China and Global Governance Panel

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China and the Advocacy of International Norms

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Abstract

Does China pursue a coherent approach towards the advocacy of international norms? What new norms does China bring to international politics? How is China’s norm advocacy likely to influence its behaviour as a stakeholder in global governance? These are all deceptively difficult questions to address, not least because of the difficulties involved in decoupling normative persuasions from strategic intent. In this regard, China is little different from any other state within the international system. Its potential to act as a peer competitor to the United States, however, means that its international behaviour is under far more scrutiny compared with other emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and South Africa. Thus China’s role as a stakeholder in global governance has to be seen in the context of its rising global power. As a relative newcomer to global governance, China is often perceived as a laggard in advocating international norms and practices. This paper seeks to question that assumption by identifying some key trends in norm advocacy in the specific realm of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Particular attention is given to the juxtaposition between traditional norms that reflect a continuing distrust of Western hegemony and new functional norms that reveal a greater openness to experimentation. Caught between the past and the present, China’s identity as a norm advocate remains deeply conservative but this does not imply that the agendas of liberal states are likely to be subverted.
Introduction

China’s role as a stakeholder in global governance is directly linked to its status as a rising global power. Its potential to act as a peer competitor to the United States means that its international behaviour is under far more scrutiny compared with other emerging powers within the international system. Realist arguments suggesting that a rising China has the potential to subvert the Western dominated liberal order have reaffirmed the importance of normative concerns. Regardless of where one stands in the debate, addressing the question of how China’s growing power is translating into influence over the norms of international conduct is now of fundamental importance to contemporary debates in international relations.

As a relative newcomer to global governance, China is often perceived as a laggard in advocating international norms and practices. Seen through the prism of Western liberal order, Chinese behaviour has largely been assessed on the basis of norms compliance rather than norms advocacy. In strictly power terms, China is seen to be either a status quo or revisionist power intent on changing the norms, rules, and institutions of the international system to accord with its national interests. The problem with this approach is that it fails to capture the ways in which China is seeking to project its own norms and values into the international arena as well as locate its national interests within a broader global framework. China’s expanding global presence means that it no longer has the option of conducting foreign policy from a distance. It now has little choice but to become an active participant in shaping the evolving global order.

How can we best interpret China’s approach towards the advocacy of international norms? What new norms does China bring to international relations? And how is China’s norm advocacy likely to influence its behaviour as a stakeholder in global governance? In this paper I seek to interpret China’s normative contribution to global governance with a focus upon evolving norms relating to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Drawing upon official discourses and recent responses to international events, particular attention is given to the juxtaposition between the advocacy of traditional norms that reflect a continuing distrust of

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Western hegemony and new functional norms that reveal a greater openness to experimentation. Caught between the past and the present, I argue that China’s identity as a norm advocate remains deeply conservative but this does not imply that the agendas of liberal states are likely to be subverted. On the contrary, the current approach is less a direct challenge to the prevailing liberal world order and more indicative of internal tensions over how to engage the world while retaining exclusive rights over future socio-economic and political development.

**China and International Norms**

International norms reflect national interests and provide a means of monitoring how states perceive their place in the world. No state advocates norms that are counter to its interests; hence the difficulty of decoupling normative persuasions from strategic intent. International norms are also often at odds with actual state behaviour. Moreover, norms are often contradictory and in a state of constant evolution.

Clearly, China is not alone in being caught between its normative claims and strategic priorities. Rather the uniqueness of China’s normative status lies in its dual identity as a powerful yet still developing state. China’s modernization drive has benefitted considerably from the global expansion of liberal norms, especially in the economic realm. Despite ongoing frictions over the revaluation of the RMB and economic nationalism, as well as growing factionalism within the party-state over the future trajectory of liberalization, I would argue that support for liberal economic norms is likely to continue. Foot and Walter’s recent study of China’s responses to macro-economic stabilization and financial regulation attests to the value that Chinese elites place upon learning from international experience in order to guide domestic economic reform.³

The political impetus behind China’s norms advocacy is more difficult to discern. On the one hand, as a leading sponsor of greater equality within the international system, China continues to attract legitimacy gains, especially in the eyes of other developing states. On the other, its willingness to accept more responsibility for dealing with global challenges across a range of issues remains highly circumscribed. This, in part, is because global governance is seen to

begin and end at the domestic level; it is also a consequence of the tendency to conceive of international responsibility in relativistic as opposed to absolute terms. Any suggestion that China should garner moral authority by sharing responsibility with the world’s dominant power is coldly received in Beijing. Above all, the bilateral US-China relationship is a major determinant of China’s normative calculus.

This is not to suggest, however, that China’s identity as a norms advocate is primarily subsumed under the prevailing power hierarchy. Nor is it clear that the evolving Chinese approach is tangential to broader shifts in international politics. If we move beyond a traditional focus on the promotion of liberal progressive norms as the sine qua non of norms advocacy, it becomes clearer that the Chinese approach is fairly unique and may offer some useful insights into how state-centric advocacy is interpreted and understood within the broader realm of international politics.

In this paper I offer a preliminary interpretation of Chinese norms advocacy for the purpose of opening a debate. Rather than promote a singular notion of China as pursuing either a revisionist or cooperative approach, I suggest three different guises: defender of classical sovereignty norms, proponent of civilizational norms, and selective arbiter of global governance norms.

Defender of Classical Sovereignty Norms

China is deeply conservative in its approach towards international norms. Its guiding doctrine of the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence’ namely mutual respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other states; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence is consistent with European classical sovereignty based upon respect for legal equality between states, territorial integrity, and non-intervention in the affairs of the nation-state.

For Beijing, new thinking on sovereignty that holds states accountable for alleged human rights violations sets a dangerous precedent. This does not mean, however, that it is wholly resistant to liberal progressive norms. To date, in supporting some interventions to protect civilians subject to the approval of the United National Security Council and the consent of the host country, it has taken a minimalist stance based upon pragmatism rather than conviction. A further shift in this direction is likely to be stimulated by the ‘go global strategy’ that seeks to
internationalize Chinese state owned enterprises and invest in natural and energy resources overseas as a hedge against future increases in commodity prices.

In engaging with the new sovereignty agenda, China faces a central paradox in that it cannot advocate political liberal norms externally in the absence of reforms internally. Even in those cases where China is working under the auspices of the United Nations to help reconstruction efforts in conflict ridden states, it is in the uncomfortable position of working collectively to bring about stability based upon free and fair elections that do not exist in the Chinese context. China is likely to remain a conservative advocate of international norms, however the maintenance of a purely defensive posture is already under strain and may well prove untenable over the longer term.

Proponent of Civilizational Norms

In more recent times, China has advocated a complementary set of Chinese norms focused upon the peaceful co-existence of civilizations rather than nation-states. Often cited official references to 和平发展 (peaceful development) 和谐世界 (harmonious world) and 生态文明 (ecological civilization) do not collectively inspire a universalist ideology, but they do reaffirm the Chinese vision of a multipolar world that embraces both a pre-modern emphasis upon differences amongst civilizations and a 21st century vision of industrialization that is greener and less resource-intensive. These indigenous norms have political utility: they act as a counterbalance to the doctrine of power struggle and competition between states; and they buttress a socialist form of political authority that privileges equality and redistribution within the international system.

More broadly, these emerging norms project the image of China as a civilizational power beyond the confines of the nation-state. In a speech in Beijing in June 2011, the then Director General of the Policy Panning Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Le Yucheng, referred to China as a civilization rather than a simple nation.4 Echoing the famous adage by Lucian Pye that China is ‘a civilization hiding behind a nation’, he drew attention to a

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fundamental value underpinning the Chinese worldview of harmony amongst diversity. While such a worldview reflects an important aspect of China’s national identity, there exists an inherent contradiction between the implied hierarchy amongst civilizations and multipolarity in a harmonious world.

For those of us concerned with global governance, the question is whether these norms resonate beyond Chinese borders. They are clearly Sino-centric. However, this is not in itself a reason for dismissal. The underlying grand narrative of restoring ancient civilizations to their rightful place within the society of states does provide inspiration for other states with long civilizational histories. In recent bilateral discussions between China and Pakistan, President Zardari alluded to the bond between civilizations; Greece has referred to civilizational connections in its recent response to criticisms over Chinese infrastructure development; and within the Alliance of Civilizations initiative announced by the UN Secretary General in July 2005 a number of states (including China) are working together to promote collective action in countering extremist forces.

The more penetrating question is whether these norms appeal on grounds of political morality? And here lies the rub: China is on the side of the developing countries but it now sits at the table with the rich industrialized Western states. The shift from recipient to stakeholder is a difficult transition and one that shall inevitably affect China’s normative influence at the global level. Indeed, China now faces serious challenges in managing the concerns of developing states with regard to its new status within the G20.

Selective Arbiter of Global Governance Norms

China’s core ambition to promote democratization within the international system falls short of support for democratic norms of transparency, accountability, and public participation. The latter are still largely perceived as Western hegemonic norms that seek to undermine China’s power and influence in the world. It is, therefore, within the realm of global governance that we are likely to witness future tensions over the sharing of norms. On the surface it is reasonable to assume that China’s statist position on norms advocacy is likely to be more amenable to dealing with arms control or financial regulation and less conducive to responding

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6 Interviews United Nations 26 March 2012
to humanitarian catastrophes. International aid is likely to fall somewhere in between. Although the Chinese approach claims to support the norm of recipient ownership, it is not clear how China’s aid policy will be able to respond to problems of corruption and dependency within host states, especially in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. Pragmatism may well have its limits.

An examination of China’s responses to emerging international norms provides an important testing ground for evaluating the degree to which its approach is likely to generate normative contestation. In contrast to extant rules that allow limited space for negotiation, new ‘norms in the making’ create more opportunities for engagement. This, in turn, allows for a closer analysis of discursive shifts and the interactive dynamic between global and national interests. Above all, the assumption here is that it is in the realm of emerging new norms where China’s presence is likely to be most visible.

While a comprehensive assessment of China’s normative engagement in global governance is beyond the scope of this study, a deeper analysis of one specific area in which China is playing a more active role can yield important insights. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding is one area that remains understudied. International norms are emerging and China’s involvement is critical in the effort to establish a global framework. As in other areas of global governance, China has shifted from a position of skepticism during the 1990s towards a more supportive stance in the first decade of the 21st century. And yet, confusion still exists over its recent responses to events in the Middle East. This is one area of actual practice that merits immediate attention.

**Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding**

*The Responsibility to Protect*

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China has special responsibilities for maintaining international peace and security that set it apart from other emerging global powers. Based upon the principle of ‘great power unanimity’ its veto power in Security Council decision-making provides significant political leverage over the future.

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7 Decisions in the Security Council are made by affirmative vote of nine out of the fifteen members including the permanent five.
trajectory of international interventions. For the most part, China has tended to abstain rather than vote against resolutions. Recent exceptions include vetoing Security Council sanctions against Burma in 2007, and blocking draft resolutions along with Russia, in October 2011 and February 2012 respectively, condemning the Syrian’s violent suppression of opposition forces.

While it is clear that China maintains a strong defense of the state sovereignty norm, it is becoming increasingly flexible over the interpretation of non-interference in domestic affairs revealing a greater willingness to respond to conflicts within states on a case-by-case basis. Humanitarian crises are now officially seen as a ‘legitimate concern of the international community’. And in cases where national authorities are failing to protect their populations from gross violations of human rights, Beijing has given its consent to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm outlined in the World Summit Outcome Document (paragraphs 38 and 139) that limits intervention to instances of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

Here the case of Libya is instructive. China first supported United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1970 invoking the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in response to escalating violence following a crackdown on protestors in February 2011. At the time, the PRC government faced a serious dilemma when they discovered that an estimated total of 36,000 Chinese citizens were also in need of protection. Following an emergency uplift, Beijing engaged in diplomatic engagement with both sides of the conflict to ensure the further protection of its commercial interests as well as promote the image of an honest broker. In June 2011, President Hu Jintao hosted the Libyan opposition leader for talks following an earlier meeting with Libya’s foreign minister, Abdelati Obeidi.

Unconditional support for civilians caught up in the conflict was short lived. China abstained from using its veto power to block resolution 1973 authorizing NATO military air strikes against the Gaddafi regime in accordance with chapter VII of the United Nations Charter revealing ambivalence over humanitarian intervention. It now recognizes the National Transitional Council but is not, as yet, actively engaged in post-conflict resolution. In February 2012 the Ministry of Commerce sent a delegation of government officials and corporate

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executives to inspect Chinese investments in Tripoli and Benghazi with a view to becoming involved in national reconstruction efforts.

China’s changing position over intervening in Libya provoked intense domestic debate about the relationship between the principle of non-interference and the national interest. Many commentators raised concerns that China was now at risk of undermining the sovereignty principle and creating a new precedent for military intervention. Others asserted that the conflict revealed ‘strong behind the scenes manipulation by Western powers’ which China could not afford to condone. External criticism centred upon Chinese complicity over covertly arming the Gadhafi regime and its lack of support for a non-NATO coalition to help rebuild Libya post-crisis.

In learning lessons from the Libyan experience, China pulled out its workers from Syria and took a more assertive stance at the UNSC. The fact that it vetoed a second resolution despite support from the Arab League suggests that domestic concerns and strategic interests were largely at play. At the time, a wave of unrest in China’s ethnic border regions of Xinjiang and Tibet would have likely hardened its defensive posture against regime change. A statement by Ambassador Li Baodong, Permanent Resident to the United Nations, at a Security Council meeting on 12 March 2012 reaffirmed China’s opposition to ‘intervention of a country’s internal affairs under the pretext of ‘humanitarianism’. China also has a strategic interest in offsetting Western influence in the Middle East and protecting its investments including energy contracts, refineries, and workers abroad.

Following a year of violent civil unrest in Syria, China is now under increasing pressure to support international efforts to broker a peace plan under the auspices of the United Nations. Beijing has given its consent to the 6 – point statement proposed by Kofi Annan, the special United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria, calling for a ceasefire between Syrian rebels and the government, withdrawal of heavy weapons and troops from populated areas,

12 On 28 February 2012 rioting took place amongst the Uighur population near the city of Kashgar. Tibetan areas in China have witnessed a wave of at least 30 self-immolation protests by mostly Tibetan monks and nuns since March 2011.
13 http://www.china-un.org/eng/dbtxx/hyxx/lbddzys/t913340.htm
humanitarian assistance, release of political prisoners, free movement and access for journalists, and political dialogue. It has also committed US$2 million in emergency humanitarian aid to the Syrian people through the International Committee of the Red Cross. And sent diplomatic envoys to discuss a Syrian peace plan with the government.

Recent responses to humanitarian crises in Libya and Syria suggest that Chinese skepticism over the responsibility to protect norm remains intact. What has changed is that it now seems more willing to consider multiple interests rather than simply promote an absolutist interpretation of non-intervention. No longer standing against the R2P norm, Beijing is playing an active role in moderating and at times constraining its development.\(^\text{14}\) Above all, it would seem that the lesson gained from Libya was that military intervention leads to sectarian civil war.\(^\text{15}\)

Beyond responses to specific events, many scholars have referred to China’s increasing involvement in peacekeeping missions as a sign of positive normative change. Once viewed as a weapon of imperialist ambition, peacekeeping is now firmly on the political agenda. Chinese participation in peacekeeping has increased exponentially over the past two decades and it now ranks 15\(^{th}\) in the world. In August 2011, almost 2000 Chinese staff officers, police, and observers were serving on 12 United Nations peacekeeping operations. Moreover, China is now the 7\(^{th}\) largest financial contributor after the United States, Japan, United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy (3.9% of total contributions in 2011-2012 compared to 27.14% from the United States).\(^\text{16}\) Converging interests appear to be behind this positive shift including the need to protect investments and workers abroad, maintain a peaceful international environment for development, facilitate the modernization of the military, and improve China’s image as a responsible rising power.\(^\text{17}\) According to the Chinese scholar Zhao Lei, involvement

\(^{15}\) People’s Daily, 20 February 2012.

It is doubtful, however, how much China will be able to wield influence in the absence of deploying combat troops. Its missions largely involve engineering battalions and medical units. Whether Chinese troops will be involved in combat operations in the future will likely depend upon the ability to negotiate a fine line between claims of impartiality and the use of force. Capacity issues also raise questions for the Chinese military, especially in terms of an ability to communicate in the English language.\footnote{Interview Department of UN Peacekeeping, March 2012.}

\textit{National Ownership}

In assessing normative shifts in foreign policy less attention has been given to China’s involvement in the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (UNPC). The UNPC was established in 2005 in response to growing recognition of the need to respond collectively to prevent the recurrence of violence in states emerging from civil conflict. Ambiguity over the concept of peacebuilding has led to some confusion over priorities and delivery mechanisms. While some scholars and practitioners favour a central focus upon post-conflict reconstruction, others advocate a broader definition that includes preventive action. Either way, intervening to assist states and societies in the recovery from conflict covers a broad spectrum of activities including election monitoring, security-sector reform, economic governance, transnational justice mechanisms, and economic governance. The dominant paradigm is that of a state that is ‘politically liberal, open to the global economy, and respectful of international human rights obligations.’\footnote{Roland Paris (2004) \textit{A War’s End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.} It is precisely in this emerging normative context where the tensions between China’s domestic political persuasions and its international obligations are most acute.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, China has automatic membership of the 31-member organization that includes representatives from ECOSOC, the General Assembly, major financial donors, and top troop contributors. To date, it has played a central role in diluting the new sovereignty approach that makes a clear distinction between post-conflict


\textsuperscript{19} Interview Department of UN Peacekeeping, March 2012.

states regaining ‘international legal sovereignty’ and the weak claim to de facto sovereignty over governance from within.\textsuperscript{21} In reversing the trend of circumventing the state for the purpose of securing peace and stability, China in alliance with other developing states has consistently reaffirmed the primacy of state sovereignty in peacebuilding interventions.\textsuperscript{22} Revealing a strong preference for building economic governance as the precursor for peace, PRC officials have advocated the norm of national ownership over international assistance predicated upon the consent of the host government.\textsuperscript{23} In the words of Ambassador Liu Zhenmin at a Security Council debate on post-conflict peacebuilding in July 2009 ‘without development …justice and the rule of law are only castles in the air.’\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Comprehensive Peacebuilding}

The Chinese approach towards peacebuilding was clearly articulated in a four point statement presented by Ambassador Wang Min, Deputy Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations, at a Security Council debate in January 2011: post-conflict countries bear primary responsibility for peacebuilding; national ownership and capacity building is the key to success; full consideration must be given to the priority needs of the countries concerned; and comprehensive strategies are needed to advance conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and development in tandem.\textsuperscript{25}

An emphasis upon comprehensive peacebuilding creates more opportunities to become involved in missions that are not strictly focused upon combat operations and security sector reform, where China’s involvement has been largely non-existent. Actual involvement in ongoing country specific peacebuilding missions is currently limited to Liberia. Peacebuilding activities in this case are centered upon countering transnational crime and drug trafficking which on the surface appear to complement China’s involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisataton agenda. Advocating an expanded vision of peacebuilding also provides greater flexibility and helps to dilute the dominant concerns of Western liberal states.

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\textsuperscript{24} http://www.china-un.org/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/thematicissues/peacebuilding/t575181.htm
\textsuperscript{25} http://www.china-un.org/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/thematicissues/peacebuilding/t824196.htm
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The above discussion suggests that China is becoming more active in advancing new norms that mesh with its national interests. It is possible to discern a shift in foreign policy away from an absolutist stance on non-intervention and towards greater flexibility. However, an important distinction needs to be made between changes in normative persuasion and new diplomatic practice. Active participation in resolving conflict on a bilateral level does not necessarily constitute a shift towards active support for humanitarian intervention. Current responses via the Security Council and Peacebuilding Commission are contradictory at best and reveal a continuing reluctance on the part of Beijing to support a new sovereignty agenda. It is, however, possible to identify a singular motivation that connects various shifts in China’s approach: the desire to shape the boundaries of what constitutes legitimate intervention for humanitarian purposes.

Conclusion

So what are the implications for global governance? Is China a custodian of the liberal global order? Or is it more intent upon remaking the rules to align with a new vision of international politics? At least in the case of humanitarian crises, this analysis suggests that the answer lies somewhere in-between. The normative ascendancy of the West may well have reached its peak, but, as yet, there is no alternative Chinese order in waiting. Rather than advancing a new normative agenda, political elites seem more intent upon defending their own national sovereignty against external interference, constraining the scope of liberal norms, and experimenting with more functionally oriented principles.

China’s normative leadership is still at an early stage of development and cannot be easily disentangled from internal challenges. It is tempting to interpret contestation over the norms guiding international responses to humanitarian crises as evidence of Chinese intentions to subvert liberal order. Growing anxieties that China will refrain from taking on international responsibilities commensurate with its growing power and influence is already having a destabilizing effect on international relations. And it is this uncertainty, rather than any conscious effort to undermine Western liberal order that poses the greatest challenge to global governance.
At a time when attention is primarily focused on how China’s rise is likely to affect its relations with Western liberal states, the United States in particular, it is important to recognize that China’s response to collective action problems is already having an influence, either directly or indirectly, on the changing balance of responsibility between the West and the developing world. This is an important dimension of the relationship between China’s rising power and international norms that is often missing in current debates. Whether China can act as a catalyst for driving normative change within the context of its relations with other emerging powers is a critical question that merits further attention. In the future it is likely that the new PRC leadership will have to tread a fine line between placating dominant Western powers and expressing solidarity with new powers on the rise. At present, there is little evidence to suggest that China will have the political latitude to act unilaterally.