Be My Friendly Reviewers: How China Shapes its Reviews in UN Human Rights Regime

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Abstract

Authoritarian states are often a vulnerable target of naming and shaming for their rights abuses and atrocities. I show that China can shield itself from severe criticisms in the UN human rights system. How do material incentives from China affect the leniency of peer reviews of its human rights conditions? I argue that trading for lenient reviews is possible, but its effectiveness depends on how reviewing states prioritize economic benefit over normative principles. Using text-based coding of over 90,000 UN Universal Periodic Review recommendations, I demonstrate that countries with strong economic ties through Chinese overseas development projects offer more lenient reviews of China's human rights records. This effect, however, is conditional: it is particularly pronounced in the "middle" countries whose stance on human rights norms is neither too aligned with nor distant from China's. The "distant" group remains resistant to offering lenient reviews. Contrary to the conventional belief that the U.N. human rights regime is window dressing or deeply politicized, I find that states have normative resilience: that commitment to the liberal value of human rights matters. I highlight the nuanced interplay between economic interests and norms in states' interactions: great powers do not always get what they want.

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1 Introduction

In the liberal norm-based human rights regime, authoritarian states are often targeted for naming and shaming due to their rights abuses. Both state and non-state entities from the Global North use various tools to assert their monitoring power. However, in the multilateral UN human rights regime, China paradoxically appears far from vulnerable to such monitoring. It receives mild criticism, gentle suggestions and support for its welfare-based human rights principle. A journalist has shown that during a pivotal Universal Periodic Review session, where, like all UN member countries, China undergoes peer reviews every five years, China has lobbied non-Western countries to "praise" its human rights conditions (Farge 2024). For example, Ethiopia, a country receiving substantial aid and loans from China[1], recommended in its Universal Periodic Review that China "continue its efforts to promote and protect the rights of children." This reflects a strategic choice to focus on a relatively uncontroversial issue and to frame the recommendation positively, using the word "continue" to signal recognition of China's ongoing efforts. In contrast, Kenya, receiving a comparable level of financial assistance from China, called on China to "ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," a treaty that China is highly unlikely to engage with. While some aid recipient countries chose to praise their donor, others did not.

China has been an important financier of development projects in the Global South in the past decades. Its material influence could potentially boost its lobbying efforts in international organizations, but how countries respond to China's economic clout is less known. How do material incentives from China affect the leniency of states' peer reviews of human rights conditions in the United Nations? I argue that trading for lenient reviews is possible, but its effectiveness depends on how reviewing states value economic benefits

[1]Ethiopia and Kenya are listed as the top 20 countries in each of the category, ODA (aid) and OOF (loans) (Lu and Williams 2024)

over normative principles. The more the Global South relies on China's overseas financing projects[2], the more inclined they are to refrain from criticizing its human rights practices.

However, support is not unconditional or unlimited. I find that states' willingness to provide lenient reviews is bounded by their predispositions toward human rights norms. Based on how compatible countries' predisposition to human rights norms with China's vision, countries are characterized into three groups: "close," "middle" and "distant." The "close" group shares a similar outlook on human rights with China; the "distant" group tends to stand at the opposite end of the norm spectrum, aligning more closely with the liberal-oriented vision promoted by Western states; while the "middle" group falls somewhere in between, neither strongly aligned with nor entirely opposed to China's perspective. Only those in the middle group are more sensitive to China's financial incentives to subsequently provide more lenient reviews. Those whose human rights norms align more closely with China are naturally more inclined to offer lenient reviews of its record without financial perks. Finally, the distant countries that highly value liberal human rights norms and standards will find material incentives hard to be sufficient to deviate from their long-held principles and co-opt with the other side.

The current norm-based human rights regime is designed to discipline norm-defiant states. However, when states review each other's performances in human rights in a multilateral setting at the UN, rather than relying on NGOs and media, the regime is deeply politicized: showing leniency to allies and strictness to adversaries (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023; Kim 2023). This pattern is not entirely surprising, as scholars have found that large countries, such as the United States, often utilize

[2]While economic benefits can take various forms, the scope condition here refers specifically to China-sponsored overseas development projects. Many countries in the Global South depend on Chinese financial support for their economic development or even survival, making them more susceptible to Chinese influence. Accordingly, China's overseas finance is treated as a key source of leverage. Countries that do not receive such financing, such as advanced economies, are excluded from the subsequent analysis.

financial incentives to influence the votes of smaller countries in the UN Security Council or General Assembly (Vreeland and Dreher 2014; Dreher, Nunnenkamp, and Thiele 2008).

Recently, there has been growing concern over how countries, notably powerful authoritarian regimes like China and Russia as well as other democratic backsliding countries have sought to undermine well-established Western liberal norms within international organizations (Binder and Payton 2022; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023; Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023). Considering China's dual agenda of promoting alternative norms while leveraging its significant economic influence, the challenges to existing liberal norms within international organizations are significant. Specifically focusing on the United Nations, recent studies indicate that countries receiving substantial aid and loans from Beijing or experiencing a surge in exports to China tend to align their voting behavior more closely with China's positions (Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. Strange, et al. 2022; Brazys and Vadlamannati 2021). It would come as no surprise to observe China exerting material influence to shape smaller states' behaviors in the UN, like many other powerful countries in the world, using political commodities to exercise influence on others on the international stage.

Powerful countries can shape smaller states' behaviors in international organizations, by buying favors or mobilizing friends and allies to stand by their positions. But realpolitik has the main predictive power, leaving minimal space for states' norms and beliefs. In fact, the middle powers have played an important role in establishing and expanding human rights throughout its history and into the present. Several examples illustrate this. Latin American countries united to advance the language of human rights in the UN Charter, and advocated for drafting the founding document of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Sikkink 2017; Cerna 2014). New democracies in post-war Europe were much more eager to commit to The European Court of Human Rights than established democracies (Grewal and Voeten 2015; Moravcsik 2000). The Global South united to overturn the proposal by powerful countries to set up an ad-hoc international court and instead helped consolidate

a permanent International Criminal Court (Simmons and Danner 2010). They continued to uphold the commitment even when they faced significant challenges from great power (J. Kelley 2007). More recently, small states like Ecuador have been active in promoting new and progressive business human rights to constrain the actions of large corporations in the UN working group (Ruggie 2013). Hence, some smaller countries are resilient enough to make their voices heard. Previous studies do not present these resilient countries in a controlled environment where they need to choose between norms and material rewards.

My work engages with an important question in the literature of political economy and human rights: Can great power use material rewards to shape norms? A simplified answer is yes, but only conditionally. Previous work highlights that the vote alignment of smaller states can be influenced by their economic relationships with more powerful counterparts (Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey 2009; Vreeland and Dreher 2014). On the other hand, smaller countries can resist economic coercion from the United States, in response to the creation of the International Criminal Court (J. Kelley 2007). China, often characterized as an illiberal force, is also very active in influencing the ecosystem of global norms (Brazys and Dukalskis 2017; Oud 2024; Dukalskis 2023; Inboden 2021). I show that when smaller states are attached to the established liberal human rights norms, they are less susceptible to economic incentives provided by China.

The finding is surprising. Writing a lenient review to appease a country's major economic partner, donor, or financier seems only costless lip service, while harsh scrutiny of its human rights records on a public platform is likely to irritate China. I show that despite the potential economic repercussions, small countries that consistently uphold liberal principles still prioritize human rights norms over immediate material interests.

This research challenges some important findings on the UN human rights regime. Recent important studies suggest that states' reviews in the UPR are products of geopolitics maneuvering, cheap talk or window-dressing (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten

2018; Kim 2023; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023). My research illustrates that this state-to-state review mechanism reflects more complex calculations as countries balance normative principles, geopolitical dynamics and economic incentives. The UPR serves as more than a mere political theater; it is a platform where human rights norms are actively contested and middle countries have to take sides and react to the normative changes.

Beyond UPR, my work contributes to the literature that recognizes the influence of China's significant economic presence on states' voting behaviors in the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly (Brazys and Dukalskis 2017; Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023; Dukalskis 2023; Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. M. Strange, et al. 2022), but few examine its boundaries and limitations. Further research is needed to examine the underlying preferences of states in response to external economic incentives (Hug and Lukács 2014), especially when the established norms are contested.

In this study, I leverage state reviews of China conducted within the UPR, a mechanism administered by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) designed to assess the human rights records of all UN member states. The UPR provides a valuable opportunity for investigating how states articulate their positions regarding the state under review and how, over time, they craft a desired image within the international human rights regime. Across the three completed cycles of the UPR, countries have collectively made 90,938 recommendations to states under review. During each cycle, every country has a chance to undergo review and to review other countries. Hence, it is possible to systematically analyze states' behaviors as reviewers and their performance when being reviewed.

I apply text-mining techniques to measure the content of these reviews and the dyadic relationships between reviewers and states under review. Specifically, I develop two measures from the UPR texts: a *review harshness* score to quantify the dyadic relation between a reviewer and a state-under-review — assessing how harsh state A's review to state B; and a cosine similarity to gauge the similarity and divergence between states' reviewing record

with a baseline state reviewing record. These two measures allow me to analyze the dyadic relationship between any country pairs. In this paper, I anchor one end of the dyad to China and examine how other countries' reviews vis-a-vis China evolve over time.

I also investigate the degree to which the leniency of reviews of China changes in response to external economic incentives from China. These incentives include the sum of overseas development project inflows, new overseas development projects, and debt relief measures between cycles. This set of information is extracted from the latest version of AidData that documents Chinese overseas development projects (Custer et al. 2023).

Leveraging the time lags between reviews, I model the effect of economic incentives on states' review leniency. My findings indicate that countries receiving larger amounts of total aid inflows from China's overseas development projects tend to provide more lenient reviews of China's human rights record. I also find that China gets additional economic leverage by initiating new projects or proposing debt relief negotiations with the countries already depend on China as their foreign financier. Those receiving larger economic incentives are more inclined to write lenient reviews to China.

However, not all countries are susceptible to such influence. Countries very distant from China's vision of human rights are not swayed by such economic incentives. Material interests often prevail over norms, but this is not always the case. Countries whose commitment to liberal principles of human rights is strong tend to prioritize norms over material interests.

2 Human Rights as Rising China's Achilles' Heel

China has become a prominent financier of development projects in the Global South. Since 2013 when China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has invested heavily in various projects in BRI member countries. 147 countries are officially part of the BRI as of 2022 (Nedopil 2022). Over 22 commitment years, about 21,000 projects covering natural

resources, infrastructure, cybersecurity and other sectors have been undertaken across 165 low- and middle-income countries (B. C. Parks et al. 2023, p. 1). From 2008 to 2021, Chinese overseas development finance committed approximately 83 percent of the total amount lent by the World Bank and its partnering banks in the same years (Center 2023). China is clearly expanding its influence in the Global South. Outpacing G-7 countries, China has become the world's single largest source of development finance in developing countries, providing grants and loans of around $80 billion a year before 2021 (B. C. Parks et al. 2023, p. 1). Despite a recent more statist economic policy turn at home after the Covid period, it has gained leverage by locking in other countries' dependence upon China for their future economic growth.

How does China's capital power as a major financier translate to influence over other issue areas of international cooperation? Most immediately, China shapes the ecosystem of foreign aid. China's aid and loans are commonly called "easy money" with little or no political conditionality. Unlike the Western donors who typically attach conditions related to human rights, democracy and good governance to their aid packages, China provides aid and lends to almost all the partner countries with no strings, including those characterized as corrupt or at high risk of bankruptcy. When many developing countries can turn to China as an alternative source of financing, traditional Western donors are witnessing diminishing influence over the conditions they once stipulated in their economic deals.

China's economic power also permits it to establish new rules, clubs and followers. China has invested in establishing alternative multilateral financial institutions. For example, it established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as an alternative to the World Bank, attracting over 100 members (Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023). China also hosted several summits for regional organizations such as the BRICS to foster closer South-South cooperation to counteract the West. Across all U.N. General Assembly votes casted between

2000 and 2021, Global South's votes align China's votes 75% of the time as opposed to only 25% with the U.S. (Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. M. Strange, et al. 2022).

When assessing China's global influence, human rights remain as the most challenging normative issue area for Beijing to assert its leadership. The primary challenge stems from the inherent incompatibility between China's authoritarian political system and the international human rights regime that strikes at the heart of liberal values. Authoritarian leaders are inherently resistant to fully embracing the liberal human rights framework, which is designed to protect individuals from state violence and tyranny. Human rights impose constraints on the freedom of action of states, and assert their relevance of standards of international justice (Donnelly 1998). The core idea of human rights as universal, deeply rooted in liberalism, remains largely uncontested in principle. Challenging such a well-established norm is particularly difficult due to decades of global efforts to institutionalize human rights through community-building initiatives and "naming and shaming" campaigns (Krain 2012). These mechanisms have consistently called attention to authoritarian regimes, such as North Korea, and Venezuela, as abusive human rights violators, ensuring sustained media scrutiny of their abuses. This deeply rooted global narrative makes it even more difficult for China to shape the human rights discourse without directly addressing the contradictions between its alleged abuses and the prevailing international standards to hold countries accountable.

China, a major authoritarian country, has reason to be particularly resistant to the current liberal-based human rights norms. However, despite China's resistance to the underlying principle of the human rights regime, it actively seeks recognition and global leadership in this area due to the high political salience of human rights. China cannot simply walk away from the well-established international regime because it plays a critical role in serving as a symbolic anchor for China to show it can adhere to global rules and norms expected of great power. Indeed, it has been very cooperative and engaged in the UN-based human rights regime (Inboden 2021). Human rights can be likened to an Achilles' heel for China in both

its global and domestic governance as it rises. Hence, China's rhetorical approach to human rights has involved a delicate balance between asserting state sovereignty and acknowledging the universality of human rights, aimed at minimizing the political costs of taking unpopular stands (Weiss 2019).

While China's authoritarian regime might suggest difficulties in its participation in the existing human rights regime, this assumption overlooks China's capability to influence how that regime functions or how the norms evolve. The human rights regime is composed of many non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch that constantly monitor states' human rights conditions and hold countries accountable to public scrutiny. China is much less vulnerable within the UN in which China enjoys significant decision-making power (Fang, Li, and Sun 2018; Fung and Lam 2021; Foot 2020). Similar to many councils and working groups in the UN, the UN Human Rights Council is an inclusive multilateral forum where small member states can play key roles (Vreeland and Dreher 2014; Donnelly 2013). This embedded norm of inclusiveness motivates China to emphasize the importance of working within the UN to pursue a leadership role within it (Inboden 2021). Furthermore, the global order should not be assumed to be fixed or universally agreed upon. Promoting and highlighting an alternative vision of human rights showcase China's ability to reconstruct and refine international norms and the global order in ways that are more closely aligned with its own vision.

3 Playing the Existing Game, Well

I identify two strategies China uses to influence human rights norms. First, China plays the existing game as an engaged player and norm entrepreneur. Second, China actively reinterprets human rights norms to distance them from liberal democracy, promoting alternative understandings that align with its governance model. In particular, China selectively

prioritizes certain dimensions of human rights, particularly economic and social rights, while downplaying civil and political rights. This emphasis serves to deflect international criticism of its human rights record by shifting the focus to economic development.

Despite China's aspirations for global leadership and investments in normative power to challenge the existing system, it has yet to present a fully developed alternative order that replaces the substance of the current liberal human rights regime. Persuading others to adopt an alternative vision is difficult, especially when human rights norms are deeply entrenched in many international legal instruments and transnational courts. The current liberal-based human rights regime enjoys broad legitimacy, as it is grounded in widely endorsed universal norms (Simmons 2009). While states vary in their levels of compliance, few openly reject the principle that protecting individuals' civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech, "is the right thing to do" (Johnston 2008; Risse 2000). After all, who wouldn't champion the idea that all people are born free and equal? The core idea of human rights as rooted in liberalism remains largely unchallenged in principle. When contesting well-entrenched norms, actors rarely seek to directly delegitimize them. Instead, they strategically reconstruct narratives by shifting the agenda: de-emphasizing certain rights while elevating others.

Rather than outright rejecting human rights discourse, China strategically reinterprets human rights to distance them from democratic ideals. The global human rights regime is enshrined in two widely recognized international treaties: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Though distinct, these covenants were drafted concurrently and are intended to function as an integrated whole. The universally accepted principle that human rights are universal, indivisible, and interdependent suggests that all rights should be equally held in principle. However, conventional wisdom treats human rights primarily 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 (Berger

2023). 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 (2000) argues that newly democratic states in Europe committed to the European Court of Human Rights because they wanted to 'lock in' democratic reforms. In another example, Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2005) prescriptively posit that the way to protect human rights is to fully democratize.

In practice, states frequently prioritize certain categories of rights over others in ways that reflect their political interests, strategic calculations, and historical traditions. For example, the United States has historically placed greater emphasis on civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression, religious liberty, and electoral democracy, and declares the promotion and protection of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms to be "principal" and "fundamental" goals of U.S. foreign policy (Weber 2025). For Western countries, human rights and democracy are closely intertwined, particularly in the framing of their foreign policy agendas. China, like many other countries, establishes a hierarchy of rights, remaining conspicuously silent on further engagement with civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech, voting, and assembly, which are integral to democratic governance.

China's emphasis on economic development in its human rights priorities stretches back decades. For a long time, the focus in China on economic and social rights rather than political and civil rights reflects the belief that states should take positive actions to provide services and goods to citizens to raise their living standards (Zhou and Nathan 2014). Economic and social rights are so-called positive rights as the government is supposed to "achieve progressively" as state capacity permits (Sunstein 2001). China stated, in the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, "For the vast number of developing countries to respect and protect human rights is first and foremost to ensure full realization of the rights to subsistence and development" (Angle and Svensson 2001, p. 392). As stated in

the Beijing Declaration adopted when China hosted the first South-South Human Rights Forum in 2017, China "develops human rights based on national conditions, with the right to substance and the right to development as the primary basic human rights" (Xinhua n.d.).

What is new is how China approaches human rights advocacy is also constrained and tailored to align with its development-centric model. China's human rights vision is deliberately framed to prioritize economic growth and social welfare, while steering the conversation away from the ideological divide between autocracy and democracy. Beyond its borders, China actively promotes this development-first conception of human rights. For example, it has played a key role in advancing revisions and the potential adoption of the draft International Covenant on the Rights to Development. This draft covenant underscores the importance of material well-being and essential resources, such as the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to work, and the right to health, while embedding the principle of social justice by ensuring an equitable distribution of development benefits (Teshome 2022). In 2023, China reaffirmed this stance through United Nations General Assembly resolutions, linking human rights advocacy to its Global Development Initiative and promoting a "human rights path with Chinese characteristics" while highlighting its achievements in economic and social rights (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN 2023). By endorsing this alternative framing, China seeks to redefine human rights discourse in a way that centers economic development, potentially shifting global attention away from civil and political liberties.

Beijing also asserts more forcefully than in the past that the state is the ultimate guarantor of human rights and that sovereign equality remains the most important norm of the international system (Foot 2024). This notion, which prioritizes state responsibilities over individual entitlements, challenges the foundational principles of the universality of human rights and the idea that human rights exist primarily to protect individuals from state abuses.

The success of norm challengers depends on the extent to which they garner support from

other states (Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2015). Growing evidence suggests that developing countries increasingly align with China's human rights framing. Joint statements on behalf of 72 countries and 19 members of the Group of Friends endorsed China's initiatives mentioned above (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN 2023). During the Universal Periodic Review on UN members' human rights records, many prioritized social and economic rights while silenced on civil and political rights (Dai and Lu 2025). Collectively, the time allocated and the attention devoted to civil and political has waned over time. The liberal-based human rights regime, once considered a cornerstone of the international liberal order, is now subject to reinterpretation. Acting as a norm entrepreneur, China's legitimacy can also be channeled in the eyes of the Global South by positioning itself as a champion of socioeconomic rights and a reliable development partner.

To what extent do these efforts begin to influence norms? Some states may strategically align with China not out of ideological commitment, but to signal political or economic affinity with China. These states do not necessarily internalize the development-based human rights, but publicly endorse it for strategic reasons. However, gradual norm shifts often begin this way — where states initially engage in strategic behavior before ultimately internalizing new norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). A particularly concerning prospect for the existing liberal order is that, over time, states that accommodate China's vision may ultimately contribute to broader transformations in human rights norms. The remaining sections will examine how a global power like China leverages economic incentives to shape states' human rights positions and advance its normative agenda on the international stage.

4 Expectations

Drawing inspiration from classic work on money and influence in the UN Security Council (Vreeland and Dreher 2014), I advance the following expectations about states' reviewing be-

havior when economic interests clash with normative commitments. Countries have different priorities when interacting with others in international forums. In general, governments of rich and powerful countries with significant economic leverage, such as China, place greater emphasis on maintaining their international reputation and prestige (J. G. Kelley 2017; Vreeland and Dreher 2014). In this context, they are particularly concerned with how their human rights record is perceived and the extent of criticism they receive at the Human Rights Council.

In contrast, countries from the Global South often prioritize securing new infrastructure projects, unconditional loans, or development assistance from donors—especially when they face acute financial distress or have ongoing project needs. This emphasis reflects not a disregard for human rights norms, but rather the reality that immediate economic concerns may take precedence over normative expressions, particularly under conditions of material scarcity (Vreeland and Dreher 2014). Developing countries tend to prioritize access to aid over influence in global security issues, reflecting the more pressing material needs they face and, in many cases, a less fully institutionalized foreign policy apparatus. Exceptions arise when certain governments hold particularly strong intrinsic preferences on specific issues, but broadly, the prospect of economic assistance can weigh heavily on diplomatic calculations.

Building on these insights, I theorize that when faced with a choice, countries may exercise strategic caution in their human rights reviews of major donors like China. In the Universal Periodic Review process, country delegates do not necessarily need to lie or misrepresent their preferences. Instead, they can select areas where recommendations remain light and encouraging, or they can avoid sensitive topics that the state under review would find politically costly to acknowledge. Unlike the casting of votes, writing carefully worded and constructive recommendations carries little reputational risk, making it a low-cost strategy to balance economic incentives with normative expectations.

Hence, economic incentives can co-opt less developed countries where economic assistance

ranks high among policy priorities into engaging in mutual exchanges within the low-cost setting of peer review, thereby mitigating the reputational risks associated with accusations of dishonesty, norm violations, or complicity in undermining a norm-based institution.

H_1 (Mutual Exchange): Economic assistance from China makes countries less critical of China's human rights conditions.

The effects of economic incentives are heterogeneous and conditional. They do not uniformly produce the intended outcomes. This variation stems, in part, from differences in their receptiveness to economic inducements. Drawing on Zaller's (1992, 22–23) seminal work *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, which introduces the concept of *political predispositions* to describe individual-level traits that regulate the acceptance level of new information the person receives, I adapt this insight to the international level. I develop a parallel intervening variable, *predisposition to human rights norms*, to capture the extent to which a state's articulation of norms can be shaped by powerful external actors. This predisposition reflects a country's normative orientation, grounded in its values and belief systems regarding the prioritization and meaning of human rights. Given that norms, like values and beliefs, are inherently multidimensional, states tend to emphasize and prioritize specific dimensions of human rights more strongly in their international discourse. By examining the patterns of the priorities of dimensions states highlight, we can infer a country's predisposition to such norms and assess its susceptibility to external normative influence.

Based on this framework, I categorize states into three groups according to the degree of alignment between their human rights predispositions and China's normative vision. As discussed earlier, China advances an alternative vision of human rights norms that emphasizes the development and collective welfare, while de-emphasizing individual rights and freedom. The "close" group includes those whose human rights visions are substantively aligned with China's development-based human rights norms. These countries tend to nat-

urally write supportive or lenient reviews of China even in the absence of material nudges. In particular, countries in less advanced development stages may tend to find China's vision of development-oriented human rights more appealing (Donnelly 2013).

By contrast, the "*distant*" group, comprises states with deep-rooted commitments to liberal human rights norms, defending civil and political rights and upholding rights to protect citizens from states' terrors. For these states, normative commitments serve as a powerful constraint on behavior, rendering them relatively resistant to external inducements, including economic incentives. Their principled normative commitments are not always compromised. Finally, the "middle" group consists of states whose human rights orientations are neither closely aligned with China's model nor firmly grounded in liberal democratic traditions. As described in the broader literature on international voting behavior (Vreeland and Dreher 2014, p. 35), these states can be understood as "swing voters" whose positions may be more flexible and responsive to material inducements from influential donors.

These group distinctions are critical in understanding how states behave within peer review processes such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). For states in the close group, bypassing liberal standards to adopt alternative evaluative criteria favorable to China does not entail a significant normative cost; their developmental orientation already aligns with China's framing of human rights. In these cases, economic inducements do little to modify their behavior.

Not all lenient reviews can be bought. Exceptions arise when countries hold strong and sincere normative commitments regarding specific human rights violations or the broader defense of human rights standards. In such cases, states in the distant group are far less susceptible to external economic pressures. For these states, the reputational, principled, and institutional costs of abandoning core civil and political rights commitments are prohibitively high. Thus, their behavior remains relatively resistant to external material pressures.

Overall, while economic inducements can facilitate the co-optation of states with more

flexible normative predispositions, those in the "middle group," they are unlikely to alter the behavior of states in the "distant group" with deeply entrenched liberal commitments. The strength and depth of a state's normative predispositions serve as critical moderating factors, conditioning the impact of material incentives on human rights articulation. Furthermore, the concept of predisposition to human rights norms provides a framework for disentangling whether a country's alignment with an external influencer reflects genuine normative convergence, responsiveness to material incentives, or principled resistance to external pressure.

H_2 (Swaying the Middle): Countries without strong attachments to liberal human rights norms are more receptive to China's economic incentives.

5 The UPR as the laboratory

I will test my hypotheses using the Universal Periodic Review as a laboratory. The UN human rights regime allows states to socialize through communication, reflection and action on predominantly normative practices with respect to human rights. The UN Human Rights Council has set up a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) system that holds member states accountable to their peers' recurrent reviews of the treatment of their domestic population. The UPR is a comprehensive and elaborate multilateral human rights mechanism where states are the primary actors in reviewing each others' human rights practices. The monitoring power lies in a formal forum-like peer review institution to "give equal treatment to all the countries and allow them to exchange best practices" (UN News - Human Rights 2018). States' peer reviews, based on regular assessments of policy performance and compliance with international organizations, have the potential to push states to make real changes (Carraro, Conzelmann, and Jongen 2019). In its ideal version, the UPR, like other international institutions, can provide a "neutral, depoliticized or specialized forum" for comments, critiques and recommendations for improving human rights (Abbott and Snidal 1998, p. 10).

In practice, the UPR is far from neutral (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Búzás 2021). States tend to review selectively, harshly condemning their adversaries while being lenient towards their friends and allies (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Búzás 2021; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023). They may focus on topics where the state under review has performed particularly well or poorly. In the former case, they adopt a cheerleading role to encourage the state under review to continue its practices and maintain progress. In the latter case, the state under review is called out to implement remedies. Hence, the actual contents of different recommendations range from praise to shaming in a wide rhetorical continuum. For that reason, the UPR is a laboratory we can use to test the power dynamics among states whether as a reviewing state or a state under review. As a recurrent monitoring mechanism, multiple cycles of reviews provide reliable data to detect changes in states' review records and human rights stand over time.

There have been three complete cycles[3] of Universal Periodic Review so far as of 2023. Each 4.5 to 5 years is called a UPR cycle. 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. Every five years or so, on a rotational basis, all 193 UN Member States undergo an interactive review of the human rights situation, with 100% participation rate so far.

In principle, when a state is under review, delegations of all other countries can review and issue recommendations. A body of information is made available to reviewing states before they issue their recommendation. It includes factual documents from a self-assessment report compiled by the state under review, observations and comments compiled by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the human rights conditions in the state under review, as well as opinions from other stakeholders including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national human rights institutions. Reviewing

[3]Cycle 1 (2008–2012), Cycle 2 (2012–2016), and Cycle 3 (2017–2021)

states are encouraged to meet with NGOs and local stakeholders in the state under review to gather information on the state under review. During a typical 3.5-hour review session for each state under review, reviewing states can ask oral or written questions and make recommendations. During the UPR, each member acting as a reviewer has approximately 45 seconds to provide as many (or as few) recommendations to the state under review, although they also provide written commentary.

Since reviewing states have limited space to ask questions and issue recommendations, states tend to use their monitoring power selectively to mention issues they are most concerned about. They reduce the complex reality of five years in a country to a condensed statement with comments and recommendations of its human rights conditions. Through this selection, I infer that the statement reflects the most critical and meaningful problems in the country under review from the perspective of the reviewing state. Following the review sessions, a report is compiled to summarize the discussions, capturing the key comments and recommendations made by the reviewing states. This report serves as a resource for the state under review, allowing them to choose which recommendations to implement before the next review cycle. The written report is then made available on the UN Human Rights Council's website.

The timeline of sessions for the ongoing cycle is publicly available, enabling states to anticipate when they will be under review and prepare accordingly. Recommendations from the first session in April 2008 through the 37th session in November 2020 are accessible on UPR Info (Info 2023), covering the full data of three complete cycles. When China was under review, the review sessions occurred in 2009, 2013 and 2018, respectively (Council 2023).

In sum, the Universal Periodic Review captures recurring interactions wherein states have one opportunity per cycle to be reviewed (as a state under review), but multiple chances to give recommendations to other countries (as a reviewing state). It serves as a unique mech-

anism that addresses a comprehensive array of human rights issues, as opposed to treaty monitoring mechanism that focuses on specific rights. It is also an inclusive multilateral mechanism where all UN member states participate and give peer reviews to each other, as opposed to experts making recommendations or NGOs publicly shaming rights-abusive states. Therefore, the UPR mechanism entails special leverage to study how states communicate and advocate their vision of human rights norms, while also considering the geopolitics and economic ties between countries.

6 Converting Text to Number: Coding Textual Information in UPR

The analysis is based on over 90,000 states' recommendations from three complete cycles in the forum-like peer review system, UPR. I use a number of text-mining tools to explore the meaning of and around countries' reviews. While this data set provides ample opportunities to study reviews at the dyadic level, I primarily analyze reviews China received: how harshly is China reviewed by any given state? I also measure countries' predisposition to human rights norms based on their reviewing records of all the other countries (not limited to China). By comparing the reviewing records of various countries with those of China, I assess the degree of similarity or divergence in their invocation of human rights norms during the review process.

6.1 Measuring Recommendation's Leniency

I analyze the UPR data compiled by *UPR Info*, a non-profit organization that supports access to information for all key UPR stakeholders of the UPR (Info 2023). The data includes all recommendations made during the three cycles of the UPR. For each recommen-

dation, UPR Info records information about the time of the review session, reviewer, state under review, the verb choices used in each recommendation conveying the necessary level of changes, and specific issue(s) addressed from a set of 56 non-mutually exclusive issue tags hand-coded by *UPR Info* researchers. Each recommendation may address multiple issue tags. *UPR Info* also publish their codebook[4] to justify why different issue tags are attached to the recommendation. Following Terman and Byun (2022), I also cluster the 56 issue tags into 8 issue topics.[5] Each recommendation can cover more than one issue topic. In sum, the textual information in each recommendation is succinctly encapsulated through different issue topics.

Figure A1 summarizes the complete process of using text-based coding to identify instances of review harshness in UN Reviews. The objective is to systematically turn the texts in the public documents "UN Reports for State Under Review" into comparable numerical scales for each of the states under review. This hypothetical score can reflect how well the state under review has protected its citizens' rights in the past five years, from the perspectives of its peer members in the UN.

At the recommendation level, the *Recommendation Severity Index* is a composite measure consisting of two components: issue sensitivity and level of action. The Issue Sensitivity Index ranges from 1 to 3, with 3 indicating the most politically sensitive issue areas. Following established distinctions between negative and positive rights (Zhou and Nathan 2014; Donnelly 2013), civil and political rights, physical integrity rights, and protections for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are closely related to individual rights of liberty, hence assigned the highest sensitivity score (3). These rights, often referred to as negative rights,

[4]Codebook can be found here: https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/general-document/2022-05/Database_Issues_explanation.pdf

[5](1) Civil and Political rights, (2) Governance and Public Services, (3) Migration and Workers, (4) Physical Integrity Rights, (5) Racial, Ethnic and Religious Minorities, (6) Social and Economic Rights, (7) Protection of Vulnerable Populations, and (8) General/Other, Appendix I shows which issue tags fall into different issue topics.

directly constrain state behavior and are closely tied to liberal democratic principles such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from torture, and the right to a fair trial. Historically, violations in these areas have triggered the strongest international condemnation and sanctions from countries like the U.S. and the E.U.[6], making them particularly politically salient in global human rights discourse. Existing human rights indices in the literature also almost exclusively focus on states' protection of these rights (Dai and Lu 2025).

Migration and labor rights, along with protections for vulnerable populations, are assigned a medium sensitivity score (2). While these rights are increasingly recognized within the international human rights regime, they are often group-specific and less likely to provoke direct naming and shaming. In contrast, socioeconomic rights, governance, public service obligations, and general development-related rights are assigned the lowest sensitivity score (1). These rights focus primarily on positive obligations of the state to fulfill citizens' needs rather than prohibitions against state abuses. In practice, recommendations addressing these issues are less likely to be perceived as direct challenges to state reputation. Each review recommendation may cover one or multiple issue topics, and the final score follows the maximal rule, the highest sensitivity score being assigned.[7] shows a workflow and working examples of constructing this measure.

On the level of action, each recommendation begins with a verb to indicate the urgency and level of action needed for the state under review to change its course. Recommendations range from requesting the state under review to conducting minimal action (i.e. continuing the course), to conducting specific action for policy changes. Following the recording methods used by Terman and Byun (2022) in their measurement of *Severity*, each recommendation

[6]For more information about human rights-related sanction regimes, https://globalsanctions.com/region/human-rights/.

[7]I acknowledge that human rights are formally understood as indivisible and interdependent. However, this operationalization reflects the differentiated political weight associated with various categories of rights in the practice of the human rights community and literature. Appendix B

receives an action category score: a recommendation that receives 3 entails a high level of action, recommending the state under review to conducting policy change or a specific action to improve the country's human rights conditions. Recommendation receiving 2 entails a medium level of action, usually related to a general element of improvement. Lastly, in cases where a recommendation pertains to sharing information, providing technical assistance or emphasizing continuity of current practice, it receives 1, indicating a low level of action.

The severity of each recommendation is determined by a composite index, calculated as a simple weighted sum of the issue sensitivity score (70%) and the level of action score (30%). A lower severity index indicates a more lenient the recommendation. I assign a higher weight to the issue sensitivity score because it largely influences whether the recommendation is a sincere criticism or a diplomatic gesture. For instance, when China receives reviews from other states regarding racial, ethnic and religious minorities — a topic with high sensitivity score — the reviews are very likely to be critical, suggesting a need for significant action. It is rare to observe countries complement China on this issue topic; if they intend to offer praise — suggesting a low level of action, they typically raise other issues, such as providing social welfare to the population — a topic with a low sensitivity score. Hence, issue topic plays a crucial role in determining the severity of each recommendation.

6.2 Aggregation: Review Harshness Score at the Country Level

Since each state under review can receive hundreds of review recommendations in one session, measuring review harshness at the country level requires aggregating the severity index for each recommendation. However, a key challenge in this aggregation process is to balance the quality and quantity of reviews. The number of reviews each state receives and the severity index of each review recommendation can vary greatly, potentially leading to either an overemphasis on quantity or an underemphasis on quality in the aggregation process. In other words, there is an asymmetry of the variations between the quantity and

the quality of the reviews. A country can receive anywhere from over 200 reviews and as few as 20 reviews, while the quality of its review, as defined by the review severity index, only ranges from 2 to 6 or 0 to 1. To address this issue, I use the scaling weighted index to calculate the review harshness score for each state under review.

The crucial step in calculating the review harshness score, which combines indices with different matrices, is to rescale the number of reviews each state receives so they fall within a comparable range to the severity index. This rescaling step ensures that the final score is based on a fair comparison so we do not put a mice and an elephant on the same scale. After rescaling, the numbers of reviews range from 1 to 3. For example, Egypt received 321 review recommendations in Cycle 2. To calculate the scaled weighted index for Egypt in Cycle 2, I rescale the number of reviews from 321 to 1.85. I calculate the average weighted severity index of the review recommendations, resulting in 2.2. The final score for Egypt is the sum of the scaled numbers of total reviews and the weighted severity index, resulting in a final score of 4.05.

When using the country-level review harshness score, I can directly answer the following question: How harsh is country A's review of China compared to country B's? Although this study primarily focuses on the reviews China receives, this series of measures opens many opportunities to compare countries' behaviors, both in terms of how a reviewing country reviews others and in terms of how it is reviewed by others.

6.3 Measuring States' Predisposition of Human Rights Norms

I now turn to address the issue of modeling the reviews that countries give of China's human rights performance. After extracting all the topics covered in each recommendation, I create a state-topic vector by grouping the topics by all the reviewing states. Each state-topic vector represents the number of topics covered in the aggregated recommendations that reviewing states make in different cycles. In this manner, each reviewing state's review

record is translated into a state-topic vector. Specifically, I extract topics from China's review record to construct a vector as the baseline.

To measure similarity in countries' review records, I conduct text similarity analysis based on countries' reviewing record vectors. In particular, I calculate a cosine similarity between each pair of reviewing states and China as follows. First, I construct a matrix where the distribution of each country's state-topic vector is compared to that of China's state-topic vector. Then I calculate the cosine similarity[8] between the two vectors of a country pair: China—reviewing state.

Table 1: How China and the U.S. reviewed other countries over the three cycles

Terms	**China as reviewer**	**U.S. as reviewer**
Public services	21	151
General and others	35	40
Migrants and Labors	49	72
Physical integrity rights	99	468
Protection of vulnerable population	180	471
Race, ethnicity and religious minority	75	152
Social and economic rights	377	61
Civil and political rights	3	345

Table 1 is an example of a matrix of topic distributions of a country pair: China—U.S. as reviewers. I highlight two specific rights in blue and red for comparison purposes. China as a reviewer has issued recommendations that mention social and economic rights 377 times, whereas the U.S. has done so only about 61 times. Conversely, China only issued recommendations related to civil and political rights 3 times. The U.S., in contrast, devoted significant space to these core issues. The cosine similarity between the U.S.'s and China's reviewing records is 0.51, suggesting a low similarity level and little overlap in terms of the counts of topic distributions. Cosine similarity formalizes the intuition of comparison by modeling each state's human rights records as a point in a multidimensional topic space. The

[8]A cosine value of 0 means that the two vectors are orthogonal and have no match. The closer the cosine value to 1, the smaller the angle and the greater the match between vectors.

closer two scripts are in this space, the closer the cosine of the angle between two vectors, the more similar their normative positions are.

Figure 1 presents word clouds comparing the frequent topics shown in China's and Argentina's human rights reviews. In the top panel, the dominant theme in China's review records is on "Social and economic rights," along with "Protection of vulnerable populations," reflecting China's prioritization of development-oriented dimensions of human rights. In contrast, the bottom panel highlights Argentina puts minor attention to "Social and economic rights" but emphasizes heavily on "Physical integrity rights" and "Protection of vulnerable populations," indicating a normative orientation more aligned with liberal human rights frameworks. This visual comparison illustrates the divergence in human rights articulation between China as the baseline and one positioned in the "distant" group with a low cosine similarity score.

By repeating this process, I obtain a review similarity score for each country pair: China—reviewing state. Reviewing records' cosine similarity here serves as a measure of the similarity between the reviewing states' aggregated human rights reviewing records and China's. A high similarity score in the China-country pair is deemed highly aligned between the interpretations of human rights norm.

Figure 1: Word clouds of China (top) and Argentina (bottom) showing frequent topics in these two countries' review records

7 Model Specification

The dependent variable is the *review harshness score* illustrated in sections 6.1 and 6.2. The independent variables in this study are aid flows and economic incentives between cycles of the UPR. I use the newest version of data collected by AidData's Global Chinese Official Finance Dataset 3.0 (Custer et al. 2023) for Chinese aid inflow between the five-year gap of cycles[9]. The dataset has been broadly used by scholars to examine the causes and consequences of Chinese aid (Dreher, Fuchs, Hodler, et al. 2021; Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. Strange, et al. 2022; Isaksson and Kotsadam 2020; Blair and Roessler 2021; Brazys and Vadlamannati 2021). I use the *total Chinese development flows per capita* (population in constant in 2010), measured in constant US dollar prices in 2021, capturing both Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and Other Official Flows (OOF) for aid recipient countries annually over the 2000—2021 period.

A second set of independent variables is the increase of newly initiated overseas finance projects or the total amount of debt relief negotiated within the current development projects financed by Chinese government institutions in between cycles. The information is coded from the detailed project descriptions available from AidData's Global Chinese Official Finance Dataset 3.0 (Custer et al. 2023). I categorize the recipient countries into three groups based on the changes in the distribution of Chinese new overseas finance projects: a group receiving zero or negative net increase, and groups receiving "small" or "large" increases in development projects, distinguished on whether the net project increase is more than the median of the total new projects. Countries receiving large increases in development projects are candidates for the binary variable, *large economic incentives*.

The variable debt relief is a categorical variable for total debt relief by country. A

[9]Chinese aid flow per capita for pre-Cycles 2: Aggregated Chinese development flow per capita between 2008 and 2012 (pre-Cycle 2). Chinese aid flow per capita for pre-Cycles 3: Aggregated Chinese development flow per capita between 2013 and 2017 (pre-Cycle 3)

debt relief program could involve wiping out the debt altogether if the country is close to bankruptcy. More specifically, a debt relief program may include renegotiating a lower interest rate, settling the debt with alternative assets, or rescheduling payment. It was relatively uncommon for China to grant debt relief before 2018 (the start of Cycle 3); hence, the total number of debt relief is relatively small. Having debt relief is automatically a large economic incentive in this study. In short, the binary variable, *large economic incentives*, is coded as 1 if a recipient country receives large increases in the number of new development projects from China or negotiations in debt relief programs from China between Cycles 3 and 2 (or 2 and 1).

The other key independent variable is a measure of the proximity of states' predispositions in human rights norms with China in UPR, illustrated in section 6.3. To measure countries' human rights stand distance, I use the classic *cosine similarity* method to calculate the distances between each pair of reviewing states and China on their reviewing records. A high similarity score in the China—country pair is deemed highly aligned between the two countries' stand in human rights norms. A country's cosine similarity of aggregated recommendations over three cycles can be classified as belonging to the "distant" group with China's reviews (0%—33% percentile of cosine similarity), "middle" group (34%—66% percentile of cosine similarity) and "close" group (66% percentile and higher). The full set of countries with cosine similarity is included in Appendix C.

The covariates include data extracted from existing datasets, selected to account for alternative explanations that could influence both how much China finances its development projects to recipient countries and how countries review China's human rights record. To measure ideological proximity between countries, I use the average voting distance from China in the UN General Assembly (Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey 2009). I expect that countries with closer voting patterns to China are more likely to provide lenient reviews, as broader political alignments shape their human rights articulations (Terman and Byun

2022). Countries' regime type is drawn from the V-Dem dataset, which captures various dimensions of regime characteristics, and countries are categorized as liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy (Coppedge et al. 2020). I expect that democratic regimes, especially liberal democracies, will be more critical of China's human rights record, whereas autocratic regimes may be more inclined toward neutrality or support. The Political Terror Scale (PTS) measures physical integrity rights violations perpetrated by state actors, drawing on reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. State Department (Score 2023). I follow the same construction method as above, using the average PTS scores across the three prior review cycles. I expect that countries with worse human rights practices will be less likely to criticize China, possibly out of solidarity or strategic caution of not facing similar criticisms. Finally, a country's economic condition, measured by GDP per capita, is also included. I expect that wealthier countries are less vulnerable to economic inducements and therefore more likely to deliver critical assessments, while lower-income countries may be more deferential toward China. Together, these covariates help isolate the effects of economic inducements and normative predispositions by accounting for potential confounding factors in countries' review behavior.

In sum, the unit of analysis in this dataset is country-cycle. In other words, each reviewing country will appear twice in the stacked dataset by cycles. Since the review sessions for China happen every 5 years, the constructed variables have different time dimensions. For example, the dependent variables, *review harshness score*, is primarily calculated from the raw scores based on recommendations the states provide to China in Cycle 3 and Cycle 2. The independent variables are the averages of the economic incentives between the two cycles, and similar for other control variables where yearly count data are available. In other words, the time lags in this design are the key: the independent variables lag before the data-generating process of the dependent variables. The latent variable, *cosine similarity*, however, does not vary across cycles.

To test hypothesis 1, in equation 1, $Y_{i,t}$ is the review harshness score of review country i in cycle t, $X_{i,t-1}$ is an indicator for total Chinese development flows per capita of review country i in the pre-cycle period, and $cov_{i,t-1}$ are voting distance in the UNGA, PTS score, GDP per capita, regime type.

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i,t-1} + cov_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t-1} \tag{1}$$

To test hypothesis 2, in equation 2, same as above, $Y_{i,t}$ is the review harshness score of review country i in cycle t, $Z_{i,t-1}$ is a binary indicator for economic incentives (whether the reviewing country receives a large economic incentive or not in the pre-cycle period), T_i is a dummy variable for cosine similarity measuring countries with different dispositions of human rights norms with China (countries are divided into three groups: distant, middle, and close), and $cov_{i,t-1}$ are the same set of covariates in the previous analysis.

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 Z_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 (T_i \times Z_{i,t-1}) + cov_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t-1} \tag{2}$$

I implement a series of ordinary least squared models to estimate the effect of economic incentives on review leniency to China. Economic incentives are modeled as either a long-term relationship between the two countries or a short-term treatment variable in between review cycles, where states are in different strata of the proximity of perceptions of human rights with China. In all models, I include fixed effects for different review cycles to take into account the long-span between different cycles of reviews and use standard errors that are robust toward arbitrary heteroskedasticity.

8 Results

8.1 Testing the "Mutual Exchange" Hypothesis

Model 1 in Table 2 supports the hypothesis that countries receiving larger Chinese aid inflows per capita, on average, give lower review harshness scores to China in the subsequent review cycle. This indicates the extent to which countries receive larger financial assistance from China improves China's human rights reviews in the UPR. The marginal effects are substantial. One standard deviation increase in Chinese aid inflow per capita, which is 2765 US Dollars, will lead to a decrease in review harshness score by 0.35, relative to its mean value, 1.9 out of a total of 3. To put this result in perspective, countries with a review harshness score of 1.55 (1.9−0.35) are in the lenient group of reviewers (below the 33 percentile of the review harshness score).

Model 2 considers covariates only. Comparing Model 2 and Model 1, all the coefficients in covariates have the same directions but slightly different effect sizes. Adding the key independent variable of interest adds to the existing explanations of how countries behave when giving human rights reviews to their peers. The directions of covariates are as expected. Countries with worse human rights conditions (higher scores) would be more lenient toward China (lower review harshness score in their reviews. Higher general UN voting distance (lower political alignment), and more advanced democracies, are associated with more critical reviews of China, as expected.

Table 2: Correlations between Chinese aid inflow per capita pre-cycles and recipient countries' review harshness scores to China in UPR

	Dependent variable:		
	Review harshness score to China		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Chinese aid flow per capita	-0.0001^{***}		0.0001
	(0.00005)		(0.0002)
Cosine similarity (middle)			-0.179^{*}
			(0.103)
Cosine similarity (close)			-0.231^{*}
			(0.120)
Political Terror Score	-0.102^{***}	-0.084^{**}	-0.090^{**}
	(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.040)
UN Voting Distance with China	0.030^{**}	0.031^{**}	0.023^{*}
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.014)
GDP per capita	0.00000	0.00000	0.00000
	(0.00000)	(0.00000)	(0.00000)
Regime type (V-dem)	0.785^{***}	0.878^{***}	0.580^{***}
	(0.162)	(0.160)	(0.186)
Aid flow * middle group			−0.0002
			(0.0002)
Aid flow * close group			−0.0002
			(0.0002)
Constant	1.658^{***}	1.514^{***}	1.883^{***}
	(0.171)	(0.166)	(0.207)
Cycle Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	221	221	221
Log Likelihood	−169.615	−163.926	−184.232
Akaike Inf. Crit.	355.230	341.852	392.465
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	382.416	365.640	433.243
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Model 3 reports the results of the flow of Chinese overseas finance project conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions in human rights norms (illustrated in Figure 2). Consistent with the findings in Model 1, particularly for middle and close country groups, when they receive higher Chinese overseas project amounts per capita before the review cycle (ranging from 0 to 1000 dollars in the X-axis of Figure 2, countries' review harshness scores decrease. There are no significant statistical differences between the close and middle groups: both tend to respond with less critical reviews of China after receiving a higher inflow of Chinese aid flow per capita. For the middle group, if countries receive more than $600 per capita in project aid, their harshness score drops to the baseline review level of the close group. The distant group, on the other hand, behaves differently from the middle and close groups. Confidence levels increase as the project amount increases because there is a risk of extrapolation for the distant group; very few countries in the distant group actually receive such a high level of Chinese overseas development projects (a distribution graph shown in Figure A3 in Appendix E). The review harshness score tends to marginally rise as Chinese project inflow increases in countries categorized under the distant group. Hypothesis 1, stating that countries reviewing high economic assistance from China tend to be less critical of China's human rights conditions, is supported.

Figure 2: Chinese aid inflow (per capita) and recipient countries' review harshness scores towards China

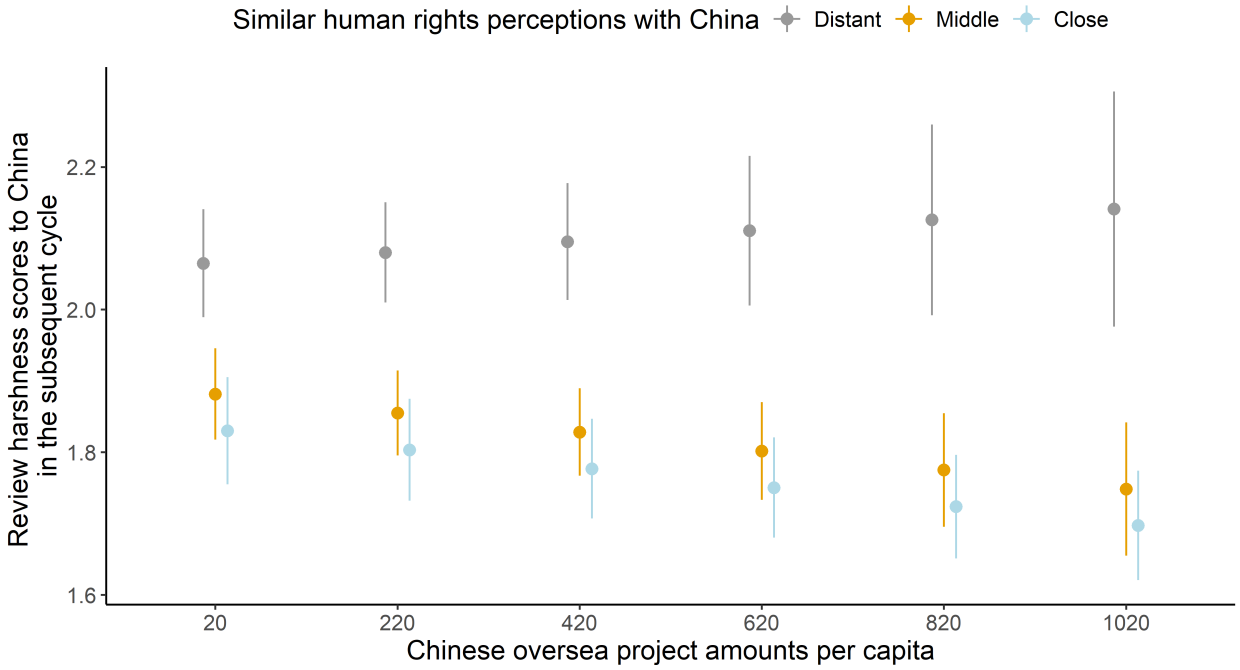


Figure 2 also supports hypothesis 2 that the "close" and "middle" groups move in parallel, but there can be ceiling effects for the "close" group to respond to the material incentives since they already share substantial normative affinity with China's human rights vision. In particular, consistent with the results in Figure 4 in Section 8.2, the "distant" group exhibits substantially different behavior, as external inducements may not work or even push them in the opposite direction.

8.2 Testing the "Swaying the Middle" Hypothesis

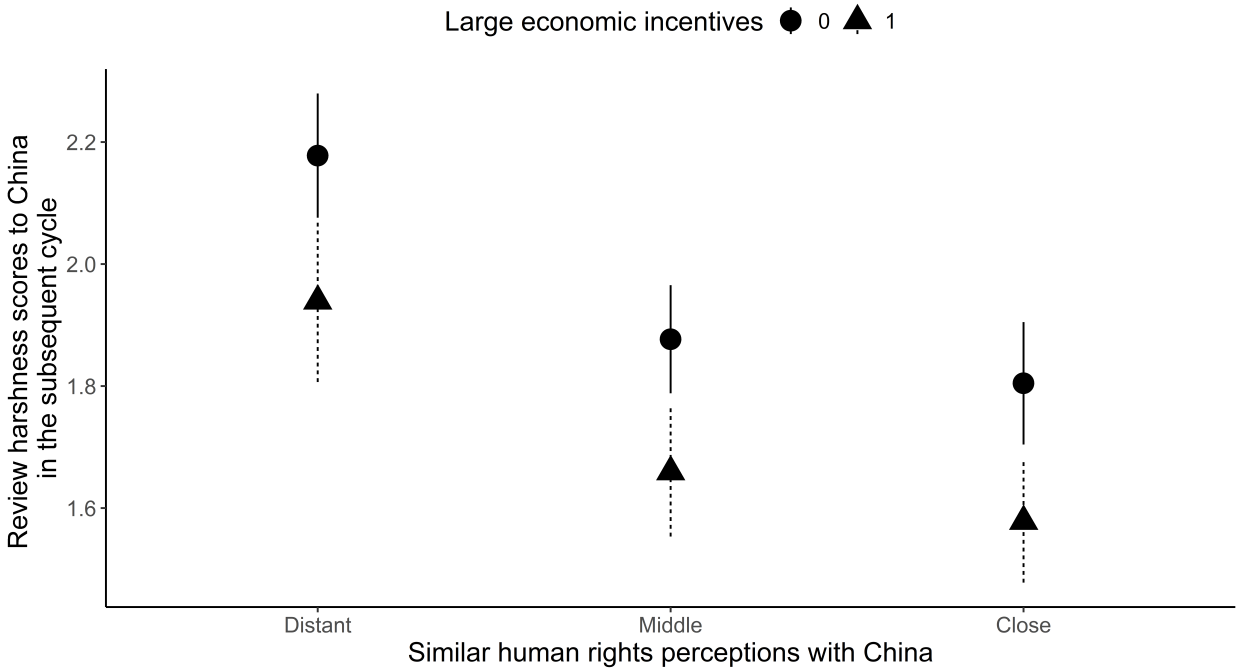
The subsequent analysis tests hypothesis 2: Countries not having a strong predisposition to liberal human rights norms are more receptive to China's economic incentives. Conversely, countries with a strong predisposition to liberal human rights norms are harder to sway. Figure 4 shows the heterogeneous effects of the material incentives on norm shifts. The full

result and model specification for this regression model are included in Model A2 in Appendix D. In particular, I report the results of large economic incentives on review harshness scores conditional on the proximity of countries' perceptions of human rights norms. I control for the covariates that can impact both whether countries get the economic incentive treatment and provide less critical reviews. Those are the pre-treatment review harshness score in the previous cycle, political terror score, UN voting distance with China, GDP per capita and regime type. I also implement fixed effects on cycles.

Figure 4 supports the hypothesis that reviewing countries respond to large economic incentives with more lenient reviews of China on its human rights conditions in the subsequent cycle. The effects hold across the board: countries with large economic incentives, measured by larger amounts of new overseas development projects and the occurrence of debt relief negotiation review China less harshly in the subsequent review cycle than those without large economic incentives from China in between the review cycles. The magnitudes of effects are conditional on the extent to which countries share similar perceptions of human rights norms with China. Countries in the "distant" group have the furthest proximity to China in perceiving human rights norms as more critical of China's human rights conditions, followed by the "middle" group and "close" group.

Although countries with large economic incentives tend to be more lenient toward China on average, countries in the middle group are the most sensitive to economic incentives. The drops in the review's harshness score are not only statistically significant, but also with pronounced effect size: their reviews of China are now as lenient as the average reviews in the close group. In other words, reviewers in the middle of the proximity of China's perception of human rights norms are most responsive to the large economic incentives they receive from China. They are less critical of China's human rights conditions than those not receiving similar levels of economic incentives.

Figure 3: Correlations between large economic incentives and countries' review harshness scores to China in UPR, conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions of human rights norms with China



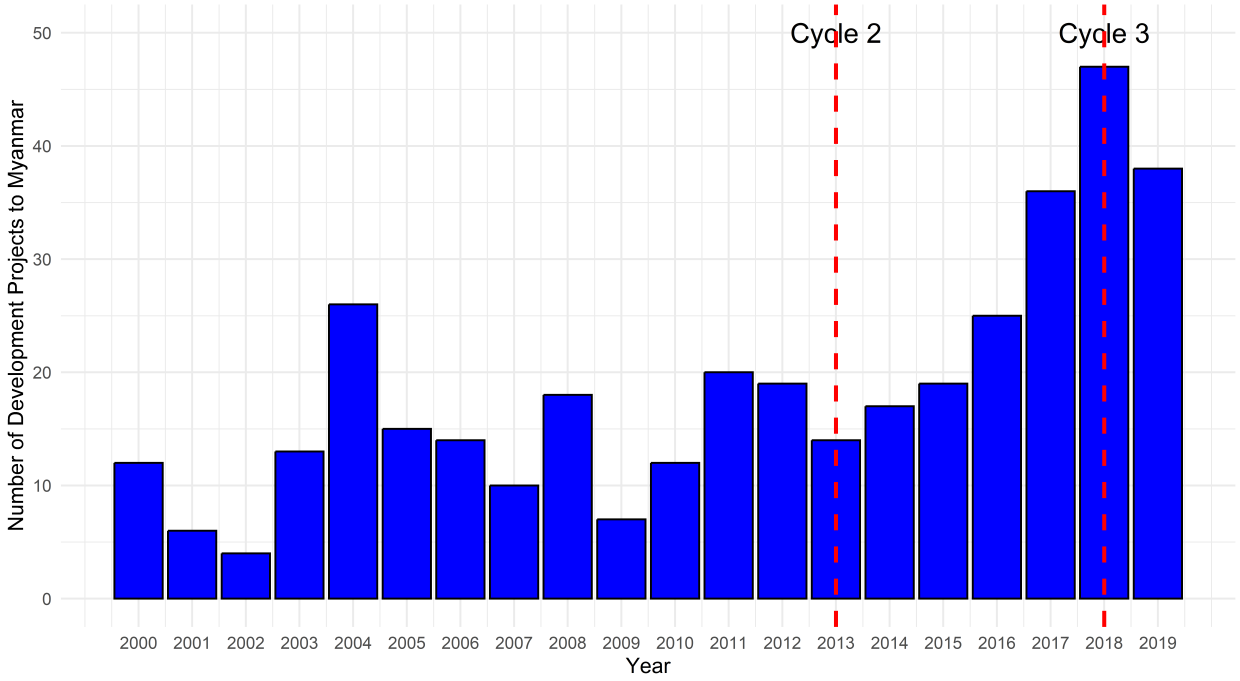
For countries in the "close" group, there may have already been significant Chinese aid inflow (aid inflow per capita as a control variable in this model, Model (1) in Table A2) so there is not much room for a higher increase in the number of new development projects. Given the close reviewers already exhibit a low degree of harshness in their reviews, there is not a ceiling effect: we still see some significant drop of the leniency of its reviews.

For the "distant" group, economic incentives do not change the severity of their reviews much. These countries are less responsive to China's financial influence when formulating their human rights assessments of China. Many of them adhere to their own human rights frameworks, which often diverge from China's, leading to an even more critical view of its human rights situation. They are reluctant to write a lenient review of China even after receiving large economic incentives. Both countries with and without significant economic incentives maintain a critical stance, suggesting that their perceptions are resistant to change

even in the face of monetary inducements. One may wonder if all the countries in the "distant" group are democracies. Appendix E includes a more detailed investigation addressing this concern.

To illustrate the proposed mechanism, consider the case of Myanmar. Over the past two decades, China's financing of overseas development projects in Myanmar has increased dramatically, particularly between 2013 and 2018, as indicated by the two dashed lines marking the years when China underwent its Universal Periodic Review. Following Aung San Suu Kyi's rise to power in 2016, Myanmar's stance toward China's economic engagement became increasingly favorable (Jones and Myo 2021). Turning to Myanmar's reviews of China, we observe a notable shift: Myanmar's harshness score declined from 1.85 to 1.23, representing a change of approximately one standard deviation. Qualitative evidence further reinforces this pattern. During Cycle 2, Myanmar's recommendations to China focused on issues such as economic, social, and cultural rights, labor rights, and freedom of the press. For example, Myanmar recommended China to "strengthen institutional guarantees for the legitimate rights and interests of news agencies and journalists," a critical review on a sensitive topic regarding individual rights. However, by Cycle 3, Myanmar's emphasis had shifted toward areas more closely aligned with China's preferred narrative, particularly poverty alleviation and the right to development. For instance, Myanmar recommended that China "continue efforts to lift the rural population living under the current poverty line out of poverty by 2020," a statement that effectively compliments China's progress and affirms its development-centered framing of human rights. Importantly, Myanmar falls within the "middle" group based on its cosine similarity score, consistent with the theoretical expectations and results as outlined.

Figure 4: Chinese overseas development projects to Myanmar between 2000 and 2019



The empirical findings provide a deeper understanding of states' reviewing behavior in the context of the UPR. By considering the proximity of their original perception of human rights norms with China, I show that large economic incentives do not necessarily sway individual states' reviewing behaviors in favor of China, while holding other relevant factors constant. "Distant" reviewers are too hard to influence. Those in the middle are more susceptible to changes in their review leniency responding to material incentives. While "close" reviewers exhibiting leniency, importantly, these changes can be significant enough to align their reviews with those of "close" reviewers, indicating the strong influence of China's economic leverage.

9 Conclusion

While economic statecraft is a key tool that China employs to influence human rights norms, it is not the only option available. China can also use diplomatic leadership or back-door channels in multilateral institutions (e.g., promoting resolutions in the UNHRC), and coalition-building with Global South countries (G77) to reshape normative priorities. China's reliance on economic power reflects its comparative advantage: economic inducements are less confrontational, more immediately attractive to partner countries, and complement its broader strategic narrative of exporting the China model that development is foundational to human rights. I do not contend that China explicitly leverages development projects in a quid pro quo exchange for more favorable comments in Universal Periodic Reviews. Rather, through sustained economic engagement, recipient countries may develop a greater sensitivity to the interests of their donor. This dynamic encourages more cautious or supportive behavior in international forums, even in the absence of direct coercion. In this way, economic statecraft operates as an indirect but effective mechanism for China to expand its normative influence.

In this paper, however, I focus specifically on economic power because I am most interested in addressing a broader question: Can states use material rewards to shape norms? By narrowing the scope in this way, the analysis aims to explore the conditions under which economic leverage can be effectively converted into political influence. I use the UN Universal Periodic Review as a laboratory to examine how China leverages its economic influence to shape the reviews conducted by other states in the human rights regime. Previous work shows that this peer review system, UPR, is political, with reviews primarily driven by states' bilateral relationships. Here I show that reviews can also be shaped by economic power, but with constraints.

Using text-based coding, I convert publicly available UN reports into a numerical scale,

capturing the instances of leniency in these review documents. Each recommendation receives a severity index score. Then I balance the quantity and quality differences of recommendations each state receives, enabling a fair comparison of the review harshness scores at the dyad level. This set of measures enables us to examine and compare the behaviors of countries from two perspectives. First, we can analyze how a country, acting as a reviewer, assesses and reviews other states. Second, we can evaluate how a country is reviewed by its peers in the international community. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and comparing the review dynamics among countries, shedding light on their interactions and relationships in the peer review process.

Using original text-as-data measures and a research design that capitalizes on the time lags between review cycles, I demonstrate that countries receiving more financial assistance from China tend to be less critical of its human rights records. Considering different levels of economic incentives between the review cycles, I find that reviews from countries receiving more new China-funded development projects or a debt relief deal tend to offer less critical reviews than countries that do not enjoy similar levels of economic incentives from China. However, the influence of economic incentives on reviewers' attitudes is contingent upon their underlying perceptions of human rights norms and values. Countries closer to the liberal principles of human rights exhibit greater reluctance to adjust their reviews leniently in response to China's economic incentives. Those in the middle are more sensitive to the financial perks.

So far I have presented additional evidence that when countries participate in the UPR, they consider factors beyond simply assessing the human rights conditions of the state under review or the bilateral relationships between the reviewer and reviewee. Reviews conducted in the UPR are shaped by the vested interests of the reviewing states. When China is under review, many of its main aid beneficiaries refrain from taking critical stands on sensitive issues that may antagonize the Chinese government, such as civil and political rights, ethnic

minority rights or religious rights. Instead, they praise China or simply urge it to continue its efforts in enhancing certain human rights that the government is proud of. These recommendations can be seen as a form of reciprocity or favor, akin to "scratching China's back." Furthermore, we observe these types of light recommendations are more common among countries receiving larger aid inflows from China or greater economic incentives between the review cycles.

However, this study also highlights the limitations of using financial incentives to influence normative decisions within human rights regimes. It is exceedingly challenging to manipulate countries' human rights reviews through economic incentives when those states strongly adhere to liberal principles of human rights. Even though China is one of the dominant economic powers, providing projects, loans and assistance to many recipient countries, many delegates from those countries are reluctant to write lenient reviews or offer disguised praise for China.

It is indeed surprising to observe that the state-to-state review system, the UPR, is not entirely politicized. Not all states are co-opted, especially considering that China is the largest trading partner and primary financier for many countries in the Global South. Some states still take their commitments to the international community seriously and strive to uphold international norms (A. Chayes and A. H. Chayes 1993; J. Kelley 2007; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), despite China's economic statecraft. We can identify "genuine human rights defender" that continue to adhere to the liberal-based international norms when it is relatively convenient to endorse an alternative norm. Future research can delve into why these country delegates might opt to risk unsettling their country's primary economic partner or financier, particularly when there are no apparent benefits to remaining faithful to upholding human rights principles in the UPR by interviews.

Future research can extend this study by examining broader normative shifts beyond countries' reviews of China. In particular, the cosine similarity score could be used as a

dependent variable to assess whether China's economic power influences how countries review others, such as testing whether language and themes prominent in China's review records are later echoed in other countries' recommendations, or whether countries increasingly align with China's patterns in selectively targeting or shielding specific states. This approach can assess whether countries increasingly mirror China's language and priorities in reviewing others, offering deeper evidence of normative shifts within the human rights regime.

It would be valuable to explore the broader network of states' reviews beyond China within the UPR framework. The UPR text data enable an investigation of a network of reviews where such a network will illuminate the key players in driving the politicization of UPR, thereby uncovering the intricate interplay between norms and geopolitics in the state review process. In other words, we have the opportunity to identify sincere reviewers and strategic reviewers and quantify under what conditions their choices converge or diverge. The network analysis can revolve around the great powers as the central node, revealing which countries tend to be lenient or harsh reviewers and the extent of leniency compared to others. Moreover, we can explore which countries demonstrate greater alignment with other geopolitical powers, and how these conditions and connections may evolve over time. Similar expectations could apply to other geopolitical powers when the following three conditions are met: (1) rising geopolitical powers are sensitive to contesting entrenched norms or establishing new rules; (2) countries expressing normative alignment or misalignment are economically dependent on these rising geopolitical power; (3) the conditional effects are more pronounced if countries are less attached to the norms. Adopting this network approach will enrich our understanding of the complex dynamics of states' interactions within international organizations, especially when norms and interests collide.

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Appendix A Tags under each issue topic

1. **Civil and political rights**: "CP rights - general, Civil society, Elections, Freedom of association and peaceful assembly, Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of the press, Freedom of movement, Human rights defenders"

2. **Public services**: "Corruption, Public security, Human rights education and training, Counter-terrorism, Privacy, National Human Rights Institution"

3. **Migrants and labors**: "Asylum-seekers - refugees, Freedom of movement, Labor, Migrants, Internally displaced persons"

4. **Physical integrity rights**: "Justice, Death penalty, Detention, Enforced disappearances, Extrajudicial executions, Human rights violations by state agents, Impunity, Torture and other CID treatment, Disability rights"

5. **Race, ethnicity and religious minority**: "Freedom of religion and belief, Minorities, Racial discrimination, Indigenous peoples, Statelessness and the right to nationality"

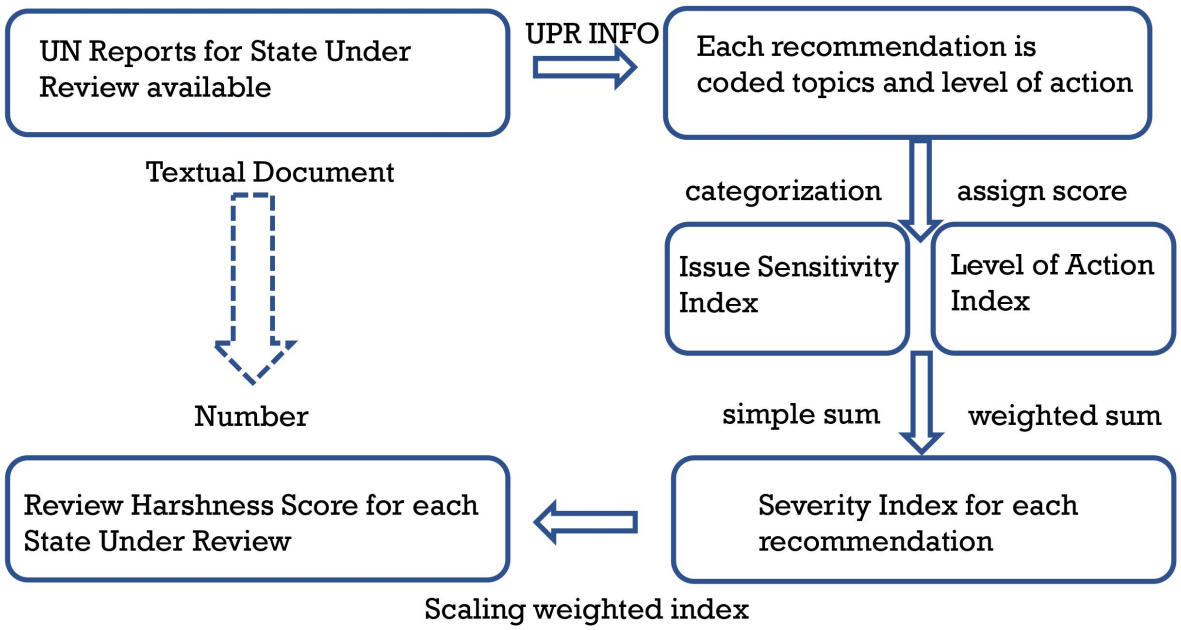
6. **Social and economic rights**: "Environment, Right to land, Right to water, Economic, social and cultural rights, Right to development, Poverty, Right to education, Right to Food, Right to health, Right to housing, ESC rights - general, Business and Human Rights"

7. **Protection of vulnerable population**: "Disabilities, HIV - Aids, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Rights of the Child, Trafficking, Women's rights"

8. **General and others**: "Special procedures, Technical assistance and cooperation, UPR process, General, Others"

Appendix B Workflow and example of creating measure of review harshness score

Figure A1: From text to number: explaining the process of creating a measure of review harshness score



For example, the Czech Republic (also known as Czechia) recommended China to "review laws and practices in particular with regard to ensuring protection of the freedom of religion, movement, protection of the culture and language of national minorities, including Tibetans and Uyghurs" (Info 2023). Based on the UPR Info classification, this recommendation was coded with the issue tags as follows: "Freedom of movement," "Freedom of religion and belief," and "Minority rights." Then each falls into three higher-level clusters of issue topics I identified: "civil and political rights," "Migration and workers," and "Racial, ethnic and religious minorities." Each topic was given a pre-defined score of issue sensitivity as explained; in this case, the issue topics in this particular recommendation have "high," "medium" and "high" sensitivity. The final issue sensitivity score is determined by the maximal rule, meaning that a review recommendation will receive a score of 3 if one of its issue topics has the highest issue sensitivity score. It means as long as a recommendation mentions a right closely related to liberal principles and protected by a democratic regime, it will receive the highest issue sensitivity score. In this specific example, this review's issue sensitivity score is 3. I reiterate the same process to calculate the issue sensitivity score for each recommendation.

To illustrate what lenient reviews look like, here is an examples of lenient review recom-

mendations given by Thailand (these are all the recommendations they issued to China in Cycle 2 and 3).

Thailand recommended China to:

- "Look into the possibility of establishing the national human rights institution in China." (Cycle 2)
- "Keep up its efforts in raising awareness among law enforcement officers and security personnel throughout the country." (Cycle 2)
- "Continue efforts to develop measures to eliminate discrimination against persons with disabilities, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities." (Cycle 3)
- "Further enhance international cooperation in the field of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, including through technical cooperation and capacity-building and South-South cooperation." (Cycle 3)

Thailand[10] tends to be very supportive of China in its UPR reviews. In Cycle 2, the focus was primarily on issues related to Governance and Public Services. In Cycle 3, Thailand expanded its scope to include the topic of Protection of Vulnerable Populations, making it a slightly more critical reviewer compared to the previous cycle. It is worth noting that the level of action is continuously minimal, encouraging China to "continue efforts" to protect persons with disabilities. Furthermore, Thailand also praised for its facilitation of South-South cooperation, again, a topic with low sensitivity to human rights. Throughout both cycles, Thailand mainly used suggestive and positive verbs such as "look into," "keep up the efforts," "continue efforts," and "further enhance." They read closer to compliments. Hence, these recommendations are light, easy to embrace, and positive.

Appendix C Cosine similarity with China

[10]Note that after the 2014 coup d'etat ousting the democratically elected government, Thailand underwent a significant time of military government and experienced an authoritarian turn. 2014 was in between China's review sessions of Cycle 2 and 3.

	Reviewers	Cosine all	Cosine C1	Cosine C2	Cosine C3
1	China	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
2	Cuba	0.99	0.94	0.97	0.96
3	Venezuela	0.99	0.95	0.96	0.94
4	Brunei Darussalam	0.97	0.90	0.97	0.97
5	DPR Korea	0.97	0.94	0.84	0.94
6	Oman	0.96	0.87	0.91	0.96
7	Saudi Arabia	0.96	0.92	0.88	0.96
8	Viet Nam	0.96	0.99	0.94	0.95
9	Dominican Republic	0.93	0.76	0.84	0.89
10	Eritrea	0.93		0.89	0.88
11	Solomon Islands	0.93		0.73	0.87
12	Yemen	0.93	0.94	0.90	0.83
13	Cambodia	0.92	0.98	0.88	0.85
14	Bangladesh	0.91	0.84	0.93	0.79
15	Equatorial Guinea	0.91	0.67	0.91	0.95
16	Fiji	0.91		0.75	0.91
17	Haiti	0.91	0.75	0.74	0.87
18	Palestine	0.91	0.86	0.93	0.82
19	Syria	0.91	0.93	0.63	0.86
20	Vanuatu	0.91		0.25	0.89
21	Ethiopia	0.90	0.79	0.87	0.90
22	Libya	0.90	0.91	0.79	0.93
23	Singapore	0.90	0.94	0.90	0.90
24	Mauritius	0.89	0.79	0.67	0.94
25	Qatar	0.89	0.92	0.81	0.88
26	Sri Lanka	0.89	0.96	0.90	0.84
27	Algeria	0.88	0.81	0.83	0.89
28	Bhutan	0.88	0.97	0.89	0.79
29	Iran	0.88	0.89	0.83	0.89
30	Laos	0.88	0.93	0.84	0.83
31	Malaysia	0.88	0.78	0.88	0.90
32	United Arab Emirates	0.88	0.84	0.90	0.81
33	Angola	0.87	0.92	0.83	0.86
34	Kuwait	0.87	0.89	0.88	0.72
35	Zimbabwe	0.87	0.94	0.73	0.65
36	India	0.86	0.73	0.80	0.88
37	Marshall Islands	0.86			0.86
38	Myanmar	0.86	0.96	0.93	0.78
39	South Sudan	0.86		0.88	0.81
40	Sudan	0.86	0.98	0.78	0.81
41	Tanzania	0.86	0.84	0.79	0.63

42	Bahamas	0.85		0.52	0.85
43	Guinea	0.85			0.83
44	South Africa	0.85	0.88	0.85	0.79
45	Trinidad and Tobago	0.85	0.68	0.90	0.79
46	Djibouti	0.84	0.87	0.87	0.81
47	El Salvador	0.84	0.66	0.85	0.80
48	Bolivia	0.83	0.87	0.66	0.76
49	Cameroon	0.83	0.78	0.23	0.84
50	Maldives	0.83	0.82	0.82	0.82
51	Pakistan	0.83	0.86	0.82	0.79
52	Uzbekistan	0.83	0.81	0.84	0.82
53	Barbados	0.82	0.88	0.29	0.80
54	Comoros	0.82		0.78	0.76
55	Holy See	0.82	0.86	0.85	0.57
56	Tajikistan	0.82	0.92	0.77	0.51
57	Bahrain	0.81	0.88	0.88	0.73
58	Jamaica	0.81	0.60	0.84	0.85
59	Monaco	0.81	0.69	0.88	
60	Somalia	0.81	0.73	0.78	0.55
61	Turkmenistan	0.81		0.79	0.65
62	Afghanistan	0.80	0.78	0.77	0.78
63	Lebanon	0.80	0.94	0.80	0.73
64	Nigeria	0.80	0.88	0.86	0.65
65	Peru	0.80	0.77	0.65	0.84
66	Portugal	0.80	0.82	0.82	0.79
67	Azerbaijan	0.79	0.80	0.64	0.77
68	Egypt	0.79	0.85	0.83	0.58
69	Kazakhstan	0.79	0.85	0.74	0.77
70	Madagascar	0.79	0.70	0.75	0.76
71	Mauritania	0.79	0.86	0.84	0.63
72	Belarus	0.78	0.71	0.75	0.84
73	Gabon	0.78	0.77	0.74	0.72
74	Republic of Congo	0.78	0.84	0.83	
75	Serbia	0.78	0.77	0.71	0.83
76	Democratic Republic of Congo	0.77	0.85	0.65	0.78
77	Iraq	0.77	0.76	0.75	0.72
78	Kenya	0.77		0.73	0.75
79	Nicaragua	0.77	0.80	0.68	0.64
80	Senegal	0.77	0.80	0.80	0.72
81	Seychelles	0.77		0.64	0.75
82	Thailand	0.77	0.71	0.81	0.77

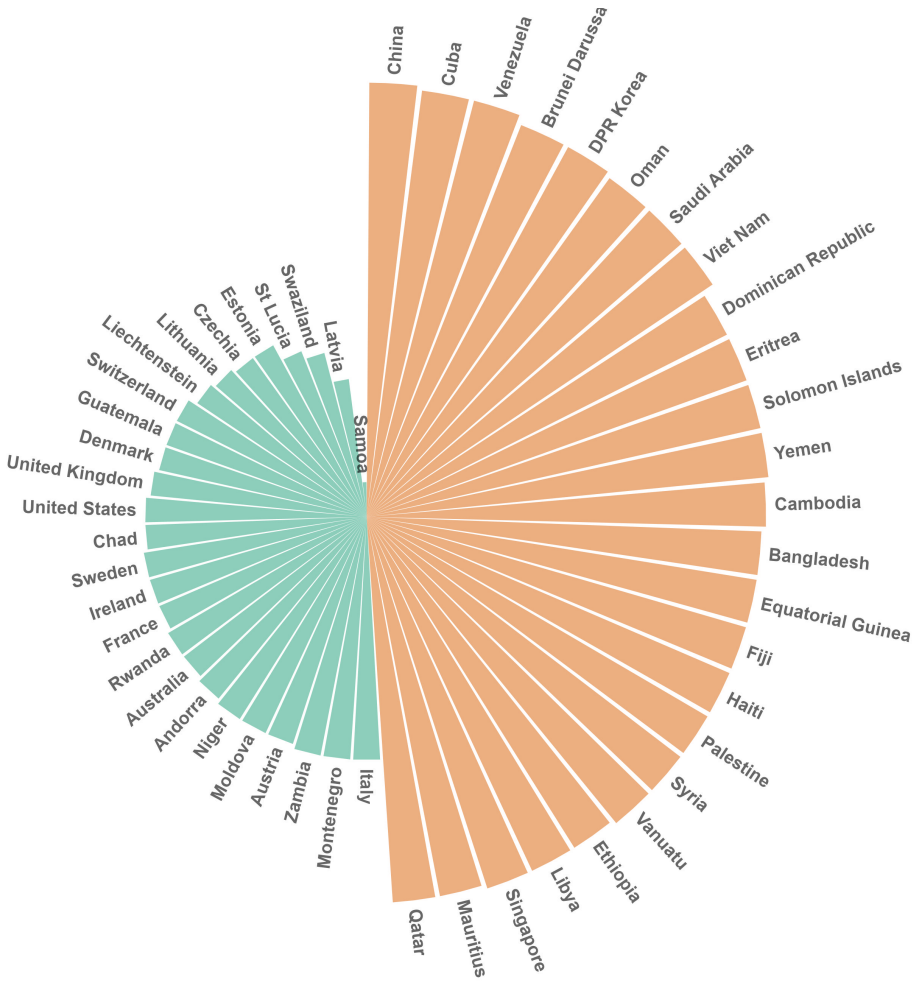
83	Finland	0.76	0.77	0.78	0.64
84	Kyrgyzstan	0.76	0.85	0.84	0.66
85	Guyana	0.75			0.75
86	Indonesia	0.75	0.82	0.74	0.74
87	St Vincent & the Grenadines	0.75		0.75	
88	Burundi	0.74	0.92	0.80	0.60
89	Cape Verde	0.74	0.72	0.69	0.80
90	Morocco	0.74	0.81	0.70	0.73
91	Bulgaria	0.73	0.79	0.77	0.71
92	Lesotho	0.73	0.69	0.49	0.75
93	Russian Federation	0.73	0.89	0.72	0.65
94	Turkey	0.73	0.79	0.76	0.67
95	Ecuador	0.72	0.73	0.78	0.69
96	Nepal	0.72	0.81	0.68	0.65
97	Timor-Leste	0.72	0.76	0.79	0.66
98	Colombia	0.71	0.81	0.76	0.64
99	Cote d'Ivoire	0.71	0.78	0.66	0.64
100	Tunisia	0.71	0.88	0.54	0.66
101	Jordan	0.70	0.75	0.63	0.70
102	Panama	0.70	0.74	0.74	0.70
103	Albania	0.69	0.73	0.78	0.65
104	Armenia	0.69	0.77	0.77	0.57
105	Benin	0.69	0.76	0.68	0.70
106	Honduras	0.69	0.81	0.68	0.67
107	Macedonia FYR	0.69	0.70	0.73	0.60
108	Sierra Leone	0.69		0.75	0.63
109	Japan	0.68	0.66	0.65	0.73
110	Mexico	0.68	0.57	0.74	0.72
111	Namibia	0.67	0.70	0.77	0.57
112	Philippines	0.67	0.86	0.63	0.64
113	Israel	0.66	0.66	0.73	0.67
114	Republic of Korea	0.66	0.75	0.67	0.69
115	Togo	0.66		0.70	0.63
116	Uganda	0.66	0.77	0.70	0.57
117	Burkina Faso	0.65	0.79	0.70	0.61
118	Spain	0.65	0.59	0.71	0.63
119	Botswana	0.64	0.86	0.57	0.67
120	Brazil	0.64	0.63	0.69	0.60
121	Central African Republic	0.64	0.69	0.56	0.68
122	Ghana	0.64	0.79	0.63	0.59

123	Luxembourg	0.64	0.67	0.63	0.60
124	Paraguay	0.64	0.70	0.67	0.63
125	Slovenia	0.64	0.57	0.71	0.63
126	Ukraine	0.64	0.78	0.69	0.58
127	Romania	0.63	0.78	0.71	0.58
128	Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.62	0.55	0.72	0.58
129	Greece	0.62	0.81	0.69	0.55
130	Iceland	0.62	0.67	0.60	0.61
131	Malta	0.62	0.66		0.60
132	Uruguay	0.62	0.73	0.62	0.64
133	Cyprus	0.61	0.75	0.56	0.64
134	New Zealand	0.61	0.57	0.67	0.57
135	Georgia	0.60	0.67	0.60	0.57
136	Hungary	0.60	0.65	0.58	0.62
137	Costa Rica	0.59	0.76	0.59	0.64
138	Mozambique	0.59	0.76	0.58	0.52
139	Netherlands	0.59	0.54	0.62	0.63
140	Canada	0.58	0.50	0.63	0.61
141	Chile	0.58	0.65	0.63	0.55
142	Croatia	0.58	0.71	0.63	0.57
143	Germany	0.58	0.58	0.62	0.59
144	Mongolia	0.58		0.50	0.57
145	Slovakia	0.58	0.53	0.63	0.52
146	Argentina	0.57	0.58	0.57	0.60
147	Mali	0.57	0.75	0.61	0.49
148	Norway	0.57	0.57	0.63	0.56
149	Poland	0.57	0.57	0.61	0.58
150	Belgium	0.56	0.51	0.59	0.57
151	Italy	0.56	0.54	0.63	0.52
152	Montenegro	0.56		0.50	0.59
153	Zambia	0.56	0.71	0.66	0.53
154	Austria	0.55	0.58	0.57	0.54
155	Moldova	0.55	0.50	0.58	0.56
156	Niger	0.55	0.79	0.47	0.46
157	Andorra	0.54		0.71	0.49
158	Australia	0.53	0.61	0.57	0.54
159	Rwanda	0.53	0.69	0.60	0.48
160	France	0.52	0.46	0.53	0.58
161	Ireland	0.52	0.52	0.62	0.48
162	Sweden	0.52	0.48	0.58	0.52
163	Chad	0.51	0.75	0.53	0.34

164	United States	0.51	0.57	0.56	0.47
165	United Kingdom	0.50	0.62	0.51	0.51
166	Denmark	0.49	0.50	0.45	0.54
167	Guatemala	0.49	0.71	0.56	0.42
168	Switzerland	0.49	0.56	0.51	0.53
169	Liechtenstein	0.47	0.81	0.50	0.43
170	Lithuania	0.46	0.57	0.52	0.39
171	Czechia	0.45	0.45	0.47	0.44
172	Estonia	0.45	0.72	0.42	0.49
173	St Lucia	0.41		0.44	
174	Swaziland	0.39	0.59	0.26	
175	Latvia	0.32	0.29	0.42	0.28
176	Samoa	0.08	0.22		

Table A1: Summary of text similarity between China's human rights scripts and other countries' scripts when they review other countries across three cycles

Figure A2: Top 25 countries sharing high proximity (warm in orange) and low proximity (cold in green) with China's vision of human rights



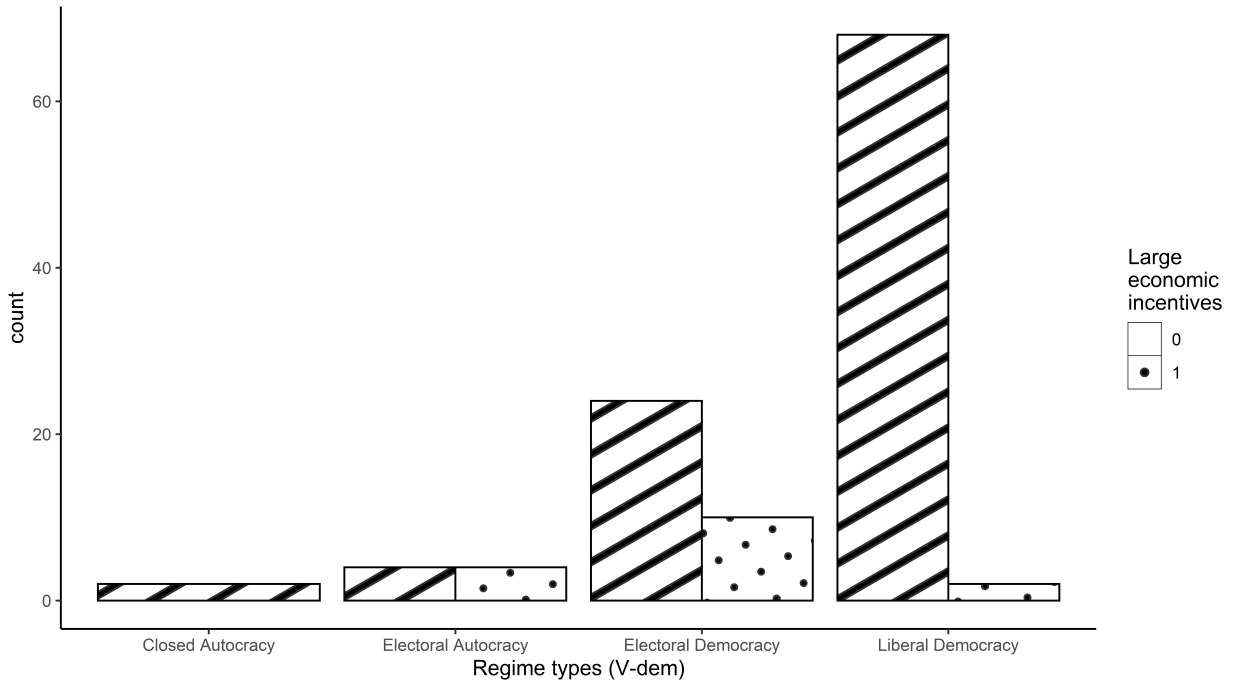
Appendix D Results: Complete models

Table A2: Correlations between large economic incentives and countries' review changes to China in UPR, conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions of human rights norms with China

	Dependent variable:
	Review harshness score
Large economic incentives	−0.238
	(0.155)
Cosine similarity (middle)	−0.301**
	(0.117)
Cosine similarity (close)	−0.373***
	(0.133)
UN Voting Distance	0.023*
	(0.014)
Political Terror Score	−0.096***
	(0.036)
Chinese aid flow per capita	−0.0001*
	(0.0001)
Incentives*Similarity (middle)	0.021
	(0.184)
Incentives*Similarity (close)	0.012
	(0.189)
Constant	2.366***
	(0.151)
Regime Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	224
Log Likelihood	−160.723
Akaike Inf. Crit.	343.446
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	380.974
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix E Robustness Check I: Are countries in distant group all democracies?

Figure A3: Distant group's (furthest proximity to China in perceiving human rights norms) regime types and the amount of economic incentives distribution



One may wonder what countries' key characteristics are in the "distant" group. I provide information on the countries that have the furthest distance of human rights norms compared to China. In Figure A3, I show one obvious feature of these 60 countries: regime type as measured by V-dem (2020). Notably, the majority of these countries are liberal democracies and most of them do not receive China's large economic incentives (a large amount of new development projects or debt relief negotiations). Yet, a handful of these distant countries that champion the liberal principles of human rights (hence, distancing from China's vision of human rights norms) are electoral democracies or even autocracies. Latin American countries like Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Paraguay that have a tradition of actively promoting universal human rights in the UN and beyond are in this distant group. Post-Soviet Union countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Romania are also in this group, possessing a more liberal view of human rights. They are in the category of "Electoral Democracy" and also have a higher proportion of large economic incentives from China. Nonetheless, although countries in the distant group have various levels of liberal democracy as measured by V-Dem they are not sensitive to China's economic incentives due to their strong commitment to the liberal principle of human rights norms.

Figure A4: Correlations between Political Terror Scale (PTS) and Cosine Similarity Score

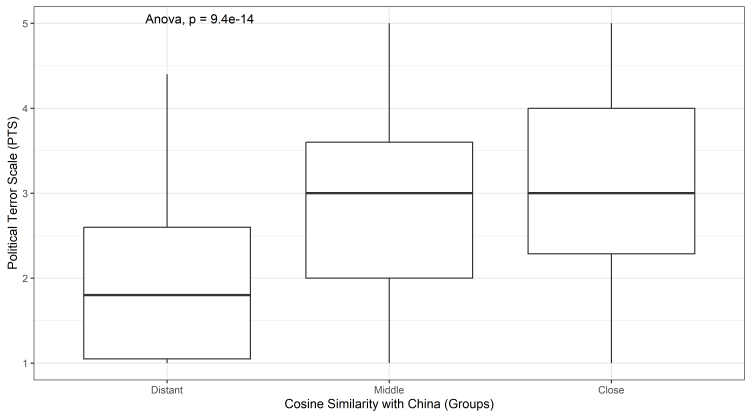
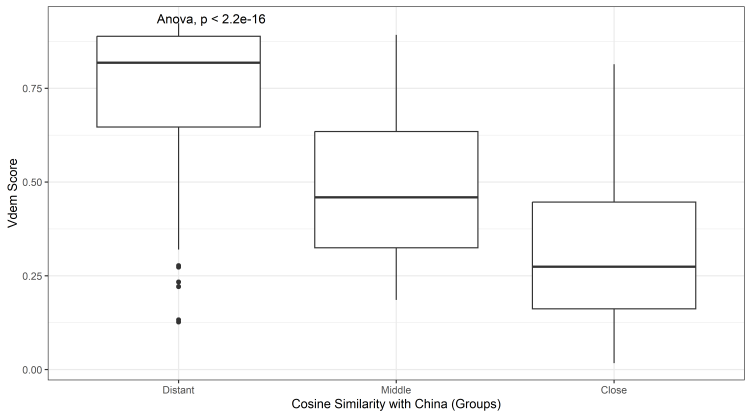


Figure A5: Correlations between V-dem Score and Cosine Similarity Score



To check the cosine similarity score against some objective measurements such as PTS and V-dem democracy score, I use barplots to visualize group differences and statistical results. They validate that countries' conceptualization of human rights norms (constructed in this study are correlated with their human rights conditions and regime types. Figure A4 presents a boxplot comparing the Political Terror Scale (PTS) scores across the three groups defined by their cosine similarity with China's human rights framing: distant, middle, and close. The results show that countries in the distant group tend to have lower PTS scores, indicating better human rights practices, while countries in the middle and close groups exhibit higher PTS scores, reflecting worse human rights conditions. The ANOVA test confirms that the differences across the groups are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that alignment with China's human rights vision is associated with greater tolerance for weaker physical integrity rights protections.

Similar patterns can be found when comparing the V-dem democracy score and Cosine similarity score with China in A5. These two figures boost some confidence in the constructed measure.

Appendix F Robustness Check II: Adding Original Review Harshness in Cycle 1 as Baseline

Adding the baseline review to China in cycle 1 as a covariate, the results remain relatively the same, although that suppresses the effects on the close group. That's why we see the ceiling effect in A6.

Figure A6: Correlations between large economic incentives and countries' review harshness scores to China in UPR, conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions of human rights norms with China (adding control of original review leniency)

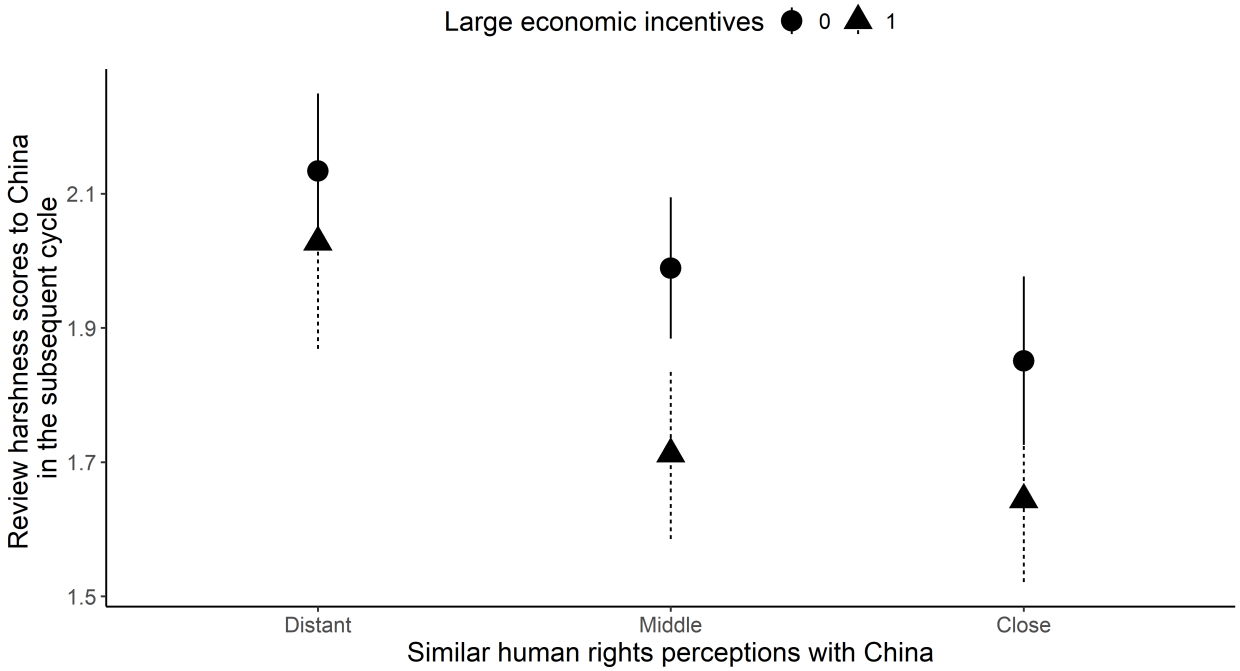


Table A3

	Dependent variable:
	Review harshness score
Large economic incentives	−0.106
	(0.179)
Cosine similarity (middle)	−0.145
	(0.129)
Cosine similarity (close)	−0.283*
	(0.157)
Review to China (cycle 1)	0.098
	(0.072)
UN Voting Distance	0.029*
	(0.015)
Political Terror Score	0.003
	(0.044)
Chinese aid flow per capita	−0.0001
	(0.0001)
Regime	0.153***
	(0.054)
Incentives*Similarity (middle)	−0.171
	(0.210)
Incentives*Similarity (close)	−0.101
	(0.215)
Constant	1.564***
	(0.258)
Observations	146
Log Likelihood	−99.427
Akaike Inf. Crit.	224.855
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	263.641
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix G Robustness Check II: Adding the comparison of China/US aid ratio

An alternative explanation is that smaller countries may be influenced not only by material inducements from China but also by pressures from allied states, such as the United States, which may prefer that they adopt a more critical stance toward China. For example, a country receiving financial support from both China and the United States might face competing incentives, with the United States encouraging criticism of China as part of broader geopolitical competition. In such a scenario, a critical review would not necessarily reflect normative commitment to human rights but rather strategic alignment with a geopolitical ally.

To assess this possibility, I constructed a variable measuring the ratio of Chinese aid to U.S. aid (official development assistance, or ODA). The expectation is that the higher the ratio in favor of Chinese aid, the more likely economic inducements from China would prevail in shaping review behavior, as expected in the hypotheses. I re-estimated the models, replacing the original measure of Chinese aid with this ratio. The results show that the new variable does not account for the variation observed in the main models.

There are several possible reasons for this null effect. First, the sets of countries receiving significant Chinese development financing and those receiving substantial U.S. aid are not fully overlapping, limiting the plausibility of direct aid competition. In terms of the nature of development projects that are financed to recipient countries, the World Bank aid projects are more comparable with the Chinese aid projects. Second, in the context of human rights reviews, states may prioritize how their recommendations are perceived by the country under review rather than by third-party allies. Thus, the influence of geopolitical allies may be less salient than direct considerations of economic relationships and how the reviews are perceived by the review target.

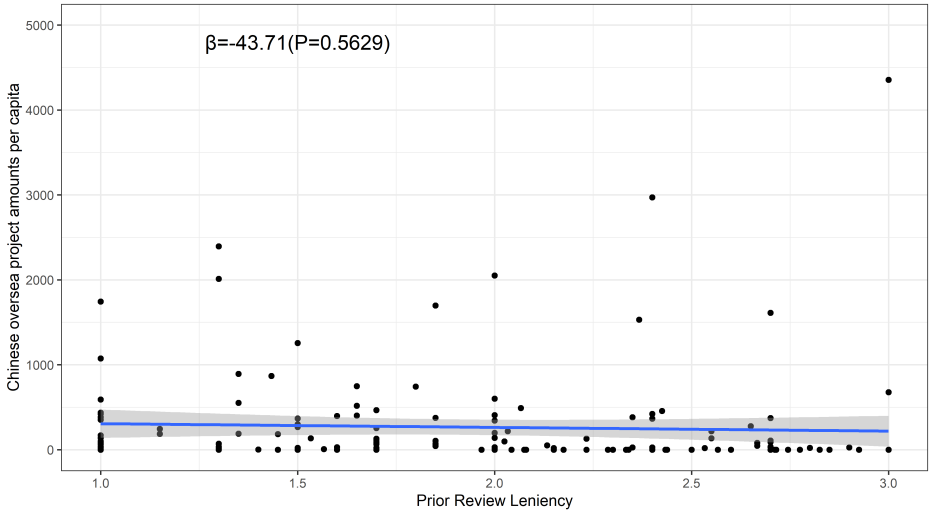
Table A4

	Dependent variable:	
	Review harshness score	
	(1)	(2)
Large economic incentives		-0.362^{**}
		(0.153)
Cosine similarity (middle)	-0.119	-0.300^{**}
	(0.150)	(0.133)
Cosine similarity (close)	-0.125	-0.460^{***}
	(0.178)	(0.139)
Chinese/US aid Ratio	0.061	0.019
	(0.187)	(0.102)
Incentives*Similarity (middle)		0.067
		(0.190)
Incentives*Similarity (close)		0.125
		(0.186)
Political Terror Score	-0.080^{*}	-0.089^{**}
	(0.042)	(0.038)
UN Voting Distance	0.026	0.015
	(0.018)	(0.016)
GDP per capita	0.00000	
	(0.00000)	
Regime	0.651^{***}	
	(0.192)	
Aid ratio *Similarity (middle)	-0.128	
	(0.242)	
Aid ratio *Similarity (close)	-0.247	
	(0.245)	
Constant	1.763^{***}	2.378^{***}
	(0.234)	(0.163)
Observations	213	216
Log Likelihood	-162.097	-150.930
Akaike Inf. Crit.	348.194	323.859
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	388.530	360.988

Appendix H Endogeneity Issue: Is Chinese aid targeting lenient reviewers?

Is Chinese aid targeting lenient reviewers?We can plot Chinese aid vs. countries' prior review leniency (before they received aid) to see if there is a pattern. To mitigate concerns about endogeneity, I test whether Chinese aid is systematically targeted toward countries with more favorable prior review behavior. Figure A7 shows no discernible relationship between pre-treatment review leniency (prior to the aid giving time) and Chinese aid allocation, and a regression analysis confirms the absence of a significant association. This descriptive evidence suggests that selection based on initial review leniency is unlikely to explain the link between Chinese aid and subsequent review leniency. It does *not* appear that China is simply targeting countries based on their expected review behavior.

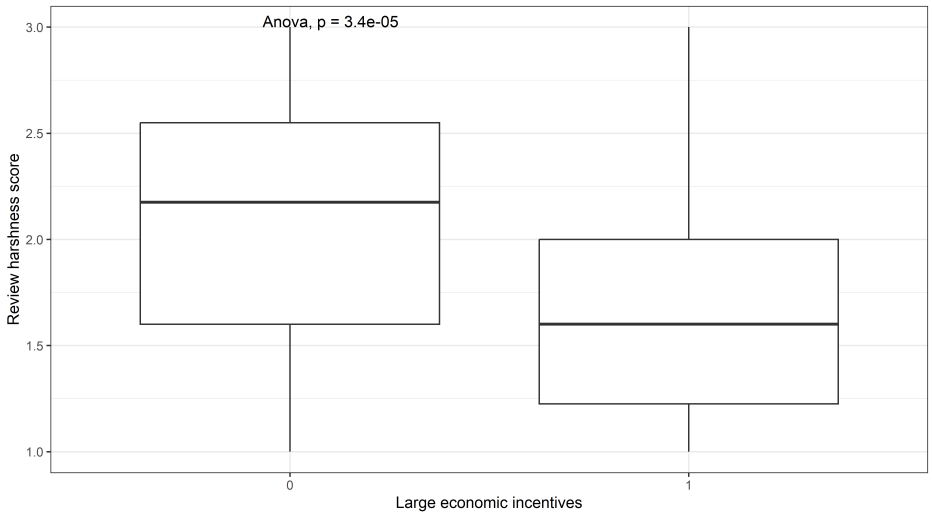
Figure A7: Relationship between aid amount and prior review leniency level



However, when examining whether substantial changes in economic incentives between review cycles are correlated with countries' prior review behavior, descriptive evidence suggests that potential bias may exist. Specifically, countries that received large economic inducements, measured by above-average levels of new development projects or participation in debt relief negotiations, tend to have issued more lenient reviews of China in earlier cycles. This pattern indicates that while overall aid distribution amount may not systematically target prior leniency, large increases in economic engagement may still be selectively directed toward countries that were already predisposed to be favorable to China in the UPR. Such selective reinforcement raises the possibility that observed correlations in the main models between Chinese aid and review leniency may partly reflect endogenous dynamics.

One potential explanation is that China may reward countries that show greater leniency in their reviews. Given the cyclical nature of the UPR process—and the inclusion of cycle fixed effects in the models to account for time-related changes—countries have opportuni-

Figure A8: Relationship between large economic incentive changes and prior review leniency level



ties to learn and adjust their behavior over time. Consequently, we cannot fully rule out the possibility that lenient reviews influence the subsequent allocation of large economic incentives.