



China's New Engagement in the International System

In the ring, but punching below its weight

Nina Hachigian, with Winny Chen and Christopher Beddor November 2009

Introduction and summary

On September 22, Hu Jintao became the first Chinese president ever to address the United Nations General Assembly. President Hu spoke on one of the trickiest subjects for China's diplomats these days—global warming—surprising the world with his promise to tackle head-on China's burgeoning emissions of greenhouse gases, drawing widespread praise from a skeptical world public. Two days later, President Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to chair a session of the United Nations Security Council, where he pushed forward a landmark resolution on nuclear non-proliferation—the Council's first comprehensive action on nuclear issues in over a decade.

The symbolism of these dual appearances was not lost on anyone. China has entered the ring as a key international player, and the United States signaled its return to multilateralism after eight years of retrenchment under the Bush administration, making clear it will share the world stage but also ask other countries to do their part to make the world a safer place in the 21st century.

The Obama administration, however, faces a new kind of challenge: how to secure the most cooperation from China on global threats. Never before in history has a pivotal power emerged in such an interdependent world in which international institutions, rules and norms blanket every area of global interaction. Throughout history, the central preoccupation of rising powers was to amass enough military might to topple the reigning power of the day in a head-to-head confrontation, and the central concern of established powers was how to head this off. Today, though, the United States and China are both caught in the vortex of globalization where global warming, lethal viruses, economic imbalances and nuclear proliferation threaten the world's big powers, whether established or emerging.¹ The United States and China need to cooperate with each other and the rest of the world to successfully manage these complex and interrelated threats.

Fortunately, the United States has led the international community to develop a complex architecture of international institutions, initiatives, treaties, rules and norms of behavior to guide and foster cooperation among the community of nations.² With the rise of more potent transnational threats, these global arrangements are only becoming more important to solve global problems and promote security and prosperity. But how does China relate to this international architecture, and how will it do so in the 21st century?³

This report analyzes China's international engagement on four deadly transnational threats, each of which the Obama administration has prioritized on its international agenda: global warming, the global economic crisis, nuclear proliferation and lethal pandemics. Each of them is global in nature; they have already or possess the potential to affect millions of Americans, Chinese and all citizens of the world. Sixty years after its founding, the People's Republic of China is a critical, if not the most critical single other power when it comes to addressing these deadly transnational threats. China is the world's largest emitter of carbon, its fastest-growing major economy, a nuclear power and favorite breeding ground for many lethal viruses.

This report first seeks to gauge both the quantity and the quality of China's engagement in these four areas, exploring the current attitudes of Beijing toward the rules, norms, initiatives and institutions that organize international cooperation. In each area, we will attempt to address the following questions:

- Is China hostile or supportive of the international architecture?
- How deeply is it engaged in institutions and initiatives?
- Does it comply with international norms and rules?
- Does it seek to shape the rules to meet its own interests?
- How much does China assist in solving global problems?
- Does China work to strengthen the international institutions and rules?
- Are there signs that China could become a constructive, proactive global leader with the risk and cost that often entails?

When answering these questions, we will demonstrate that China is a legitimate heavy-weight in the international arena. Beijing is deeply engaged in international institutions and initiatives. The Chinese show up, they are serious, and they often contribute to policy discussions in a constructive manner. This is no minor milestone. Yet we also will demonstrate that China today is mostly punching under its weight when it comes to the quality of its engagement on these four transnational threats, though in several arenas China has taken bolder steps than in the past to solve global problems.

What's at stake for the United States

The depth and quality of China's engagement in addressing these four threats will greatly influence how they affect U.S. security and prosperity. Beijing holds weighty cards in each of these areas due to the size of its economy and population, its geography, relationships and history. The extent to which China contributes to solutions to global problems matters to ordinary Americans—from the frequency and severity hurricanes to the quality of jobs to the degree of protection they enjoy against pandemics and hostile nuclear states.

President Obama’s foreign policy will be judged, in part, on whether it persuades China to play by the rules and use its leverage to strengthen the system and solve global problems. The Obama administration is explicitly framing the bilateral relationship in terms of a strategic collaboration—arguing that the United States and China are both global powers that must work together, and through the international system, to tackle transnational threats.⁴

What’s more, the administration has dedicated itself to reinvigorating and reforming the key multilateral institutions—such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the United Nations and World Health Organization—as well as reengaging on critical global treaties such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a new global warming treaty now under negotiation in the run up to the climate change conference in Copenhagen next month.⁵ The future strength and efficacy of these international organizations and global treaty commitments may well mark the legacy of the Obama administration,⁶ and China’s decision to support these institutions and rules, shape them, ignore them, undermine them, or some of each, will determine their efficacy and relevance to a significant degree.

China’s engagement party

What is China ready to do? As we will show, China’s transformation on the international stage has been profound, moving from a hostile, aggressive “rogue” state outside the international system to a full and active participant in global institutions and a sometimes constructive player. Rarely, though, and only with reluctance, is China a leader on global problems.

Of course, when nations choose to engage in the international system they do not drop their national interests in favor of international ones. Instead, countries re-conceive their national interests, redefine the rules to meet their interests, or seek ways where their interests can be met within an established international architecture. This process is akin to, over time, coming to enjoy Thanksgiving dinner at the in-laws. Participation in global institutions and treaties can facilitate this socialization process.⁷

So the United States should have no doubt that, like all nations, China wants foremost to further its own national interests. The good news is that in the four priority areas of climate change, global economic stability, non-proliferation and pandemic response, China has increasingly sought to achieve its own aims within international frameworks and forums. China has not tried to destroy international institutions in these areas from within—steps that might have been expected looking back at the first four decades of the communist regime—but rather has chosen to engage with them, shape them, and master them in order to “obtain further resources, knowledge and abilities to continue evolving as a great power.”⁸ China often champions the demands and expectations of the developing world in these global forums while also positioning itself as a developing nation that should not be expected to punch above its weight.

But what about the *quality* of China's engagement on these four transnational threats? This report will examine whether China is:

- Playing by the rules itself.
- Contributing to solutions on global problems.
- Strengthening the system.
- Showing leadership.

As we will demonstrate, the answers to these questions are far less straightforward. China's record on domestic measures to reduce its emissions is impressive, but without agreeing internationally to measurable and verifiable limits, a global deal will not happen. Amid a global financial and economic crisis, the size of China's stimulus was very helpful to the nascent recovery, and China's agreement to participate in the macroeconomic peer review process that the Group of 20 developed and developing nations agreed undertake earlier this year at their summit in Pittsburgh may be a positive step. Yet China's undervalued currency continues to help generate the economic imbalances that must be addressed to prevent future crises.

On the Korean peninsula, China is now genuinely dedicated to finding a solution to the problem of North Korea's nuclear program and is even beginning to enforce sanctions against its nominal ally. Rhetorically at least, China also is highly supportive of the non-proliferation regime including the Non-Proliferation Treaty and has greatly tightened up its export control mechanisms, thus cleaning up its own record significantly. But it took great U.S. pressure and escalating North Korean intransigence before China would take a real leadership role. And on Iran, China remains largely unsupportive of aggressive international efforts to address Iran's violations of the non-proliferation regime.

The one international arena where Beijing now demonstrates consistent leadership is battling pandemic diseases, dealing with outbreaks forcefully at home (sometimes too aggressively), convening countries to share ideas about influenza and coordinating with the World Health Organization. Especially since WHO is now led by a Chinese national from Hong Kong, China has an opportunity to take real leadership of a major transnational threat over the coming years.

In none of these areas, however, has China yet actively taken consistent and significant steps to improve the institutions and rules of the international system. And though it has come a very long way to its now deep engagement, China tends only to be proactive on global problems when its short- and medium-term domestic imperatives align with strong international expectations.

This report recommends that the Obama administration not demand or promote Chinese global leadership in general. The Chinese won't welcome that, and it is not clear that Washington should want to accelerate the coming of the day when China throws its weight

around in every area. Instead, the United States should encourage China toward specific sets of actions, including leadership, on specific issues, particularly when it comes to strengthening the system itself, recognizing that the United States does not have a great deal of leverage. Specifically, we recommend:

- In climate change negotiations, that China agree to measureable, reportable, verifiable targets for emissions and use its leverage to forge a consensus for an international climate framework at Copenhagen (U.S. legislation to reduce carbon is also necessary).
- In global economic initiatives, that China rebalance the global economy by continuing to move to a more domestic-led growth model and ensure the G-20 is a successful forum.
- In nuclear non-proliferation negotiations, that China become a constructive, proactive and dedicated player in the Iran and North Korea talks and in the push to enact, enforce, and strengthen the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty.
- In pandemic prevention efforts, that China take the lead to reform WHO to make it a more effective organization and also produce vaccines that meet standards for use by U.N. agencies.

As American policymakers in the Obama administration and Congress attempt to maximize China's inclination to follow the rules, solve global problems, strengthen the system, and lead on particular initiatives, they should keep the following suggestions in mind:

- Be attuned to China's domestic priorities. Always consider how China's leaders will view a given international problem through their domestic lens.
- Don't let American exceptionalism justify Chinese exceptionalism. The more the United States acts in the global interest, and agrees to be bound by common international rules, the more pressure China will face to act likewise.
- Develop a comprehensive view about China and international institutions. The Obama administration should convene periodic reviews of China's behavior in international regimes, to gain insights across disciplines about what kinds of U.S. tactics and strategies have worked best.
- Take serious Chinese ideas seriously. When China chooses to float a proposal that could benefit the world community, whatever else its motives, U.S. officials at all levels should welcome the effort and attempt to shape its content, not ignore or reject it.
- Be prepared to push back. By returning to its role as a champion and reformer of international institutions and rules, as the Obama administration has done, the United States will ensure it has the clout and diplomatic capacity within institutions to push back on Chinese initiatives that harm U.S. interests.

- To reduce “free-ridership,” advocate for more “pay to play” and accountability mechanisms in international organizations.
- Put reform of international institutions on the U.S.-China bilateral agenda. When acting in concert, the United States and China could be a powerful force to push for reform.

China’s relationship to the international system is still evolving. As it grows, it will have more to lose if the international system is not prepared for potent transnational threats. As that reality begins to sink in, we can hope that China increasingly tackles difficult problems before they get worse and invests in the architectures of order that will assist in that challenge. That is the China the world needs.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

