

**Who Still Advocates for Human Rights?  
China's Contestation and Influence in the UN Human Rights Regime**

Lucie Lu, Princeton University Center on Contemporary China

*In the liberal-based international human rights regime, authoritarian states are often a robust target of “naming and shaming” due to their rights abuses and atrocities. Is China an exception to this trend? If so, why? Considering the different approaches to human rights between the United States and China, which country’s vision resonates more with the Global South? This paper illustrates that China is not as vulnerable in the UN-based multilateral human rights regime as might be expected. Instead, it actively contests and shapes international human rights norms to gain more followers aligning with its development-oriented human rights framework. Many Global South countries, regardless of regime type, largely resonate with China’s vision, prioritizing economic and social rights over civil and political freedoms. However, a subset of states do resist China’s economic influence and maintain a commitment to liberal human rights principles. This paper suggests the U.S. should seriously evaluate how human rights norms are articulated within the Global South and use economic leverage to reverse the erosion of liberal norms. Rejoining the UN Human Rights Council would be a crucial first step in counterbalancing China’s growing influence and reasserting moral leadership in the global human rights discourse.*

Human rights have become a unique value battlefield in U.S.-China relations. The U.S. and China both claim to champion human rights, yet their visions of what human rights entail cannot be more different. This struggle over values extends beyond rhetoric, influencing how global norms are shaped through economic influence, multilateral institutions, and strategic partners.

Human rights play a pivotal role in distinguishing the ideologies and identities of nations, particularly exemplified by the contrast between the United States and China, and more broadly, between democratic and autocratic systems. The U.S. emphasizes individual freedoms and democratic governance, while China prioritizes state development and collective order. Unlike in other issues areas like trade, technology or climate, where China has often followed the U.S. lead, in the realm of human rights, China does not seek alignment but instead redefinition. Rather than outright rejection of the liberal human rights framework, however, China engages with it strategically — reinterpreting norms to prioritize state-driven development over civil liberties. Through active participation in the UN Human Rights Council and economic influence in the Global South, China is advancing a vision of human rights that shields authoritarian regimes from scrutiny and criticism — particularly those most likely to infringe upon individual rights.

## Working Paper for the Penn Project on the Future of U.S.-China Relations

At the heart of this struggle is a key question: To what extent can a rising economic power like China contest and reshape global human rights norms? The U.S. and its allies have long used foreign aid to promote democratic governance and individual freedoms.<sup>1</sup> China has learned and adapted this norm-promotion strategy, leveraging its overseas development projects to accumulate political capital. One way to assess the political returns on its outward-facing economic engagement is by examining how China cultivates support for its development-oriented vision of human rights.

This paper demonstrates that China's economic engagement does yield political returns in one of the most entrenched value-based issue areas. In the Global South, where many countries have benefited from China's economic assistance projects, there is an increasing alignment with Beijing's emphasis on developmental rights over civil and political rights. However, not all beneficiaries succumb to China's economic influence; some continue to uphold a liberal, rights-based framework in the United Nations.

This set of findings raises critical policy questions. If the U.S. aims to maintain its leadership in global human rights governance, it must confront three key challenges:

- ***Regaining its footing in multilateral normative institutions:*** The U.S. must reaffirm its leadership in multilateral human rights institutions by actively advocating for the continued relevance of civil and political rights in global governance. To counter competing narratives, Washington should work to strengthen the effectiveness of international human rights laws and institutions, ensuring that contested norms align with liberal values. A key step in this effort would be rejoining the UN Human Rights Council while simultaneously leading new initiatives that reinforce human rights protections globally.
- ***Regaining economic leverage through foreign aid:*** U.S. foreign assistance programs should be recognized not only as humanitarian efforts but also as essential strategic tools for advancing liberal norms and shaping global governance. This paper illustrates that China has effectively leveraged economic assistance to expand its political influence, demonstrating that financial aid can serve as a powerful instrument for securing diplomatic support and reshaping established international human rights norms. In this evolving geopolitical landscape, abandoning U.S. foreign assistance programs would be a critical mistake. As China has invested billions of dollars in development programs across the Global South, it strengthens its foothold in regions historically influenced by the United States. To maintain its leadership in global governance, the U.S. must enhance its own economic engagement by coordinating with other donors and multilateral institutions, offering more competitive alternatives with

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<sup>1</sup> James Raymond Vreeland and Axel Dreher, *The Political Economy of the United Nations Security Council: Money and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139027755>.

effectiveness, and ensuring that assistance aligns with democratic governance and economic sustainability.

- ***Searching for like-minded friends based on data-driven analyses:*** Finding like-minded partners beyond traditional allies remains a persistent challenge in international diplomacy. To navigate this, U.S. State Department officials can use what is presented in this paper as a starting point to assess different countries' narratives and voting patterns across international platforms, to better understand their priorities and interests. Washington must proactively identify and support developing countries that share a commitment to liberal values. By strategically using economic engagement as a tool for alliance-building, the U.S. can strengthen these relationships while countering China's growing influence in international organizations and elite political circles. A data-driven approach to diplomatic and economic partnerships will ensure that U.S. foreign policy remains both adaptive and effective in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

### **Uniqueness of Human Rights: Value Battlefields between Autocracy and Democracy**

For a long time, human rights have been one of the most established yet contentious areas of global governance — particularly in relation to a rising authoritarian power like China. Core principles of international human rights, rooted in liberalism, fundamentally contradict the foundations of an authoritarian regime. Historically, human rights have been seen as a “codeword for democratization,”<sup>2</sup> a path that China has deliberately resisted, despite its robust engagement with the U.S. in other issues areas. Because human rights are so closely tied to democratic values, they remain a particularly difficult and sensitive issue for China to navigate. At its core, the human rights debate reflects the broader normative and ideological divisions that define U.S.-China relations, making it one of the most fiercely contested battlegrounds between the two countries.

While human rights may not always appear at the top of the list in discussions about U.S.-China relations, they strike at the heart of liberal values. Human rights are not merely an American concern; they resonate with people across borders, transcending national boundaries. After all, who wouldn't champion the idea that all people are born free and equal? The current liberal-based human rights regime derives its legitimacy from the widespread appeal of universal norms.<sup>3</sup> While states may differ in their degree of compliance with the regime, few openly challenge the principle that protecting civil and political rights — such as freedom of speech — “is the right thing to do.”<sup>4</sup> No country would openly question the value of human rights as human rights is perceived as a so-

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Nathan, “China: Getting Human Rights Right,” *The Washington Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1997): 132–51; Andrew Nathan, “China's Rise and International Regimes: Does China Intend to Join or Overthrow Existing Norms and Institutions?”

<sup>3</sup> Beth A. Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Alastair I. Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

called “worldwide secular religion” by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel.<sup>5</sup> The core idea of human rights as universal, deeply rooted in liberalism, remains largely uncontested in principle.

In this arena, the divergence between the U.S. and China in championing human rights through their foreign policies is particularly stark. While China has made significant advances in technology and other sectors, human rights remain a contentious issue where its advocacy is deliberately constrained and tailored to align with its economic development model. China's vision of human rights prioritizes economic growth and social welfare while intentionally steering the conversation away from the ideological divide between autocracy and democracy. In contrast, the U.S. continues to uphold human rights as a fundamental pillar of its foreign policy, reinforcing the core principles that liberal states have long sought to promote and influence globally.<sup>6</sup> This normative appeal serves as the U.S.’s key currency in building resilient international institutions grounded in shared aspirations and principles.

When assessing China’s global influence, human rights remain the most challenging normative issue for Beijing to assert its leadership. This difficulty stems from the inherent incompatibility between China’s authoritarian political system and the international liberal norm of universal human rights, which emphasizes civil and political freedoms. Authoritarian leaders are inherently resistant to fully embracing the liberal human rights framework, which is designed to protect individuals from state violence and tyranny. 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. These mechanisms have consistently highlighted authoritarian regimes — such as North Korea, and Venezuela — as leading human rights violators, ensuring sustained media scrutiny of their abuses. This entrenched global narrative makes it even more difficult for China to reshape the human rights discourse without directly addressing the contradictions between its governance model and prevailing international norms.

China’s recent approach has not been to discredit or disengage from liberal-based human rights principles but rather to engage with the multilateral human rights regime more actively than ever. Indeed, China has demonstrated cooperation within the UN-based human rights system — ratifying most UN international human rights conventions<sup>7</sup> and securing seats on the UN Human Rights Council. However, China’s adeptness at reinterpreting, contesting, and expanding human rights norms has arguably distanced these principles from their traditional association with liberal ideology and democracy. The instrumental use of these norms remains deeply contested and politicized. At a time when the values of liberalism and democracy are increasingly questioned,

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<sup>5</sup> Henri Féron, “Human Rights and Faith: A ‘World-Wide Secular Religion’?,” *Ethics & Global Politics* 7, no. 4 (January 1, 2014): 181–200, <https://doi.org/10.3402/egp.v7.26262>.

<sup>6</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Democracy and Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Evolution, Tools, and Considerations for Congress,” 2025, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47890>.

<sup>7</sup> Rana Siu Inboden, *China and the International Human Rights Regime* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

whereas autocracy is perceived to be in a safer place,<sup>8</sup> it is time to reflect on what has contributed to this shift, and how countries interpret and engage with these principles in practice.

### **Shifting Perspective: China's Human Rights Governance in the Multilateral UN-based Regime**

China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang have received significant media attention and policy scrutiny. Discussions about China's human rights conditions and the role of the U.S. government often center on issues such as forced labor and the treatment of ethnic minorities. From 2020 to 2024, over 640 pieces of legislation were introduced in Congress to address China's human rights matters.<sup>9</sup> Within this framework, China is frequently placed in a defensive and vulnerable position, preoccupied with managing and responding to external criticism. However, viewing human rights through a contested and politicized bilateral lens overlooks the broader question of how other countries assess China's record. When situated within the multilateral UN-based human rights regime, is China similarly vulnerable and subject to scrutiny from the international community? Furthermore, given the distinct approaches of the United States and China in advocating human rights, which country's influence resonates more with the Global South within the UN-based multilateral framework?

The United Nations Human Rights Council's open ballot in October 2022 was seen as China winning a political power play regarding salient human rights issues.<sup>10</sup> China's Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Chen Xu, told a reporter confidently in September 2022, "The developing world will reject all anti-China initiatives initiated by Western countries."<sup>11</sup> Indeed this turned out to be the case. The U.S. and its allies proposed to hold a debate on China's alleged rights abuses against Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. However, the resolution failed as the U.S. was unable to secure enough votes among the 47 member countries — despite many of them having a significant Muslim population and an apparent vested interest in supporting the measure.

It should be a wake-up call for the West to struggle to mobilize many developing countries to take an explicit stance against China in the UN. This episode suggests that more countries align themselves with China than with the liberal countries in contested issues within the UN, indicating that China is less vulnerable than perceived in the multilateral framework of human rights. By itself, it was a display of Chinese political power in the international human rights regime.

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<sup>8</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracy?," *Foreign Affairs*, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> "Congress Legislative Search Results," legislation, accessed February 5, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/search>.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Wintour, "UN Vote to Ignore Human Rights Abuses in China Leaves West in Dead End," *The Guardian*, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/06/un-vote-ignore-human-rights-abuses-china-leaves-west-dead-end>.

<sup>11</sup> The Straits Times, "West Weighs Contentious Anti-China Move as Un Rights Council Opens," *The Straits Times*, September 11, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/west-weighs-contentious-anti-china-move-as-un-rights-council-opens>.

If proposing the resolution is seen as a battlefield, the U.S. lost to China. It may be a coincidence of the U.S. losing the ideological frontline, or it reflects a deeper problem and power shift. China may have engaged in the human rights regime so well that it is much less subject to scrutiny. Nonetheless, as the oldest and most established international regime, the international human rights regime presents important symbolism for China to show that it adheres to the world's rules and norms as a great power should. In addition, a state's failure to keep promises can be interpreted as a "sign of incompetence and/or outright disrespect of the law," resulting in citizens' disapproval of the government.<sup>12</sup> Hence, tensions arise from its foreign policy goal of being a respected and credible actor in the world community and its deteriorating protection of the civil and political rights of its domestic citizens.

In terms of formal participation in the human rights regime, the UN is an important platform in which China can work with other great powers as well as middle powers to establish its reputation as a responsible global power. Compared to its treatment by human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, China is much less vulnerable in the UN where it enjoys significant decision-making power.<sup>13</sup> The UN Human Rights Council is an inclusive multilateral forum where small member states are encouraged to be the key players in the exchanges.<sup>14</sup> This embedded legitimacy in inclusiveness drives China to reinforce the importance of working within the UN and pursuing a leadership role. Indeed, it has been very cooperative and active as a participant in the UN-based human rights regime.<sup>15</sup>

Recognizing the complexities in China's approach to global human rights governance, it is instructive to assess how China invokes international human rights norms in recurring practices of a monitoring mechanism in the UN Human Rights Council, universal periodical reviews ("UPR"), when interacting with other countries.<sup>16</sup> While the UPR includes a full array of international human rights norms, how China invokes certain dimensions of human rights norms likely reflects its priorities in legal commitment and actual implementations. By systematically analyzing China's stated positions within UN-based human rights monitoring mechanisms —

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<sup>12</sup> Jana von Stein, "Making Promises, Keeping Promises: Democracy, Ratification and Compliance in International Human Rights Law," *British Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 3 (July 2016): 659, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000489>.

<sup>13</sup> Songying Fang, Xiaojun Li, and Fanglu Sun, "China's Evolving Motivations and Goals in UN Peacekeeping Participation," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 73, no. 3 (September 2018): 464–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702018795898>; Courtney J Fung and Shing-hon Lam, "Staffing the United Nations: China's Motivations and Prospects," *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July 1, 2021): 1143–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab071>; Rosemary Foot, *China, the Un, and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image*, First Edition (Oxford, United Kingdom ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Vreeland and Dreher, *The Political Economy of the United Nations Security Council*; Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, electronic resource, 3rd ed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio14195853>.

<sup>15</sup> Inboden, *China and the International Human Rights Regime*.

<sup>16</sup> Xinyuan Dai and Lucie Lu, "Beyond Liberal Narratives. China and the International Human Rights Order," *SCRIPTS Working Paper*, Cluster of Excellence 2055 "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS), 40 (April 3, 2024), <https://www.scripts-berlin.eu/publications/working-paper-series/Working-Paper-40-2024/index.html>.

alongside those of other countries — we can assess its stance on interpreting international human rights norms, including which rights it prioritizes.

Similarly, we can also observe all UN member states' interpretations of human rights norms by assessing their review records. The fact that the reviews are recurring in a public peer-review forum further enhances the reliability of using the reviewing records to measure the continuity and change of the interpretation of norms across states. Again, while human rights are multidimensional,<sup>17</sup> countries prioritize different aspects of human rights based on their unique perceptions, emphasizing certain rights over others. This variation allows for an analysis of how closely China's stance aligns with other nations in articulating and interpreting human rights norms. Examining how states articulate human rights norms within a constrained forum provides a valuable opportunity to assess the perspectives of Global South countries on human rights. This analysis helps illuminate whether their views align with the conventional wisdom that civil and political rights — rooted in liberal ideology — remain the core of the human rights framework.

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 the 90,938 recommendations from three complete cycles of the UPR. On the recommendation level, we have 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 categories hand-coded by UPR Info researchers. Each recommendation may address multiple issue tags. UPR Info also publishes their codebook to justify why different issue tags are attached to the recommendation. Following coding rules performed by scholars in previous research,<sup>18</sup> I also cluster the 56 issue tags into 8 issue topics. Each recommendation can cover more than one issue topic. In sum, the textual information in each recommendation is succinctly encapsulated through different issue topics.

When viewed through this lens, how does China's articulation of the international human rights order appear? Figure 1 presents a summary of the relative weights attached to different categories of rights in China's recommendations over the three cycles. The top three categories of rights that China highlights most frequently are consistent across the three cycles (from left to right): social and economic rights, protection of vulnerable populations, and physical integrity rights. When China provides recommendations to other countries through all three cycles, it most often addresses efforts to protect citizens' social and economic rights. Examples of this dimension of human rights include the right to water and the right to education, thus addressing poverty or environmental issues. Furthermore, there is a growing emphasis on social and economic rights

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<sup>17</sup> Dai and Lu.

<sup>18</sup> Rochelle Terman and Joshua Byun, "Punishment and Politicization in the International Human Rights Regime," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 2 (2022): 385–402.

over time; in Cycle 3, for example, the mention of this particular dimension of human rights occupies half of the space (50%).

Next, China addresses the protection of vulnerable populations, including women, children and persons living with disabilities, and the issue of human trafficking as its second most important issue category. On the other hand, China addresses the topic of civil and political rights the least, a topic that is valued as one of the most essential in Western liberal democracies. In fact, China addresses it so rarely that the topic of civil and political rights does not even appear in the tail of Figure 1. This finding is not surprising; rather, it reinforces our understanding of China's stance on human rights norms, confirming its consistent approach to shaping and interpreting them within the global framework.

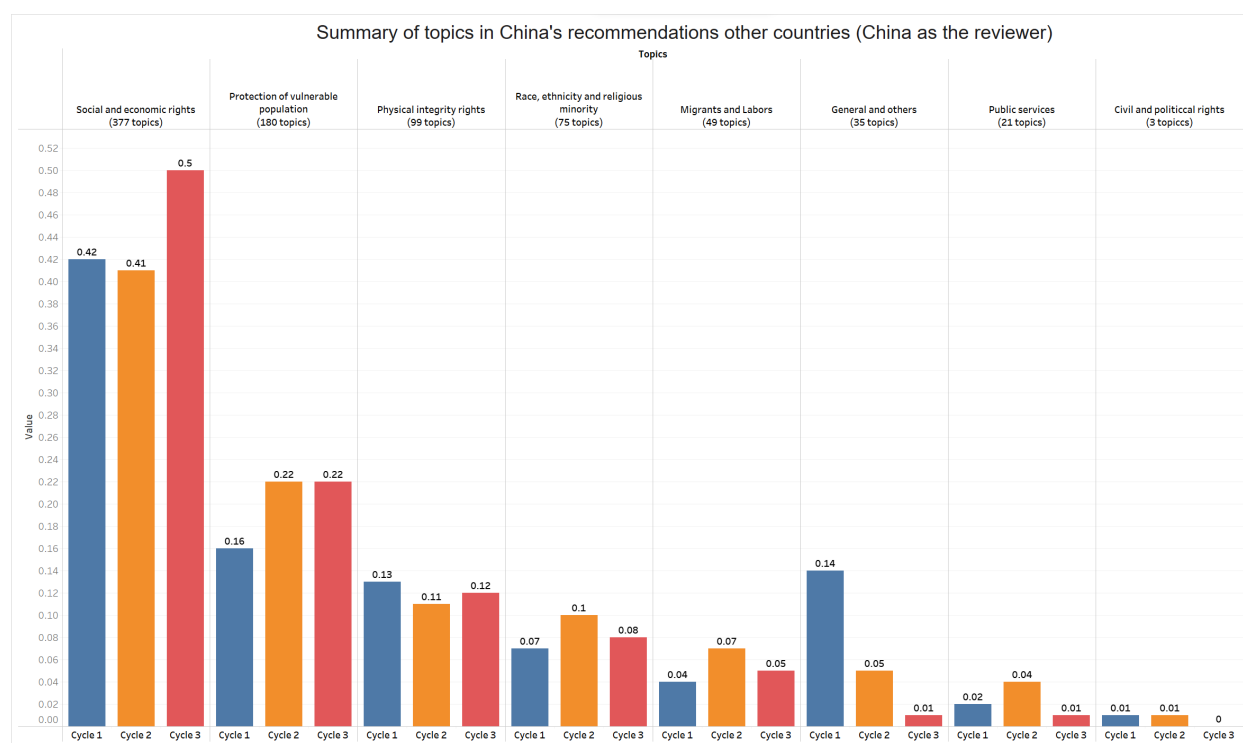


Figure 1: Summary of topics in China's recommendations to other countries

Shifting our attention to the developing world, how does China's position resonate in the Global South? Their collective articulations of human rights norms are revealed through this systematic examination.<sup>19</sup> The "Global South" is an umbrella concept, here defined as 158 countries that have received development projects funded by Chinese governmental institutions or state-owned enterprises from 2000 to 2017, the period during which most Chinese development

<sup>19</sup> More detailed explanations about how we achieve the results are documented in Dai and Lu, "Beyond Liberal Narratives. China and the International Human Rights Order."



projects were granted, according to AidData.<sup>20</sup> Figure 2 shows that the collective vision of the Global South with regard to rights resonates well with China.

Countries in the Global South give the top priority to the same three categories of rights that China identifies as most important. They do not prioritize social and economic rights above all other rights as China does. They address social and economic rights in less than 20% of their recommendations, while China addresses these rights in 50% of recommendations. Yet, like China, those in the Global South address civil and political rights the least. Across three review cycles, there is an increase in the proportion of recommendations that address social and economic rights, but the topic of civil and political rights remains stable at the bottom of the list, with a weight of about 4% concerning this category of rights across three cycles. Quite surprisingly, while we assume civil and political rights are at the heart of the discussions of human rights, Global South countries take a similar stance with China, spending little time articulating or reviewing this category of rights in the periodic reviews.

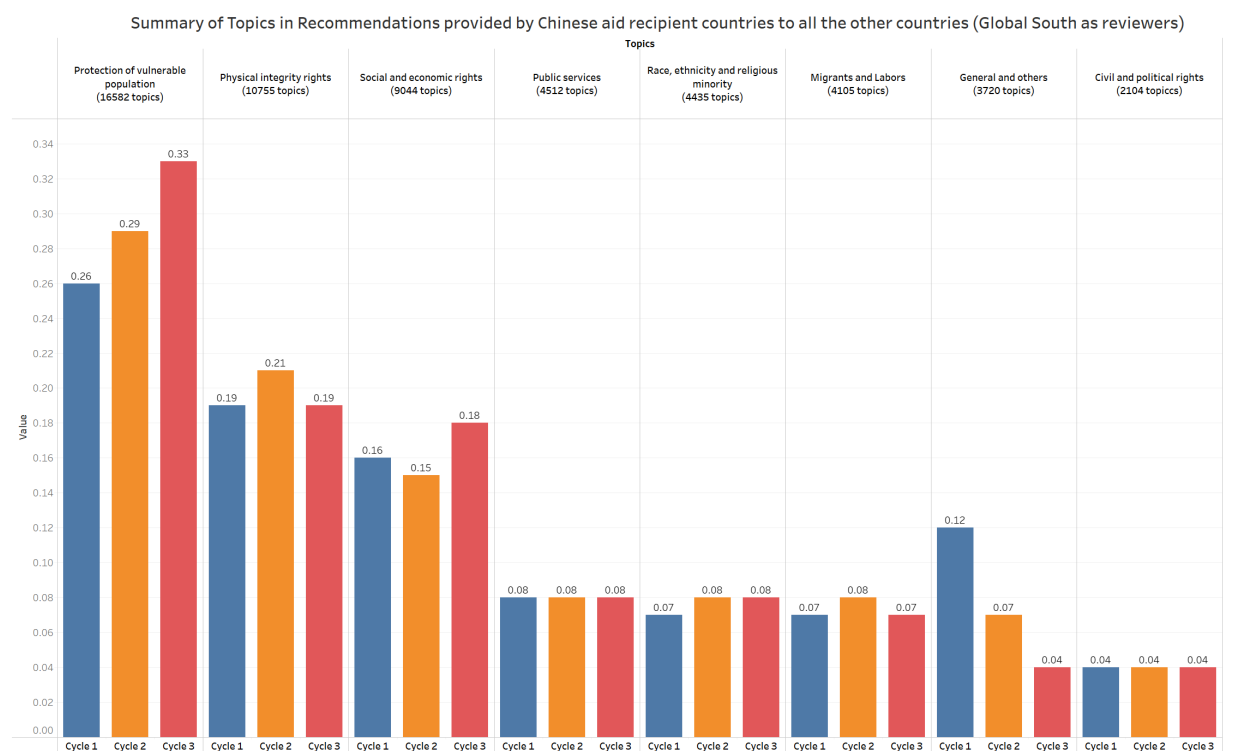


Figure 2: Summary of topics in recommendations provided by Chinese aid recipient countries to all the other countries (Global South as reviewers)

So far, using states' reviewing records, I have shown that China prioritizes social and economic rights in its human rights agenda. Global South countries' stance on human rights

<sup>20</sup> AidData, "AidData | China's Public Diplomacy Dashboard Dataset, Version 2.0" (AidData, 2021), <https://www.aiddata.org/data/chinas-public-diplomacy-dashboard-dataset-version-2>.

mirrors China's focus closely, albeit with some nuances. First, China stands out in championing social and economic rights, devoting, on average, close to 50% of its recommendations to this topic. The Global South is still aligned with this vision, despite not entirely adhering to it, as they treat this category of developmental rights as among the top three most important. In fact, like China, the Global South gives the least attention to civil and political rights among all topics.

Perhaps it is also surprising to see a great deal of agreement exists in how countries engage with international human rights norms. Across the globe, countries converge on the importance of protecting vulnerable populations and physical integrity rights, topics most frequently addressed by developed countries as well as the Global South. China shares that agreement as these topics are among the top three categories of rights that China addresses most often in its recommendations. In this regard, China is not a clear outlier in interpreting human rights norms. In fact, its vision largely resonates with many of the Global South countries.

These two figures show about 160 countries' reviewing patterns in the UN human rights regime. If we think about the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) as a forum for discourse on human rights, the data suggest that the time allocated to invoking and discussing civil and political rights is minimal. This raises important questions about the shifting focus of global human rights discussions and the prioritization of certain rights over others. If civil and political rights — traditionally considered fundamental to the human rights framework — are being sidelined, this signals a normative shift in global governance.

One possible explanation is the growing emphasis on economic and social rights, particularly in the Global South, where many states view development, poverty alleviation, and access to basic welfare as more immediate concerns than civil liberties or political freedoms. China has played a key role in shaping this discourse by advocating for a state-driven developmental human rights approach, in which economic growth and poverty reduction take precedence over individual rights and democratic governance. Additionally, the minimal discussion of civil and political rights may indicate the influence of political and economic alignments within the UN system. Countries with strong economic ties to authoritarian-leaning states may be less inclined to highlight civil liberties, either to maintain diplomatic relationships or to avoid criticism of their own domestic policies.

To tease out the mechanism, I examine models taking into account countries' regime type differences and domestic human rights conditions. I use Chinese aid flow per capita<sup>21</sup> as the key independent variable to demonstrate the relationship between Chinese aid flow prior to the review sessions and the degree of similarity in human rights articulations between China and aid recipient countries. I expect that the higher number of developmental aid flows per capita is associated with greater similarity of human rights articulations between the two countries. To make better

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<sup>21</sup> AidData.

comparisons, I account for important covariates such as a country's human rights practices<sup>22</sup>, its voting distance with the UN General Assembly as a proximate for ideological similarities between China and the country under investigation<sup>23</sup>, economic conditions<sup>24</sup>, regime type<sup>25</sup> and the timing of review cycles.

Results from the regression models suggest that on average, Chinese aid inflows significantly influence the alignment of Global South countries' human rights reviews with those of China. Those who benefit more from Chinese overseas finance projects are more likely to review other countries' human rights conditions similarly to China. Their articulations of human rights norms, hence, are similar. Notably, the models have held regime variations in terms of democracy versus autocracy, economic conditions and human rights conditions constant. This provides suggestive evidence that China's overseas economic engagement pays off in the long run to shape the beneficiaries' human rights articulations.

In short, I find that China engages in the norm-shaping enterprise in the UN-based international human rights governance by bringing the used-to-be peripheral rights closer to the center of the human rights narratives. Importantly, China highlights developmental rights as the most important issue areas for human rights advocacy. The Global South, regardless of regime type, broadly aligns with China's interpretation of human rights norms, prioritizing social and economic rights and downplaying civil and political rights. The latter are championed and deeply rooted in the liberal tradition and closely associated with the underlying principle of liberal democracy, but they are now pushed to the corner.

In addition, countries more reliant on China's overseas development projects tend to adopt a similar stance in articulations of human rights norms as China's. I provide suggestive evidence that China leverages its economic ties to heavily influence other states' human rights norms articulations, a tactic that is widely used in powerful countries shaping other's normative positions.

### **Countries Holding Liberal Human Rights Norms Closer to Heart**

Reviewing records' cosine similarity, used as the dependent variable in the previous section, is a measure of the similarity between the reviewing states' aggregated human rights reviewing records and those of China. Countries' review records (i.e. how countries invoke different dimensions of human rights norms) reflect their specific stance in articulating human rights norms. Comparing each country's review record with China's can show similarities or differences in the

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Gibney et al., "The Political Terror Scale 1976-2016," 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Erik Voeten, Anton Strezhnev, and Michael Bailey, "United Nations General Assembly Voting Data" (Harvard Dataverse, V29, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LEJUQZ>.

<sup>24</sup> World Bank, "World Development Indicators," 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset V10" (Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemcy18>.

articulation of human rights norms. A high similarity score in the China-country pair is deemed highly aligned between the interpretations of human rights norms. In contrast, a low similarity score means this country's interpretation of human rights norms is far from China's vision of human rights.

To capture the changes in countries' human rights articulations between cycles (i.e. whether their reviews to other countries are more or less similar to China's reviews), I first categorize countries according to their overall three-cycle review similarities into three groups: high, medium and low proximity, with an assumption that countries have articulated their normative positions in human rights through their review records. For a sound comparison, I examine countries' movements over time in similarity in human rights reviews within their proximity group. Countries are divided into three groups based on their overall human rights reviews' proximity with China across three cycles. Here, I plot changes in the low proximity group's human rights reviews in cosine similarity over three cycles in Figure 3. In other words, countries shown in Figure 3 have the most distinct views of human rights norms compared to China's.

This figure has three axes, one for each cycle, with lines connecting data points for each reviewing state, indicating the change in their cosine similarity from one cycle to the next. Countries on the left panel named "Similarity increases in Cycle 2" suggest these countries show an increase in similarity from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. Countries on the middle panel named "Similarity drops in Cycle 2" have a drop in similarity from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. For a simple guide to read the countries' movements in this figure, Table 1 summarizes what we can look for.

Position & Color	Cycle 1 to Cycle 2	Cycle 2 to Cycle 3
Left — Red	Increase	Increase
Left — Blue	Increase	Decrease
Middle — Red	Decrease	Increase
Middle — Blue	Decrease	Decrease
Right	NA at some point	NA at some point

Table 1: Guide to read Figure 3

52 countries are in the group of low proximity relative to China's vision of human rights, meaning that in fact, they align more closely with the traditional view of human rights norms. The y-axis is similarity score: the higher the value, the more aligned a country's stance with China's on human rights norms articulation. Note that Figure 3 includes developed countries as well. Among those who showed more alignment in Cycle 2, most came back down with two exceptions: the Netherlands and France (left panel in red). Brazil, on the left panel in blue, on the other hand, has shown increasing similarity from Cycle 1 to 3. One-third (middle panel in red) reversed back

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up, but not to as high as in Cycle 1. Nearly two-thirds (middle panel in blue) double-down their decrease in alignment rather steeply (Chad, Lithuania, Guatemala, Niger, the U.S., Rwanda, etc).

Understanding specific countries' normative alignment with China helps analyze their perspectives on both China and the U.S., providing insight into the nature and intensity of their critiques. Take Rwanda as an example and observe how it reviews China and the U.S. (selected reviews are quoted below):

- Consider further limitations on the use of the death penalty with a view to imposing a de facto moratorium on its use, aiming at its total abolition (Rwanda's review to China, Cycle 2)
- Strengthen measures to combat violence against women and domestic violence including through enhancing existing legislation to better ensure accountability for victims (Rwanda's review to China, Cycle 3)
- Impose a moratorium on the death penalty at the federal and state levels aiming at its complete abolition (Rwanda's review to the U.S., Cycle 3)
- Ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (Rwanda's review to the U.S., Cycle 3)

Rwanda consistently emphasizes the death penalty, which falls under physical integrity rights, when reviewing both China and the U.S.. Notably, it raises this issue repeatedly across all three cycles, indicating its strong commitment to advocating for change in this area. Additionally, Rwanda prioritizes women's protection but with different concerns for each country. For the U.S., Rwanda advocates for the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In contrast, for China, which has already ratified CEDAW, Rwanda urges stronger legislation to combat domestic violence against women. This comparison highlights Rwanda's consistent focus on human rights advocacy, particularly in areas of capital punishment and gender equality, adapting its recommendations based on each country's legal and policy context.

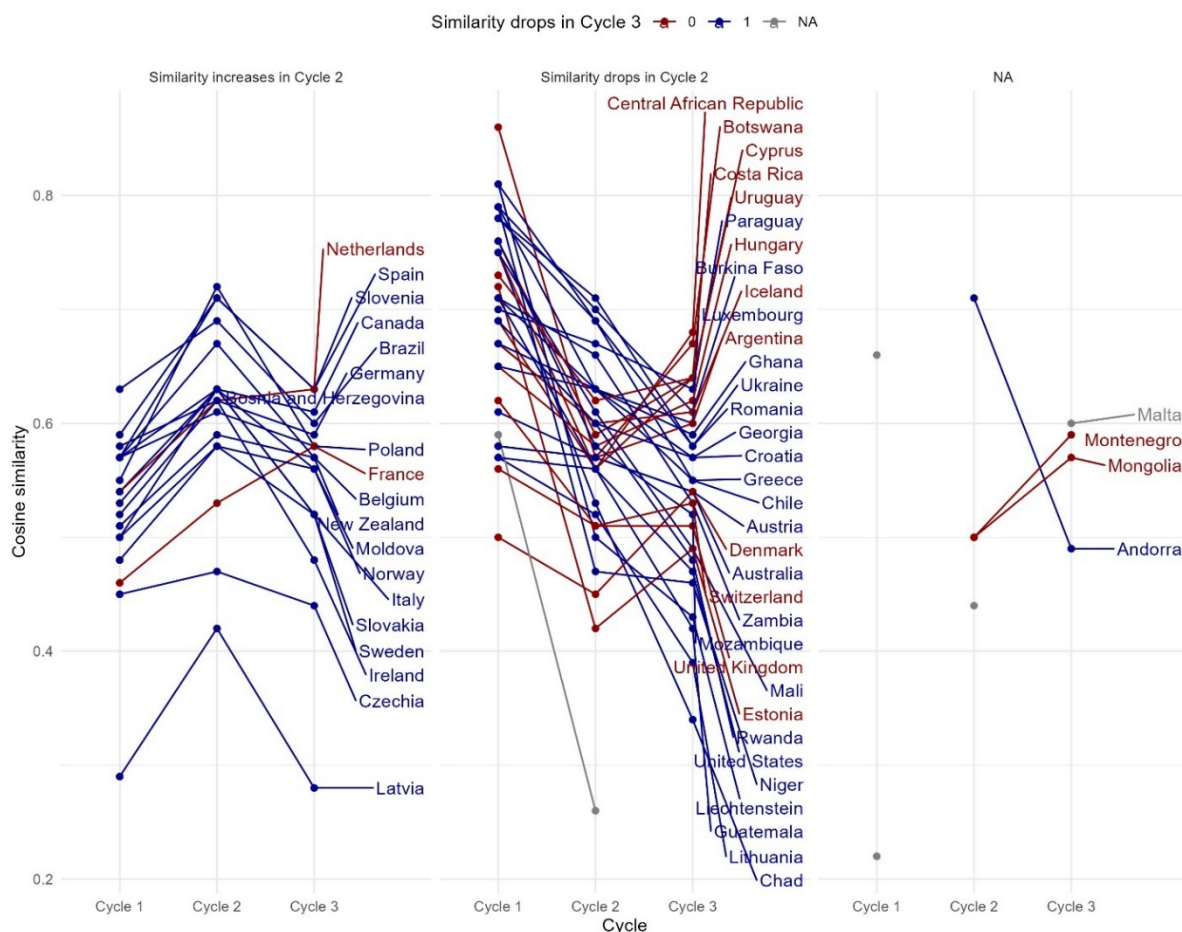


Figure 3: Changes in cosine similarity scores over three cycles of UPR among low proximity group

Rwanda receives aid from both China and the U.S., though it is not a top priority for either country. As a low-income nation, it has benefited from 152 Chinese development projects between 2000 and 2021, mostly in health care, education, and sanitation, with fewer investments in infrastructure and energy. Between 2018 and 2021, China provided Rwanda with \$480 million in aid and loans, a relatively modest amount.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, U.S. support has focused on health services, food security, education, and promoting civil engagement in governance. Despite relying on donor support for basic needs, Rwanda's human rights stance appears largely unaffected by either country's economic influence, remaining critical of China's or the U.S.'s human rights records. Its history of genocide may have also reinforced its commitment to human rights, especially women's rights, in the present day.

<sup>26</sup> S. Custer et al., "Tracking Chinese Development Finance: An Application of AidData's TUFF 3.0 Methodology" (AidData, 2023), <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/aiddata-tuff-methodology-version-3-0>.

In short, my findings indicate that not all countries receiving Chinese foreign aid and loans align with China's normative stance on human rights. Many middle-power countries remain critical of China's human rights record, as reflected in their evaluations of China during the Universal Periodic Review. However, a similar pattern emerges in their assessments of the U.S.'s human rights record, suggesting that these nations prioritize normative commitments and uphold liberal human rights principles.

By analyzing how these countries articulate human rights norms, I have identified a subset of states that demonstrate a strong inclination toward advocating liberal human rights values. As a brief case study, I have examined Rwanda's aid profiles from both China and the U.S. To gain deeper insights into their positions on human rights, the U.S. State Department can further analyze these countries' articulations, voting records, and sponsored resolutions. By collaborating with aid agencies and multilateral banks, the U.S. can strengthen economic ties, provide targeted resources, and support initiatives that amplify the voices of vulnerable groups in these nations — reinforcing their commitment to liberal human rights norms in practice.

### **Policy Implications**

Observers, policymakers and media professionals from the West perceive that China struggles to comply with the Western liberal international human rights regime. I argue that we need to revise this perception. China is not as vulnerable as might be expected within the human rights regime in the international law and organization framework. Drawing on empirical analysis of the primary human rights platform in the United Nations, I have shown that China has exhibited moral leadership within the UN Human Rights Council: there is a significant overlap between the perceptions of human rights from the Global South and China, in its emphasis on the primacy of development rights. China has been building its inner circle from its overseas development project beneficiaries to contest established human rights norms and advocate for a new version that distances from liberty, individual rights and democratic governance.

As a result, many countries in the Global South support China's agenda in shaping, stretching and reinterpreting new human rights norms within a multilateral, core human rights regime in the United Nations. They bring formerly peripheral rights — development-oriented human rights — closer to the center of human rights articulation. The matters under consideration in agenda-setting and periodic state-to-state reviews of human rights conditions have been broadened and expanded to the point where civil and political rights no longer hold central importance in defining human rights norms.

One significant implication of my research is the need to reassess the perception that China is a vulnerable target for denouncement within the human rights regime. Instead, China's perspective on human rights finds resonance among many developing countries perhaps due to the

alignments of state preferences or material incentives provided to these countries. However, there is a notable shift in norms occurring, for which the U.S. and its allies are ill-prepared.

The second implication is the need for the United States to earnestly consider the peer reviews from other countries on its own human rights performance. The U.S. has consistently received many harsh reviews and significant criticisms from its peers in the United Periodic Review, indicating that other countries are apprehensive about how the U.S. treats its citizens on various issues. These peer criticisms may stem from concerns regarding the U.S.'s judgments and reviews of their own human rights conditions within the context of Universal Periodic Review and the annual country reports on human rights practices prepared by the State Department. These critiques serve as a warning sign that the U.S.'s perceived leadership in the human rights arena is not universally accepted — or that its exceptionalism in the area of human rights is questioned, particularly from the Global South. Recognizing human rights as a backbone norm contributing to restoring a resilient international liberal order, the U.S. needs more than ever to emphasize its support of the multilateral, consensus-based UN international human rights regime. The U.S. should assert a stronger presence within the multilateral UN human rights regime and keep pace with China's lobbying endeavors to revert the engineer of norm-contesting within the UN.

Based on the foregoing analysis, here are my key policy recommendations:

- ***Regaining U.S. footing in multilateral normative institutions:*** China's emphasis on developmental rights resonates strongly with many developing countries, challenging the traditional liberal human rights framework. To counter this change, the U.S. must clearly articulate why civil and political rights remain essential to the global human rights discourse, particularly in key multilateral forums. The U.S. should focus on strengthening the efficacy of international human rights laws and institutions, where norms and principles are actively contested and interpreted by diverse voices. To reclaim its influence, the U.S. must re-engage in shaping these discussions through a liberal-based perspective, ensuring that civil and political rights remain central to global human rights governance. A critical step toward restoring leadership is reintegrating into the UN multilateral human rights system. This requires increased participation in thematic working groups, experts, and high-level forums, as well as close coordination with allies to reinforce liberal human rights norms. By actively contributing to norm-setting discussions, the U.S. can reaffirm its commitment to human rights, which is the fundamental principle of U.S. foreign policy, and strengthen its position within the UN Human Rights Council. Rejoining the Human Rights Council is a necessary step in this process.
- ***Regaining economic leverage through foreign aid:*** China has learned so well from the West that economic assistance programs can buy political support. This report has provided empirical evidence that, in the issue area that arguably China finds hard to contest, its aid



beneficiaries are more likely to be influenced. Washington must recognize that one of the long-term benefits of foreign assistance programs is their role in shaping influence within international organizations and elite political circles. Foreign aid is not merely a humanitarian effort — it is one of the most effective diplomatic tools for liberal norm diffusion. Decades of social science research have demonstrated that foreign assistance enhances a donor’s political influence, negotiation power, and global image.<sup>27</sup> The question is not whether the U.S. should provide aid, but rather where, when and how to allocate it more effectively for both strategic and humanitarian purposes. Restarting and scaling up U.S.’s foreign assistance programs is critical, particularly in light of the scope of Chinese overseas development initiatives, which far exceed the current scale of U.S. aid efforts before the shutdown. The U.S. should identify states that have recently experienced setbacks in their economic relationships with China and collaborate with them to alleviate financial pressures. However, these partnerships should extend beyond economic relief to include shared normative agendas and broader diplomatic cooperation.

To enhance effectiveness, Washington must strengthen coordination with multilateral banks and refine its aid and development programs. Rather than abolishing the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), policymakers should consider restructuring it to align goals with the State Department and better address recipient countries’ priority concerns as well as the U.S. diplomatic needs. By providing more targeted and impactful assistance, the U.S. can reinforce its global influence and present a compelling alternative to economic dependence on China. Restoring and reactivating the full capacity of aid agencies and development programs will be essential to ensuring sustained, long-term impact.

- ***Searching for like-minded friends based on data-driven analyses:*** Finding like-minded partners beyond traditional allies remains a persistent challenge in international diplomacy. This report has demonstrated that by analyzing states’ normative stances on human rights, we can gain a clearer understanding of how much they, like the U.S. and other Western countries, prioritize liberal human rights norms. The State Department can use this analysis as a strategic resource to track these countries’ narratives and voting patterns across international platforms, enabling a more precise assessment of their priorities and interests. Building stronger ties with states that share a commitment to liberal human rights norms will reinforce U.S. efforts to shape rights-related issues within the UN Human Rights Council, General Assembly and other multilateral organizations where votes and collective decisions matter. Understanding the underlying normative preferences of these states provides a strategic advantage in diplomatic negotiations, allowing the U.S. to maximize leverage and secure support on key initiatives. Additionally, U.S. engagement should prioritize assisting states facing economic challenges in their interactions with Beijing, particularly those experiencing debt distress or domestic

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Winters, “Ending U.S. Foreign Aid Hurts Far More than Aid Programs,” *Good Authority*, 2025, <https://goodauthority.org/news/ending-us-foreign-aid-hurts-far-more-than-aid-programs/>.

opposition to Chinese-funded projects. Over time, many countries have recognized both the benefits and the unintended consequences of economic dependence on China, especially in the context of international diplomacy. Human rights is a critical domain where China's economic influence has demonstrated both effectiveness and resistance, making it a key area for the U.S. to restore its normative leadership and strengthen its role in global governance.