

CIVITAS

A Long March through the Institutions

Understanding and responding to China's influence
in international organisations

Radomir Tylecote
and Robert Clark



THE COVID-19 REVIEW

How Britain responded to the Coronavirus

Part Seven

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Summary

The Covid crisis and the relationship between China and the WHO has prompted a reassessment of China's relationship with international institutions.

This report suggests that there are two 'fronts' to China's more expansionist strategy:

1. Influencing and potentially co-opting existing organisations such as UN bodies;
2. Creating rival Chinese-dominated international institutions to propagate political norms and to promote China's regulatory and technical standards.

The report highlights instances of China's apparent subversion of the norms of core UN bodies; some institutions' policies are now increasingly designed to assist Chinese international strategy (Tung and Yang, 2020). The WHO in particular demonstrates how this influence allows China increasingly to influence leadership elections, as shown in the election of current Director-General Dr Tedros Adhenom Ghebreyesus, a man who has described Xi Jinping as a 'visionary'. Again, while the head of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) has described China as a 'global leader [in] non-proliferation', the US State Department claims China secretly carried out underground nuclear tests in 2019.

China is also pursuing a 'Sinocisation' strategy for international technology standards, which Beijing

increasingly sees as ‘strategic weapons’. This includes standards facilitating state control of the internet and facial recognition, which it aims to propagate through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure. In 2020, it also became clear that China’s tactics in one standards-setting organisation (SSO) may fundamentally alter the way the internet functions, where its firms’ proposed ‘New IP’ aims for granular control over citizens’ net use, or a new ‘authoritarian web architecture’ that is creating a ‘battle’ for the future of the internet.

China’s new, parallel, BRI-linked institutions include the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), where Beijing has overall control of major operations and which Washington and Tokyo believe may rival the World Bank. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meanwhile accounts for half the world’s population, and its charter shows how it sees itself as a counter to NATO.

Recommendations

International institutions

- Instead of moving towards supranational regulatory capacity, or strongly prescriptive technological capacity, these institutions should be consensus-seeking in nature and able to maintain national sovereignty and therefore choice. This is to say that our approach to these organisations should uphold a ‘UK ethos’ in general.
- The immediate priority is to use UK research capacity and intelligence services to build a more detailed picture of China’s activities within these institutions, including its apparent nurturing of individuals, and of violations.
- The UK should therefore not only demand the expulsion of individual diplomats for violations, but should, as

a strategic priority, act in concert with the US, willing Commonwealth partners, and potentially others, in a ‘strategic planning group’ to form common positions such as responses to violations, and to push for the reform of international institutions – for example in election rules and transparency, and penalties for bribery.

- Through this group, the UK should put forward more candidates for positions in these organisations – proposed centrally and strategically by the UK government itself, not simply the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or civil service. While some have proposed pre-emptive withdrawal from these institutions, we suggest it may be too early for these tactics: instead, the strategy should be to generate and use numbers, among countries and delegates, then to use the group to increase the costs of siding with China when it violates rules, as well as to work with parties excluded by China (in particular Taiwan) to push for representation.
- It is also important that this UK approach is informed by a more systematic understanding of technological strategy within industrial policy. China has a clear understanding of how to use standard-setting to its advantage. It is not clear that UK institutions, such as BSI (formerly the British Standards Institute) share this capacity.
- Failure to address Chinese behaviour is liable to lead to technological ‘lock-in’ around Chinese technologies and standards, which, as the analysis of internet and facial recognition standards has demonstrated, implies grave consequences for innovation, wealth generation, and civil liberties elsewhere.

Domestic responses

- Domestically, an assessment should be made of those companies that are active in pursuing a technological agenda that diverges from the UK's, and that are implicated in the development of cyber technologies, mass surveillance, and facial recognition technologies, to the extent that these pose threats to UK security and civil liberties elsewhere.
- The UK government should investigate a full suite of restrictions, and in some cases sanctions, against certain companies, systematically outlining the rationale for an ongoing system of responses.
- The UK's response should also use the upcoming integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy to continue to reassess, then reshape, domestic dependency on Beijing in certain sectors. This includes dependency on Chinese imports, Chinese direct foreign investment, and corporate takeovers leading to strategic intellectual property acquisition.
- A policy review would include firms such as Huawei and China Reform Holdings, which have close ties to the Communist Party of China (CCP) (Huawei CEO Ren Zhengfei has extensive links to both the CCP and the People's Liberation Army, PLA) and their advanced levels of access to the UK's financial institutions and critical infrastructure. It would also address weapons proliferators such as Norinco, and their subsidiaries and employees.
- One important reason for a policy review is the 2017 National Intelligence Law, which requires Chinese companies to cooperate with China's intelligence agencies, at home and abroad. In effect, this requires all

Chinese firms abroad to supply intelligence, including IP, to Beijing when requested.

Chinese-originated institutions

- The UK and its allies need to build a clearer picture of the mechanics and aims of Chinese-originated institutions. It is already apparent that UK membership – and funding – of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is unwise and is liable to strengthen China's 'debt diplomacy' abroad. Similar concerns should inform the UK's approach to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Here, the UK should begin by working in a much more coordinated fashion with allies in the provision of infrastructural aid and spending especially, to create scale that can compete with Chinese offers to developing countries, and attach conditions designed to prevent the entrenchment of Chinese debt diplomacy.
- The UK should ensure the creation of a proposed 'D10'. The D10 alliance would include the G7 countries (Japan, Italy, Germany, France, the UK, US, and Canada), in addition to India, South Korea and Australia. This bloc would make up some of the world's largest democracies, plus some of the globe's leading technology markets, and can develop competing digital infrastructure to that offered by Beijing, and help make global technology standards more robust to Chinese practices.

These are among the policy shifts that will be needed if international institutional structures are to become more robust to the authoritarian governance practices which the Chinese government seeks to export into the existing global order.

Introduction

The Covid crisis and strategic reassessment

The Covid crisis has accelerated a reassessment among Western powers of their approach to China. This reassessment was arguably already underway, having begun in the early stages of the leadership of Xi Jinping (General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CCP) since 2012, and President since 2013). More broadly however, the reassessment that may now follow has been prompted by a clearer understanding of three factors.

- First, the effects of China's policies in developed economies, where it is increasingly understood that these include some role in a fall in productivity growth via a switch in global FDI towards cheap labour-based investments in China, instead of innovation in developed economies (Paterson, 2018).
- Second, the apparent 'authoritarian resilience' of the Chinese system (Pillsbury, 2015), whereby the CCP has become more, not less, entrenched, with the press arguably less free than in the early 2000s and a lack of separation between the Party, judiciary, and state.
- Third, the appearance of a more expansionist and aggressive posture abroad since Xi Jinping's ascendancy especially, with serious implications for a liberal political order and the political freedoms it has helped to

underpin. In this third area, China's ultimate aims and its short-term actions need to be reconsidered.

The way Xi Jinping himself describes China's approach is illustrative. The appearance of the concept of the 'strong nation dream' (including in his first speech as leader in 2013), is taken by many scholars to be a reference to the major 2009 work of strategic literature *The China Dream* by Colonel Liu Mingfu of Beijing's National Defence University, which advocates the concept in pursuit of the 'Hundred-Year Marathon', whereby China surpasses the US as 'hegemon' by 2049: Xi has also stated that the 'dream' will be realised in 2049 (Pillsbury, 2015). This informs new approaches to China's institutional behaviour, including: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with its internationalisation of China's currency (through denomination of investment in Renminbi) and institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), given their capacity to become rivals to international institutions – and its use of existing institutions to promulgate its own norms, such as Chinese-originated technological standards.

Liberties, prosperity, and Beijing's expansionism

It is therefore necessary to understand the roles of Chinese diplomats and companies in international institutions. This includes instances where Chinese diplomats and civil servants who have taken on roles in international institutions appear to be following Chinese government orders, against the rules of these institutions. Just as importantly, these include state-backed companies with interests in promulgating their own new technological norms in areas such as internet governance and facial recognition.

Beijing now appears to be promulgating the adoption of technical standards in the interests of its own (often state-

owned) firms, which risks creating technological ‘path-dependency’ around these companies, to the detriment of their foreign competitors. This may become a serious impediment to growth through reducing incentives to innovate elsewhere; given these Chinese firms’ links to their government, and their involvement in areas such as the technologies fundamental to the structure of the internet, it may also become a serious concern for political freedoms and sovereign polities themselves.

1.

China's role in the United Nations and its core agencies

China's role within the UN has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Since 2000, China's financial contribution to the UN budget has increased from under one percent in 2000 to 12 percent in 2019.¹ While the US contribution, at 22 percent in 2019, still exceeds China's, Chinese financial contributions now generate more international attention, especially in developing countries. This is partly due to US contributions generally remaining relatively stable during this period. China's contributions are also less likely to come with demands for budgetary restraint or structural or policy reforms which may be at odds with some UN member states' interests.²

China's financial influence at the UN appears to be matched by its capacity to deliver a growing number of senior Communist Party of China (CCP) officials into leadership roles (also discussed regarding agencies and standards organisations, below). Senior CCP officials are now at the helm of 4 of the 15 specialised agencies,* with a further two powerful bodies run by Chinese officials. The US, France, and the UK each have one senior official as the head of one of the other agencies.

*Counting the World Bank group as one specialised agency.

On recruitment, Article 101 of Chapter 15 the UN Charter declares that:

'The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible.'

This requires that *central* UN personnel are selected based on merit, ensuring fair geographical representation. However, there is no such requirement for the *leadership* positions of UN bodies and agencies. Instead, these are selected from nominations from member states, then voted on (often secret), with little transparency over the frequently intense lobbying efforts that result. In the cases of some Chinese officials elected to leadership positions, discussed below, this has included allegations of corruption and bribery. In the following, we outline concerns about core UN agencies.

United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)

The UNHRC is the body of the UN responsible for promoting and protecting human rights. Comprising 47 member states, each elected for a three-year term on a regional group basis, it is headquartered in Geneva. Its combined budget in 2019 was \$284.6m, and the UNHRC receives approximately 3.7 percent of the UN budget.³ The resolution establishing the UNHRC stated: 'when electing members of the Council, Member States shall take into account the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights and their voluntary pledges and commitments made thereto',

and 'members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights'.⁴

Despite its limited budget, the UNHRC holds a unique position among global institutions through its ability to identify, investigate, and highlight, emerging instances of human rights abuses across the globe.

In April 2020, China's Minister to the UN delegation at Geneva, Jiang Duan, was appointed to the UNHRC's Consultative Group. Comprising only five nations, the announcement was made by Oman, which coordinates the UNHRC Asia-Pacific Group (APG) (UN Watch, 2020).⁵ Joining the group means China can influence the selection of the holders of at least 17 UN human rights mandates in the next year. These will report on themes and countries across the world. China will also vet candidates for human rights positions as interview chair for five mandates, as well as making recommendations for roles (*Ibid.*). Generally, the council President will give appointments to those the group selects, but this influence in decision-making bodies, such as the Consultative Group, demonstrates growing power. It may in principle allow China to encourage a focus on apparent human rights abuses in western countries, and/or broaden or alter what the agency understands 'human rights' to mean.

Officially, Jiang Duan will serve on the group in his 'personal capacity', but in practice, country representatives, particularly those from authoritarian regimes, frequently follow strict instructions from, and pursue the interests of, their respective governments. Indeed, the APG entitled its letter to the UN, 'Nomination of the People's Republic of China to membership of the Consultative Group' (*Ibid.*).⁶

In the UNHRC, China will also help nominate the coming

two new members of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN Watch, 2020),⁷ and will influence the selection of the next member of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances despite apparently placing over one million ethnic Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang province into forced labour, often on spurious security and counter-terrorism charges and without trial (*Ibid.*).⁸

Furthermore, Beijing will now be involved in choosing the next UN Special Rapporteur on the Protection of Freedom of Opinion and Expression (in 2019, *Freedom House* placed China in the lowest possible category for 'freedom of expression and belief') (UN Watch, 2020).⁹ Finally, Beijing will be involved in appointing the UN's next Global Monitor on the Right to Health, supporting HRC Resolution 42/16: 'The right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health' (*Ibid.*),¹⁰ – in the wake of the Chinese government's apparent silencing of Chinese doctors following their attempts to alert authorities to the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan in December 2019.¹¹ Indeed, Resolution 42/16 states:

'Recognizing the need for States, in cooperation with international organizations and civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to create favourable conditions at the national, regional and international levels to ensure the full and effective enjoyment of the right of everyone to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and to address the underlying and social determinants of health'.¹²

China's influence within the HRC however to some extent predates the recent appointment of Jiang Duan. The current mandate-holder of the 'independent expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations' is another Chinese official, Ms Yuefen Li.¹³

This position requires the individual to ensure that the effects of structural adjustment and economic reform policies and foreign debt do not interfere with the human rights of member states. (We will consider below the BRI and the apparent structural role of ‘debt diplomacy’ within its affiliated states, particularly those with developing economies). Again, this raises questions about Beijing’s influence within the UNHRC, and the resulting robustness of UN institutions more widely.

For example, in April 2019, diplomats and activists described Chinese lobbying – and ‘threats’ – to curb criticism of China during a UNHRC session in Switzerland. Human Rights Watch states the Chinese mission in Geneva sent a letter to a number of missions, urging them to keep away from a US-led event on 13 March about China’s treatment of Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (HRW, 2019). The letter, signed by Chinese Ambassador Yu Jianhua and seen by reporters, tells countries ‘not to co-sponsor, participate in or be present at this side event... in the interest of our bilateral relations and continued multilateral cooperation.’ (*Ibid.*)¹⁴ China has also tried to stifle criticism of its record within bodies of the UN, asking questions of the capacity of the UN system over the long-term.

Beijing’s officials have also violated UN rules by photographing and filming activists on UN premises, and in the case of Chinese activists, restricting their attempts to travel to Geneva. A report from Human Rights Watch from 2017, detailing numerous instances of activists being harassed on UN premises due to their criticism of China, provides a broader context for the PRC’s influence within certain UN bodies and agencies. (*Ibid.*)¹⁵ Beijing has also used its membership of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) NGO Committee to block NGOs that criticise

China from receiving UN accreditation, seeking to blacklist accredited activists and bar their attendance. In violation of UN rules, Chinese diplomats have contacted UN staff and experts on treaty bodies and special procedures (independent experts on human rights issues), including harassing and intimidating them (HRW, 2017).¹⁶ In one 2013 case, Chinese authorities detained activist Cao Shunli after she urged Beijing to consult civil society in drafting China's second Universal Periodic Review, and tried to travel to Switzerland to participate in Human Rights Council training. After she died in detention, in March 2014 China's delegation in Geneva blocked a moment of silence NGOs had requested at the Council (*Ibid.*).¹⁷

United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)

One of the central development organisations of the UN, UNDESA is an arm of the UN Secretariat, its leadership appointed by the UN Secretary General. UNDESA aims to help countries make informed decisions about economic and developmental issues, providing information through publications and databases, and through support for deliberations at the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and other bodies.¹⁸ It supports international cooperation for 'sustainable development for all', including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015.

Uniquely among international organisations, July 2020 will mark 13 unbroken years in which UNDESA has been led by a Chinese official (or three consecutive former CCP

officials). The current Under-Secretary-General (USG), Liu Zhenmin, was personally appointed by Secretary-General António Guterres on 26 July 2017: before his appointment, Liu was China's Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs since 2013, having served in China's Foreign Affairs Ministry for over 30 years.¹⁹ Liu succeeded Wu Hongbo, who had served as USG at UNDESA from July 2012. Before this, Wu was Assistant Foreign Minister in Beijing and Ambassador to Germany. Preceding Wu was Sha Zukang, another senior former Foreign Affairs Minister, appointed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in July 2007.

The remit of UNDESA's chief includes advising the Secretary-General on all development-related issues, including climate change, internet governance, and, critically for the CCP regarding their flagship BRI programme, financing and governance for international development.²⁰

Despite rules intended to prevent UN officials from acting on behalf of their member states, and to act in a strictly personal and professional capacity in order to retain neutrality on international matters, Chinese officials at international organisations have admitted that they act on behalf of the CCP. Former UN Under-Secretary-General in charge of the UNDESA Wu Hongbo stated in an interview that his nationality meant he acted in Beijing's interests, despite acknowledging that UN employees are not allowed to accept instructions from beyond the UN. He gave an example of how he instructed UN security to remove a 'Xinjiang separatist' from a seminar being held at the General Assembly in New York²¹ – Wu has also used his rank to intimidate an Assistant Secretary-General who complained that he was violating free speech (Schaefer, 2019). He concluded by stating that he still regards himself as an employee of Beijing: 'I think being a Chinese diplomat

means one can't be careless, when it is about protecting China's national interest and safety. We have to strongly defend the motherland's interests'.²² (Conversely, in October 2018, China arrested the president of Interpol, Meng Hongwei, and charged him with abuse of power and refusing to 'follow party decisions.'²³ Meng was one of the highest-level Chinese nationals in any international organisation) (Schaefer, 2019).

Specifically, in relation to the centrality of UN personnel maintaining absolute neutrality when concerned with matters of international importance, Article 100 of the Charter states that:

'1. In the performance of their duties the Secretary-General and the staff shall not seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the Organization;

2. Each Member of the United Nations undertakes to respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of the Secretary-General and the staff and not to seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities.'²⁴

By circumventing such institutional norms, Beijing utilises senior CCP officials at a disadvantage to the international system and liberal order which these institutions are designed to uphold.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

Headquartered in Rome, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was established in October 1945, making it the oldest UN agency. Charged with leading international efforts to defeat hunger and improve nutrition, the FAO had a budget in 2018-19 of \$2.6bn,

and employs over 11,000 people in 130 countries. Comprising 197 members (including 194 member nations), the FAO is governed through a biennial conference representing each member country (and the European Union), and which elects a 49-member Council. The current Director-General is China's Qu Dongyu.

On 1 August 2019, Qu Dongyu took up office as the ninth Director-General of the FAO. He is the first Chinese national to head the organisation, and China's former Vice Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs.²⁵ He was elected on the first round of voting, with 108 of the 191 votes cast by the member-countries, with a mandate to serve until July 2023. His election was followed by widespread accusations of bribery, particularly from the US.²⁶

Qu's election also followed a large lobbying campaign by the EU on behalf of the French candidate Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle (the only European candidate). According to a source quoted in *Le Monde*, this diplomatic effort was met by 'intense Chinese pressure' to ensure Qu was elected. The one African candidate, Cameroon's Médi Moungui, has been accused of abandoning the race after receiving a bribe of €62m.²⁷ Although the ballot was secret, media also reported that Latin American countries including Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina backed Qu. Cuba made its backing public. A source quoted in *Le Monde* claimed China threatened to block Brazilian and Uruguayan agricultural exports should they fail to vote for the correct representative.²⁸ Following his victory, Qu stated that he will 'uphold the principles of fairness, openness, justice and transparency'²⁹, was 'committed to the original aspiration, mandate and mission of the organisation', and would '[remain] impartial and neutral'.

International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)

Based in Montreal, Canada, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) helps establish the principles and techniques of international air navigation, including planning and developing international air transport. With an annual budget of approximately \$76m,³⁰ the ICAO Council also adopts standards for air navigation, infrastructure, flight inspection, border procedures for international civil aviation, and protocols for air accident investigation. China is currently on the 36-member Council, which is elected every three years (consisting of 36 members elected in 3 groups).

The Secretary General of ICAO is head of the Secretariat and Chief Executive Officer of the organisation, responsible for its general direction, and provides leadership in international civil aviation, in particular aviation safety, security, and environmental protection.³¹ The Council appointed Dr Liu Fang as Secretary General for a three-year term, from 1 August 2015 to 31 July 2018. Liu was reappointed by the Council for a consecutive three-year term in March 2018.³²

The ICAO has been relatively little-studied in the last two decades, particularly compared to other UN institutions including the WHO (below), and the UNHRC. However, the immediate impacts of China's leadership in ICAO are illustrated by its treatment of Taiwan. Despite the Republic of China (Taiwan) having been a founding member of ICAO, when invited in 2013 to attend the 38th Session of the Assembly as a guest, under Chinese pressure ICAO withdrew the invitation (shortly after Liu's appointment³³), also despite host nation Canada insisting that aviation

security should transcend national politics and strongly advocating Taiwan's presence.³⁴ In January 2020, ICAO also blocked a number of Twitter users, including employees of the US Congress, who were advocating for Taiwan's inclusion into the organisation's health and safety bulletins in response to the emerging Covid pandemic.³⁵ This was enabled by another senior Chinese official working at ICAO, the Communications Officer Guang Qining, responsible for the agency's presence on social media, who previously worked at the Civil Aviation Authority of China for 15 years.³⁶ Anthony Philbin, Dr Liu's Chief of Communications, also refused to answer questions on Taiwan in exchanges with the International Flight Network.³⁷ In response, in February the US Department of State issued a press release heavily criticising ICAO's actions as 'outrageous, unacceptable, and not befitting of a UN organization'.³⁸

ICAO's actions and language in the early stages of the Covid pandemic appear now to fit a larger pattern of changing structural and governance norms, whereby UN organisations under Chinese leadership, including via unaccountable promotion and election of senior CCP officials, begin to appear to promote Beijing's interests.

United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

Headquartered in Vienna, UNIDO exists to assist countries' economic and industrial development. In promoting the Sustainable Development Goals, UNIDO seeks 'economic and industrial growth to help eradicate poverty, promoting the application of modern industrial policies in compliance with global standards and norms'.³⁹ Its 2019 budget was \$304m.⁴⁰

Comprising 170 member states, UNIDO is governed by several policymaking organs, including the Industrial Development Board (IDB), which comprises 53 members including China, elected for a four-year term on a rotational basis from all member states. The IDB reviews implementation of the work programme, the regular and operational budgets, and makes recommendations to the General Conference on policy matters, including the appointment of the Director-General. The IDB meets once a year.

The IDB is selected from all member states by the General Conference (GC), UNIDO's supreme policymaking organ. Meeting once every two years, the GC determines the guiding principles and policies of UNIDO, approving its budget and work programme. The GC appoints the Director-General every four years.

In June 2013, senior CCP official and economist Li Yong was appointed Director-General. Elected by a two-thirds majority by the IDB, Li had previously served as Vice Minister at the Chinese Ministry of Finance (since 2003). In this official capacity, we can assume that Li would have been instrumental in developing the BRI. In his capacity as Director-General of UNIDO he continues to advocate for China's flagship programme and appears to utilise UNIDO resources to do so.

In July 2008, UNIDO established the Centre for South-South Industrial Cooperation (UCSSIC-China), based on a Memorandum of Understanding of September 2006 on enhancing 'South-South industrial cooperation' between UNIDO and China. The centre's stated objective is to contribute to industrial development and economic growth in developing countries, identifying and mobilising

technical, financial, managerial, and other resources for projects and programmes within the framework of South-South cooperation.⁴¹ UNIDO-based but China-led, UCSSIC-China has gained momentum under Li's leadership. UCSSIC-China has sought to build partnerships between China and developing countries,⁴² emphasising technology transfer, one of UCSSIC-China's central aspects now appears to be developing the BRI with partner states.⁴³ In April 2019, Li used a speech in Beijing to reiterate the UNIDO's willingness to further engage with the BRI, emphasising that: '[we] need to move towards coordinated strategies and policies, ensuring compatibility with BRI implementation in the participating countries and regions.'⁴⁴

2.

The World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization (WHO) is the specialised UN agency responsible for international public health. Established in 1948, it is headquartered in Geneva, where its governing body is the World Health Assembly (WHA), which consists of representatives from all the WHO's 194 member states. The WHA elects an Executive Board (EB) and selects the Director-General. The incumbent is Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, former Health Minister and Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, who started his five-year term on 1 July 2017. The WHO is funded by member states and private donations, and its budget is over \$4.2bn.

Of all UN institutions and specialist agencies, the WHO has inevitably drawn the most attention in relation to the Covid pandemic, being the central institution in coordinating the international response. However, since the disease was first reported to the WHO in December 2019, there has been much discussion of both its favourable language towards China and the apparent relationship between Beijing and the Director-General, as well as the extent to which this has hindered the international response to the virus.⁴⁵

While China is clearly within its rights to send delegations to the WHO or any other international body, a better understanding of Beijing's actions within such institutions allows more detailed analysis of China's behaviour, which, in turn, sheds light on the role the Communist Party of China (CCP) envisages for China in institutions generally.

Analysing the EB's historical context and the capacity this provides China can help demonstrate how the CCP has utilised this influence, not just for health policy but wider strategic concerns: the response to human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the North Korean regime, Taiwan, and now the Covid pandemic, have all been affected by China's presence at the WHO, which has grown since 2006 and the election of the first Chinese official as Director-General.

The Executive Board (EB)

Comprising 34 individuals (and their advisers) elected by the World Health Assembly (WHA) for three-year terms, each member of the Executive Board represents their affiliated state but is intended to act in a strictly personal capacity. Sitting twice a year, the board is primarily charged with giving effect to the decisions and policies of the WHA, to advise it and generally facilitate its work.⁴⁶ In addition, until 2016 it retained the sole capacity to appoint the WHO Director-General. The protocol changed in 2016: the EB shortlisted a selection of nominated candidates, put to an open ballot at the WHA. In 2017, the EB put forward three final candidates for the election of the next Director-General,⁴⁷ in which Dr Tedros won a landslide victory. By tracing the role China has played in the EB in the decade before this election

victory, it is possible to understand how Beijing has developed its influence within the WHO more broadly.

In 2006, Dr Ren Minghui and four advisers constituted China's contribution to the EB. In May 2006, then- Director-General Lee Jong-wook died in office, leading to a rushed election process to replace him. Dr Margaret Chan, a senior official who previously served as Director of Health in Hong Kong, was appointed as new Director-General. Chan was re-elected in 2012, as the only candidate put forward by the EB for the WHA to formally appoint.⁴⁸ In the run-up to Chan's re-election, Dr Ren Minghui again headed the CCP delegation at the EB, this time with 24 Chinese advisers. The remaining 33 members of the EB averaged only five advisers each.⁴⁹ Dr Ren also led the Chinese delegation to the EB in 2015, with 16 advisers against an EB average of seven.⁵⁰

Before the WHO Director-General election in 2016, China was once again on the EB, and its delegation was led by Ms Zhang Yang, with 15 advisers against an EB average of eight.⁵¹ During the election itself in 2017, Yang again led the Chinese delegation.⁵² China was subsequently re-elected to the EB in 2018, with Yang leading the delegation once more, to serve until at least 2021.⁵³

In both election years for the Director-General position (2006 and 2012), the large Chinese delegation would have been able to exert pressure on the remaining 33 EB members. That in 2012, only Chan was nominated from the EB with no rivals is notable. Ren was able to field almost five times the average delegation at the EB (24 advisers compared to five for the remaining members). Again, in 2016 and 2017 and the election of Dr Tedros, Ms Yang was able to field almost double the size of the average EB delegation. That

successive Chinese delegations have been so successful at being elected by the WHA into the EB, and then to subsequently enable a CCP official to become Director-General for 11 years, followed by an apparently pro-Beijing Director-General for at least another five in 2017, is unique. The implications have not just been useful for Beijing's immediate interests (discussed below in the role of Dr Tedros in the Covid pandemic), but also in broader strategic questions.

WHO Directors-General (DGs)

Dr Margaret Chan, whose tenure was marred by accusations of a slow response to an Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014,⁵⁴ was also criticised for making positive comments about the state of the health service in North Korea on a short visit in 2010,⁵⁵ directly contradicting her predecessor, Lee Jong-wook, who stated that the North Korean health service was near total collapse.⁵⁶

However, having successfully run to become Ethiopia's nominee for Director-General in 2017, Dr Tedros was heavily supported by the African Union and China, which is known to have utilised both economic and diplomatic pressure on his behalf.⁵⁷ It is also reported that Tedros's campaign received heavy financial backing from both the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF),⁵⁸ a party in the ruling Ethiopian government of which Tedros was a long-term member, and China.⁵⁹

After receiving the EB's three nominations, it was up to the WHA, the 194 members under the WHO, to elect the next Director-General. The vote remained a secret ballot, allowing member states to pledge support to one candidate but vote for another.⁶⁰ During the election, there were several instances in which Tedros's record in various posts brought

into question his suitability for the candidacy of the Director-General: these included his spells as both Health and Foreign Minister. As Foreign Minister, Ethiopia garnered favourable relationships with international tobacco firms and lobby groups, in breach of Ethiopia's own domestic laws on tobacco advertising (Horton, 2013),⁶¹ in addition to widespread accusations of the regime's human rights abuses and closer economic dependency on China. His tenure as Health Minister, and potentially covering-up a cholera epidemic in 2007, predated this,⁶² during which Ethiopia refused to hand over test samples to the WHO and senior WHO officials complained of a lack of cooperation from Ethiopia.⁶³ international organisations and aid agencies were prevented by the Ethiopian government from labelling the outbreak as cholera, despite independent verification to the contrary, and were also prevented from calling it an epidemic, despite it having killed nearly 700 people in a year and spreading across international borders.⁶⁴ Paul Hebert, head of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Ethiopia, stated that 'If it was called an epidemic by the authorities we could see a much more vigorous response from donors in terms of funding and mobilisation'.⁶⁵ In apparently covering-up the 2007 cholera epidemic, the Ethiopian Health Ministry also directly inhibited the international response, including from the WHO.

Chinese-Ethiopian relations were already strong when Tedros assumed office as Foreign Minister in 2012. In the first two years of his term, there were nine official visits to either China or Ethiopia by the two countries' leaders.⁶⁶ China places great value in these visits, with 'people-to-people relations' seen as holding great political value – especially, in this case, the relationship between Tedros and his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi.⁶⁷ These visits resulted

in increased prestige for China in Africa and, in the wake of a perceived US leadership-void, increased economic incentives for Ethiopia.

During Tedros's time as foreign minister, China became Ethiopia's largest trading partner and largest foreign investor, and there are now many examples that illustrate the large-scale Chinese infrastructure investment in Ethiopia through Chinese companies and loans. One of the largest is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile. After the World Bank and European Investment Bank withdrew from the project amid social and environmental concerns, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) is believed to have covered 85 percent of the costs of the project. The Export-Import Bank of China is also supporting high-voltage transmission, built by another Chinese company, while Chinese operators will build transmission lines for GERD, for \$1.2bn. In 2017, the final year in which Tedros was Foreign Minister before leaving for the WHO, Ethiopia received \$652m in Chinese loans.

One of Tedros's first major acts as Director-General was appointing Robert Mugabe a WHO goodwill ambassador, leading an official to state that 'senior WHO staff were dumbfounded' and 'greatly concerned' about the effect on the funding and credibility of the WHO.⁶⁸ At his appointment in November 2017, Tedros paid tribute to Mugabe, claiming that Zimbabwe is a country committed to 'provide health care for all'.⁶⁹ Hillel Neuer, executive director of UN Watch, stated: 'It's clear that this was a prize, if not compensation',⁷⁰ and there has been speculation that this was a favour to China as a long-term supporter of Mugabe.⁷¹

Tedros also visited Beijing in August 2017, his first overseas visit as Director-General, a month after taking office. This was not his first visit to China in 2017, having been hosted

as a guest in March during the election campaign for his leadership bid.⁷² At the conclusion of the August visit, which included private talks with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, two things were announced which may be a concern for the neutrality of the WHO. First, the WHO stated its interest in promoting health services in BRI member states. Second, it will receive an additional \$20m contribution from China in return.⁷³ During this visit, Tedros attended the *Belt and Road Forum for Health Cooperation: Towards a Health Silk Road*, stating in his speech at the Forum that: 'President Xi's proposal for a Health Silk Road... with health at its core, is indeed visionary', adding, 'we must seize the opportunities the Belt and Road Initiative provides.'⁷⁴ Furthermore, during Tedros's tenure especially, the WHO has been moving to a new position on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), and plans that, in 2022, its revised International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11), will include classifications for TCM as well as for evidence-based medicine, a change the authorities in Beijing have pushed for. This has met with considerable criticism from the scientific community due to lack of evidence for the efficacy of TCM in general and its ongoing use of endangered and illegally trafficked wildlife products.⁷⁵

Chinese influence has also been apparent during the Covid pandemic itself. In January 2020, Tedros met President Xi in Beijing, where he praised China for its 'transparency' in combatting the disease,⁷⁶ despite officials in Wuhan having cracked down on doctors and medical professionals in an online group for 'spreading rumours'⁷⁷ and an announcement by Wuhan police on 1 January that they had 'taken legal measures' against the group (one member of the group, a doctor, was forced to sign a letter promising to make no further disclosure about the outbreak).⁷⁸

A week before the Tedros-Xi meeting in Beijing, a telephone call from President Xi to Tedros on 21 January ‘urged’ the WHO to ‘delay a global warning’ about the outbreak. Citing information from Germany’s Federal Intelligence Service (BND), German news outlet *Der Spiegel* reported on 10 May that Xi also personally urged Tedros to ‘hold back information about a human-to-human transmission and to delay a pandemic warning’.⁷⁹ The WHO reported on 22 January that there was evidence of human-to-human transmission in Wuhan, though more evidence would be needed.⁸⁰ The BND estimates that China’s misinformation policy lost four to six weeks in fighting the virus worldwide. In fact, the WHO did not identify the Covid outbreak as a pandemic until 11 March, 7 weeks after an alleged telephone call in which Xi urged Tedros to delay calling it a pandemic.⁸¹

The WHO also ignored Taiwanese officials who attempted to warn the WHO of the risk of human-to-human transmission. According to Taiwan’s Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC), Taiwan warned the WHO about the possibility of human-to-human transmission of coronavirus as early as 31 December 2019. However, the CECC reported that the WHO merely acknowledged that the information had been transferred to the relevant department.

This was not the first time the WHO has ignored Taiwan. After Taiwan elected President Tsai-Ing Wen in 2016, who ran as an advocate for sovereignty from Beijing, the WHO stopped inviting Taiwan to its global summit as an observer member.⁸² Human-to-human transmission was publicly announced by Maria Van Kerkhove,⁸³ acting head of WHO’s emerging diseases unit, on the same day as a tweet from the WHO claiming to ‘have found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel #coronavirus.’⁸⁴

3.

Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO)

The CTBTO was established in 1996 to uphold the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty, designed to slow and halt nuclear weapons testing. The Treaty will enter force once ratified by all 184 signatory members. China is one of eight yet to ratify. Although detail about possible Chinese influence in the CTBTO is not yet available on the scale of the WHO, and conclusions should not be drawn beyond the information available, a number of recent events may merit further investigation.

The CTBTO will operate 337 International Monitoring Systems (IMS), 300 of which have already been certified, sending data on nuclear activity to the International Data Centre (IDC) in Vienna.

In his first official visit as the CTBTO Executive Secretary, BurkinaFaso's Lassina Zerbo travelled to China in 2013, where it was stated that he 'regained Beijing's technical cooperation with the organisation'.⁸⁵ This apparently facilitated the connection from 2016 to 2018 to the CTBTO's monitoring system of the first five IMS stations in China. Zerbo stated that that this was: 'indicative of China's increasing role as a global leader in advancing peace and non-proliferation'.⁸⁶

This followed an unorthodox keynote speech by Zerbo at the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference 2016, in which he repeatedly picked out Thomas Countryman, US Acting Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security. (For example, Zerbo stated on North Korea: ‘So Tom, here’s your task. Okay? You help us to move on this issue, and then we will give you the Nobel Peace Prize’; on ratification of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty: ‘this is what we need from you, Tom’; then ‘Now, that leads me to the next point, which is keeping the momentum. Tom, you will help me to keep that momentum.’ (IISS, 2016)).

Despite China’s apparent cooperation, the US State Department has recently claimed that China secretly carried out low-level underground nuclear test explosions in 2019, with a State Department report citing possible breaches of a ‘zero yield’ standard for test blasts following activities at China’s Lop Nur nuclear test site throughout 2019, and that China probably carried out multiple nuclear weapon-related tests or experiments in 2018 (Gordon, 2020)⁸⁷ (additional information is provided in the higher classification version of the report).⁸⁸ The report also claimed that:

‘China’s possible preparation to operate its Lop Nur test site year-round, its use of explosive containment chambers, extensive excavation activities at Lop Nur and a lack of transparency on its nuclear testing activities... raise concerns regarding its adherence to the zero-yield standard’.⁸⁹

Beijing’s apparent lack of transparency about this allegation included blocking data transmissions from sensors linked to one of the IMS systems operated by the CTBTO in China.⁹⁰ The only official comment from the CTBTO in response has been that ‘there [had] been no interruptions in data transmissions from China’s five sensor stations since the

end of August 2019 following an interruption that began in 2018', suggesting that there may have been interruptions in data transfers up to August 2019.⁹¹ However, the data itself from the five Chinese IMS stations is sent to the National Data Centre (NDC) in Beijing, before being sent on to the IDC in Vienna.

Meanwhile, following the certification of the five Chinese IMS stations, the CTBTO stated that these stations filled an important 'geographical coverage gap in terms of event detection in the area'.⁹² However, the Lop Nur nuclear testing site remains a considerable distance from any of the Chinese IMS stations: the nearest stations are at Lanzhou, approximately 1,300 kilometres from Lop Nur. This appears to be a considerable 'geographical coverage gap' that has not been corrected, and raises questions about China's approach to this institution, a central part of the counter-proliferation architecture.

4.

The international standards institutions

Standards play a crucial role in economies and regulatory systems, generally demonstrating that a product or service meets a jurisdiction's performance or safety regulations. They are also vital to the international integration of markets. In one recent definition:

'Technical standards are the definition of processes [or] specifications designed to improve the quality, security, and compatibility of various goods and services, for instance GSM for telecommunications or WiFi for wireless internet. They can be thought of as basic specifications or technologies on which other technologies or methods will evolve – creating lock-in effects and path-dependency for future products and technological trajectories. Defining standards [carries] significant implications for which technologies will dominate future markets' (Seaman, 2020).⁹³

There is therefore some truth to the statement by Werner von Siemens in the late 1800s, that 'he who owns the standards, owns the market' (*Ibid.*). While some standards are voluntary, many are mandatory. Among these mandatory standards, some are determined on an entirely national level (or, within the EU, increasingly on a harmonised basis). However, many are agreed, or first agreed, in international

technical-specialist standards organisations, in which China has become increasingly active.

Domestically and within these organisations, China's approach appears to involve two aspects:

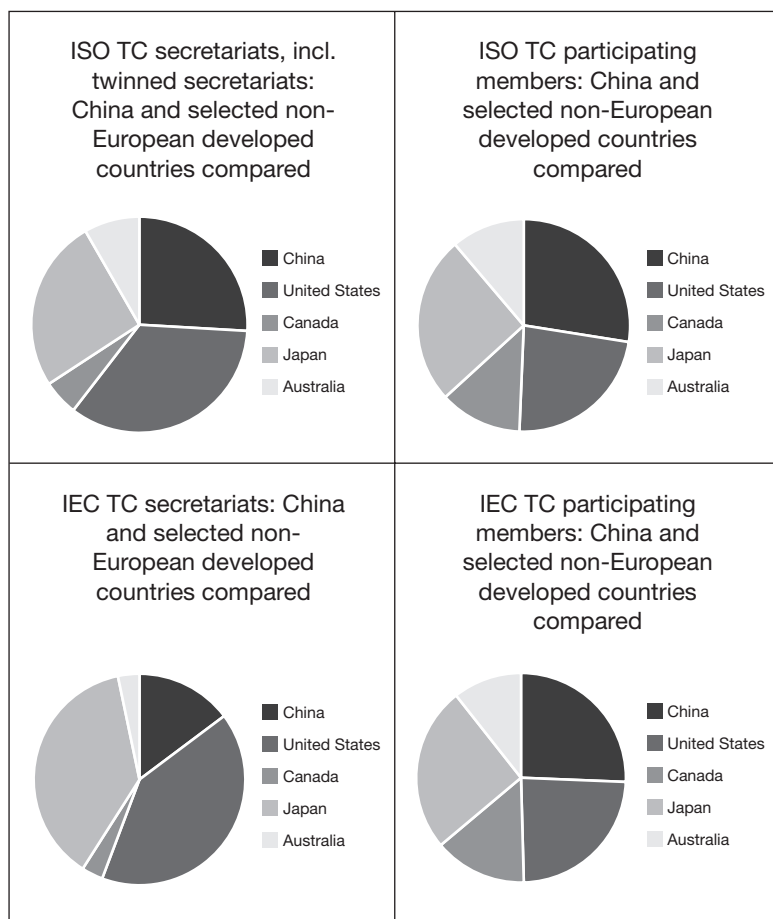
- First, to pressure multinationals to use Chinese standards in China;
- Second, to 'Sinocise' international standards.

This can be understood as part of a broadly mercantilist trade policy whereby the resources of the Chinese state are deployed to the benefit of a number of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) especially, and in particular in higher-technology corporates and the sectors within its 'Made in China 2025' or 'Strategic Emerging Industries' strategies, to 'alter the competitive dynamics of global markets in industries essential to economic competitiveness' (US Chamber of Commerce, 2017).

On the domestic level, China's standards system is led by the Standardisation Administration of the People's Republic of China (SAC), under the State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR), a branch of the State Council. SAC represents China within the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and other international organisations. China's standards model differs considerably from the model of bottom-up participation in the US, and to some extent the EU.⁹⁴ There are 192 ministry-level institutions now involved in standard-setting in China. By end-2020, SAC plans to have 60 'standards innovation bases' across the country. Among major firms, Huawei for instance dedicates around fifteen percent of its revenues to standards (Seaman, 2020). Below the central organisation are numerous committees dedicated to particular technical fields (recently discussed

by the US Trade Representative (USTR) in the National Trade Estimate 2020).

Figure 4.1: China's participation in secretariats of selected standards-setting organisations



Source: Fägersten and Rühlig, 2019

A 2015 State Council decision to place standards closer to the centre of national strategy led to the revamp of standards law in 2018 (Seaman, 2020), a revision welcomed by most western observers (Fägersten and Rühlig, 2019).⁹⁵ However,

one of the results was that, whereas previously, international standards, like national standards, had been mandatory, after 2018 only national standards were mandatory. It is also a concern that one aim of the next phase, ‘China Standard 2035’, is to facilitate ‘civil-military fusion’ while increasing China’s international standard-setting role.

Of the resulting revised Standardisation Law, the US Trade Representative (USTR) states:

‘many of these implementing measures cause concern for U.S. industry as they appear to focus on the development of Chinese standards without sufficient consideration being given to existing, internationally developed standards. In addition, they do not explicitly provide that foreign stakeholders may participate on equal terms with domestic competitors in all aspects of the standardization process’.

It notes this process in an area of particular concern, cybersecurity:

‘As these implementing measures have been issued, China’s existing technical committees have continued to develop standards. Foreign companies have reported an inconsistent ability to influence these domestic standards-setting processes, and even in technical committees where participation has been possible for some foreign stakeholders, it has typically been on terms less favorable than those applicable to their domestic competitors. For example, the technical committee for cybersecurity standards (known as TC260) allows foreign companies to participate in standards-development and setting, with several U.S. and other foreign companies being allowed to participate in some of the TC-260 working groups. However, foreign companies are not universally allowed to participate as voting members, and they report challenges to participating in key aspects of the standardization process, such as drafting.’

The report also notes a technique increasingly reported by foreign companies, and considers its global economic implications:

‘U.S. stakeholders have also reported that, in some cases, Chinese government officials have pressured foreign companies seeking to participate in the standards-setting process to license their technology or intellectual property on unfavorable terms... concerns about China’s standards regime are not limited to the implications for U.S. companies’ access to China’s market. China’s ongoing efforts to develop unique national standards aims eventually to serve the interests of Chinese companies seeking to compete globally, as the Chinese government’s vision is to use the power of its large domestic market to promote or compel the adoption of Chinese standards in global markets.’ (National Trade Estimate Report, USTR, 2020⁹⁶).

The recent case of China Mobile demonstrates this domestic standards strategy in action, as well as the problems it now causes for competition and growth elsewhere. Beijing has used ‘standards setting’ with increasing frequency to favour domestic champions over foreign competitors, introducing technical standards that differ from accepted global standards for similar products. In 2009, China launched the TD-SCDMA 3G wireless standard, assigning it to China Mobile, which controls two-thirds of China’s wireless market. American firms wishing to access China’s market need to divert resources to create new versions of their products. It took more than two years’ delay for Apple to be able to introduce its iPhone to China Unicom customers (which operates the more widely used WCDMA standard, but it will still need to develop TD-SCDMA-compatible phones to access the larger China Mobile market) (Singham, 2012). In the meantime, a market for counterfeits, driven by

the unavailability of the iPhone, has been emerging.

Beijing has also supported Chinese companies adopting the TD-SCDMA 3G standard with billions of dollars of subsidy. These firms both displace foreign competitors in China and compete aggressively with them abroad (ZTE was ranked one of the top five global handset producers in 2010) (*Ibid.*). China's standard-setting policies may also force foreign firms to move even more R&D and production to China, meaning more job losses in Western and other countries. Beijing has also written standards and licensing requirements for foreign software producers who wish to sell products to the Chinese domestic market. China Compulsory Certification (CCC) rules mean many software producers must submit products for certification. US companies have stated that they are concerned that submission will mean IP infringement and increased costs before products can go to market (*Ibid.*).

Participation in international standards bodies

The Chinese government sees standards as a central component in competition, making it a priority to become more influential in standards bodies. This means increased participation in international standards-setting organizations (SSOs). Chinese-led technical committees or subcommittees in the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), one of the largest international standards-setting organizations, rose 75 percent between 2011 and 2019.⁹⁷ Another important measure is the distribution of secretariat positions in the Technical Committees (TCs) of these organisations, because technical standards are drafted within these committees (Fägersten and Rühlig, 2019).

The three largest international organisations are the International Organization for Standardisation (ISO), the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). China's participation in all three has 'grown exponentially' in recent years (Seaman, 2020). We outline these among the below.

**International Organization for Standardization (ISO),
International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and
Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)**

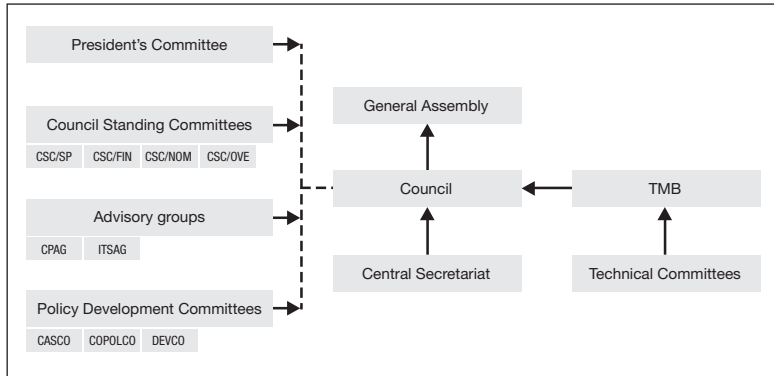
The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is an independent, non-governmental organisation with 164 national standards organisations as members. It develops voluntary, consensus-based international standards. Its Central Secretariat is in Geneva. This is led by the Secretary General and runs day-to-day ISO operations.

The annual General Assembly decides strategic objectives and is the 'overarching organ and ultimate authority of the Organization'⁹⁸, attended by members and Principal Officers. The ISO Council is ISO's 'core governance body', reporting to the General Assembly. It consists of 20 member-bodies, and ISO Officers and Chairs of the Policy Development Committees. The Council has direct responsibility for several bodies reporting to it, including Council Standing Committees for strategy and policy, for nominations for governance positions (CSC/NOM), and practices (CSC/OVE); Advisory Groups such as on IT (ITSAG), and matters relating to developing countries. Membership of the Council is open to all member bodies.

Meanwhile, management of 'technical work' is

undertaken by the Technical Management Board, which reports to the Council and is responsible for the technical committees leading standards development, as well as for 'strategic advisory boards' on technical issues.⁹⁹

Figure 4.2: International Organization for Standardization (ISO) governance structure



Source: ISO, 2020

ISO works with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) especially,¹⁰⁰ and UN partners such as the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

In 2013, China became a permanent member of ISO's Technical Management Board (above, which oversees the technical committees), alongside the US, UK, France, Germany and Japan. In 2015, Zhang Xiaogang was elected China's first President of the ISO (for a three-year term).

Founded in 1906, the IEC (International Electrotechnical Commission) publishes international standards for electrical and electronic technologies, known collectively as 'electrotechnology'. IEC International Standards are

voted on by IEC member countries on a one-member-one-vote basis. The Officers of the IEC, who comprise the Executive Committee, are elected or appointed by the Council. The Executive Committee reports to the Board and implements its decisions. It also appoints ‘Ambassadors’ for ‘outreach’ and to represent IEC’s interests. Two of the current eight Ambassadors are from the PRC: Mr Hu Jingyi, Senior Director of Standardization and Industry Development of Huawei, who represents the IEC in internet of things (IoT) and smart engineering, and Mr Wei Hao, Director General of the China Information Security Certification Center, who represents the IEC in cyber security.

At the IEC, Shu Yinbiao, Chairman of the China Huaneng Group, one of China’s five largest state-owned electricity generation companies, was elected in 2019 to become IEC President in 2020 (the first among the Officers, and who is appointed by the Council). China also holds a rapidly growing number of ISO and IEC Secretariats.

One of the lessons China has taken from its recent experience in these organisations is the importance of first-mover advantage, which comes especially from China’s 2006 attempt to propagate its own WLAN Authentication and Privacy Infrastructure (WAPI) standard. China had designed its own standard to close the perceived security loopholes of the existing WiFi standard (ISO/IEC 8802-11 or IEEE 802.11) and to facilitate state oversight and control of wireless networks. However, an ISO Technical Review established that the two standards were competing and, because an international WiFi standard had already been established, China’s WAPI could not be. This was an early example of China’s strategy of attempting to permeate

its own standards for state technological control – WAPI remains the standard in China today.

China is now attempting to establish first-mover advantage in another sphere, the internet of things (IoT). As of 2019, of China's 11 proposed standards within the ISO/IEC framework, 5 have been adopted and published and 6 are being reviewed. Under Chinese leadership, the IEC has also begun coordinating standards for Global Energy Interconnection, a concept of China's State Grid Corporation for massive intercontinental smart grids. In facial recognition, in conjunction with a group of 27 Chinese firms who are developing national standards, the Chinese companies ZTE, China Telecom and Dahua appear to have been establishing positions at the ITU in facial recognition and other surveillance technologies (Seaman, 2020).

The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) is a professional association headquartered in New York City. Its Standards Association (IEEE-SA) develops global standards in industries including IT and electronics, energy, biomedical equipment, robotics, and telecoms. It is governed by the Board of Governors (BOG), elected by IEEE-SA members. The Board oversees a range of operational committees, and the IEEE-SA Standards Board, which oversees standards development. Members of the Standards Board are elected by IEEE-SA members.

At the IEEE, Huawei, Tencent and Baidu all became active corporate members after around 2010, with seats in all major decision-making panels, while IEC President and State Grid Chairman Shu Yinbiao is an IEEE senior member. These corporates are heavily involved in the Third Generation Partnership Project (3GPP, a partnership of standards

organisations developing standards for mobile telecoms), where much of 5G standards development is taking place. However, in May 2019, the US Department of Commerce (DOC) placed Huawei and its affiliates on the 'Entities List' in relation to sanctions on Iran, meaning the company was excluded from various domestic standard-setting organisations (such as JEDEC, which develops semiconductor standards, the SD Association, Bluetooth SIG and the Wi-Fi Alliance). Shortly afterwards, the IEEE announced that, to comply with US regulations (as it is headquartered in New Jersey), Huawei employees would no longer be allowed to participate in the association's peer-reviewed journal editing process. However, this decision was reversed three days later after Chinese 'outrage' and an apparent US Administration reprieve for this specific issue.¹⁰¹

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

The ITU was founded in 1865 as the International Telegraph Union. It is now a specialised UN agency, responsible for information and communication technologies. Headquartered in Geneva, it coordinates standards in areas including Wi-Fi, aeronautical navigation, satellites, radio astronomy, and voice recognition.

With a mandate to '[facilitate] international connectivity in communications networks',¹⁰² the UN-affiliated ITU has spoken positively about China's attempts to invest in future communications infrastructure in BRI member states, through a further CCP initiative known as the Digital Silk Road. ITU head Houlin Zhao was nominated to the position by China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) in 2014.

After a career in China's Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, Zhao Houlin was elected Secretary-General of the ITU in 2014. Under his leadership, the organisation has seen increasing cooperation with China, which has in turn enabled Beijing lucrative telecommunications contracts with developing states, whilst promoting China's BRI programme at global events. This comes despite the increased mass surveillance and censorship which these deals with Chinese firms allow. ITU Vice-Chair posts are now held by employees of the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT), Alibaba, ZTE, Huawei, China Mobile and China Telecom.

As Beijing exports aspects of its model of governance to BRI partner states, particularly digital infrastructure through the Digital Silk Road, this already poses questions for the freedom and openness of internet use throughout the developing world, often in states with fragile democratic institutions. Even as states maintain their own political governance structures, where they are dependent on China's digital infrastructure, they may adopt Beijing's own models for cyber security. Indeed, since 2017, this has become apparent across East Africa, notably in Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Uganda.

Tanzania's May 2018 Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations force content creators to pay around two million Tanzanian shillings (\$930) to a central register (Tanzania's per capita GDP is \$879),¹⁰³ also mandating that they be able to disclose sponsors and retain contributors' details for one year. A few months before the bill was introduced, the Cyberspace Administration of China chaired meetings with Tanzania's Deputy Minister for Communications, to discuss collaboration with China on social media censorship.¹⁰⁴

Despite less than 1 percent of the Ethiopian population having access to the internet on a mobile device at the time, in 2013 Addis Ababa signed an \$800m deal for China's telecom giant ZTE to help modernise state telecommunications infrastructure,¹⁰⁵ widely acknowledged to strengthen the Ethiopian government's ability to censor the internet. Once the bill passed, in 2017 the regime used a state of emergency to intermittently ban popular social media and messaging platforms, including WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook.¹⁰⁶ In Uganda, the Chinese state-owned company China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC) was awarded a deal to 'build the capacity' of the Communications Commission, Police, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.¹⁰⁷

Finally, there is a growing Chinese presence within the ITU's internal work on setting global technical standards and best practice. Drawing on leading industry experts and academic institutions to inform policy, the ITU relies heavily on Chinese stakeholders, with the highest figure for a state, at 15 academic experts, compared to nine for the US.¹⁰⁸ However, information from China's Academy of Sciences states that there are actually 34 members from China, while of listed Chinese affiliates, four are Academy of Sciences institutes.¹⁰⁹

Despite these concerns about models of cyber-security exported by Beijing, in addition to its influence within ITU governance structures, under the leadership of Secretary-General Zhao the ITU continues to pledge cooperation in the Digital Silk Road. In 2017, Zhao visited China's inaugural Belt and Road Forum, signing an agreement to 'cooperate with China to assist countries to strengthen their ICT networks and services'. Crucially, it pledged ambiguous future collaboration 'on other developing projects to assist

OBOR [Belt and Road]-participating countries.’ While the nature of the proposed cooperation is not clear, the fact that the ITU is willing to promote Beijing’s strategy suggests influence within these institutions. Among developing countries, China has signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on standardisation with Mexico, Vietnam, Burma and Indonesia, among others, and appears to be providing financial assistance to help these countries integrate their systems with Chinese standards. At the May 2017 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, China also signed framework agreements on mutual standards recognition with 12 countries, including Russia, Mongolia, Serbia, Belarus, and Greece (Seaman, 2020).¹¹⁰ These mechanisms are intended to complement the diffusion of physical infrastructure through BRI countries, such as ports, logistics, and 5G.

China’s ITU activity became clearer in 2019 in China’s framing of facial recognition policies. Huawei, Hikvision, ZTE, Dahua, and China Telecom are involved in international standard-setting for these technologies, to the extent that Chinese firms have made every submission to the ITU on surveillance technology standards over the last three years (December 2019 data). Most submissions relate to the storage and analysis of facial recognition data,¹¹¹ where European and US submissions have been relatively light. According to 2019 analysis by the *Financial Times*, ‘one proposal [from] China Telecom and ZTE outlines how a surveillance system can trigger alarms and automatically “deploy personnel” if conditions set by its user are met.’

ITU delegates state that China now uses the large corporate membership of its delegations to push through standards. A UK delegate stated: ‘I’ve sat in the room and watched half of a delegation say they don’t agree, and [a standard] has passed anyway’, describing one 2017 meeting

in which Chinese companies made 24 sequential proposals on the surveillance of individuals within cities. The delegate stated that China '[uses] volume of contributions [so] that it's difficult for meetings not to reflect theirs as a dominant view.' (*Financial Times*, 2019)

The BRI also incorporates infrastructure that is intended to feature facial recognition technologies, including for African and Asian countries.¹¹² Chinese firms already provide AI surveillance technologies to 63 countries (Huawei alone supplies 50 countries, by far the world's largest supplier).¹¹³ These efforts at the ITU follow Chinese firms forming the National Standardisation Group for Facial Recognition Technology in 2019. Analysts also find that without their own standards organisations, developing countries often follow the standards set at international organisations, the ITU included.¹¹⁴

In March 2020, it also became apparent that Chinese strategy at the ITU included a more radical tactic, which could fundamentally alter the way the internet functions.¹¹⁵ Huawei, China Unicom and China Telecom, with China's MIIT, have proposed at the ITU a new core network technology standard called 'New IP', which the US, UK and Sweden have stated threatens to create granular control over citizens' internet use: as such there is now 'a huge battle going on' at the ITU. Scholars have described this as an attempt to incorporate a new 'authoritarian architecture' into the web (Oxford Innovation working paper 2020), with Huawei and others reportedly planning to push through the standardisation of New IP at an ITU conference in India in November (*Financial Times*, 2019).¹¹⁶

The Universal Postal Union (UPU)

The Universal Postal Union (UPU) was established in 1874 by the Treaty of Bern, where it is headquartered, and is now a specialised UN agency overseeing international postal duties and express mail services.

The decision taken by the US in 2018 to threaten withdrawal from the UPU proves a useful case study in how states can utilise their diplomatic and economic leverage to prevent authoritarian regimes gaining excessive leverage. Since the Reagan Administration, the US has considered that the UPU allows an unfair trade advantage to China, given the lower fees it need pay for international postage (considered by the UPU to be a ‘Tier 3’ economic state, vs. the US, a designated Tier 1 state). The US calculated in 2019 that this classification cost its economy \$300-500m annually.¹¹⁷ In 2019, the US stated that China continuing to receive preferential treatment would result in US withdrawal.

As a result, the UPU convened an emergency congress of its 192 member states and voted to restructure current postal fees. In the wake of the vote at the UPU, the White House claimed that the outcome asserted the principle that international organisations like the UPU had to ‘serve their members rather than be used as piggy banks for bad-actor countries that seek to bend their rules.’¹¹⁸

Just as in the early twentieth century, when defining telegraph and railway gauge standards were central to competition between the UK and Germany, in ‘the development of a China standard’, China’s policymakers have become aware of ‘the relationship [between] standard-setting and economic power’ (Fägersten and Rühlig, 2019).

In Mongolia, President Battulga even ran his 2016 electoral campaign on the security implications of China's railway standards (*Ibid.*). A popular saying in China posits that third-tier companies make products, second-tier companies make technology, and first-tier companies make standards, and Chinese analysts increasingly see standards as 'strategic weapons of international competition' (Seaman, 2020).

Beijing's growing influence in SSOs also helps establish standards where China's firms have standard-essential patents (SEPs). Firms with SEPs save switching costs when adapting products to international standards for interoperability and can more easily sell and license technology. China intends to increase its share of SEPs, especially in strategic sectors, to provide royalties and reduce their adaptation costs to the foreign technologies which have been the industry standards. Beyond SSO-participation, Beijing intends to promote its standards through foreign construction contracts and exports, especially to developing countries without sufficient resources to develop their own standards. In the long term, this approach stands to create a separate technological sphere of influence (Fägersten and Rühlig, 2019).

There are also suggestions that China is considering establishing an 'Asian Standardization Organization' (*Ibid.*), which would be available to Asian BRI partner countries first, before being opened to non-Asian states. Such an institution would put the future of existing international standardisation organisations in question and is an example of the 'alternative institutions' discussed in the section that follows.

5.

Creating authoritarian alternatives to the liberal order

Two years before Covid emerged in China, Roy Kamphausen, Commissioner for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, testified for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that BRI represents a test case for China's vision for a new international order throughout Eurasia, possibly even the world. The BRI has now extended into the Western Hemisphere, Europe, and the Arctic, launching what the Communist Party of China (CCP) calls a 'Digital Silk Road' and a 'Space Silk Road' (NBR, 2019). China has used the BRI to promote its influence in economic governance and, more fundamentally, international order. This was noted by President Xi in a speech in August 2018, when he declared that the initiative 'serves as a solution for China to improve global economic governance... and build a 'community of common human destiny' (*Ibid.*), a term used by Chinese leaders with increasing frequency, apparently to refer to progressive re-alignment.¹¹⁹

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in addition to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and development banks, are tasked by Beijing with the financing of BRI projects, but do so with little transparency, a challenge for open market economies. China is beginning to create parallel institutions, especially international financial

institutions and development banks, which are linked to the BRI. In the process, China appears to be structuring these institutions to align with its own governance styles. This section will discuss the apparent strategic intent behind the BRI as a platform for regional and global influence, including analysis of some of the institutions linked to it.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese strategy

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promotes Chinese-led alternative financial institutions across Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. By January 2020, 2,951 BRI-linked projects with a combined value of \$3.87trn were planned or under way.^{120 121} Drafting an infrastructure or energy project to the BRI through an MoU provides crucial access to Chinese finance from its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and development banks, the two largest being the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank (CDB).

To reflect the BRI's strategic significance, the BRI has been enshrined in the CCP constitution, becoming an official pillar of the country's foreign policy.¹²² Beijing traces the origins of the BRI to Xi's 'profound reflections on the future of human destiny,' which also produced the other signature component of China's foreign policy under Xi, the 'community of common human destiny'. This theme was an extension of discussions by Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao, especially his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2005 entitled 'Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity',¹²³ in which he discussed the 'harmonious world' concept.¹²⁴ The US strategist and former senior Defense Department official Michael Pillsbury describes how Hu and Xi's language is

entwined, and illustrates a central long-term CCP strategy. Herein, the notion of 'harmony' in Chinese strategy and geopolitics is understood as referring to unipolar dominance – the 'Chinese dream' for a 'common human destiny'.¹²⁵ CCP leaders have since described the BRI as a key test for this effort, which derives from what the CCP identifies as its 'historic mission'.¹²⁶

BRI therefore seems liable to become an example of Beijing's capacity to generate new norms (chiefly in international development and finance), but also to 'socialise' them, and subsequently persuade other actors to internalise China's alternatives to existing models of governance. One of the means by which Beijing seeks to apply leverage through the BRI already appears to be through debt, although according to the Oxford Business Group (2020), this implies developing economies 'risking unsustainable debt burdens for projects that are not necessarily in their national interest'. For instance, in December 2017, Sri Lanka formally ceded 70 percent of control of Hambantota Port to a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) on a 99-year lease, after it became unable to repay loans, from China, with which it had paid for the construction of the strategic \$1.3bn port in the Indian Ocean.¹²⁷

Apparently supporting continuity in the current order may be one way Beijing advances alternatives to parts of the international system it considers unsatisfactory. Contributing to existing norms and institutions means Beijing gains legitimacy from participating in international affairs, while facilitating the introduction of alternative norms which it intends will be accepted by others, developing countries especially. Chinese foreign policy is thus following two strategies simultaneously: actively supporting the international order to gain experience and

legitimacy as a responsible power, and promoting Chinese-centred initiatives and competing institutions. An example of this dual performance is the way BRI projects impact the international order.

In dealing with BRI member states, and issuing loans, grants and infrastructure projects, China seeks no pre-conditions or favourable governance models, as western countries often do, hindering the promotion of human rights, civil liberties and personal freedoms. President Xi told a major forum held in Beijing in May 2017 that ‘mutual learning will replace clashes, and coexistence will replace a sense of superiority’¹²⁸, adding that the BRI will help build ‘a new era of harmony and trade’.¹²⁹

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)

Frustrated by what China regarded as favourable policy towards the US, Europe and Japan, Beijing has sought to create an alternative to the World Bank, IMF and Asian Development Bank (ADB). Whilst domestic development banks such as the Export-Import Bank and the China Development Bank (CDB) are state-operated enterprises, China appears to seek an international development bank to rival the ADB, which Beijing can use to greater strategic and regional effect than its own domestic financial institutions.

Officially launched by President Xi on a state visit to Indonesia in October 2013, the AIIB is a multilateral development bank which seeks to promote and finance infrastructure projects across the Indo-Pacific region. According to an ADB study conducted in 2018, this region requires \$1.7trn a year until 2020 in infrastructure investment – by 2019, that spending was

roughly \$900m per year,¹³⁰ and the AIIB seeks to bridge the gap. Whereas the US and Japan have refused to join the organisation, the UK has, in addition to France, Germany, Italy, South Korea, Australia and India. In the AIIB, the UK's \$3,054.7m subscription gives it a 2.9 percent vote-share – overshadowed by China's \$29,780.4m subscription and 26.6 percent vote.¹³¹

However, rather than act as a multilateral development bank (MBD) along similar lines to the World Bank/IMF, China expects not simply more influence in the institution but overriding control and veto power in many areas of the bank's operations. These veto powers include:

- Expanding the operations of the bank;
- Changing the size of the board of directors and structure of the board;
- Appointing or removing the president;
- Suspending a member;
- Terminating the bank and distributing its assets;
- Amending the Articles.

These powers include many means by which other members could attempt to change or alter structural and governance aspects of the bank, currently weighted in China's favour. China's voting power in the AIIB of 26.6 percent overrides a 75 percent majority vote and is significantly larger than the 15.02 percent US vote share in the World Bank, or Japan's 12.84 percent vote share in the ADB. China also has more control over the appointment of the President of the AIIB than the US in the World Bank or Japan in the ADB.¹³²

In addition to control and veto power, there are important

concerns about the bank's internal governance arrangements, and whether these provide acceptable checks on Beijing's power. Like other multilateral development banks, the AIIB has a three-layer governance structure involving a Board of Governors, a 12-member Board of Directors, and management. The most distinguishing aspect is the absence of a full-time, resident board of directors. In contrast to the AIIB, the World Bank and IMF were established with executive boards to act as a political check on decisions.

For example, at the 2017 annual meeting, the AIIB's former China Financial Ministry President Jin Liqun stated that the AIIB 'will not consider any proposals if we are concerned about their environmental and reputational impact', and that 'there are no coal projects in our pipeline'.¹³³ Yet one 2018 report from Bank Information Center Europe and Inclusive Development International outlined how the AIIB has supported the IFC Emerging Asia Fund (EAF), which has invested in Shwe Taung Cement in Burma. This more than doubled output from a coal mine exclusively supplying the factory. EAF also invests in Summit Power International, whose 13 Bangladeshi power stations all use fossil fuels.¹³⁴ Regarding the concerns about a lack of internal checks and balances, a permanent resident executive board at the AIIB could have intervened on this matter, ensuring that the AIIB kept to its promises on fossil fuels. This is one example of governance oversight, 18 months after the operationalisation of the AIIB in late 2015.

By commanding veto power which limits member states' ability to restructure AIIB governance, in particular given both the lack of a permanent executive board to oversee policy and choose leadership, Beijing has exported a model of governance into an international organisation central to its strategy.

The concern that AIIB funds would be used to pursue

Chinese strategic objectives was a leading reason for Australia's foreign minister arguing against Australia's early participation.¹³⁵ There has also been considerable concern in Washington and Tokyo that the AIIB will rival the World Bank and IMF in the coming decades.

BRI, Chinese financial institutions, and Covid debt-relief

The role of BRI in Chinese strategy has, through the Covid pandemic, been exposed to greater questioning, especially over so-called 'debt diplomacy' and the apparent use of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and financial institutions to restrict or deliver debt relief during the Covid emergency.

In April 2020, the Group of 20 announced it would freeze all debt payments for the world's poorest countries until the end of the year, a deal open to the world's least-developed states, as defined by the World Bank and the UN, as long as they are current in debt service payments to the World Bank and IMF.¹³⁶ However Chinese Ministry of Commerce official Song Wei stated in the *Global Times* that Export-Import Bank of China preferential loans are 'not applicable for debt relief': Export-Import Bank is a major BRI investor, financing over 1,800 infrastructure projects valued at a minimum of US\$149bn.¹³⁷

Another major Chinese financial institution with heavy investments in BRI projects is the China Development Bank (CDB). Since 2013, the CDB has financed over \$190bn through over 600 BRI projects, accounting for 34 percent of the bank's overall international business.¹³⁸ In March 2020, a report by *Belt and Road News* claimed that the CBD, in contrast to the Export-Import Bank, would assist BRI member states during the Covid pandemic, involving an offer of low-cost financing and special foreign exchange liquidity loans for companies involved in BRI projects.¹³⁹

This includes widening a credit line by \$700m for Sri Lanka, lowering the interest rate, and delaying the repayment timeline by two years.¹⁴⁰

Chinese financial institutions provide 90% of the credit and investment for the BRI projects.¹⁴¹ By choosing to selectively approve debt relief in some instances, whilst declining it in others, points to possible selective manipulation of debt diplomacy. Even throughout the Covid pandemic, Beijing has insisted on dealing with its debtor countries individually. Benn Steil, Director of International Economics at the Council on Foreign Relations, suggests that: 'China wants to keep Belt and Road countries divided, as they are stronger than each country individually'.¹⁴²

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

Founded in 2001 of China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is headquartered in Beijing, with the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The organisation includes eight member states (India and Pakistan were admitted in 2015), in addition to four observer states (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia), and six dialogue partners, including Turkey. By 2017, the eight full members accounted for approximately half the world's population, a quarter of its GDP, and 80% of the Eurasian land mass. According to the SCO's founding charter, central to the organisation's objectives are making 'joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security, and stability in the region – and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order'.¹⁴³

From the founding charter, two factors can be inferred. First, the SCO is primarily a regional security alliance, steeped in the notion of non-interference and a respect for member states' national sovereignty. Critical to this effort are counter-terrorism operations across member states, conducted by RATS, and which combat the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.¹⁴⁴ The centrality of this commitment reaffirms the perceived threat posed to member states' national security from separatist movements (separatism among Uighurs in Xinjiang being a prime example).

The second observation from the SCO's founding charter is that it views itself as a counter to NATO and the North Atlantic security alliance generally. By describing itself as 'fair' and 'rational' it also seeks to challenge existing security alliances' legitimacy, particularly through the prism of central Asian security concerns following the first decade of this century and the US-led War on Terror, in addition to threats from separatism and Islamic radicalisation. Furthermore, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov implicitly confirmed the SCO's role as a counter to NATO. In an article for *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* on 10 September 2014, Lavrov asserted that: 'The SCO is fully in tune with the realities and demands of the 21st century, unlike the relics of a past era that rely on rigid adherence to discipline that exists within particular blocs of countries'.¹⁴⁵

There are two major differences between the SCO and NATO, the first being structure. While NATO, in general, is a collection of Euro-Atlantic liberal democracies, the six SCO founding members are generally authoritarian states. The second major difference between the two organisations is that while the cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic alliance is its Article Five, assuring collective self-defence for all

members, there is no such guarantee, even implicitly, within the SCO.

This is the inherent normative weakness of the SCO as a security alliance, particularly one which often frames itself as a counter to NATO in Eurasia. The often-fragmented foreign policy agendas of the member states, particularly when considering the additional observer and dialogue members, further inhibits the organisation to act as a security alliance in the same manner as NATO. This is especially true when considering that India and Pakistan, who have framed their respective security policies largely since their independence around countering the other, are full members. The addition of Turkey as an observer member throws further speculation on regional security matters, such as its approach to the Syrian civil war with Russia; both militaries openly engaging in direct, limited conflict with the other since 2019.¹⁴⁶ This had the serious prospect of drawing in a wider conflict between NATO and Russia, asking how Turkey can balance its commitments to the Euro-Atlantic alliance whilst also seeking membership for the SCO.

Despite the SCO lacking a NATO Article 5-style collective security guarantee, an inherent weakness undermining a sense of deterrence by punishment, the SCO is not without agency. At the July 2005 summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, the SCO issued a declaration requesting a deadline for the use of SCO member states' military bases by the US-led coalition in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁷ This was followed 25 days later by Uzbekistan issuing the US a 180-day notice to leave its K2 base in the south of the country:¹⁴⁸ the US had considered Uzbekistan a close ally in its war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, providing aid and training to the Uzbek military in addition to counter-terrorism assistance.

Kyrgyzstan was then the next US ally to face an SCO agenda. The Deputy Speaker of the Kyrgyz parliament stated that he expected pressure from the Chinese on his government concerning the use of the Manas air base by US forces in the run up to the 2007 SCO Summit in Bishkek, preceded by a leading article in an official PRC newspaper calling for US military withdrawal for Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴⁹ The US ceased to use the base in 2014.

More recently, all SCO member states have expressed a wish for Syria's President Assad to remain in power,¹⁵⁰ reinforced by Beijing's use of veto power at the UN Security Council, China having vetoed eight proposals on Syria since 2011 (each was also vetoed by Moscow).¹⁵¹ A central theme of the 2014 SCO Summit in Dushanbe focused on the bloc's goals in Syria, which centred around ensuring regime survival for Assad,¹⁵² in contrast to UK and US strategy.

China has also managed to transform the SCO from what was originally described as a central Asian security alliance combatting 'terrorism' and 'extremism' in the late 1990s and 2000s, to include mechanisms for collaboration on trade, finance, development and legal issues. This included establishing the Interbank Association in 2005, the Business Council in 2006, and Development Fund in 2009. These institutions were created to strengthen cooperation between the major banks of the SCO nations, helping implement regional investment projects and drive economic and trade relations between member states.¹⁵³ However Beijing uses these mechanisms to strengthen its SCO role, including in loaning billions of dollars to SCO member countries. In 2005, Beijing used the setting of the 2009 heads of state summit to announce a \$10bn credit line for SCO members, to help them 'counter the shock of the international financial crisis'.¹⁵⁴ Chinese officials stated that the loan would

primarily focus on large transport and energy projects, and would go through the Business Council and the Interbank Association.¹⁵⁵ This was not the first time China used the SCO to provide loans and credit to SCO states, a precedent that was set in 2004 when Beijing pledged \$900m of preferential export buyers' credit to other SCO members. By 2007, Beijing had guaranteed an additional \$1bn of credit for SCO members.¹⁵⁶

Beijing has subsequently been able to utilise the financial and trade mechanisms it helped establish as a platform for furthering the BRI with SCO members, such as the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline, which, at over 1,100 miles long, traverses Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to Xinjiang. China also promised a \$16.3bn fund for the 'integration' of the region as part of BRI.¹⁵⁷ In addition, SCO discussions have led to bilateral trade and investment deals between SCO members and China, specifically for BRI projects. China will invest \$5.8bn in the construction of the Moscow-Kazan High Speed Railway, to be extended through China.¹⁵⁸ Facilitated by SCO dialogue, this will create continuous rail lines from the industrial and manufacturing heartlands of China to western Europe.

Conclusions and recommendations

The emergence of regulators like China with the capacity to disincentivise innovation may be one of the major causes of the stall in prosperity growth experienced in western countries since around 2000. Equally, civil liberties and political choice appear to be threatened both by the regulatory and standards environment being encouraged by Chinese firms active in relevant international bodies, and, to an as-yet unclear degree, by China's fostering of individual bureaucrats and foreign politicians through apparent client-type relationships. In both cases, the Covid-19 pandemic has begun to show the risks of China's influence within such international organisations.

With these intentions in mind, we can divide the recommended responses into:

- First, direct responses within international institutions;
- Second, domestic responses to relevant Chinese companies and;
- Third, responses to China's new 'homegrown' international institutions.

International institutions

Responses in the first area should be informed by an understanding of what role we want these institutions to have. Instead of moving towards supranational regulatory capacity, or strongly prescriptive technological capacity,

these institutions should be consensus-seeking in nature and able to maintain national sovereignty and therefore choice. This is to say that our approach to these organisations should uphold a ‘UK ethos’ in general.

Beyond this, the immediate priority is to use UK research capacity and intelligence services to build a more detailed picture of China’s activities within these institutions, including its apparent nurturing of individuals, and of violations, such as Article 100.

The next component is to respond to violations. These organisations generally depend on the presence of major western nations for credibility, and it is hard to argue that the US threat of withdrawal from the UPU has not had some success. The UK should therefore not only demand the expulsion for individual diplomats for violations such as of Article 100, but should, as a strategic priority, act in concert with the US and willing Commonwealth partners, as well as potentially others, in a ‘*strategic planning group*’ to form common positions, including responses to violations, and to push for the reform of international institutions (for example in elections rules and transparency, and penalties for bribery).

Through this group, the UK should put forward more candidates for positions in these organisations (proposed centrally and strategically by the UK government itself, not simply the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or Civil Service). The UK should also use this group to be more vocal about abuses. While some have proposed pre-emptive withdrawal from these institutions, we suggest it may be too early for these tactics: instead, the strategy should be to generate and use numbers, among countries and delegates, then to use the group to increase the costs of siding with China when it violates rules, as well as to work with parties

excluded by China (in particular Taiwan) to push for representation.

It is also important that this approach by the UK is informed by a more systematic understanding of technological strategy within industrial policy. China has a clear understanding of how to use standard-setting to its advantage (if not for its growth in the long-term, given that its strategy is liable to entrench the incumbents that have the least incentive to innovate). It is not clear that UK institutions, such as BSI (formerly the British Standards Institute) share this capacity.

Failure to address Chinese behaviour is liable to lead to technological ‘lock-in’ around Chinese technologies and standards, which, as the analysis of internet and facial recognition standards has demonstrated, implies grave consequences for innovation, wealth generation, and civil liberties elsewhere.

Domestic responses

The next area is the domestic UK response to the Chinese companies that use international organisations to further the technological interests of their state-backer, especially those whose activities pose a threat to civil liberties. The opportunity for the UK post-Brexit is considerable, given its potential to be a ‘beacon’ for liberties and democratic choice.

Following the October 2015 UK state visit by President Xi Jinping, the UK and Chinese governments heralded a new ‘Golden Era’ in bilateral relations,¹⁵⁹ characterised by increased Chinese foreign investment into UK industries and bilateral trade. The central document of this era was the UK-China Joint Statement 2015, which described how the visit provided an ‘historic opportunity’ for UK-China relations, and that the two countries will commit

to building a 'global comprehensive strategic partnership' for the 21st Century, ushering in this new 'golden era' featuring 'enduring, inclusive and win-win cooperation'.¹⁶⁰ This document was also the blueprint for increased Chinese investment into UK industries at a time when considerable economic stimulus was needed.¹⁶¹ Emphasising bilateral trade and Chinese FDI, the memorandum included several overtures towards increasing good governance practice, accountability and transparency, and a fair and open mutual understanding of each other's national interests, including to:

'enhance political trust based on equality and mutual respect and, in that spirit, recognise the importance each side attaches to its own political system, development path, core interests and major concerns'.

The immediate period after the announcement saw a rise in both Chinese investment in UK businesses and overall bilateral trade. In 2017 Chinese investment into the UK totalled £20bn, almost triple that of 2016.¹⁶² In 2016, total UK-China trade was worth £59.1bn. Running a trade deficit of £25.5bn, UK imports from China were £42.3bn and UK exports were worth £16.8bn.¹⁶³ However, Xi's state visit in 2015 outlined a UK-China relationship with limited emphasis on other matters central to the UK's national interests.

Domestically, the priority should be those companies that are both active in pursuing a technological agenda that diverges from the UK's, and that are implicated in the development of cyber technologies, mass surveillance, and facial recognition technologies, to the extent that these pose threats to UK security and civil liberties elsewhere. It should also apply to companies such as Norinco, as well as all their subsidiaries, employees and potentially even former

employees. Norinco is a technology company that the US State Department believes has helped the development of weapons of mass destruction by Iran and North Korea. Even a brief internet search suggests its subsidiaries' energy products are available in the UK, and their employees may be doing business in the UK. The UK government should investigate a full suite of restrictions, and in some cases sanctions, against certain companies, systematically outlining the rationale for an ongoing system of responses.

The UK's responses should also use the upcoming integrated defence, security and foreign policy review to reassess, then reshape, domestic dependency on Beijing in certain sectors. This includes dependency on Chinese imports, Chinese direct foreign investment, and corporate takeovers leading to strategic intellectual property acquisition. A report by the Henry Jackson Society in May 2020¹⁶⁴ highlighted the extent to which the UK is dependent on certain essential imports from China. The study found that the UK is strategically dependent on China for 229 categories of goods, with 57 of these having applications in critical national infrastructure. This review would include firms such as Huawei and China Reform Holdings, which have close ties to the CCP (Huawei CEO Ren Zhengfei has extensive links to both the CCP and the PLA) and their advanced levels of access to the UK's financial institutions and critical infrastructure.

One reason this is important is the 2017 National Intelligence Law, which requires Chinese companies to cooperate with China's intelligence agencies, at home and abroad. In effect this requires all Chinese firms to supply intelligence, including IP, to Beijing when requested, if operating in foreign countries.

Chinese-originated institutions

In response to China's emerging international institutions, the first area is information. The UK and its allies need to build a clearer picture of the mechanics and aims of these institutions. That said, it is already apparent that UK membership – and funding – of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is unwise and is liable to strengthen China's 'debt diplomacy' abroad, as well as much else. Similar concerns should inform the UK's approach to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Here, the UK should begin by working in a much more coordinated fashion with allies in the provision of infrastructural aid and spending especially, to create scale that can compete with Chinese offers to developing countries, and attach conditions designed to prevent the entrenchment of Chinese debt diplomacy. The UK should go a step further in this regard by supporting the establishment of a proposed 'D10'.

The D10 alliance would include the G7 countries (Japan, Italy, Germany, France, the UK, US, and Canada), in addition to India, South Korea and Australia. This bloc would make up some of the world's largest democracies, in addition to some of the globe's leading technology markets. This can be utilised to develop and create competing digital infrastructure to that being offered by Beijing, and even exported to other states as a means of making global technology standards more robust to Chinese practices.

These are among the policy shifts that will be needed if international institutional structures are to become more robust to the authoritarian governance practices which the Chinese government seeks to export into the existing global order.

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The Covid-19 Review

There will be plenty of official inquiries into the Covid-19 pandemic and the British Government's response to it. This series of reports is intended to help those sitting on these inquiries, as well as the public, MPs, peers and experts, to ask the right questions.

To ensure proper accountability and independent scrutiny, these reports are inspired by the need respectfully to examine some of the roots and handling of the crisis and how we can best prepare for future outbreaks.

The authors do not doubt the huge efforts of all involved in addressing the pandemic, from the frontline medical staff, to all those in care homes and the ancillary services, through to our political leaders. Nor do we doubt that, throughout the crisis, they acted with the best of motives.

But there are clearly alternative approaches and different national rates of success in responding to Covid-19. What is important is that we learn the right lessons from this outbreak so that, next time, it really will be different.

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The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated a reassessment among Western powers of their approach to China. This report by Radomir Tylecote and Robert Clark analyses China's strategy towards international institutions and indicates that there are two 'fronts' to China's contemporary expansionist strategy.

- The first is to influence and potentially co-opt existing organisations such as UN bodies;
- The second is to create rival Chinese-dominated international institutions to propagate political norms and promote China's regulatory and technical standards.

The authors' analysis of China's actions in the World Health Organisation (WHO) and in other core UN agencies demonstrates how Beijing is utilising this influence to promote a wide strategic agenda. The report also analyses China's activities in international technology standard-setting organisations (SSOs), where Beijing aims to internationalise its technology standards, which it increasingly sees as 'strategic weapons' – including for increasing state control of the internet and facial recognition. Finally, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is developing its own group of organisations including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a potential rival to the World Bank, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a counter to NATO.

The authors therefore draw up a series of recommendations for domestic and international responses, including:

- The UK should, as a strategic priority, act in concert with the US and willing Commonwealth partners in a 'strategic planning group' to form common positions, including responses to violations, and to push for the reform of international institutions.
- The UK government should investigate a full suite of restrictions, and in some cases sanctions, against certain companies, systematically outlining the rationale for an ongoing system of responses.
- The UK's response should use the upcoming integrated defence, security and foreign policy review to reassess domestic dependency on Beijing such as on Chinese imports, Chinese direct foreign investment and corporate takeovers.
- The UK should ensure the establishment of a D10 alliance which would include the G7 countries (Japan, Italy, Germany, France, the UK, US, and Canada), in addition to India, South Korea and Australia, to develop a competing digital infrastructure with more robust global technology standards.

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