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**House Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations**  
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**“The Chinese Communist Party’s Malign Influence  
at the United Nations—It’s Getting Worse”**

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and distinguished members of the Committee – thank you for inviting me to speak to you on this important and timely topic. I am here today in my personal capacity and am not appearing on behalf of any of the institutions or organizations with which I am currently or was previously affiliated.

The United States contributes approximately \$18 billion annually to the UN system, most of which is voluntary funding. The main argument in favor of funding is that our contributions to the UN system benefit from a multiplier effect by joining with other donors in global, multilateral efforts. But what if this is no longer true? Increasingly, the UN’s value proposition for the American people comes down to 2 questions: First, is the UN the most efficient and effective way to address problems outside the United States that concern the American people? And second, to what degree is the People’s Republic of China and its ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) using these institutions to expand their power and influence at our expense? While the first question is beyond the scope of today’s hearing, it is not unrelated because the more influence China has at the UN, the less likely the UN system’s activities will redound to the benefit of our or the world’s security, freedom, and prosperity.

Whether through “wolf warrior” diplomacy, dramatic expansion of international United Front work, transnational repression, or ambitious pronouncements of grand global strategies, Xi Jinping’s approach to foreign policy is rooted in his conviction that ensuring regime security at home requires a proactive strategy abroad. As a result, China’s efforts to reshape the international political battlespace have grown exponentially in scope, scale, and sophistication over the past ten years. In a 2023 speech, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen put it well:

*The Chinese Communist Party’s clear goal is a systemic change of the international order with China at its center. We have seen it with China’s positions in multilateral bodies which show its determination to promote an alternative vision of the world order. One, where individual rights are subordinated to national security. Where security and economy take prominence over political and civil rights...*

Nowhere has this new vision been more deeply felt than in China’s approach to the United Nations system.

As CCP head, Xi Jinping has reinvigorated the Chinese Communist Party’s state security architecture and consolidated personal control over it to a degree unprecedented since Mao. His comprehensive national security concept (总体国家安全观 *zongti guojia anquan guan*) does not

functionally distinguish between internal and external security. Rather, according to CCP sources, it encompasses “political, military, homeland security, economic, cultural, social, technological, cyberspace, ecological, resource, nuclear, overseas interests, outer space, deep sea, polar, and biological security issues, among others.” This everything, everywhere, all at once approach is deemed necessary because Xi and his colleagues believe the CCP party-state is under perpetual threat from hostile foreign forces whose true aim is to weaken China and derail the “Chinese Dream” (中国梦 *Zhōngguó Mèng*) of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” The CCP insists that “safeguarding party leadership, China’s socialist system, and the authority of the Central Committee with Xi Jinping at the core” is essential to achieving the Chinese Dream. Thus, regime security is intrinsic to China’s national security, and vice versa. China scholar Sheena Greitens has described this as “a regime security concept codified as grand strategy.”

Xi’s Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) must be viewed in this context. These Initiatives represent an ambitious effort to reshape the normative and ideological underpinnings of the post-World War II global architecture to make the world more accommodating of CCP authoritarianism. Since paranoia is not the most attractive look, Beijing has cast GSI, GDI, and GCI as China’s “gift to the world” of novel solutions to the global challenges of economic development and international peace and security. As the English language state-run tabloid *Global Times* said:

*[The initiatives] are highly condensed versions of China's past successful experiences, which China is willing to share with the world without reservation to achieve common development through mutual exchange and learning. It can be said that these three initiatives are all high-quality global public goods demonstrating China's sincerity and goodwill.*

As the pillars of Xi’s vision of the ‘community of shared future for mankind’, China has claimed the 3Gs are not just consistent with but *integral* to the Sustainable Development Goals that have served as the UN’s operating system since 2015. When Xi announced GDI at the UN in 2021 and hailed it as China’s contribution to accelerating momentum on the SDGs, the PRC had already spent nearly a decade assiduously working to conflate the SDGs with the Belt and Road Initiative. China also attempted to use its rotating presidency of the Security Council to insinuate GSI into the UN’s collective security framework, asserting that Xi’s “vision for common security” was the way to “build together a balanced, effective, and sustainable international security architecture.”

These slogans are built around deeply authoritarian ideas and rhetoric that contradict the object and purpose of the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and other foundational pillars of the UN. In the CCP’s state-centric ‘shared future’, human rights are not a birthright but instead are subject to the state’s whim. GDI prioritizes development as the “master key” to solve societal problems and a prerequisite for the enjoyment of human rights—in direct contradiction to the letter and spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Likewise, the GSI rests heavily on concepts like ‘greater good’, ‘mutually beneficial’, and ‘right to development’, and the GCI explicitly promotes a particularized version of human rights nested within state-determined ‘culture.’

This view of human rights as negotiable, contextual, and subject to the whim of authoritarian states is anathema to the bedrock principles of the UDHR that rights are intrinsic, universal, and inalienable. The CCP is largely repackaging the old Marxist wine of situational rights in new GDI, GSI, and GCI bottles. In the past, Beijing largely deployed this doctrine defensively to shield itself from international and domestic criticism. Today, the party-state is aggressively promoting its funhouse mirror vision of human rights as superior to the “Western” model.

The authoritarian and authoritarian-wannabe states that constitute a sizable chunk of the UN’s membership have been quite receptive to China’s efforts. Leading members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have been key partners in China’s norm-shaping activities at the UN, including by providing valuable politico-religious cover for the repression of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim peoples. Leaders of the Group of 77 (G77) developing countries are also fans. These countries happily embrace what Nadege Rolland calls China’s paradigm of “paradoxical universal exceptionalism” that insists the international community embrace states’ diverse paths even when they are wildly at variance with the universal values that serve as the basis for the international community.

Authoritarian states are not the only problem. When Chinese diplomats began attempting to insert ‘community of shared future’ language into UN resolutions, many leading democratic member states viewed it as benign or even as a positive indicator of Chinese engagement. This wishful thinking was on display in the spring of 2018 when the Chinese delegation in Geneva introduced a Human Rights Council resolution calling for “win-win cooperation in the field of human rights.” The U.S. was the only country to vote against this resolution, while 17 other countries abstained—including human rights stalwarts Australia, Belgium, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

China’s aggressive propagation of Xi Jinping Thought at the UN, alongside growing evidence of industrial-scale repression of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minoritized communities at home, highlighted the glaring contradictions between China’s words and deeds. The U.S. also undertook a concerted effort to expose the depth, breadth, and sophistication of Beijing’s ideological assault on the normative framework. Since 2019, China’s tactics have faced greater headwinds, but substantial damage has been and continues to be done. Xi Jinping Thought has become enshrined in the international lexicon. “Win-Win Cooperation on Human Rights” is now a permanent platform for China’s assault on human rights from within the UN system. And UN officials continue to parrot ‘shared future’ and other loaded language—either ignorantly or willfully propagating these toxic phrases.

Although China is frequently cited as the second largest assessed contributor to the UN’s regular budget, it has historically lagged far behind not only the US but many other donors in the voluntary contributions that fund approximately 2/3rds of the UN’s overall annual outlays. In 2021, for example, the United States and Germany provided, respectively, 31% and 17.5% of earmarked voluntary contributions, while China provided a mere .5%. Rejecting the commensurate approach of other major donors, China makes highly targeted voluntary contributions in a manner designed to get maximum value for minimal money. Funding commitments are often accompanied by a push to place Chinese nationals in key secretariat and agency positions or partner UN agencies with Chinese party-state institutions.

One example is China's sole funding of a UN Global Geospatial Knowledge and Innovation Center to map human behavior, infrastructure, and topography worldwide. The ostensible purpose of this Center is to support the use of data in achieving the SDGs, but critics have cited Beijing's worrisome track record on data theft, security, and surveillance in expressing concerns about the Center's source of funding and its location inside a Chinese geospatial industrial park.

More blatant is the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDF). Xi Jinping announced the fund with great fanfare during a 2015 speech to the General Assembly, with a commitment of \$1 billion. With China as the only contributor, the actual funding has come in at \$20 million a year since 2016. As directed by Beijing, the Fund's assets are split evenly between the Secretary General's executive office and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The DESA sub-fund is explicitly charged with integrating the Belt and Road Initiative and the SDGs. The UNPDF's management committee consists of three senior Chinese officials, the Under-Secretary General of DESA (the highest-ranking Chinese national in the UN Secretariat and a former senior PRC official), and the *chef de cabinet* of the Secretary General. This gang of five makes all funding decisions with no oversight from the General Assembly or any other UN member state body. More than one-third of the projects approved to date mention the Belt and Road in their titles. The amounts involved are relatively small, but they are valuable to both the Chinese government and UN agencies that receive them—despite or possibly because of the lack of transparency and normal oversight.

China's self-interested approach to funding aligns with other efforts to enhance its influence in the UN, including strategic placement of Chinese nationals in appointed positions and aggressive election campaigns for Chinese candidates to lead UN bodies. Beijing has sought and won leadership positions in bodies where China has core interests, such as INTERPOL, the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In these bodies, Chinese agency heads openly pursue China's interests in ways that are contrary to their oath of office requiring them to act as neutral international civil servants. Their efforts range from the trivial—such as blocking critics of ICAO's treatment of Taiwan from following the agency's Twitter feed—to the dangerous, including facilitating Beijing's efforts to rewire the global architecture of the Internet.

China also excels at instrumentalizing the UN Secretariat, agencies, and member state groupings. One of the most egregious examples was China's effective neutering of the Office of High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) under Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, using a combination of charm and coercion. After entering office in 2018 with pledges to address reports of worsening systemic human rights violations against Turkic Muslims, Bachelet quickly pivoted to "quiet diplomacy" with China, ostensibly to gain access to the region. When she finally visited China in May 2022, Bachelet allowed the party-state to place her in a variety of deeply compromising situations. At one point, she appeared in a state media broadcast, beatifically receiving a video-conferenced lecture on human rights from Xi Jinping.

In a valedictory interview published on her last day in office, Bachelet unironically claimed "Engagement and dialogue should never be at the expense of speaking truth to power, being the voice of the voiceless and promoting accountability for human rights violations." Thirteen

minutes before midnight that same evening, Bachelet's office finally released the Uyghur human rights report it had been suppressing for at least two years. Bachelet damaged not only her credibility but the whole UN human rights system, perhaps irrevocably.

Bachelet's experience closely followed the example of Vladimir Voronkov. As Under-Secretary General for Counterterrorism, Voronkov took a heavily criticized trip to China in July 2019. Amid reports Beijing was blocking Bachelet's travel to the Uyghur region, Voronkov visited Urumqi to 'inspect Beijing's counterterrorism efforts.' The U.S. and others vociferously but vainly objected to the inappropriate visit. As an anonymous diplomat told Reuters at the time, "China will, and is, actively saying that what they're doing in Xinjiang is good terrorism prevention. The visit by Voronkov validates their narrative that this is a counterterrorism issue..." adding that if Voronkov did not speak out after his visit then "silence could be seen as implicit acceptance, at worst U.N. complicity." Voronkov's post-trip press release expressed his gratitude for the financial support provided by China's UN Peace and Development Fund but did not mention the more than one million Uyghurs arbitrarily and extrajudicially detained on suspicion of terrorist activity at the site of his visit.

Bachelet and Voronkov were largely following the cues of the man who appointed them, Secretary General Antonio Guterres. While Guterres has freely condemned other Security Council permanent members for alleged human rights violations, misuse of terrorism charges, racism, and a host of other behaviors he sees as undermining the multilateral system, he generally maintains a studied silence on China's abuses. But he does find regular opportunities to heap praise on Xi's commitment to multilateralism, including while attending China's Belt and Road Forums.

When cooptation and collusion fail, Beijing does not hesitate to use coercion. China is regularly cited by the UN team that documents reprisals against individuals and civil society groups that cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms. Chinese diplomats have been accused of harassing civil society representatives on UN premises, including by blocking their access to UN forums. During one such incident involving Dolkan Isa, head of the World Uyghur Congress, the Chinese ambassador reportedly was heard screaming threats at Guterres over the telephone, demanding he stop Isa from entering the UN. When the Chinese mission was unable to stop Isa's accreditation, they tried to revoke the consultative status of the German NGO that sponsored him. This transgressive behavior has not led China to suffer any meaningful loss of access or diminution of influence at the UN. Rather, China's leverage and influence keeps growing.

Authoritarian regimes provide a durable base of support for Beijing's norm-shaping activities, while democratic countries have failed to rise to the challenge. To date, the combination of dependence on trade with China, the allure of Beijing's investment and financial assistance, and the regime's willingness to resort to strong-arm tactics has overwhelmed both established democracies and those struggling with democratic self-governance. Given the inability of even the most stalwart democracies to defend themselves against Beijing's predatory behavior, is it any surprise that the unaccountable global elites who roam the UN corridors have been such easy prey? Even when Beijing's behavior threatens to harm the entire globe, as with China's blatant violation of international health regulations during the COVID pandemic, the UN system continues aligning with Beijing's preferences.

Given this grim situation, what is to be done? Any serious effort to combat China's pernicious influence at the U.N. urgently requires a qualitatively different long-term strategy and sustained commitment by principled countries, coupled with a willingness to expend meaningful political and diplomatic resources needed to mount a credible fight.

The U.S. and its allies must recognize the depth of the problem and take the necessary and difficult steps to diminish or end China's current capability to weaponize multilateral institutions. Some of this has already begun, including stepped-up efforts by the U.S. and others to reduce China's control over UN agencies, funds, and programs by obtaining leadership positions. Unfortunately, the U.S. recently undermined this effort by unseating a European agency head at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and by rejoining UN bodies such as the WHO, UNESCO, and the Human Rights Council without demanding much-needed reforms. This must stop; the U.S. cannot afford to alienate key allies or waste opportunities at this stage of the game.

As the largest funder of the UN system, the United States must take a harder look at where our funding is going, what is being done with it, and how China is leveraging the institutions we support to advance its pernicious authoritarian agenda. Well-intentioned American supporters of the UN need to realize the threat to the system they love and accept that they are enabling its demise by refusing to acknowledge how the organization's deep and serious structural problems contribute to China's successful instrumentalization. By spending their time arguing with UN critics instead of facing these structural problems, they are reinforcing a doom loop of unaccountable behavior that will eventually exhaust the patience of the American people.

Among the biggest structural problems—and one that China has taken full advantage of—is the fact that the UN keeps expanding its agenda even as it struggles to manage core tasks with a minimum level of competence. If UN supporters were to advocate for a moratorium on new initiatives, they would be doing the UN a huge favor. Such a commitment by supporters to get the UN “back to basics” would align their interests with the constructive critics. Once a moratorium is in place, supporters should work on sunseting irrelevant, anachronistic, and failed initiatives that continue to parasitically suck time, energy, and funding from core functions.

An overall push for greater transparency and accountability also is in the interest of the U.S., its allies, and the UN itself. Democratic countries constitute the overwhelming majority of donors to nearly all U.N. agencies, funds, and programs. This pro-rights coalition should be more hard-headed in using their financial sway across the U.N. system to this end. Whether from their positions on various executive boards or otherwise, major donors to the system should coalesce to demand the UN's constituent parts take the following initial steps:

- Increase transparency and accountability around bilateral MOUs signed by UN agencies funds and programs. This is not just a problem with Chinese entities, but the lack of transparency benefits authoritarian regimes disproportionately and sets a bad example. There should be no reluctance by democratic donors to make copies of their MOUs either publicly available or available for review by the executive boards. Executive boards should also support increasing audits of programs derived from MOUs and requiring prior approval of any future bilateral MOUs.

- Promptly remove those who violate the international civil service code of conduct, including participants in the junior professional officer (JPO) program.
- Remove proprietary Chinese/Xi Jinping Thought references from all programming and public engagement documents, including references equating the Belt and Road Initiative or Global Development Initiative, etc. with the SDGs and “win-win” or “mutually beneficial cooperation”, or any of the variations on “community of shared future of humanity for all mankind.”
- Enforce loss of voting privileges or other sanctions for violations of ballot secrecy, bribery, coercion, or other forms of interference in elections, resolutions, or other activities that compromise the integrity of the processes and institutions.
- Ringfence contributions for activities targeting developing countries to block funds from supporting any activities in or on behalf of the People’s Republic of China so long as the recipient agency, fund, or program recognizes the PRC as a developing country; and
- Be willing to walk away or find alternatives to agencies that will not meet reasonable minimal standards of transparency and accountability for receiving voluntary funds.

Pro-rights countries must realize they can only realign the UN’s current terrible incentive structures by sending a clear message across the entire system that China’s abuses have consequences. When we first started calling votes on Xi Jinping Thought phrases in resolutions, we were almost always alone. Today, there is now a relatively durable block of 75 countries that will either vote against or abstain over this language and the G77 preemptively blocks its inclusion in their draft resolutions. Once the U.S. clearly explained why we were breaking consensus over Xi Jinping Thought and that we were watching how others voted, many otherwise unhelpful member states began resisting Chinese promotion of these phrases out of self-interest. The same can happen in other areas, including the justifiably maligned Human Rights Council.

Such efforts should only alienate those who benefit from incompetence and malfeasance but, in reality, they are likely to be met with charges of bullying and neo-imperialism. To preempt this, donors should expand their outreach to developing countries, starting with democracies. Pro-rights donors should not pander to these countries but instead have honest conversations with them. In my experience, I found that it was helpful to commiserate with them on how they are harmed by the UN’s increasing ineffectiveness because they rely on the UN to support them with technical assistance and otherwise; emphasize our commitments to accountability, transparency, and effectiveness as the driving motivation for the UN’s policies and programs; note our obligation to faithfully represent the interests of US taxpayers who expect their money to be used accountably and effectively; observe that their citizens will get more value from a UN that is more transparent and focused on accountability and effectiveness; and take seriously their complaints about weaknesses in our approach to development aid.

Using financial and political capital at the UN this way is uncomfortable for many member states. But if we are serious about this fight, we must be more creative and robust in our approaches. Success likely will come down to whether the U.S. can persuade our friends that such hardball is a necessary defensive measure to preserve what is valuable about the international system and reassure them that we have their back when they take a stand. I have some specific recommendations on tactics that I am happy to share during Q&A.

## Conclusion

This is a particularly challenging time to argue the UN can return to credibility. The futility of multilateral responses to Ukraine, Burma, Syria, Sudan, Ethiopia, and other ongoing crises contrasts poorly with the near-hysterical performative outrage over Israel. It is enough to cause even the most committed human rights activists to question the continued relevance and utility of the UN system. There is no reason to believe the system will self-correct, and even leading members of the pro-rights coalition regularly engage in selectivity, politicization, and hypocrisy in ways that make China's job easy. A sustained effort to push back on Beijing's UN malign influence requires the kind of leadership, creativity, political will, and diplomatic resources that are not currently in evidence.

Fortunately, the UN does not rely solely on the political will of UN member states. If it did, it likely would have collapsed long ago. Much of the energy and drive for action in core areas such as human rights and accountability has always and will continue to come from outside the system, especially demands from citizens for democratic governments to stand for human dignity as a core value. While these dedicated little platoons of activism and conscience continue their work, they will keep the pressure on governments to act and on the system to do better. These communities and energizers need to be supported and sustained, and the pro-rights member states should treat them as the valued allies and force multipliers they are. This means bringing them into decision-making and strategy development early on, ensuring they continue to have access to UN forums and platforms, and otherwise recognizing their value as partners. It also means a willingness to expend political will and diplomatic resources in ways that have previously made democratic member states uncomfortable.

At the same time, civil society cannot forget that UN bodies are comprised of member states with varying degrees of domestic accountability. Human rights advocates must be careful not to exploit the openness of democratic societies by subjecting them to public pressure while failing to call out abusive authoritarian states in hopes of gaining or preserving access or other moral hazards. If Beijing and other evil regimes face no meaningful consequences or are rewarded for bad behavior, the incentive for democratic countries to cooperate with the system will disappear. Pro-rights countries and human rights advocates alike must also avoid the temptation to import domestic political agendas into their work in the UN system. Civil society should be mindful of being instrumentalized in these efforts and work to ensure these tendencies are discouraged.

The rest of the world gets a say in whether China succeeds in its effort to avoid accountability and hollow out the international human rights framework. It is inspiring to see some developing countries willing to stand on principle and stand up to Beijing. Expanding their ranks is the long-term hope for changing the status quo at the UN and otherwise, but their continued willingness to resist coercion and cooptation must be nurtured and rewarded. Pro-rights member states must decide whether they will dedicate themselves to correcting the UN's problematic incentive structures that China currently exploits—even when it means temporary setbacks to their national agendas. The U.S. played an instrumental role in bringing the Chinese regime into these systems and allowing Beijing to create a bubble of exceptionalism around its conduct. As a result, the U.S. has a heavy obligation to lead the effort to repair the damage to the system and strengthen its resilience against Beijing's assault. I look forward to your questions.