

United Nations

Trump left a power vacuum at the UN. China saw an opportunity

Beijing makes concerted effort to place officials and push its agenda in Geneva, say western diplomats



Liu Guozhong, vice-premier of China, addresses the UN's World Health Assembly in Geneva in May © WHO/Pierre Albouy

Mercedes Ruehl in Geneva, **Henry Foy** and **Laura Dubois** in Brussels and **Joe Leahy** in Beijing

Published JUL 22 2025

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China is making a concerted effort to expand its influence throughout the UN, taking advantage of Donald Trump's disdain for multilateralism to place officials and push Beijing's agenda more aggressively, according to western diplomats.

After cuts to US foreign aid prompted what could be the UN's most radical restructuring in decades, [China](#) has stepped up attempts to fill the vacuum, particularly in the Swiss diplomatic hub of Geneva, multiple officials and diplomats told the Financial Times.

This has included increasing its personnel footprint, building voting coalitions, and in some cases, financial contributions to entrench its position in a city called the "[kitchen of global diplomacy](#)",

with more than 450 international bodies.

Agencies of particular interest to China include the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which sets global communications standards, and the World Health Organization (WHO), according to western officials.

China has long sought to bolster its sway in Geneva and has steadily expanded its presence in UN agencies for almost a decade, particularly those tied to development, technology and technical standards. Although China contributes more than 15 per cent of the UN's regular budget, second to Washington's 22 per cent, it remains under-represented in staff.



Liu meets WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at the World Health Assembly © WHO/Pierre Albouy

A [study](#) by Shing-hon Lam of the University of California and Courtney J Fung of Macquarie

University found China had nearly 1,600 UN staff in 2022 compared with more than 5,000 for the US, though it is building new staff pipelines through internships.

Western officials said they had observed a fresh push since the Trump administration began pulling the US away from the [UN](#), triggering a financial squeeze that has pushed the UN towards deep reforms.

China has been particularly proactive around the overhaul, known as the [UN80 Initiative](#), which could include department mergers and significant streamlining of operations.

One senior western official briefed on internal UN discussions said China was expanding its presence in “the institutions of the multilateral world order . . . and then using that influence to slowly turn them to their own world view”.

Lu Xiaoyu, a professor at Peking University and former UN consultant, said China supported “necessary and equitable” UN reforms under the UN80 Initiative. He said Beijing advocated for “stronger representation for the global south, respect for national sovereignty, and a multilateral order”.

“With the potential merging of development agencies under UN80, China is well positioned to expand its influence in the field of international development,” he said, adding that as the second-largest contributor to UN peacekeeping, it is likely to gain more senior appointments there.

Asked about allegations China is taking advantage of the UN80 reforms, a ministry of foreign affairs spokesperson said on Monday that Beijing supported the UN “in responding to new circumstances and tasks, further reinforcing all parties’ commitment to multilateralism, improving its efficiency through reform, increasing its capability to address global challenges and better play its role in international affairs”.

The spokesperson said the reforms “should take seriously the opinions of UN member states, especially the developing countries, and make global governance more just and equitable”.

A Geneva-based former UN diplomat said China had become more sophisticated in how it operates within the system. “They’ve honed the ability to lead resolutions, give concessions and get consensus. That has made them well positioned now,” the person said.

Another senior European diplomat said China was casting itself as an “honest broker” in response to Trump’s often truculent foreign policy, even towards US allies. “They have many countries in Africa and the Indo-Pacific with them, there are a lot of votes,” the person said.

In response, EU officials said they had begun coordinating more closely with other western

governments, attempting to replicate a job that had typically been done by the US. Meetings have been held in Geneva and Brussels in recent months. “The question for us Europeans is to fill that vacuum and not leave it to the Chinese,” the diplomat said.

This year, China pledged \$500mn to the WHO over five years. Part of this voluntary funding is expected to involve secondment opportunities for Chinese technical and advisory staff.

At the World Health Assembly in Geneva in May, Chinese vice-premier Liu Guozhong voiced support for internal reforms at the WHO and pledged China’s backing through finance and personnel.

“We don’t have information on the specifics of the contribution announcement by China,” the WHO said.

China also won a bid in June to host the 2027 World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC), the ITU’s most influential forum. The decision to host the WRC in Shanghai followed a last-minute US challenge.

“The positions [in the ITU] remain highly disputed between the US and China,” said an EU official.

While the ITU is currently led by American Doreen Bogdan-Martin, her predecessor was China’s Houlin Zhao. “The director-general is now American but China put — mostly African — people close to China in high positions, such as the current director of the Development Bureau,” the EU official added.

Cosmas Luckyson Zavazava, formerly head of Zimbabwe’s telecommunications agency, is now director of the ITU’s Telecommunication Development Bureau. According to the EU official, he was strongly backed by China, which has close ties with Zimbabwe, including Huawei-led telecoms infrastructure projects.

China has tried to promote its Digital Silk Road initiative, which expands digital infrastructure in developing countries, through the ITU. Diplomats also pointed to the UN Development Programme as strategically important to China because of its involvement in infrastructure projects aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative.

ITU said it “values the strong engagement and support” of its 194 member nations but added that it did not comment “on political matters or elections, as these fall directly under the purview of its member states”.

In seeking to influence policy language and appointments, Beijing leverages its ties with developing countries in the UN, particularly via the Group of 77 — a coalition of 133 global south nations. Many have strong trade ties or infrastructure deals with China.

China also targets particular organisations for funding, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, where it increased contributions from \$100,000 in 2017 to \$4mn in 2023.

That funding often came with an expectation of prioritising economic and development issues over civil and political ones, said Rosemary Foot, professor of politics at Oxford university.

Beyond Geneva, China has also increased its presence in senior UN roles this year. In May and June, Chinese nationals were appointed as resident coordinators — the most senior UN representatives in a country — in Botswana and the Maldives. The first such appointment for China was only in 2020, in Namibia.

Last week China secured a new senior position after a Chinese national was made UN special envoy to the Horn of Africa, succeeding an official from Ghana.

“They were lobbying hard,” said one Geneva official.

The UN said in response to questions that “all member states try to exert influence in whatever way they can in order to win support for their goals at the UN . . . it’s simply a fact of life”.

It added: “Regarding the representation of Chinese officials at senior posts in the UN, we expect all UN staff to act as international civil servants, not as representatives of their national governments, and to be impartial in carrying out their duties.”

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