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China's influence over the UN

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In the throes of an unprecedented global emergency, the crisis-management and response of the World Health Organization (WHO) and its governing body the United Nations (UN), are under severe scrutiny. Despite increasing evidence that China was understating the nature and extent of the outbreak in Wuhan, the WHO was glaringly remiss in 1) preparing the world in a timely manner by declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic, 2) exerting pressure on China to be forthcoming with research and information, and 3) being pro-active in issuing warnings and travel restrictions for China.

China was chair of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in March 2020, when the epidemic rapidly escalated across the world. Previously, in similar world crises situations (Ebola, HIV), the UN Security Council played a definitive role in swiftly passing resolutions to promote cooperation. This was noticeably missing in the case of COVID-19.

In April 2020, the Dominican Republic took over as head of the UNSC, but China as a veto exercising, permanent member, has obfuscated attempts at comprehensive analysis and rectification. The UNSC meeting on 9 April, for example, was conducted as a closed door event under pressure from China. No details are publicly accessible and actionable agreements have not been announced.[1]

The underlying reason for such lapses is that developing countries such as the Dominican Republic rely heavily on China as a critical trading partner and a potential source of investment for their flagging economies. The overarching reason is that China has been systematically and pointedly increasing its authority across various UN agencies.

Currently China heads 4 out of 15 of the UN's specialised agencies – the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecom Union (ITU), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDP).[2]

There is also an implicit understanding that the current Director General of the WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, was elected with China's support.[3]. He is the former Health and Foreign Minister of Ethiopia – one of the largest recipients of investments from China, in Africa. This indirectly allows China sway over the WHO, as well.

In effect, this means China controls nearly one third of leading UN agencies. These positions greatly help extend China's influence in global decision-making and forward its national agendas, such as the Belt and Road initiative, among others. The ICAO for one, impacts world transport routes. The ITU allows China's state companies such as Huawei, to exert pressure in negotiating global telecom standards across the industry. The 8 April, appointment of China, a country with a

questionable history of Human Rights abuse, to the UN Human Rights Council panel, has also sparked concern on the future of the UN's human rights agenda.

Currently, the U.S., while erratic, is the largest contributor of funds to the UN. However, China's contributions to UN organizations have risen steadily over the past decade making it the second largest contributor. Importantly, almost 90% of voluntary contributions to the WHO are from EU nations, but unlike China, the U.S. and EU are not focused on placing their nominees in pivotal positions. This year, for example, China tactically offered to relinquish Cameroon's debt if they supported China's candidature to head the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).[4]

In a pandemic with urgent need for medical and ancillary supplies, most countries are dependent on China to fulfill immediate requirements. China is the second largest manufacturing economy in the world contributing an estimated 19% to global GDP[5]. It is the largest trading partner for most nations and effectively controls the global supply-chain for products and goods, including critical pharmaceutical supplies. This gives China a lot of leverage. Combine this with the pressure it can exert through its positions at the UN on technology standards, for example, and it makes for a loaded playing field.

This is largely why, amidst concerns of securing immediate supply to tackle COVID-19, there has also been a concerted push-back against China's manufacturing strong-hold. The U.S. and Japan, the world's biggest and third-biggest economies respectively, have already announced measures to reduce manufacturing and supply dependency on China.[6] The rest of the world should take note.

China's intent to control the diplomatic narrative on COVID-19 through multilateral institutions such as the UN and other global incentives is a measured strategy. This has inadvertently also drawn focus to the obvious inadequacies of the UN in being an effective and objective governing body in the face of China's aggressive geopolitical and economic machinations.

To balance the future economic and political order that will emerge from the ravages of COVID-19, now is an opportune time to revisit the UN's charter and reassess its relevance and efficacy. It might also be the right time for India to start building a larger diplomatic footprint in the UN and across various multilateral forums.

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