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Constructivist Aspects of The UN Security Council's Permanent Members' Conduct: The Case of China

Ljupcho Stojkovski

Abstract

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has been under an increasing international spotlight with the wars in Syria and Ukraine and the vetoes of some of its five permanent members (P5) in these wars. Yet, the P5 behave differently in and towards the UNSC, and this difference is not (only) explainable by material factors but also, as constructivist IR theory would argue, by the different ideational perspectives they have about world politics and their place in it. This paper deals with China's conduct in and toward the UN Security Council from a constructivist perspective. China's behavior rests on several notions, such as non-interference in the internal affairs of a State, and respect for its territorial integrity, as well as opposition to the use of force for regime change. China perceives the world as multipolar and pluralistic and considers that world politics should be conducted in a prudent and constructive manner that is based on consensus through consultation (among great powers) and the respect of the interests of all parties (including small and middle States). Since the start of the 21st century, China has been increasingly more active and assertive in the UNSC, which is evidenced by the fact that it is the permanent member with the most abstentions during this period and the only permanent member that has used the veto more times after the end of the Cold War than during it. At the same time, China wants to portray itself as a "responsible great power" in the UN and in the global order and pays considerable effort in building and maintaining this image. Yet, it stands for a restrictive interpretation of key concepts for international peace and security, such as sovereignty, responsibility, and threat to peace, and is not keen on Security Council reform.

Keywords: UN Security Council (UNSC), permanent five (P5), constructivism, China, international peace and security

Introduction

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is under constant scrutiny by the world public, especially when it is unable or unwilling to prevent a major international conflict, as has been the case over the past two years with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli bombing of Gaza. Calls and proposals for reform of the Council, as the body with the primary responsibility for ensuring the maintenance of international peace and security, have been constantly circulating. In the face of such huge failures of the Security Council, the finger is always pointed, rightly, at its five permanent members, who have the right to veto (and many other, at least implicit, privileges that arise from their permanent membership) on every substantive decision that this body can make. But apart from having the same rights and privileges under the UN Charter, the five permanent members – the United States, China, Russia, Great Britain, and France – differ quite a bit in how they behave in and towards the Security Council. Their differences are certainly due to differences in material factors (military force, economic power, other resources, etc.), but also in intangible, value-based, and ideational factors (identities, beliefs, discourses, worldviews) that they have for the world and for international politics (Reus-Smit, 2005). More precisely, as constructivist IR theory argues, material factors in themselves have no meaning unless they are put in context with the intangible, ideational, and normative views that give meaning to these material factors (Wendt, 1995). Terms such as "power" or "national interest" do not have an independent or self-evident meaning but depend on the values, identities and norms used by States, which, values, identities and norms are not something external, given to States, but are created through language and mutual interaction (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). That is why it is important to delve into these aspects of the permanent five members in order to understand their behavior in and towards the Security Council.

This paper will focus on the constructivist aspects – ideas, beliefs, identities, and discourses in and towards the Security Council – of one permanent member – China. In short, China identifies and presents itself as a "responsible great power". For China, the world is multipolar and pluralistic, and therefore China is expected to pursue a flexible and constructivist policy that is based on reaching consensus through consultations of major powers, but which should also take into account the interests of all parties (specifically small and medium-sized states). China promotes itself, as Xi points out, as "a builder of world peace, contributor to global development, defender of the international order, and provider of public goods".

(Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 5). However, Chinese normative views, for example, on sovereignty or human rights, differ to some extent from the widely agreed-upon international ones. For China, the United Nations are a "cornerstone for a state-led international order" (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 10) but it is trying to shape the UN according to its needs, understandings, and views on international politics. It is the UN where China most promotes itself as a responsible great power.

Responsible Great Power

China wants to portray itself in its actions on the international political scene, and especially in the UN, as a "responsible great power." The role of a responsible great power implies that it should pursue its interests as a great power but not stop there. The concept of a responsible great power:

> Calls for respect of the diversity and interdependence among different states and pursues the common security of the international community; the equality of the countries, big or small, strong or weak; peaceful means like the diplomatic, economic and cultural ways to solve the problems instead of the use or threat of use of force; the establishment of a more just and reasonable international order; more responsibilities of the great powers when confronting the global issues and balance between state sovereignty and international concerns. (Tiewa & Haibin, 2014, p. 424)

The identity of a responsible great power stems from China's global strategy, which is based on two elements: a perspective on the world as a multipolar and pluralistic place, and prudent management of great power relations aimed at correcting misperceptions and addressing common challenges. According to these views, pluralism and multipolarity imply that global power is gradually shifting from the West to the East and from established great powers to developing countries, and that global problems and challenges are interconnected and interdependent. China sees this trend of multipolarity and economic globalization to its advantage and believes that the balance of power is slowly being distributed more equally among the great powers. Because of this interdependence and multipolarity, no country, no matter how powerful, can resolve conflicts and crises around the world on its own, and therefore intensive dialogue and consultation among the great powers is needed (Lei, 2014). This also means that in finding solutions to world problems, the emphasis should be on achieving a global rather than a Western normative consensus (Foot, 2014).

Wise management of great power relations, however, should be based on mutual respect and aim for "win-win" cooperation. Mutual respect implies that great powers should be willing to listen to each other, put themselves in the shoes of the other great power, and try to understand and accommodate their positions. According to the former Chinese Ambassador to the USA, "win-win" cooperation means that the parties should abandon the all-or-nothing strategy when negotiating a solution and should welcome each other's successes and find opportunities for the other great power to succeed as well (Lei, 2014, pp. 3-4). In other words, the Chinese worldview tries to be democratic and inclusive towards all states, but at the same time it is hierarchical and in some ways favors the great powers (Fung & Lam, 2022).

It is exactly the concept of a responsible great power that can best explain China's position in and towards the Security Council, and towards the UN in general, which takes place along two separate lines: the significantly more involved and assertive position that China takes in the UN today, and the different identity that China manifests in the Security Council as opposed to the UN General Assembly.

Observing China's behavior in the Security Council, one can note China's increased activity, involvement, and assertiveness in the work of this body in the post-Cold War period, and especially in the last decade. First, although China was one of the founding great powers of the United Nations, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was not a permanent member of the Security Council for the first 26 years after its establishment. This changed in 1971, when, by General Assembly Resolution 2758, the PRC took the place of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in the Security Council (Lei, 2014; Wenqi & Xinyu, 2015). This did not mean, however, that China immediately began to act as a great power. In the 1970s and 1980s, Chinese diplomacy was guided by Deng Xiaoping's maxim that the Chinese government should "bide its time, hide its brightness, not seek leadership, but do something" (Foot, 2014, p. 1085). In practice, Chinese diplomats during that period were rather unskilled and silent, or as a former UN diplomat from that time described them: "They come. They smile. They leave." (as cited in Fullilove, 2011, p. 68). In the rare moments when they did speak during this period, it was often "propagandistic rhetoric carefully prepared in Beijing" (Fullilove, 2011, p. 68).

China's attitude towards the Council began to change in the 1990s, and an even more notable change can be observed in the last decade of this century. Modern Chinese diplomats are now "extraordinary sophisticated and capable" and have a "clear strategic vision" (Fullilove, 2011, p. 68). In the UNSC, since the end of the

Cold War until today, China has abstained the most of the five permanent members. China's abstentions are guided by its approach of "principled pragmatism" – on the one hand, the desire to maintain and present Chinese positions on a particular issue, but on the other hand, China should not be an obstacle and not block the Council. (Lei, 2014). In addition to abstaining the most, China is also the only permanent member of the Security Council to have used the veto more times since the end of the Cold War – 18 times, as of January 2026 – than during the entire period of the Cold War – 3 times (Dag Hammarskjöld Library, n.d.).

In contrast to this behavior in the Security Council, China presents a different face in the UN General Assembly. Thus, if we look at its voting preferences, in the Security Council, China votes identically to the US and the other permanent member states in 95% of cases, while in the General Assembly, it agrees with the US in only 11.7% of the votes, and with France and the UK in 44%. In contrast to the voting of the other P5 in the General Assembly, China's voting here coincides with that of the emerging and developing economies – for example, with the BRICS or the G77 countries, China coincides in 80% of the votes (Foot, 2014, p. 1089; Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 26). Such a sharp discrepancy is due to the amalgam that constitutes the identity of a responsible great power that China manifests in international relations, and which is best expressed in the United Nations – on the one hand, it identifies and presents itself as a great power that, together with other great powers, decides on international peace and security. On the other hand, China is also presented as a post-colonial, non-Western, middle-power developing country, which stands in solidarity with smaller and middle-sized countries and wants to present itself as their representative on the international stage (Foot, 2014; Garwood-Gowers, 2016). In other words, there are two Chinas in the UN - one before the General Assembly that is more rigid and doctrinaire, and one before the Security Council that is more pragmatic and flexible (Fullilove, 2011). A large part of this transformation and discrepancy is that China is a "powerful but poor major power" (Lei, 2014, p. 5), a "rising power, but a fragile one" (Chen, 2016, p. 12). This refers to, on the one hand, the enormous economic and growing military rise of China in the last few decades, but also to the poverty of its citizens, on the other.

Chinese Normative and Value Positions

China's worldview, and thus its foreign policy, is largely based on the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence." The five principles, which stem from the 1954 China-India Treaty and were later incorporated into the Chinese Constitution, include:

mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.). Although these principles largely coincide with some of the guiding principles of the UN Charter, China interprets them rather restrictively and conservatively. This is due to different normative understandings of the concept of sovereignty, the relationship of sovereignty with human rights and economic development, the use of force, but also to its own experiences and unresolved issues with ethnic separatist movements in the country.

Central to the "Five Chinese Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," the notions of sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and non-intervention differ from those inherent in the modern ("Western") interpretation of these institutions. Respect for territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs has a more than 2,000-year tradition in China (Wang, 2015). During this period, "Chinese intellectuals and government policymakers reached a consensus that sees sovereignty as the right [of the authorities] to autonomously handle domestic issues free from [any] external interference" (Wang, 2015, p. 89). Human rights are important, but the protection of the individual in relation to the state is only secondary to the survival and power of the state. Therefore, human rights should be placed and improved within the framework of the state. Hence, external interference would not only weaken state sovereignty but would also completely worsen the human rights situation in the country (Tiewa, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the state because this will inevitably strengthen the harmony between the state and its people (Foot 2014). Moreover, a "healthy and powerful sovereign state is beneficial to the stability, good governance and balanced development of a country and [the] international society" (Tiewa & Haibin, 2014, p. 411). Stability is of paramount importance in China because it is considered a prerequisite for peace and development (MacLeod, 2017). China assumes that there is "a causal linkage between peace and [economic] development" (Hirono, as cited in Foot, 2014, p. 1096), or, as the Chinese Special Envoy for Darfur has emphaiszed repeateadly at the height of the Darfur crisis and the criticism directed at China for blocking appropriate action, that the key problem in Darfur is economic development and poverty, not genocide (Tiewa & Haibin, 2014, p. 417). If we take into account the poor human rights situation in the country, the challenges with separatist movements in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as the fact that economic development is what has made China a world superpower on the one hand, but on the other hand, despite it, China has a very poor Human Development Index (Foot, 2014, p. 1089),

it becomes clearer why the communist regime in power has a strong inclination towards domestic stability, non-intervention and why it links human rights and development with sovereignty.

The conservative interpretation of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, the maintenance of domestic stability through (indirect) support for the authorities in that country, as well as the five principles of peaceful coexistence, are also reflected in Chinese understandings and preferences for the use of force in international relations. In general, China has an aversion to the use of any coercive measure (sanctions, peacekeeping missions to impose peace, force to protect civilians, etc.), especially when they have to be used without the consent of the host country. After all, "it has been standard Chinese practice to align itself with the stances of the incumbent governments in various conflict-ridden countries" (Lei, 2014, p. 11). In those situations where there is no consent from the host country, and there is a consensus from the wider international community for the use of force, China does not hinder (although most often does not even explicitly approve and support) the use of force, emphasizing that it is an exceptional measure that should not become a precedent, and recalling that the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs have priority. Such a Chinese inclination is also visible if we observe China's strategic preferences for the use of force. Analyzing the period from 1949-1992 and classifying the use of force into three categories: territory-oriented force, policy-oriented force, and regime-oriented force, Johnson concludes that China uses force aimed at (or resulting in) regime change by far the least. Only in 7% of cases was force directed at an existing regime, in contrast to 42.3% when it was directed at a specific policy and 49% when it was directed at a specific territory (Wang, 2015, p. 85; Tiewa, 2012, p. 165).

From the preferences for the use of force and from the understanding of sovereignty and its relationship with human rights, one can also induce and explain the rather restrictive and literal interpretation of the phrase "threat to *international* peace and security". For China, a crisis, regardless of its dimensions, is considered a domestic affair as long as it does not affect the region or the world at large. Massive human rights violations within a country, at least initially, are not in themselves sufficient grounds for the Security Council to take any action and therefore should not interfere in that crisis.

However, in the context of understandings of sovereignty as responsibility (Cohen & Deng, 2016) and the discourse and normative power of human rights, the conservative interpretation of the principles of sovereignty, non-interference in

internal affairs, and non-use of force, do not (always) correspond to the image of a "responsible great power" that China promotes. Therefore, paying attention to its image in the eyes of the international scene, China's position on these issues is evolving to some extent, and China is taking a more flexible, and as it likes to say for itself, constructive position. In order to maintain its international reputation and the image of a responsible great power, China has often known (and has) to approach a certain international agreement or normative standard of behavior (Foot, 2001). The most obvious and relatively recent example of this is the agreement with the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1973 and the authorization of the use of force in Libya in 2011, although China emphasized in the debate on its adoption that it "is always against the use of force in international relations", and that it does not support certain parts of the resolution (United Nations Security Council, 2011, p. 10), but in the end it did not block its adoption. Also, China often gets involved diplomatically and medially in the resolution of specific crises and conflicts as soon as such conflicts can threaten the image it wants to build for itself before the international community. A serious threat to its image was the so-called "Genocide Olympics" launched by the international non-governmental sector in the face of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, and on the occasion of the situation in Darfur (Chen, 2016). This was followed by the intensified recovery of its international reputation. Similarly, the Chinese behavior has been publicly called responsible for blocking action in situations of mass suffering, such as when vetoing the war in Syria over the past thirteen years. China strongly protests when "controversial draft resolutions" are publicly proposed for which there is no prior agreement among the five permanent members, such as those that it (always together with Russia) blocked on Syria, and believes that they should not be put to a vote at all, and in order to maintain a good image for itself, it tries to balance and somehow contribute to mitigating the crisis. Examples of such Chinese behavior in the past are Darfur, Zimbabwe and Myanmar (Teitt, 2009). When it is directly diplomatically involved, China does so through its formula of "three-party dual track diplomacy", which implies the involvement of the current government of a country, the regional organization of that country, and a UN body. Such political engagement is complemented by a humanitarian aspect, most often expressed through the delivery of humanitarian aid (Chen, 2016). In the war in Syria specifically, China is also providing humanitarian aid and has repeatedly called for a "balanced" political solution to the crisis and for reaching a consensus through consultations in the Security Council.

Chinese Constructivist Aspects in Practice

China's increased participation and assertiveness on the international stage, its commitment to maintaining its own image as a "responsible great power", but also the promotion of its normative views on (sovereignty, human rights, and the use of force), are particularly visible through China's attitude towards UN peacekeeping missions, through the initiation of new or modification of current (security) initiatives or norms, and through the issue of Security Council reform.

Peacekeeping Missions

From being one of the biggest opponents of the institution of 'peacekeeping missions', which they considered to be a neo-imperialist venture of the great powers, China has become one of the biggest supporters of these missions. In line with its overall disregard and opposition to the Security Council and the UN during the Cold War, China initially refused to even participate in the Security Council vote on peacekeeping missions as well as to contribute financially to the budget of these missions (Wenqi & Xinyu, 2015, p. 91). Since the 1980s, China has slowly begun to soften on this issue and not oppose their existence at all, and in 1989 China sent its military observers to a UN mission for the first time (the UNTAG mission in Namibia) (Wenqi & Xinyu, 2015).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has been steadily increasing its troop contribution to UN peacekeeping missions, rising from 44th place in 2001, to 16th place in 2005, to 15th place in 2010, to 12th place in 2016 (Tiewa, 2012, p. 164). Today, as of October 2025, China ranks 8th (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.-a) and is the permanent member of the Security Council that by far contributes the most personnel to UN missions. Of course, this increased involvement is in absolute numbers, and from the perspective of the size of the Chinese army (about 2 million) (Fullilove, 2011) or from the perspective of the total population of China (about 1 billion), it is quite small. Moreover, of the total Chinese personnel, the largest share is accounted for by police forces, medical forces, and military observers, and not by combat troops. It was not until late 2014, as part of the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan, that China first sent combat-ready troops (Wenqi & Xinyu, 2015, p. 92). One reason for this is the limited Chinese strategic military capabilities and capabilities (Wang, 2015, pp. 83-84). Performance evaluations of Chinese peacekeepers, however, are "generally positive" and, according to Gill and Huang, as of 2011, "no allegations of misconduct have been logged

against Chinese personnel in UN peacekeeping operations" (Foot, 2014, p. 1093). Additionally, "Chinese peacekeepers are consistently rated among the most professional, well-trained, effective, and disciplined contingents in UN peacekeeping operations" (Gill & Huang, 2009, p.25).

There has been a similar growth in the financial contribution to the budget of UN peacekeeping missions. Thus, for the period 2010-2012, China contributed 3.9% of the total budget of the missions, for the period 2013-2015 such contribution was 6.6%, while for the period 2020-2021 it contributes 15.2% of the total budget, making it the second largest financial supporter of UN peacekeeping missions, right behind the United States (which covers 27.9% of that budget) (Lei, 2014, p. 3; United Nations Peacekeeping (b), n.d.).

This increased involvement in UN peacekeeping missions is a significant and indicative change in the course of Chinese foreign policy. It contributes to building and nurturing the image of a responsible great power, as China wants to be perceived by the world. More specifically, engagement in peacekeeping missions helps China: first, to project a more benign and "harmonious" image [of itself] beyond its own borders; second, to reassure its neighbors of its peaceful intentions; and third, to gently balance the United States and other Western powers, while gradually but surely establishing itself as a great power (Wang, 2015; Wenqi & Xinyu, 2015). Additionally, the three basic principles of classical peacekeeping missions – consent of the host state, neutrality, and use of force only in self-defense – are well-connected and similar to the main pillars of Chinese foreign policy when it comes to the use of force (seeking a diplomatic solution that includes all parties; force as an exception, deployment of troops only after consent of the host state, non-use or minimal use of force). By using this UN institution, China, in addition to gaining the opportunity to present itself as a responsible power, is also trying to project its normative views regarding issues of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the use of force in international relations.

Discursive-Normative Shaper

According to Chinese President Xi, China is weak in its discursive power on the international stage, that is, in its "ability to exert influence over the formulations and ideas that underpin the international order" (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 30). To this end, China acts in two separate but often related directions – on the one hand, it constantly tries to insert (into UN documents) some of the same phrases

that reflect Chinese ideas and identities and that will show that "China is on the right track and developing in a good direction" such as, for example, "compromise through consensus", "win-win cooperation", "shared, mutual benefits" "community of shared future", etc. (Fung & Lam, 2022, p. 31). On the other hand, China also launches its own global initiatives and promotes them through UN forums, through which it wants to shape the international order according to its normative views. Examples of this are the Global Development Initiative, promoted in 2021, the Global Security Initiative, launched in 2022, and the Global Civilization Initiative, actualized in 2023. China's behavior is similar to already existing concepts and norms, which it wants to shape and change according to its beliefs, such as by promoting the doctrine of "Responsible Protection". The concept of "Responsible Protection" is a "semi-official Chinese version of R2P". R2P, or the Responsibility to Protect, is a norm agreed upon at the 2005 World Summit according to which each state has the primary responsibility to protect its population from genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing, and the international community has a secondary responsibility to do the same when states fail to do so (Stojkovski, 2017a). The Chinese version of the Responsible Protection (Zongze, 2012), however, prescribes strict and conservative conditions and interpretations of what constitutes and how R2P should be developed (Garwood-Gowers, 2016).

Security Council Reform

Regarding the issue of reform of the Security Council – more specifically, enlargement of the UNSC – China believes that there should be a broad consensus on it, that there should be no rush or set any deadline for the adoption of the same reform, nor should the adoption of controversial draft resolutions be forced (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2015). In line with its identity as a representative of small and medium-sized states, China publicly supports reform, or rather, the expansion of the Security Council. However, in the background, it actively opposes the expansion of the Council, such as in 2005, when individually and together with the United States, it thwarted the initiative of the G4 countries to expand the Council (von Freiesleben, 2013, p. 8). Also, although it is publicly silent on this issue, China is opposed to limiting the privilege of using the veto in the Security Council, even in situations where mass crimes are at stake (Stojkovski, 2017b, pp. 99-100).

Conclusion

This paper presented the main constructivist aspects of China in and towards the UN Security Council, i.e., the guiding ideas, beliefs, and identities that shape its behavior on the international stage. Central here is the amalgam of a responsible great power, according to which China is in the club of great powers that decide on world issues, but at the same time it is a growing power that understands and advocates for small and medium-sized states, which shapes the global political and legal discourse on security and other issues according to its interpretations of sovereignty, human rights, development and dispute resolution, as well as a power that sees the UN, especially the Security Council, as a place where it can further establish itself on the international stage and contribute to or influence the shaping of the multilateral world order. China is increasingly active and assertive in promoting its normative views and shaping legal and political discussions, and thus the international order.

Granted, China's increased engagement in the Security Council and the promotion of the position of multipolarity and the image of a responsible great power are not and will not be without problems for China. The Security Council is a world forum where China can, on the one hand, limit the United States in its actions and in its imposition of "Western" norms, and on the other hand, promote its views and establish itself as a growing great power. China can achieve these goals, among other things, through the use of the veto and the threat of a veto. But here we come to the paradox of this position. The frequent use of the veto with the desire to oppose the power and interests of the United States (and the West) and to emphasize its own worldview and interests can make the Security Council irrelevant and "force" the United States to take action unilaterally and independently and outside the Council. On the other hand, the use of abstention (instead of the veto) with the desire to be a constructive side, but also to maintain the relevance of the Security Council as the primary institution for regulating issues of international peace and security, but also as a forum before which China (and Russia) can to some extent keep the United States "under control", may put China (and Russia) in the shadow of the unipolar world of the United States, rather than promoting the multipolar view it advocates (Foot, 2014).

Hence, China will likely continue to be proactive in the Security Council and in the UN in general, promoting its beliefs, views, and identities and seeking to shape these institutions accordingly.

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