interact directly with China. In fact, when they review any other country among the BRICS group, countries in the global South do not prioritize social and economic rights above all other topics. Instead, in each case they highlight the protection of vulnerable populations as the most important, in accordance with their overall recommendations to all other countries. In contrast, the global South seems to reserve its emphasis on social and economic rights only for when it reviews—and offers recommendations to—China.

Thus, our analyses so far show that not only is China not an outlier in its position on the international human rights order, but also that China has effectively influenced the countries of the global South in their engagement with this order.

Chinese foreign aid and position alignments

We have shown that China has influenced the countries in the global South in terms of their engagement with the international human rights order, but how do we know that this is due to China's material power and large amounts of foreign aid, as we have suggested? We now deepen our analysis further by examining how Chinese aid flows affect the extent to which global South countries align with China on their human rights positions. We find in essence that global South countries' human rights articulations are more similar to China's when they have received higher aid flows from China.

Our dependent variable is the alignment of human rights positions between a global South country and China. To measure human rights position alignment, we quantify how similar a global South country's review of others and China's review of others are in terms of the human rights topics mentioned. We first create a state–topic vector to specify how frequently the topics are articulated by each reviewing state. We then construct a matrix where the distribution of each country's state–topic vector is compared with that of China's state–topic vector. We calculate the cosine similarity⁵¹ between the two vectors of a country pair:

⁴⁹ Inboden and Chen, 'China's response to international normative pressure'.

⁵⁰ Up to the end of cycle 3 of the UPR, BRICS comprised Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. In January 2024 Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates acceded to full membership of the group, which subsequently became known as 'BRICS+'.
⁵¹ A cosine value of 0 means that the two vectors are orthogonal and have no match. The closer the cosine value

China as a reviewer against a global South country as a reviewer, regarding the topic distributions in their reviews. A country with a higher cosine similarity score is more aligned with China in terms of its human rights position.

Our key independent variable is Chinese aid flow per capita⁵² prior to each review cycle. We expect greater developmental aid inflows per capita to be associated with a higher degree of human rights position alignment with China. To enable accurate interpretation of the results, we include in our analysis additional variables to control for their potential influence on the relationship between our dependent and key independent variables. These additional variables include a country's human rights practices,⁵³ its voting distance *vis-à-vis* China in the UN General Assembly,⁵⁴ economic conditions,⁵⁵ regime type⁵⁶ and the timing of review cycles. We use fixed effects models, where the effects of certain groups—specifically, regime types and the timing of review cycles—are considered as fixed or non-random quantities. That is, we focus on analysing changes within each group while controlling for characteristics specific to that group.

Table 5 includes two models with a stacked analysis of cycles 1–3. We operationalize cosine similarity, our key variable of interest, as the similarity of human rights positions with China when reviewing every other country in model 1, and the similarity of human rights positions with China when reviewing G7 countries in model 2.

The results show that Chinese aid inflows prior to each review cycle are significantly correlated with human rights position similarity with China during a review cycle at a significance level of 0.001 and 0.05, in model 1 and model 2 respectively.⁵⁷ Specifically, as in model 1, countries in the global South that receive a higher amount of Chinese aid are more likely to be aligned with China in their reviews of all other countries. Furthermore, as in model 2, the higher the amount of foreign aid from China, the more likely the recipient country is to be aligned with China in terms of its reviews of G7 countries.

Results are also interesting with respect to the control variables. In particular, the coefficient on political terror scores is also positive in model 1, suggesting that countries with worse human rights practices by this measure are more likely to align with China on human rights positions. In addition, a country's ideal point as revealed in its General Assembly votes, *vis-à-vis* China's—a measure of broad policy alignments with China in the UN—has a negative effect, suggesting that countries that are politically distant from China are less likely to align with China on human rights. GDP per capita, a crude measure of a country's development, is

to 1, the smaller the angle and the greater the match between vectors.

⁵² AidData, 'China's public diplomacy dashboard dataset, version 2.0.'

⁵³ Mark Gibney et al., 'The political terror scale 1976–2016', Political Terror Scale, 2017, <https://www.political-terrorscale.org>.

⁵⁴ Erik Voeten, Anton Strezhnev and Michael Bailey, 'United Nations General Assembly voting data', Harvard Dataverse, V29, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LEJUQZ>.

⁵⁵ For relevant data, see World Bank, 'World development indicators', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator>.

⁵⁶ See V-Dem, 'Dataset archive', <https://www.v-dem.net/data/dataset-archive>.

⁵⁷ The effect of an independent variable as indicated by **, for example, means that the probability of concluding that this variable is significantly correlated with the dependent variable when it actually is not is less than 5%.

positively correlated with human rights alignment with China, but the magnitude of the effect is close to zero.

Table 5: Correlations between Chinese aid flow and human rights review record similarity with China when reviewing all other UN member states and G7 countries across different cycles

	<i>Dependent variable: cosine similarity</i>	
	<i>Reviews of all other countries</i>	<i>Reviews of G7 countries</i>
	(1)	(2)
Chinese aid flow per capita (log)	0.009*** (0.003)	0.010** (0.005)
Political terror score	0.021*** (0.007)	-0.015 (0.013)
UN voting distance (<i>vis-à-vis</i> China)	-0.005* (0.002)	0.001 (0.004)
GDP per capita	0.000** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
Regime fixed effects	✓	✓
Cycle fixed effects	✓	✓
Observations	432	263
Robust Standard Errors	✓	✓

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

In sum, our analyses reveal that Chinese aid flows have a significant effect on the extent to which human rights positions of global South countries are aligned with that of China. This effect is evident in the general context, when the states under review include all the other UN member states, and in the specific context when the states under review are limited to G7 countries. Global South countries' human rights articulations are similar to China's when they receive higher aid flows from China. These findings underscore the geopolitical impact of China's economic statecraft on global human rights discourse.

Conclusion

How does a rising China affect the international order, particularly the international human rights order? Our research offers a more complex view of China's influence than is suggested by the simplistic question of whether China is a revisionist power. Using the UPR as a laboratory, we argue that international human rights norms are multidimensional and go beyond the narrow focus of the conventional liberal narrative. Moreover, by analysing over 93,000 recommendations made by

states between 2008 and 2021 we find no evidence that China is seeking to overturn or abandon the international human rights order. Instead, we uncover a previously underappreciated convergence among all countries (advanced industrialized countries and the global South, including China) in supporting the protection of vulnerable groups (e.g. women and children) and the prohibition of torture and other repressive practices against individuals (the upholding of physical integrity rights) as two of the most important dimensions of international human rights norms. While China shares this broad agreement, it is assertively and increasingly championing social and economic rights while downplaying civil and political rights. Our UPR-based evidence confirms our longstanding observations of China's advocacy of development-orientated human rights norms and further enriches our understanding of China's increasingly vigorous call, in forums—including the United Nations Security Council, which has the broadest mandate going beyond human rights—to recognize the contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights.

While China's position contrasts with that of the G7, it enjoys considerable support from the global South. Previous research has suggested that China seeks to appeal to like-minded groups.⁵⁸ Our study is the first to provide systematic empirical evidence that a significant proportion of developing countries share China's perspective on human rights, emphasizing the importance of socio-economic rights over what is conventionally perceived as the liberal foundation of human rights norms. The resonance of the Chinese position in the global South is most evident when developing countries are in direct dialogue with China: they emphasize social and economic rights, as China does, and they are most vocal about China's recent progress in these areas. As Foot argues, an enabling environment expressed in some degree of followership crucially influences how China pursues global governance reforms:⁵⁹ a key insight that has until recently received inadequate attention.⁶⁰ The evidence we provide helps better understand the followership that China enjoys in international human rights governance, thereby shedding light on the strategic choices that China makes in engaging with the international institutional order.

Our analysis suggests important questions for future research. First, why are countries in the global South collectively silent on civil and political rights, when many of them are stable democracies? While it is understandable that the need for development is paramount in the global South, it is interesting to see them using the primary forum for human rights to advocate for development-based rights. These facts do not bode well for the dominant liberal narrative in which human rights are seen as little more than political rights. Moreover, does the focus on development-based rights reflect intrinsic normative values in the global South, or rather China's influence? Our analysis is compatible with the possibility that China's economic and political power extends to shaping how the global South engages with the

⁵⁸ Inboden and Chen, 'China's response to international normative pressure'.

⁵⁹ Foot, 'Institutional design and rhetorical spaces'.

⁶⁰ Stacie E. Goddard, *When right makes might: rising powers and world order* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Beyond liberal narratives

international human rights order. Nevertheless, fascinating questions await future research. How does China exercise its influence? Does China provide economic aid to countries in the global South in exchange for their normative alignment?⁶¹ Or does China simply exist as an alternative development model without linking foreign aid to human rights?

⁶¹ Guan Wang, Margaret M. Pearson and Scott L. Kastner, 'Do China's foreign economic ties lead to influence abroad? New evidence from recent events', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 19: 4, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orado16>.

