

The United Nations, with Chinese characteristics

Beijing is not seeking to replace the post-war order; it is trying to make its institutions, rules and priorities serve a more sovereign, state-led vision of global governance

China's latest articulation of its vision for global governance is notable less for what it seeks to abolish than for what it seeks to reinterpret. Beijing is not calling for the destruction of the United Nations-centred international system, nor is it openly proposing a rival constitutional order. Instead, it is presenting itself as a champion of the existing system while steadily arguing that its institutions, rules and priorities must be understood differently.

That distinction matters. On June 17, China's State Council Information Office released a white paper titled More Just and Equitable Global Governance: China's Principles, Proposals and Actions. Its most revealing formulation was also its most conservative. It called on countries to uphold the international system with the United Nations at its core, preserve an international order based on international law and respect the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, rather than attempt to "reinvent the wheel".

A month later, on July 16, 29 governments signed the founding agreement of the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization in Shanghai. The new organisation, headquartered in China, invokes the United Nations Charter and adopts a stated "people-centred" approach.

Taken together, the two developments offer a useful window into Beijing's method. China is not attempting to replace the architecture created after the Second World War with a wholly separate system. It is seeking to work from within that architecture, place greater weight on some of its principles, diminish the influence of others and create new institutions through which its preferred interpretation can become routine practice.

The result is neither a simple defence of the status quo nor a clean break with it. It is reform without rupture.

Reforming the order without abandoning it

The familiar question of whether China is a defender of the existing international order or a revisionist power is increasingly inadequate. International orders are not single structures that countries either accept or reject in their entirety. States may defend one part of the system while challenging another, and China has followed precisely this pattern.

Beijing calls its approach reform. The Global Governance Initiative, launched by President Xi Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Plus meeting in Tianjin on September 1, 2025, provides the clearest expression of that thinking.

The initiative identified three broad shortcomings in contemporary global governance: inadequate representation of the Global South, weakening adherence to international rules, and ineffective institutions, particularly in development and emerging areas such as artificial intelligence. It proposed five principles — sovereign equality, the international rule of law, multilateralism, a people-centred approach and the pursuit of practical results.

At the same time, it made an important qualification. Reform, according to Beijing, does not mean overturning the existing international order or constructing an alternative system outside it.

This is consistent with several strands of Chinese foreign-policy thinking developed over decades. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the call for the democratisation of international relations and the idea of a community with a shared future for humanity all seek to place sovereignty, equality and cooperation at the centre of international affairs.

The June white paper attempts to bring these ideas together. Development, security, civilisation and governance — the four broad areas associated with China's global initiatives — are presented as parts of a comprehensive framework.

Yet it would be a mistake to read this coherence backwards and conclude that every step of China's global institutional strategy was designed according to a fixed master plan. Its approach has evolved incrementally. Positions have accumulated, experiments have been tested and institutions have emerged around areas where Chinese interests and diplomatic influence could be advanced.

What once appeared fragmented is now being given a common vocabulary.

That vocabulary is important because it enables Beijing to portray itself not as an insurgent challenging the international system but as a country helping that system adapt to a changing distribution of power.

Sovereignty becomes the principal lens

The strongest organising principle in this vision is sovereignty.

The United Nations Charter itself contains tensions that have never been completely resolved. It affirms the sovereign equality of states and limits intervention in matters essentially within domestic jurisdiction. At the same time, its broader commitments include human dignity, human rights, development and fundamental freedoms.

The post-war international system therefore brought together two ideas that do not always sit comfortably together: a world composed of sovereign states and a growing recognition that individuals possess rights that governments cannot legitimately disregard.

China places sovereignty firmly at the centre of this balance.

There is nothing inherently illegitimate about that position. Sovereign equality is not a Chinese invention, nor can every defence of sovereignty be dismissed as authoritarian self-protection. For smaller states, former colonies and countries vulnerable to pressure from stronger powers, sovereignty remains a fundamental protection against domination, political tutelage and great-power privilege.

China's emphasis on the democratisation of international relations also addresses a genuine problem. States may be formally equal under international law while possessing profoundly un-

China does not need to dismantle the post-war order to change it. Beijing is learning to speak its language, inhabit its institutions and build platforms around its interpretation of sovereignty, equality and development. Its challenge is subtler than a rival order: it is a contest over who defines rules, who interprets them and who must obey when the verdict goes against them. The future may belong not to a new order, but to a different reading still.

equal political, economic and military influence. Calls for greater equality therefore have considerable resonance, particularly in the developing world.

But sovereignty becomes more contentious when it becomes the principal lens through which every other international norm is interpreted.

The Global Governance Initiative describes sovereign equality as the foremost premise of global governance and connects it to non-interference and the right of every government to choose its political system and development path.

This creates an important distinction that should not be blurred.

Democratising relations between states is not the same as democratising relations within states. The first concerns whether powerful countries should enjoy privileges denied to weaker ones. The second concerns whether governments are accountable to the people over whom they exercise authority.

A country can legitimately demand equality between states while still being expected to answer questions about rights and accountability within its own borders.

That distinction is at the heart of the debate over China's model.

The rule of law and the problem of adverse judgments

The same tension appears in Beijing's interpretation of international law.

China's criticism of unilateral sanctions, extraterritorial jurisdiction and the selective application of international rules cannot simply be dismissed. Powerful states have frequently used economic and legal instruments to impose costs on weaker countries while creating exceptions for themselves. Such practices undermine confidence in the universality of international law.

But international law also requires something more difficult than agreement in principle. It requires states to accept procedures whose outcomes may not favour them.

The 2016 arbitration over the South China Sea remains an especially revealing test.

The tribunal did not decide sovereignty over land territories. It addressed questions concerning maritime entitlements, the status of geographical features and state conduct under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. China rejected the proceedings, arguing that the tribunal had exceeded its jurisdiction and that the process violated the principle of state consent.

Ten years later, Beijing continues to describe the award as illegal, null and void and without binding force.

The difficulty for China's broader argument is that the Convention provides for arbitration under specified circumstances and states that refusal to participate does not necessarily halt proceedings. It also provides that awards are final and must be complied with.

The deeper issue, therefore, is not whether China had grounds to dispute the tribunal's jurisdiction. Those grounds can and should be examined seriously. The question is what happens after the dispute over jurisdiction has itself been settled through the treaty's prescribed procedure.

Can international law constrain a major power when an authoritative decision runs against what that power considers a core national interest?

That question cannot be answered by pointing to Western double standards. Western governments weaken their own rule-of-law arguments when they demand compliance from others while reserving exceptions for themselves. But hypocrisy elsewhere does not make exceptionalism legitimate at home.

If China is calling for international law to be applied uniformly, its own willingness to accept unfavourable legal outcomes will inevitably become part of the test.

People-centred governance — but who speaks for the people?

China's language of a people-centred international order is another important component of its argument.

The Global Governance Initiative describes people across nations as the fundamental actors and ultimate beneficiaries of global governance. Beijing places particular emphasis on peace, development, public health, security, technological inclusion and the ability of governments to deliver tangible improvements in living conditions.

These are not trivial objectives. Economic and



social rights matter, and Western policy has at times treated them as secondary to political and civil rights.

The difficulty arises when people are understood primarily as beneficiaries of state performance rather than as rights-bearing citizens capable of challenging the state.

The right to development itself does not support such a narrow interpretation. The human person is both participant and beneficiary, while human rights and fundamental freedoms are understood as interconnected rather than competing categories.

The central question, therefore, is not simply whether a government delivers development. It is who defines development, who participates in that definition and who has the ability to challenge the government when its claims of success are disputed.

This is where Beijing's conception differs from a more rights-centred understanding of global governance.

Chinese diplomacy has increasingly promoted economic and social rights, a position shared by many developing countries. At the same time, Beijing has often challenged international mechanisms that monitor violations or impose consequences on governments.

The distinction is subtle but consequential.

China is not necessarily seeking to remove human rights from international institutions. Rather, it seeks greater state authority over their interpretation and over the mechanisms through which rights are invoked.

Its people-centred model is therefore heavily mediated by the state. Its emphasis falls on delivery, stability and development rather than on individuals possessing claims that can be pressed against governments.

Why China's argument finds an audience

Beijing's growing influence cannot be explained solely through diplomatic pressure or propaganda. Its appeal also rests on genuine weaknesses within the existing system.

Africa accounts for a substantial share of United Nations membership but has no permanent seat on the Security Council. The International Monetary Fund's latest quota review increased overall quotas but did not alter relative voting shares. Climate finance has repeatedly fallen short of promises, with the annual \$100 billion goal reached only in 2022, two years later than originally intended. Even the higher level of climate finance reported subsequently has been unevenly distributed, with adaptation receiving a relatively small share.

For many developing countries, these are not abstract grievances. They are evidence of an international system whose formal promise of equality sits alongside institutions built around historical distributions of power.

Western sanctions, extraterritorial legal measures, technology restrictions and selective responses to international conflicts have further reinforced perceptions that international rules are sometimes applied according to who possesses power.

China has learned to use these contradictions effectively.

But the existence of Chinese strategic opportunism does not make the underlying grievances imaginary.

Nor does the Global South constitute a unified bloc waiting for Beijing to provide leadership. Governments in Asia, Africa, Latin America and elsewhere can support reform of the Security Council, welcome Chinese investment, oppose unilateral coercive measures, disagree with China's maritime claims and maintain close relations with the United States or Europe at the same time.

Strategic autonomy is often the objective.

China may therefore find considerable support for individual elements of its agenda without securing endorsement of the entire Chinese model.

That distinction is crucial when assessing claims about the size of China's coalition.

The Group of Friends began with 43 members in December 2025, and Chinese officials later said membership had exceeded 60. The June white paper referred to nearly 160 countries and international organisations that had welcomed or supported the Global Governance Initiative.

These numbers should not be treated as evidence of a single political bloc. Membership, participation in meetings, support for specific reforms and endorsement of China's complete vision are different things.

Beijing's influence is real, but it should not be exaggerated into uniformity.

From diplomatic language to institutional practice

The most consequential aspect of China's strategy may be the movement from interpretation to institution-building.

The United Nations provides universal legitimacy and a vocabulary that almost every government recognises. Other organisations and coalitions provide additional spaces for coalition-building, agenda-setting and practical implementation.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, the Group of 77 plus China and the Group of Friends can help develop political support. Sector-specific organisations can then translate broad principles into standards, training, financing and administrative networks.

This is a form of institutional layering.

Instead of replacing existing structures overnight, new practices and institutions are placed alongside them and gradually become part of the normal machinery of international cooperation.

The World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization offers an early example.

It would be premature to claim that a single organisation headquartered in China represents the birth of a parallel international order. Its influence remains untested. Yet its political significance lies in the combination of two elements: an explicit invocation of United Nations principles and a China-convened institutional platform in one of the most consequential emerging areas of global governance.

Artificial intelligence is still being regulated, and international standards remain contested. Establishing a permanent forum gives Beijing a seat not merely at the negotiating table but closer to the process through which rules, technical standards and development priorities are shaped.

China's promises at the organisation's launch — including thousands of training opportunities for developing countries, cooperation centres with regional organisations and access for dozens of countries to an artificial intelligence-based meteorological warning system — also illustrate the practical side of the strategy.

These are tangible benefits rather than grand declarations.

That may prove to be both the strength and the vulnerability of China's approach.

An order built around "real results" must ultimately be judged by sustained delivery. Diplomatic enthusiasm can be generated relatively quickly; durable institutions require money, expertise, credibility and consistent performance.

The real test is reciprocal restraint

China's vision should ultimately be judged not by the elegance of its principles but by what those principles require when compliance becomes inconvenient.

Representation offers the first test.

Beijing is right to highlight the exclusion of Africa from permanent membership of the Security Council. Yet China itself is a permanent member and possesses veto power. Its call for a more representative system will carry greater weight if it also explains how permanent membership should evolve and whether privileges associated with permanent status should be constrained.

Equality is most persuasive when it applies to hierarchies from which its advocate benefits. International law offers the harder test.

China is entitled to contest the jurisdiction of international tribunals and defend its interpretation of treaties. But a categorical rejection of an adverse award sits uneasily beside a demand for universal and uniform adherence to international law.

The same standard must apply to Western powers.

The United States and European countries cannot credibly defend a rules-based system while selectively invoking legal constraints, imposing sweeping unilateral measures or treating international institutions as legitimate only when their decisions align with their interests.

The answer to Chinese exceptionalism cannot be Western exceptionalism.

The same principle applies to the people-centred approach.

A genuinely people-centred international order must leave room for individuals, civil society, journalists, experts and independent institutions to question governments. If exter-

nal scrutiny is rejected whenever a government invokes sovereignty, participation becomes largely intergovernmental and accountability ends at the national border.

Development is essential, but development alone cannot define political agency.

A contest over the meaning of the existing order

China's approach should therefore not be reduced to a simple attempt to overthrow the international system. Its ambition is subtler.

Beijing has recognised that the existing order contains tensions that can be politically exploited. Sovereignty exists alongside human rights. Legal equality coexists with unequal power. Universal institutions operate within a hierarchy created by history. Development is recognised as a global objective but is backed by uneven resources. Multilateralism is widely endorsed while major powers routinely make exceptions for themselves.

China is positioning itself within these contradictions.

Its argument is strongest where the international system has failed to live up to its own promises. Its demand for greater representation, more reliable development finance, stronger respect for sovereign equality and less selective application of international law deserves serious consideration.

Its argument becomes weaker when sovereignty is transformed into immunity, when state performance substitutes for individual agency, or when international law is treated as binding only when its outcomes are acceptable.

The response from other major powers should therefore not be to defend every existing arrangement simply because China criticises it.

Nor should developing countries be asked to choose between competing camps.

A better response would be to repair the weaknesses that have made Beijing's message attractive in the first place: reform the representation of the Security Council, address voting imbalances in international financial institutions, provide dependable development and climate finance, restrain the use of sanctions and extraterritorial power, and apply international law with greater consistency.

Cooperation with China will remain indispensable on issues that do not respect borders — climate change, debt, pandemic preparedness, artificial intelligence safety, cyberspace and outer space.

Engagement, however, need not mean accepting every Chinese interpretation of international norms.

The June white paper matters precisely because China does not appear interested in abandoning the post-war order. It has chosen instead to inhabit its institutions, invoke its texts and organise coalitions around those parts of the system that best support its conception of sovereignty, equality and development. The future contest over global governance may therefore be less dramatic than the language of a new world order suggests.

It will not necessarily be fought over whether the United Nations survives. It will be fought over who gets to interpret the principles of the United Nations Charter, which institutions acquire authority to give those principles practical meaning, and whether major powers are prepared to accept those interpretations when the outcome runs against their interests.

That is the real test facing Beijing — and, no less importantly, Washington, Brussels and the wider international community.

A durable international order cannot be built merely by declaring equality, nor can it survive by defending privileges that have lost legitimacy. It must persuade states that rules apply beyond rhetoric and convince individuals that sovereignty does not make governments immune from accountability.

China is seeking to reshape that balance from within.

Whether it succeeds will depend not simply on the number of countries that attend its meetings or endorse its declarations, but on whether the institutions it helps create can deliver genuine public goods while accepting reciprocal restraint.

The post-war order, in other words, may not be entering an age of replacement. It may be entering an age of reinterpretation.

And in that contest, the most consequential question will not be who writes a new constitution for the world, but who succeeds in giving the old one a different meaning.