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## How China Is Changing the UN

**“The Chinese leadership derives legitimacy from its constructive role in matters of peace and development.”**

By Janka Oertel

October 05, 2015

When asking Chinese officials late last year about foreign policy priorities for 2015, the 70th anniversaries of the end of World War II and the founding of the United Nations were usually named among the top five. The importance China attributed to these events was not in Europe, where commemorations of the past were vastly overshadowed by the challenges of the present. However, the opening of the 70th session of the General Assembly did serve as a reminder of why the UN is still one of the few constants in international relations. In these turbulent times, the gathering of world leaders that allows for an open exchange and many behind the scenes encounters has not lost its relevance.

The anniversary celebrations in connection with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Peacekeeping Summit led to an audience packed with world leaders – a degree of high-level representation that New York witnesses only every five to ten years. The setting thus served as an ideal stage for Xi Jinping’s first appearance at the United Nations. It was a wisely chosen opportunity for the president to lay out China’s agenda for the future.

Xi Jinping addressed his colleagues on the banks of the East River at three occasions. He used the undivided attention of the international community to not only indulge in standard Chinese Communist Party rhetoric but also make concrete announcements. It was the first opportunity for

the international community to get an idea of the future role Xi wishes for his country to play within the United Nations.

At the Sustainable Development Summit, Xi pledged to provide an assistance fund worth \$2 billion for South-South cooperation in support of developing countries and promised to increase its support for the least developed countries to \$12 billion by 2030. Additionally, China will provide debt relief to least developed and landlocked countries as well as small island states. Xi underlined that China has contributed greatly to the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and given a strong burst to global development by providing aid to more than 160 countries with more than half a million aid workers.

And indeed, the partial success of the MDG initiative to foster global development can, to a significant degree, be attributed to China's domestic efforts in lifting millions of people out of poverty. This process was not driven by the MDG initiative as such, but the Chinese leadership successfully linked its own development agenda to the efforts of the United Nations providing an international narrative for its achievements. And the UN has benefited from this somewhat artificial link, making the MDGs seem much more helpful than they actually were.

Xi presents China as a potent partner for the United Nations in development issues and continuously stresses the virtuous cycle of stability, development, and peace. His message went out especially to the African delegates in the audience, underlining China's commitment to the continent, where China has vested business interests. But it is not all about business. Key to China's UN policy is its identity as a member of the developing world, and the reassurance of political support from African countries. The political symbolism of the UN is important for the Communist Party. It is constitutive to its legitimacy ever since UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 "restored the lawful rights" of the PRC with the support of the developing countries. It marked the final victory of the CCP over the Kuomintang and the international acceptance of the People's Republic as a member of the international community.

The UN has since been a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, but it was only under Hu Jintao that UN policy gained prominence and became much more nuanced and professional. Xi is upholding this clear commitment to the UN, but at the same time his appearance in New York indicates that the linear evolution of China's engagement will receive an upgrade and be transformed into an even more visible UN role.

After a somewhat lengthy speech in the General Assembly filled with standard phrases and little news, Xi saved the best for last: He announced that China would not only build a permanent peacekeeping police squad but also a peacekeeping stand-by force of 8,000 troops. The scale of this announcement came as a surprise.

During the subsequent Peacekeeping Summit, which took place upon the invitation of U.S. President Barack Obama, Xi gave a detailed account on the substance of China's future peacekeeping engagement. It will include more engineering, transport, and medical staff but also the first-ever helicopter squad from China to join UN operations. In addition to this impressive stand-by force, China will provide financial and military assistance to the African Union, training to international peacekeepers, and de-mining assistance programs.

Put into action, China's commitment is far from symbolic. It is not only intended to signal to the world China's willingness to behave as a responsible stakeholder. If Xi makes good on his promise — and there is thus far no evidence to make us anticipate the contrary — China will reshape the face of UN peacekeeping. If all of the 8,000 troops in some form or another are deployed in addition to those more than 3,000 Chinese men and women already engaged in blue helmet operations, China will be the largest troop contributing nation in the world. This is an entirely new situation. China's peacekeeping personnel is known to be highly qualified, well-trained and equipped, and exemplary in terms of behavior on the ground — something that unfortunately cannot be said about all blue helmets. China, with its largest individual pledge, made the UN Peacekeeping Summit a success and Xi "the man of the moment," as Richard Gowan of the European Council on Foreign Relations put it.

Among experts on UN peacekeeping, China's announcement is welcomed. As Tobias Pietz, Acting Head of Analysis at the Center for International Peace Operations, Berlin underlines:

*The Chinese commitment to UN peacekeeping serves as an upgrade to peacekeeping in general. It shows that China as a member of the P5 regards the UN as the sole place for international peace operations. The meaning of the contribution thus goes beyond its actual and practical assistance to the UN. It is symbolic in the sense that it gives gravitas to the UN and sends a clear message to the Western countries that have turned their back on UN Peacekeeping over the past decades when it comes to the provision of blue helmets.*

Joachim Koops, Dean of Vesalius College at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels, adds that the Chinese commitment could have a significant effect on the formulation of future mandates: "Thus far the Chinese have been rather reluctant in the process, but as the dominant force on the ground, this might well change. For the UN Peacekeeping sector China's commitment is a good development and it might force others to reconsider their position."

Currently, more than 100,000 peacekeepers serve in 16 operations worldwide. Due to a constant lack of qualified personnel, equipment, helicopters, and other military capacities, however, most of these operations, have not lived up to expectations. On the other hand, China's leaders have continuously underlined that they regard UN-mandated operations that operate with the consent of the host nation as the only way to go in reaching sustainable peace. China under Xi remains skeptical about the virtue of international intervention for conflict resolution or protection of civilians, even as China's interest and investments go global and might require more flexible or creative interpretations in the future.

For the UN, active Chinese participation is a bonanza. No other member of the P5 is as clearly committed to the world organization as *the* forum for multilateral diplomacy and conflict resolution. The UN benefits greatly from China's engagement and the Chinese leadership derives legitimacy from its constructive role in matters of peace and development.

However, it remains to be seen whether the Chinese leadership is able to bridge the gap between international commitment and regional ambitions. China's policies in the South China Sea have unsettled the region and clearly raise doubts about China's willingness to commit to multilateral solutions and international law if it regards it as not being in its interest.

And while the UN Charter stands for non-intervention in the domestic affairs of their member states, de-linking the universality of human rights – a cornerstone of the UN's identity – from questions of peace and security will not resolve the conflicting interests of the Chinese leadership between international responsibility and domestic stability. The mutually beneficial relations between the world organization and its most populous member state will continuously be challenged by these contradictions.