

Be My Friendly Reviewers: How China Shapes its Reviews in UN Human Rights Regime

Lucie Lu*

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Abstract

In a liberal norm-based human rights regime, authoritarian states are expected to face regular criticism for their rights abuses from their peers. However, research to date shows that this is not necessarily the case in a highly politicized international human rights regime. How, then, can a rising authoritarian power such as China avoid criticism and enhance its standing within the international human rights regime? I argue that China leverages its economic power to emphasize an alternative standard and improve reciprocal state-to-state reviews of its human rights conditions. Using text-based coding and text similarity analysis of the UN Universal Periodic Review reports, I demonstrate that China primarily adopts development-based human rights norms when assessing other countries. Interestingly, the Global South also places strong emphasis on development-based

*Columbia University, China and the World Program Post-doctoral Fellow 2023-24, lucielu.uiuc@gmail.com. I would like to thank Xinyuan Dai, Stephen Chaudoin, Scott Althaus, Matt Winters, Lula Chen, Sarah Leffingwell-Kim, Shuyuan Shen, Chris Fariss, Meina Cai, Francesca Parente, Andy Nathans, Hao Zhang, Zoe Xincheng Ge, Songying Fang, Jamie Gruffydd-Jones, Aditi Shetty, participants at the Student-Faculty Seminar at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 2023, MWEPS 2023 at University of Michigan, Interactions in International and Domestic Human Rights 2023 at Columbia University, UIUC-Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) Series 2023, Junior IO Workshop 2023, APOSS Workshop 2023, GSIPE Workshop 2023, and PIPC 2023 for constructive comments and generous support.

human rights norms when reviewing China's human rights conditions in particular. After receiving new development aid projects and debt relief from China, countries tend to be more lenient in their reviews of China's human rights record in subsequent cycles. This increased leniency in reviews of China's human rights record is particularly notable among those known for their typically harsh reviews. These findings suggest that power shift has occurred in a liberal-norm based order: The Global South is more receptive to China's voices in the human rights regime than expected.

1 Introduction

China has expanded its economic power on a global scale. Since 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and invested heavily in various projects in BRI member countries. 147 countries are officially part of the BRI as of 2022 ([Nedopil 2022](#)). From 2008-2021, Chinese overseas development finance committed approximately 83 percent of the total amount lent by the World Bank and its partnering banks in the same years ([Center 2023](#)). China, no doubt, is expanding its influence in the Global South. It has become a prominent financier of development in developing countries. With over 150 countries considering China as their primary trading partner, China has emerged as the world's largest trading power ([Hass 2023](#)). Despite a recent more statist and domestic-oriented economic policy turn after Covid, China has gained leverage by locking in other countries' dependence upon it for future economic growth in the past decade. China, at this moment, is a rising global economic power who is determined to gain leadership abroad.

In recent years, China's human rights abuses of the Muslim minority in Xinjiang have sparked global outcries, calling for actions to circumvent China's investments in their countries. In response to these abuses, governments and multinational companies in Western countries have threatened to implement or actually implemented sanctions against Chinese businesses to show their disapproval of its human rights violations. Additionally, China's crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong and tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea have caused concerns among the United States and its allies.

Western countries grabbed a lot of news headlines about China's disdain for its human rights records. The discussion around China's human rights practices is often presented as a "morality play" between good versus evil ([Hass 2023](#)). When considering the spectatorship of morality play, particularly in the context of global affairs, I examine how various audiences, countries in this case, interpret and respond to this morality play. What about the globe's middle powers that happen to be the beneficiaries of China's over-

seas development initiatives? Are they on board with the traditional liberal, right-based human rights principle, or the alternative development-based human rights approach pushed forward by China? My project provides an answer to this pressing question.

More specifically, I ask: How can a rising power like China improve its standing in the international human rights regime without improving its domestic compliance record? I argue that China can wield its economic power to influence states' reviews of its own record. The Global South receptive to China's economic influence refrain from harshly criticizing its human rights practices. Instead, they align well with China's narratives and interpretations of human rights norms.

I use Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the uniquely periodic peer review system in the international human rights regime, as a laboratory to show how states interact in a normative setting. I use a text-based similarity analysis to compare the topics in China's recommendations to other countries with each of the Chinese aid recipient countries' recommendations to other countries. I uncover that the aid recipient countries' visions of human rights norms align closer with that of China than to the so-called "Western norms." In fact, the reviews from the Global South camp and the developed countries camp are quite polarized.

The current norm-based human rights regime is designed to discipline norm-defiant states. However, when states have the voices to review their each others' performance in human rights, rather than relying on NGOs, the regime is deeply politicized resulting in a tendency to be lenient with friends and strict with enemies ([Terman and Byun 2022](#); [Terman and Voeten 2018](#)). My research further demonstrates that the current politicized nature of dyadic reviews scales up to influence the prevailing human rights norms. The division between the Global South and the North, advocating for their distinct visions of human rights norms, suggests that China's efforts to reshape and redefine these norms have been remarkably successful, attracting a significant following for its alternative development-based norms. These are areas in which China has made considerable

progress and of which it is proud, spanning the past few decades.

We may be also surprised to see the the erosion of liberal norms in the international organizations to the extent that it loses support from the Global South. While the U.N., where the leading liberal states and NGOs are part of the active network to exert influence and “teach” the novice states what is good and appropriate in human rights (Finnemore 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), what we actually observe is a erosion and circumvention of liberal norms as states interact with one another.

Based on original text-based measures of review leniency, I have also discovered that countries dependent on Chinese overseas development aid projects tend to be lenient when reviewing Chinese human rights records. New development projects and debt relief can induce leniency in the subsequent review cycles. China plausibly leverages its economic ties to co-opt states that were critical in previous reviews. I suggest that a major power resistant to liberal-led international norms can trade money for influence. This influence is evident in the bypassing of the liberal norms embedded in the current human rights regime and the advocacy for alternative human rights norms and standards in its favor.

We are not surprised to observe this pattern because scholars have found that large countries often use financial incentives to influence the votes of smaller countries in the UN Security Council (Vreeland and Dreher 2014). When norms conflict with interests, some scholars argue that material interests typically take precedence (Vreeland and Dreher 2014), while others suggest that even small states can prioritize adherence to normative standards over material interests (Kelley 2007).

This study presents a scenario in which material interests prevail over norms: states bypass the current liberal norms when reviewing China and instead opt for an alternative standard to inflate its human rights performance. It appears to be a straightforward choice for like-minded countries with similar visions of human rights, as they may genuinely believe that China has made improvements in alleviating poverty, increasing liter-

acy rates and so on to improve the welfare of its citizens. This is also a model that their country can adapt to. For other countries critical of China's human rights conditions, the decision is not very difficult either because using a standard that is more lenient toward China does not necessarily imply a rejection of liberal norms. They may prioritize continuing to receive China's aid packages over publicly shaming China on the international stage by upholding established liberal norms. Consequently, they choose to focus on other legitimate aspects of human rights norms to portray China more positively or refrain from commenting altogether. This sets up a situation where the potential gains far outweigh any potential losses when being lenient with China in this context.

What is indeed surprising is to observe that the state-to-state review system, the UPR, is not entirely politicized. Not all states are co-opted, especially considering that China is the largest trading partner for over 100 countries in the world. Some states still take their commitments to the international community seriously and make efforts to uphold international norms (Chayes and Chayes 1993; Kelley 2007). Therefore, in this case, we can identify sincere states that still respect the liberal-based international norms when it is relatively convenient to endorse an alternative norm. Economically powerful countries do not always get what they want in a normative setting.

China, a major authoritarian country, is particularly resistant to the current liberal-based human rights norms. Nevertheless, it strives to achieve recognition and global leadership in this issue area because the high political salience of human rights is as if an Achilles' heel for its global and domestic governance in its rise. The UN is an important platform in which China can work with other great powers as well as middle powers to establish a reputation as a responsible global power. Compared to other human rights non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, China is much less vulnerable in the UN in which China enjoys significant decision-making power (Fang, Li, and Sun 2018). Similar to the Security Council, UN Human Rights Council is also an inclusive multilateral forum where small member

states are encouraged to be the key players in the exchanges ([Vreeland and Dreher 2014](#)). This embedded legitimacy in the inclusiveness drives China to reinforce the importance of working within the UN and pursuing a leadership role.

2 China's Dilemmas in Pursuing Moral Leadership

2.1 What Dilemmas?

China is pushing for subtle and significant changes in international regimes. For decades, it had often abstained from votes in the United Nations Security Council, but its neutrality and low profile have decreased significantly. Similarly, China is also hesitant to offer substantive ideas about peace building: Chinese peacekeepers have built infrastructures but remain on the sidelines while Western peacekeepers assist domestic reforms in conflict-ridden states ([Fang, Li, and Sun 2018](#)). Given China's increasing weight in economic imperative and global politics, it has shed its humble and reactive posture and shifted to a more provocative and aggressive stance. In the international human rights regime, China had been an outsider, a passive taker of criticism for years. However, now it seeks to blunt the impact of liberal-based human rights norms. Any major country is expected to have a negotiating position to influence and shape an international regime ([Nathan 2014](#)). China is no exception. Nowadays, China is ready to be a shaper of human rights norms in the international community. It has proposed a welfare and development-based human rights vision, emphasizing the importance of economic and social development in promoting human rights ([Xinhua 2019](#)).

We have observed Chinese rhetoric of human rights norms for a long time, but it has not been taken seriously in investigating its success. There are two possible reasons for this. Empirically, this kind of rhetoric is prevalent in human rights abusive countries to defend themselves against international naming and shaming. This argumentative discourse with the international community is a preliminary step towards being receptive

to the socialization of liberal norms if other facilitating factors are in place (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). This is a very optimistic model. While the spiral model has become influential since its introduction in 2000, the world has changed significantly into a so-called world “safe for autocracy” (Weiss 2019). If we still think that the efforts of global power in shaping liberal norms are mere window-dressing and reactive posture, then we risk overlooking a critical dynamic of shifts.

Shaping the liberal-based human rights norm is a challenging task. Human rights have been a sensitive issue for a rising authoritarian regime like China, and they pose the toughest challenge for its foreign and domestic policy, as the term human rights often serves as a code word for subverting non-democratic regimes (Nathan 1997). Consequently, there is an inherent incompatibility between its political system as an authoritarian regime and the underlying liberal value of universal human rights that features civil and political rights. History tells the entangling association between the idea of human rights and the possibility of democratization and Westernization. Nonetheless, as the oldest and most established international regime, the international human rights regime is critical to serving as a symbolic anchor for China to show that it adheres to the world rules and norms as a great power should. In addition, state’s failure to keep promises can be interpreted as a “sign of incompetence and/or outright disrespect of the law,” resulting in citizens’ disapproval of the government (von Stein 2016, 659). Hence, tensions arise from its foreign policy goal of being a respected and credible actor in the world community and its deteriorating treatment of domestic citizens in upholding universal standards and norms.

China’s approach to human rights has been balancing between the principle of state sovereignty and the universality of human rights, to avoid the political costs of taking unpopular stands (Weiss 2019). And yet, compared to its peers or other issue areas such as environment or international political economy, China is strikingly less embedded and reluctant to integrate into the international human rights regime (Dai and Renn 2016).

Perhaps it is because the traditional liberal norms underpinning such a human rights regime do not conform to the goals of the Chinese government, but instead resonate with the political sophisticates (Kent 1999, 2). Embracing the ideas of human rights presents a challenge to the resilience of a leading authoritarian regime. However, it is nearly impossible to become a global leader without being recognized as a cooperative player in this norm-based international regime. Therefore, given China's status and ambitions in the world community, it is critical to study China's approach to global governance on the issue of human rights. Examining how it attempts to resolve the dilemmas would make for an intriguing case.

2.2 How to Find a Way Out?

I identify three possible alternatives for China to seek moral leadership roles in this liberal-based regime: 1) be a sincere player to play by the rule to improve its human rights records, 2) influence other states in its favor in the current regime, and 3) propose an alternative narrative and set of rules to replace the regime. Given China's domestic interests and still-rising power status, the first and the last options have been undesirable or unfeasible thus far.

China's human rights conditions have deteriorated amid the global wave of democratic backsliding. To examine the extent of degradation in civil liberties, according to V-dem, China's freedom of torture indices were observed to be consistently low, placing the country in the worst quantile between 2009 and 2022 (Boese et al. 2022). Similarly, its freedom of political killings declined from the second quantile to the first quantile during the same period, marking itself one of the most repressive regimes in the world. In the issue domain of civil and political rights, China's three cycles of human rights review before the U.N. Human Rights Council in 2009, 2013, and 2018 were described as periods of "cautious hope, increasing uncertainty, and alarm," respectively (Lewis 2020, 137).

Since Xi assumed power, China has actively resisted compliance with the civil and

political rights underpinning the current liberal-based norms. Topics such as universal values, citizens' rights, and freedom of the press are prohibited for research and teaching at all levels of education, as these discussions are viewed as a threat to China's political system ([Economy 2014](#)). Official narratives often relegate civil and political rights, seen as values underpinning democracies, to lower importance. They instead place greater emphasis on economic rights that may be supplied by technocrat autocracies ([Ji 2022](#)). China's selective prioritization of these norms appears to resonate with its domestic audience and serve as a foundation for exerting influence beyond its borders.

As China seeks to undermine shared understandings of liberal norms and promote its version of human rights ideals, it is believed to appeal to like-minded autocracies and efficient technocrats. Although China aspires to global leadership and invests in normative power to challenge the current system, it is still far from sufficient to propose a full-fledged alternative order to challenge the substance of the existing liberal one ([Zhao 2018](#)). Suppose China aims to eventually replace the current American-led human rights regime and establish a new norm-based "club" that cheers for its own human rights ideals. It is particularly difficult for China to attract other club members to sign up for a norm-based new club led by an autocracy so far.

Challenges of creating new institutions in the human rights regime are much greater than in other issue areas. In the international economy, given China's economic strength and influence, it is relatively easier to build and consolidate leadership. A prominent example is China's establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as a viable alternative to the World Bank ([Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023](#)). The current liberal-based human rights regime has less to do with money but more to do with the appeal of widely endorsed universal norms ([Simmons 2009](#)). Principles, values and ideas take priority. While states may vary in their degrees of compliance with the regime, none openly challenge the principle that protecting individuals' civil and political rights "is the right thing to do" ([Johnston 2008](#); [Risse 2000](#)). In other words, the liberal-based human rights norms

are not openly contested. State and non-state actors across international, national and domestic levels deeply engage in and defend this dense network (Risse 2000). Hence, it is particularly challenging for an authoritarian regime to claim leadership in the human rights realm and to attract other club members to sign up for a hypothetical new norm-based club at this stage. Nevertheless, the key to evaluating the success of a new, stand-alone institution is how much it garners support among other states (Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2015). Motivated by moving up to the hierarchy of prestige, a rising power may aim to replace the current rules and rights embodied in the system, but such “systemic change” is hard to realize (Gilpin 1981, 41–43).

Recognizing the conflicting domestic interests of following the liberal norms, and the inherent difficulties of replacing the existing normative order, I propose to look at how China has sought the middle path: influencing other states in the current system. We see evidence that the Chinese official narratives relegate civil and political rights to much lower importance and place economic rights to the highest rank. To what extent it starts to shake the substance of the existing order? I will show that China’s counter-narratives have been channeled through its economic influence to coerce (or inspire) a number of other countries to align with.

Since the human rights regime by no means requires a standard of strict compliance, as long as states are perceived to have an “acceptable” level of overall compliance, they can stay comfortable (Chayes and Chayes 1993). Agreements in the human rights regime rarely have formal enforcement mechanisms of its own to ensure that state commitments are respected (von Stein 2016; Simmons 2009; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007). However, at the international level, what motivates states to abide by international obligations in the human rights arena is mainly reputational concern. Achieving a mediocre standing and distancing itself from the worst offenders in the peer review system seem to be modest and realistic goals for China. This project will showcase how a global power like China can use economic rewards to influence states’ behaviors to achieve this goal.

To summarize, I outline three potential approaches available to a rising authoritarian power seeking to navigate the international human rights regime. The first one is undesirable, while the third one is unfeasible in the short run. The second alternative, which lies in the middle, has yet to be thoroughly examined. Despite China currently faces challenges in safeguarding citizens' civil and political rights and lacks the normative power to replace the current liberal regime, its rising economic power is being directed to shape the norm-based regime in a way that aligns with China's efforts to unsettle the previously American-dominated norm regime. I investigate how an emerging power like China, aiming to improve its standing in the human rights domain, can take advantage of the politicized UN human rights review system. Major power like China can use economic rewards to elicit lenient reviews from its peers. This misuse of power may further dampen the integrity of the review system.

3 Argument and Expectations

I propose that a major actor can use economic influence to shape the behaviors of others within a norm-based regime. Specifically, if the major power is in fact a norm defector, states under influence can make the major power appear as a norm complier in order to achieve a better standing in the peer review system in human rights institutions.

The power dynamics in the states' reviews interactions imply that China can use economic influence to incentivize states to give lenient reviews. The effects, however, are heterogeneous. On the one hand, China's friends or allies may have already colluded with China to provide lenient reviews from the beginning. On the other hand, material incentives will not dampen the integrity of the 'noble' states that always uphold human rights norms and standards to give China harsh reviews. Hence, only those swaying in critics and dependent on the Chinese economic imperative may change their reviews dramatically. More specifically, this middle group of states may not have good human

rights records and be financially reliant on Chinese overseas development projects.

I expect states dependent on Chinese overseas finance tend to be lenient reviewers of China. Between the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) peer review sessions, states receiving larger numbers of new investment from China and debt relief deal tend to review China more leniently in the subsequent cycle. The effects are more pronounced in countries that do not initially offer the most lenient reviews.

4 Research Design

4.1 Laboratory to Test the Proposed Mechanism

The UN human rights regime allows states to socialize through communication, exchange and reflection to diffuse the predominantly normative practices in human rights. In particular, the UN Human Rights Council has set up a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) system that holds all states accountable to their peers' recurrent reviews of the treatment of the domestic population. The monitoring power lies in a formal forum-like institution for states' socialization. The idea is to "give equal treatment to all the countries and allow them to exchange best practices" ([Human Rights 2018](#)). States' peer reviews building on regular assessment of policy performance and compliance of states in the international organizations have the potential for naming and shaming, pushing malfeasant states for real changes ([Carraro, Conzelmann, and Jongen 2019](#)). In its ideal version, the UPR can provide "neutral, depoliticized or specialized forums" for comments, critiques and recommendations for improvement ([Abbott and Snidal 1998, 10](#)). In practice, the UPR is far from neutral ([Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018](#)). States tend to review selectively, condemning their adversaries harshly while going easy on their friends and allies ([Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018](#)). That said, the UPR is a laboratory to test the power dynamics in socialization because it is a recurrent monitoring mechanism that elicits reputational concern in forum-style interactions. Moreover,

multiple cycles of reviews can reveal changes in a single state's review record over time.

There have been three cycles of Universal Periodic Review so far. In each cycle, all countries are under review; however, each country will be assessed in a specific review session. About 14 countries are reviewed in each session, three times a year. Every five years or so, on a rotational basis, all 193 UN Member States undergo an interactive review of the human rights situation. During the review sessions, the State under review writes a self-assessment of its human rights practices, and is given a chance to explain the actions they have taken, or plan to taken, to address the issues presented. Reviewing states provide comments and issue recommendations for the state to improve upon, and the state under review can choose to accept or take note of the recommendations. Since reviewing states have limited space to ask questions and issue recommendations, states tend to use their monitoring power selectively to mention issues they are most concerned about. They reduce the complex reality of five years in a country to a condensed statement with comments and recommendations of its human rights conditions. Through this selection, we can infer that the statement reflects the most critical and meaningful problems in a country under review from the perspective of the reviewing states. After the review sessions, a report is prepared to provide a summary of the actual discussion. It is available on the UN Human Rights Council.

With 2-3 sessions per year, each cycle requires about 13 sessions to cover all countries. The timing of the sessions for ongoing cycle is publicly available. Data is available from the first session in April 2008 through the 37th session in November 2020 on UPR Info ([Info 2023](#)), covering the full data of three cycles. When China was under review, the review sessions occurred in 2009, 2013 and 2018, respectively ([OHCHR 2022](#)). To show that China attempts to exert power over other states' regarding the reviews it receives, I collect and compare two episodes for each China-country X pair. First, China received its review from country X in Cycle 2 in October 2013, where 125 countries issued 284

recommendations to China's human rights records¹, where I distinguish harsh versus lenient reviewers. Then, country X reviewed China again in Cycle 3's session. Cycle 3's session occurred in November 2018, where 135 countries issued 387 recommendations.

4.2 Do China's development-based Norms Have Followers?

During the review session, each country receives reviews when it is their turn to be under review. For each review recommendation, there are two state actors: one actor is the state under review, while the other is the reviewing state who provides comments and recommendations. Each review starts with a comment, acknowledging the country's significant progress in selected issue areas and critiquing the most concerning ones for immediate improvement. Then it ends with a number of recommendations. There is a wide spectrum of comments and recommendations in substantive issue areas and action levels in states' review recommendations. UPR Info, an NGO aiming to raise awareness and provides tools to promote human rights, has published a data set that classifies 56 issue themes covered in the reviewing states' recommendations (Info 2023). It also provides information on the verb choices used in each recommendation, conveying the necessary level of changes. Using the UPR Info data, Terman and Bynn (2022) clustered the 56 issue themes into 7 issue topics. Building off the existing typologies in the human rights literature (Park, Greene, and Colaresi 2020), I adapted Terman and Bynn (2022)'s framework and clustered the issue themes into 9 issue topics². Each recommendation can cover more than one issue topic. In sum, the textual information in each recommendation is succinctly encapsulated through different issue topics.

Figure 1 is a word cloud summarizes how China advocates its visions of

¹The reason that I skip Cycle 1 in the quantitative analyses is because there were only 47 countries participated in the review process. The sample discrepancies in sample size pose difficulties in comparing Cycle 1 with Cycle 2 and 3.

²1) Civil and Political rights, 2) Governance and Public Services, 3) Migration and Labor, 4) Physical Integrity Rights, 5) Racial, Ethnic and Religious Minorities, 6) Social and Economic Rights, 7) Protection of Vulnerable Populations, 8) International Treaty Commitment and 9) General/Other



Figure 1: Word cloud of topics of recommendations from China to other countries, all three cycles included

development-based human right norms. The larger the font of the issue topic, the more frequently such topic is covered in China’s recommendations to others. When China provides recommendations to other countries from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3, roughly 42% of the times China comments on the countries’ efforts to protect citizens’ social and economic rights. Examples of this dimension of human rights include the right to water, the right to education, addressing poverty or environmental issues and so on. Next on the list is the “Protection of vulnerable population,” including women, children and disabilities, and the issue of trafficking. Note that China does not mention the topic “Civil and political rights” at all in its recommendations (hence this topic is missing in Figure 1), while this topic is one of the most classic and essential topics in liberal-based human rights norms.

What topics are covered when China receives recommendations from other countries are also worth exploring. Figure 2 shows the recommendations from countries that have never received aid from China. The top three areas that China needs to improve upon, from the perspectives of these countries, are “Physical integrity rights,” “Civil and polit-



Figure 2: Word cloud of topics of recommendation China Received from other countries that have never been Chinese aid recipients since 2000, all three cycles included

ical rights,” and “International treaty commitments.” In contrast, “Social and economic rights” receive little emphasis in the conversations.

In contrast, the topics discussed in countries that have received Chinese aid differ significantly, shown in the Word Cloud in Figure 3. “Social and economic rights” takes the center stage, as if the Chinese interpretation of human rights sets the tone for the conversations. Additionally, “Physical integrity rights,” “International treaty commitments,” and “Protection of vulnerable populations” are prominent topics in the recommendations. It is noteworthy that sensitive issues such as “Civil and political rights” and the “Rights of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities” receive far less attention in countries that receive Chinese aid for their development projects, compared to the other group con-



Figure 3: Word cloud of topics of recommendation China received from other countries that have been Chinese aid recipients since 2000, all three cycles included



Figure 4: Word cloud of topics of recommendation the G-7 received from other countries that have been Chinese aid recipients since 2000, all three cycles included

sisting of more developed countries as reviewers.

Natural follow-up questions include: How do Chinese aid recipient countries review other countries? Do they uniquely review China by following China’s preferred human rights scripts, or is it a general pattern that applies when the state under review is another

country? When this group reviews G7 countries, the Word Cloud in Figure 4 reveals diverse topics. “Social and economic rights” rank near the bottom in terms of frequency of mention, but “Protection of vulnerable populations” and “Rights of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities” receive significantly more attention. Another noteworthy observation is that “Civil and political rights” also occupy a very limited portion of the review dialogues that the Global South presents.

Topics	China	Russia	South Africa	India	Brazil
1 Social and economic rights	149	44	68	53	69
2 Physical integrity rights	78	81	33	59	49
3 Protection of vulnerable population	75	106	73	77	75
4 Civil and political rights	54	29	0	4	8
6 Public services	29	19	12	16	19
7 General and others	25	28	6	11	2
8 Migrants and Labors	20	18	19	3	11
9 Race, ethnicity and religious minority	15	47	48	16	34

Table 1: Summary of Topics in Reviews BRICS Received from Chinese Aid Recipient Countries from Three Cycles

Table 1 reveals that when states under review shift to BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), a group of states representing emerging economic powers from the Global South, we can examine the types of reviews they generally receive from other developing economies. Only China receives the highest number of recommendations regarding “social and economic rights,” whereas for the other four countries, “Protection of vulnerable populations” is the most frequently mentioned topic. It is worth noting that discussions of “Civil and political rights” feature prominently in China’s human rights records, especially when compared with the other four countries in the BRICS group. This is a piece of evidence that not all aid-recipient countries refrain from addressing sensitive issue areas when dealing with an authoritarian country like China.

In summary, China actively promotes its development-based human rights norms within the UPR system. This assertion finds support in the fact that, when offering recommendations to other nations, China allocates approximately half of its suggestions to

the topic of “Social and economic rights.” Conversely, when China receives recommendations from countries that have not benefited from Chinese aid, typically OECD countries, the emphasis centers on classic and fundamental liberal-based human rights themes. In contrast, countries that have previously received Chinese aid align their recommendations to China with the thematic priorities espoused in China’s recommendations to others. This type of thematic priorities is only apparent when they review China, when compared to G-7 and other BRICS countries. This analysis underscores China’s considerable influence in shaping the discourse and setting the tone for which topics take precedence within the UPR framework.

4.3 Measuring Review Leniency

4.3.1 Coding Text to Number: Review Harshness Score at the Recommendation Level

Figure 5 summarizes the complete process to use text-based coding to identify instances of review leniency in UN Reviews. The objective is to systematically turn the texts in the documents “UN Reports for State Under Review” into comparable numerical scales. The goal is to create a summary of review harshness score of each of the state that is under review. This hypothetical score can reflect how well the state under review has protected its citizens’ rights in the past five years, from the perspectives of its peer members in the UN.

Review harshness is a composite measure with two components: issue sensitivity and level of action. I create the `issue sensitivity` index ranging from 1 to 3, with 3 indicating the most sensitive issue topics. Civil and political rights, Physical integrity rights, and Racial, ethnic, and religious minorities have high issue sensitivity, scoring 3. Migration and labor, Protection of vulnerable populations seeking to protect vulnerable individuals, have medium sensitivity, scoring 2. Since the topics of Socio-economic rights, International commitment, Governance and public services and General/other do not

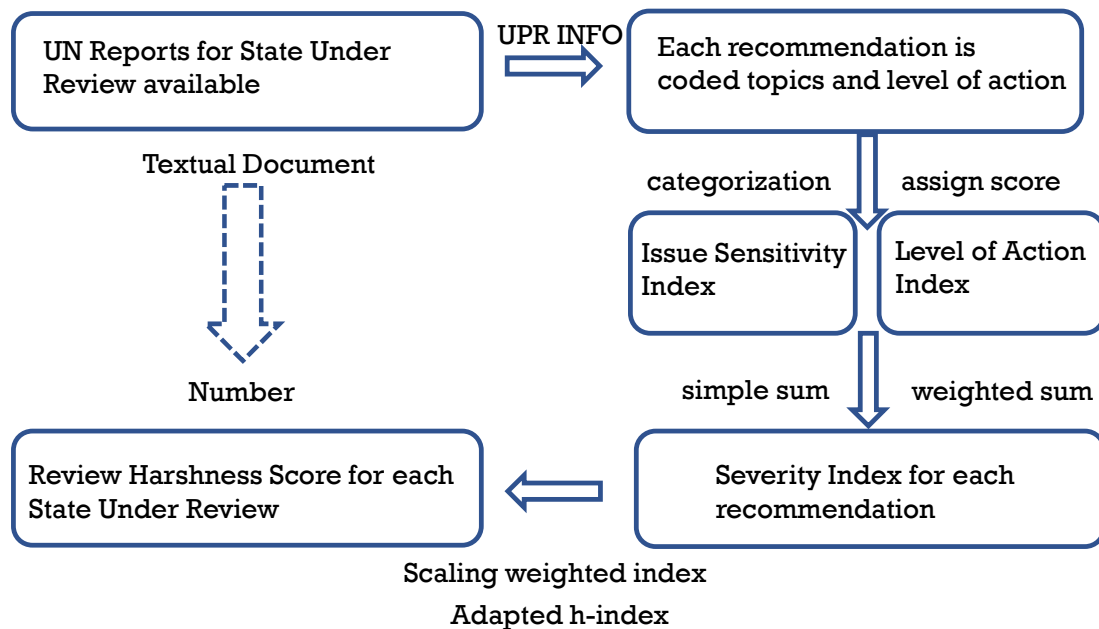


Figure 5: From text to number: explaining the process of creating measure of review harshness

have impacted persons, these topics have low sensitivity, scoring 1. Note that each review recommendation can cover one or multiple issue topics.

For example, Czechia recommended China to “review laws and practices in particular with regard to ensuring protection of the freedom of religion, movement, protection of the culture and language of national minorities, including Tibetans and Uyghurs” (Info 2023). Based on the UPR Info classification, this recommendation was coded as covering

the following issue themes: “Freedom of movement,” “Freedom of religion and belief,” and “Minority rights.” Then each falls into three broader clusters of issue topics that I defined: “Civil and political rights,” “Migration and labor,” and “Racial, ethnic and religious minorities.” Each topic was given a pre-defined score of issue sensitivity; in this case, the issue topics have high, medium and high sensitivity. The final issue sensitivity score is determined by the maximal rule, meaning that a review recommendation will receive a score of 3 if one of its issue topics has the highest issue sensitivity score. In this specific example, this review’s issue sensitivity score is 3.

On the level of action, each recommendation starts with a verb to indicate the urgency and level of action needed for the state under review to change its course. Recommendations range from requesting the state under review to conducting minimal action (i.e. continuing the course) to conducting specific action for policy changes. Based on the level of action, each recommendation receives an action category score: a recommendation that receives 3 entails a high level of action, recommending state under review to conduct policy change or a specific action to improve the country’s human rights conditions. 2 entails a medium level of action, usually related to a general element of improvement. Finally, in cases where a recommendation pertains to sharing information, providing technical assistance or emphasizing continuity of current practice, it receives 1, indicating a low level of action.

The measure of severity for each recommendation is a composite index, as a simple unweighted sum of issue sensitivity and the level of action score (50% of each). Alternatively, I put a higher weight on the issue sensitivity score (70%) and lower weight on the level of action score (30%). The lower the severity index is, the more lenient the review is.

4.3.2 Review Harshness Score: Aggregating Recommendation Severity Index at the Country Level

Since each state under review can receive hundreds of review recommendations in one session, measuring review harshness at the country level requires aggregating the severity index for each recommendation. However, a key challenge in this aggregation process is to balance the quality and quantity of reviews. The number of reviews each state receives and the severity index of each review recommendation can vary greatly, which may result in an over-counting of quantity or under-counting of quality in the aggregation process. In other words, there is asymmetry of the variations between the quantity and the quality of the reviews. A country can receive as many as over 200 reviews and as little as 20 reviews, but the quality of its review defined by review severity index only range from 2 to 6 or 0 to 1. To address this issue, I design two ways to calculate the review harshness score for each state under review. The first method is to use the scaling weighted index, and the second method is to use the adapted H-index.

The crucial step of the first method is to rescale the number of reviews each state receives so they fall within a comparable range to the weighted severity index. This rescaling step ensures that the final score is based on a fair comparison. After rescaling, the numbers of reviews range from 1 to 3. For example, Egypt received 321 review recommendations in Cycle 2. I calculate the average weighted severity index of the review recommendations, which is 2.2. To calculate the scaled weighted index for Egypt in Cycle 2, I rescale the number of reviews from 321 to 1.84. The final score for Egypt is the sum of scaled reviews total and weighted severity index, resulting in a final score of 4.05.

The second method is inspired by the h-index, a common composite indicator to measure authors' research impact across fields and generations in the bibliometric study. It is designed to balance the quantity and quality of one's publications and citations. To make a fair comparison between young and senior scholars, the h-index can take into account the productivity and citation impact of publications ([Hirsch 2005](#); [Sugimoto 2018](#)).

The calculation of h-index is fairly straightforward: A scholar has an index of h when he has published h papers, each of which has been cited at least h times. To adapt the h-index in this scenario, it can solve the problem of balancing the number of reviews (quantity of publications) and the severity index of reviews (citation impact of each publication).

To calculate the adapted h-index, I first calculate the total sum of the unweighted severity index³ from the review recommendations of each reviewing state. For example, China received a country-sum unweighted severity index of 7 from Algeria, 30 from Australia and 15 from the U.S.. Simply by looking at these scores, we can infer that Australia issued higher numbers of recommendations than Algeria to China, and each of them are relatively harsher than that of Algeria's. The next step is to rank the country-sum severity indices in descending order. Then I find the score of at least X numbers of countries reviewing it larger than X score. According to this formula, China in round 2 of the UPR session receives an h-index of 11. It means that at least 11 countries reviewed China with the country-sum severity index higher than 11. By repeating these steps, I am able to derive all the h-index of the states under review and compare them accordingly.

There are two main advantages of using these methods to aggregate the Recommendation Severity Index. First, as illustrated, it can be challenging to combine the indices with different matrices in a sensible way. Second, having two methods allows us to cross-check and increase confidence that the measures largely reflect the nuances of the review recommendations. By using the country-level review harshness measure, I can compare countries' reviews at two levels. First, at the dyad level, I have direct evidence of the following question: How harsh is country A's review of China compared to country B's? Second, at the aggregate level, I can analyze how well China did relative to any other country, from the perspectives of all the other countries as reviewers in the UPR. Although this study primarily focuses on the reviews China receives, this series of measures opens a lot of opportunities to compare countries' behaviors, both in terms of how a country, as

³The unweighted severity index is used because the h-index requires integers, and the number of citations in evaluating publications is always an integer.

a reviewer, reviews others, and in terms of how it is reviewed by others.

4.3.3 NA is Special

I treat NAs as special cases in this specific design. I assume that countries give a lot of reviews to other countries but no review to China specifically means that they are silent with intention. I treat them by giving the “most lenient” review and assign 0 to its country-sum severity index.

First, I count reviewing countries that give zero recommendations to China, recommendations in both cycles, recommendation in Cycle 2 or Cycle 3 only. We can see 39 countries did not issue recommendations to China in both cycles. I further investigate who these countries are and whether they tend to be low-profile reviewers to all the other countries in this review process.

	None	Both Cycles	Cycle 2 Only	Cycle 3 Only
Country Counts	39	107	14	22

Recommending states	Recs in Cycle 2	Recs in Cycle 3	Number of Projects
Bosnia and Herzegovina	48	66	29
Burkina Faso	97	117	0
Israel	173	173	15
Kazakhstan	277	259	124
Nicaragua	259	112	1
Turkey	447	213	59
Panama	161	112	8
Somalia	39	47	50

After analyzing the data, I find that 39 countries did not make any recommendations to other countries in the review process. These countries are marked as NAs because they are true silent players. Countries that commented on China's human rights conditions in one cycle but remained silent in the other cycle were given a severity index of 0, which is the lowest possible severity index in that specific review cycle that it chose to be silent.

There were 8 countries that were active in the UPR review system, but still remained silent to China in both cycles. Although the specific reasons for this silence are unknown, silence may be due to economic or political reasons, as they may not want to say anything that could potentially increase tensions with China. The table below shows the selected countries that did not review China and the total recommendations they made to other countries in Cycles 2 and 3, as well as the number of China-funded projects in those countries. Kazakhstan, one of the most active reviewing states in the UPR system, remained silent regarding China in both rounds. China supported approximately 124 development countries in Kazakhstan between 2000 and 2017, which is also in the upper tail of countries China assisted. Overall, I infer that when countries remain silent in the review process, particularly when considering China seems to be a special case in their review patterns, it suggests leniency towards China.

4.3.4 Closer Look at some reviews China received

How well did China perform in this review system? From the perspective of its peers, it appears that China is not the worst human rights offenders among the international community. Figures 6 and 7 show that China was ranked 42th in Cycle 2 and 12th in Cycle 3. The changes in the review harshness scores of both cycles reflect that the human rights conditions in China have worsened at the aggregate level. However, surprisingly, China performed much better than the United States, from the perspectives of other countries. While the analysis of the substance of the reviews that the U.S. received is beyond the scope of this article, it is intriguing to note that the U.S. received the harshest reviews

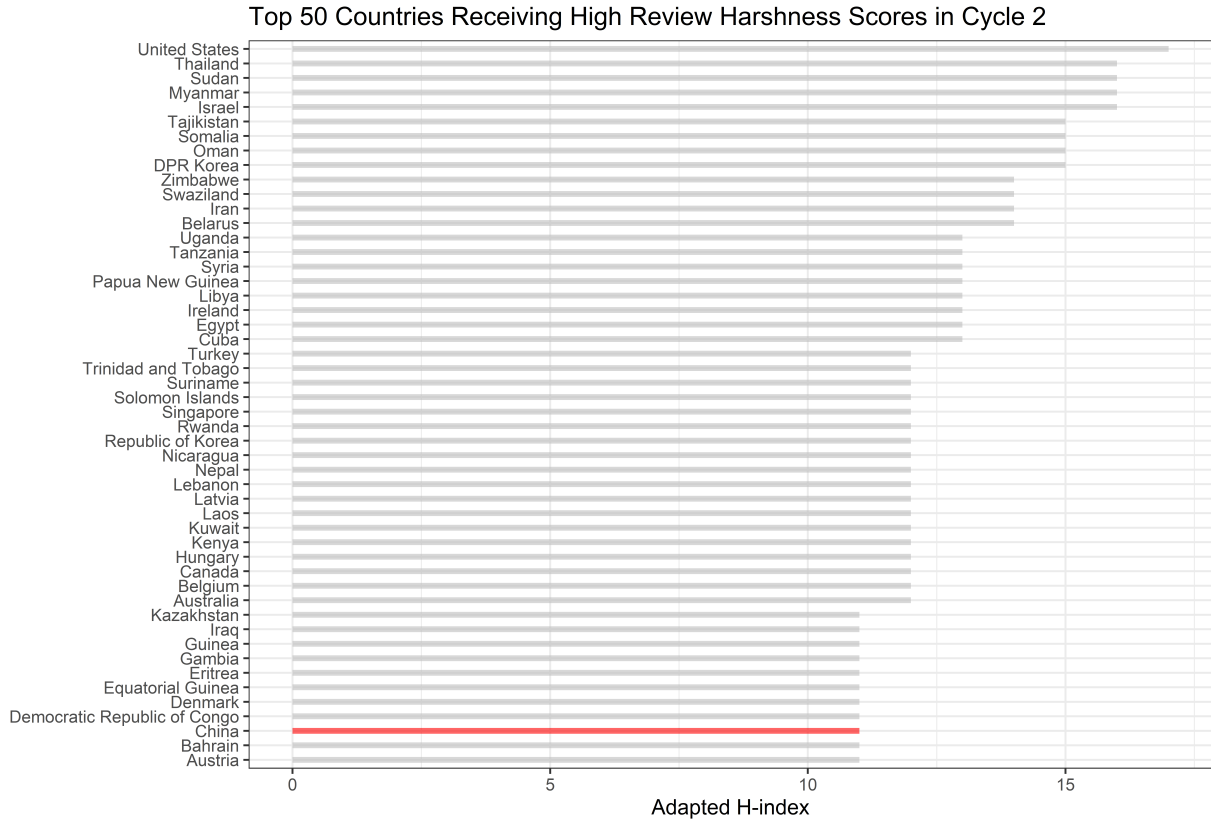


Figure 6: Top 50 Countries Receiving High Review Harshness Score in Cycle 2

among all the countries under review in Cycle 2 and only slightly improved in Cycle 3 (the second harshest reviews collectively). Notably, the U.S. received the same adapted h-index review harshness score as Russia, Iran and Brunei in Cycle 3. This suggests that there is no evidence of the U.S. being recognized as a leader in the human rights realm in the UN, despite its claims. Moreover, considering China’s alarming human rights conditions, it receives mediocre scores according to the views of other countries. Its presumed goal appear to have been achieved.

To illustrate what lenient reviews to China look like, here are two examples of lenient review recommendations given by Senegal and Thailand (these are all the recommendations they issued to China in Cycle 2 and 3):

Senegal recommended China to:

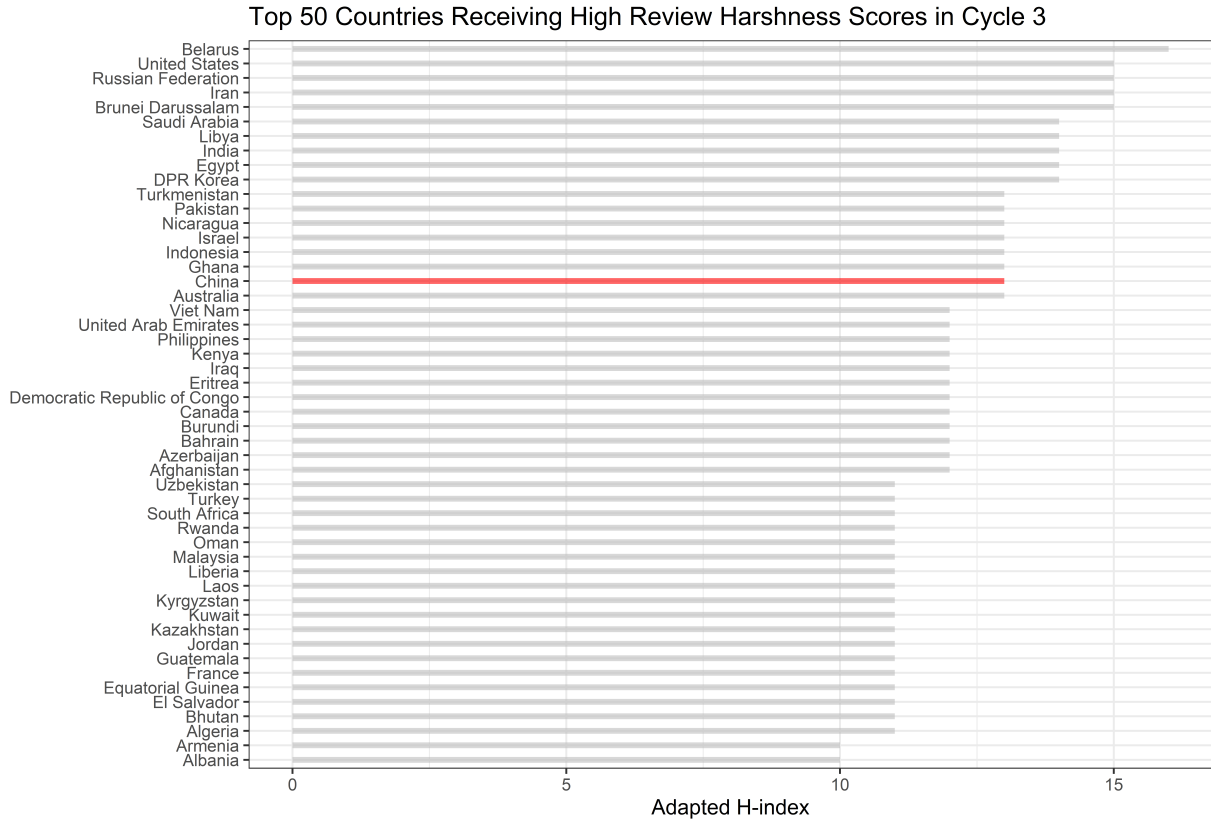


Figure 7: Top 50 Countries Receiving High Review Harshness Score in Cycle 3

“Improve access to education for disadvantaged people.” (Cycle 2)

“Continue actions to address the needs of persons with disabilities.” (Cycle 2)

“Strengthen its cooperation and continue the process of ratifying the appropriate international instruments.” (Cycle 3)

Thailand recommended China to:

“Look into the possibility of establishing the national human rights institution in China.” (Cycle 2)

“Keep up its efforts in raising awareness among law enforcement officers and security personnel throughout the country.” (Cycle 2)

“Continue efforts to develop measures to eliminate discrimination against persons with disabilities, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” (Cycle 3)

“Further enhance international cooperation in the field of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, including through technical cooperation and capacity-building and South-South cooperation.” (Cycle 3)

Regarding issue areas, Senegal addressed issues in Protection of Vulnerable Populations and International Commitment, which have medium and low issue sensitivity. Regarding level of actions, Senegal uses “improve access,” “continue actions,” “strengthen its cooperation,” and “continue the process,” suggesting the continuation of the current practices and lightest possible action plans for China to move forward. Senegal only provided one to two recommendations, making it one of the most lenient reviewers in both cycles. Similarly, Thailand is very friendly to China. In Cycle 2, the focus was on issues related to Governance and Public Services, as well as International Commitment. In Cycle 3, Thailand added the topic of Protection of Vulnerable Populations, making it a slightly harsher reviewer compared to the previous cycle. In both cycles, Thailand mainly used suggestive and positive verbs such as “look into,” “keep up the efforts,” “continue efforts,” and “further enhance.” They read closer to compliments. Hence, these recommendations are light, easy to embrace, and positive.

4.4 Other Variables

I have categorized the countries that reviewed China into three groups based on their review harshness scores in Cycle 2. Countries whose scores fall in the lowest one-third of the scores are categorized as lenient reviewers, while those falling in the medium and highest one-third are considered middle and harsh reviewers, respectively. This categorization, which I refer to as the *nature of reviewers*, will be included as a moderator vari-

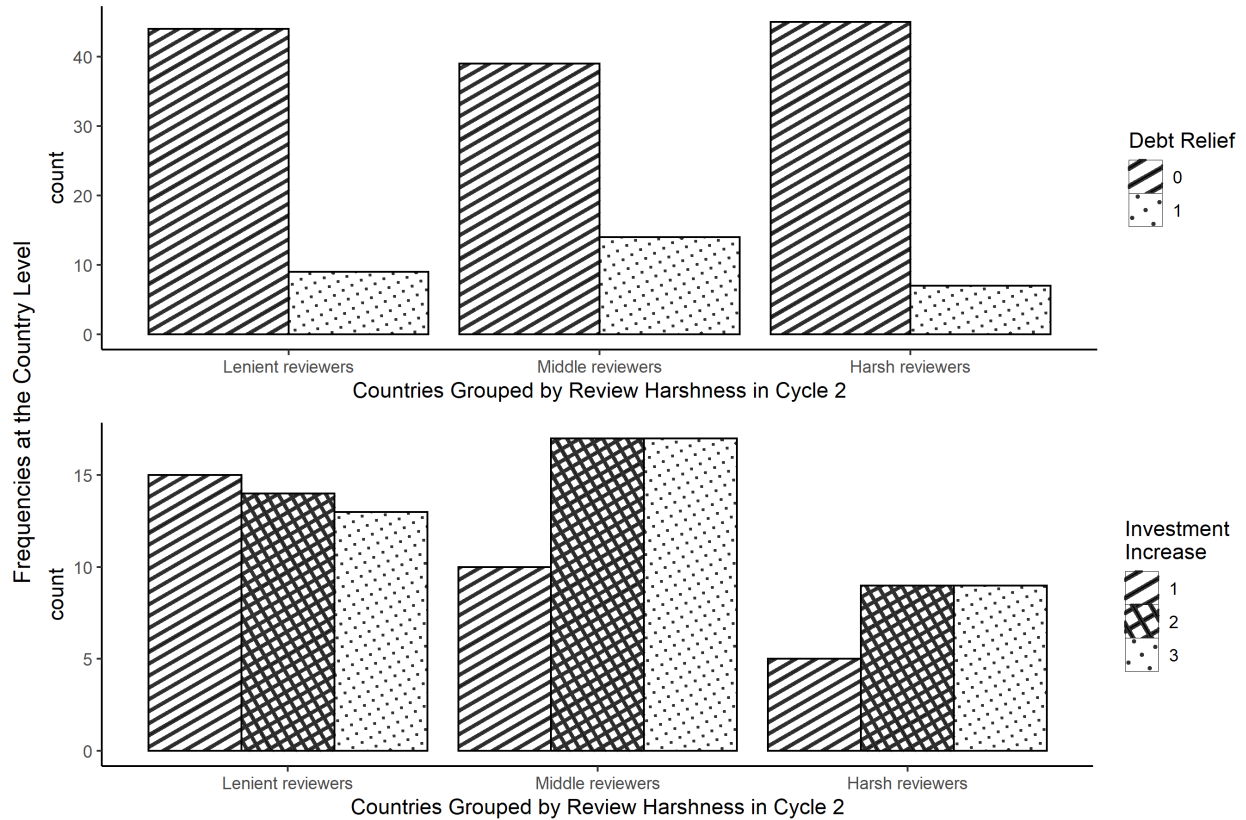


Figure 8: Distributions of Countries Receiving Debt Relief, Investment Increase and Review Harshness

able. The dependent variable is the *review leniency change*. I capture the changes using two variables: raw differences, which is the difference between review harshness scores in Cycle 3 and 2. I also create a binary variable to summarize the changes in review leniency change. There are two criteria to capture the range of changes: if the raw score drops by any amount, then the binary review leniency change equals to 1. A stricter case is when the raw score drops by half a standard deviation, then I count those cases as review leniency change.

The independent variable in this study is economic rewards between cycle 2 and 3 of the UPR. Specifically, I measure the increase of newly initiated overseas finance projects or the total amount of debt relief negotiated within the current development projects financed by Chinese government institutions between 2014 and 2017 from AidData (2021).

The variable *investment increase* captures the number of new development projects. I divide recipient countries into three groups based on the distribution of Chinese new overseas finance projects: small investment increase, medium investment increase, and large investment increase. The variable *total debt relief* is a categorical variable for total debt relief by country. For example, Angola receives 2 debt relief deals between 2014 and 2017. The bar chart at the top of Figure 8 shows that it is relatively uncommon for China to grant debt relief, and that the total number of debt relief is relatively small. Among the three types of reviewers, middle reviewers tend to receive relatively more debt relief than the other two. The bar chart below shows that harsh reviewers are much less likely to receive investment increase, perhaps because many of these harsh reviewers are OECD members that do not receive any form of Chinese aid from the beginning. Middle reviewers, on the other hand, tend to receive more new investment in total. Countries classified as lenient reviewers are equally likely to fall into any of the three categories based on the level of investment increase they receive, whether it is small, medium, or large. Finally, I include a pre-treatment covariate, the number of China-funded overseas projects up to 2013 (Cycle 2) in the models.

5 Preliminary Analysis

Table 4 shows some evidence of a positive relationship between the numbers of projects China invest in developing countries as overseas development projects from 2000 to 2013 and their leniency in reviewing China's human rights records in Cycle 2. Similar relationship persists for development projects invested from 2000 to 2017 and countries' leniency in reviews of Cycle 3. When countries receive more financial assistance from China, they tend to give less severe reviews to China. The average number of Chinese development projects is 66. The effect of projects is substantial: when the project increases by 66, the Harshness Score decreases by around 1.12 on average in both cycles.

Table 4: Bivariate relationships between review harshness score and the number of Chinese oversea development projects up to 2013 and 2017

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Harshness Score (C2)	Harshness Score (C3)
	(1)	(2)
Projects till 2013	-0.017*** (0.005)	
Projects till 2017		-0.017*** (0.004)
Constant	4.544*** (0.376)	5.943*** (0.415)
Observations	158	159
Residual Std. Error	3.476 (df = 156)	3.778 (df = 157)
F Statistic	10.210*** (df = 1; 156)	17.665*** (df = 1; 157)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This piece of evidence shows that the review system is quite politicized. When countries review China’s human rights records, they may consider how heavily China has invested on the ground. If it has strong economic cooperation with China, it tends to give more lenient reviews on its human rights performance. This table provides strong evidence that the UPR review system is politicized based on the geo-economic relationships between reviewing countries and China.

Figure 9 shows suggestive evidence that there is positive relationship between China’s new investment in recipient countries and their more lenient reviews in return. The dependent variable is a binary variable of review leniency change, capturing whether there is a drop of harshness score in Cycle 3 compared to Cycle 2. The x-axis is a categorical variable, capturing how many newly initiated projects China invest in the recipient countries. The findings suggest that the more projects recipient countries receive (from small increase to large increase) in between two cycles, countries’ reviews are more likely to be more lenient in Cycle 3.

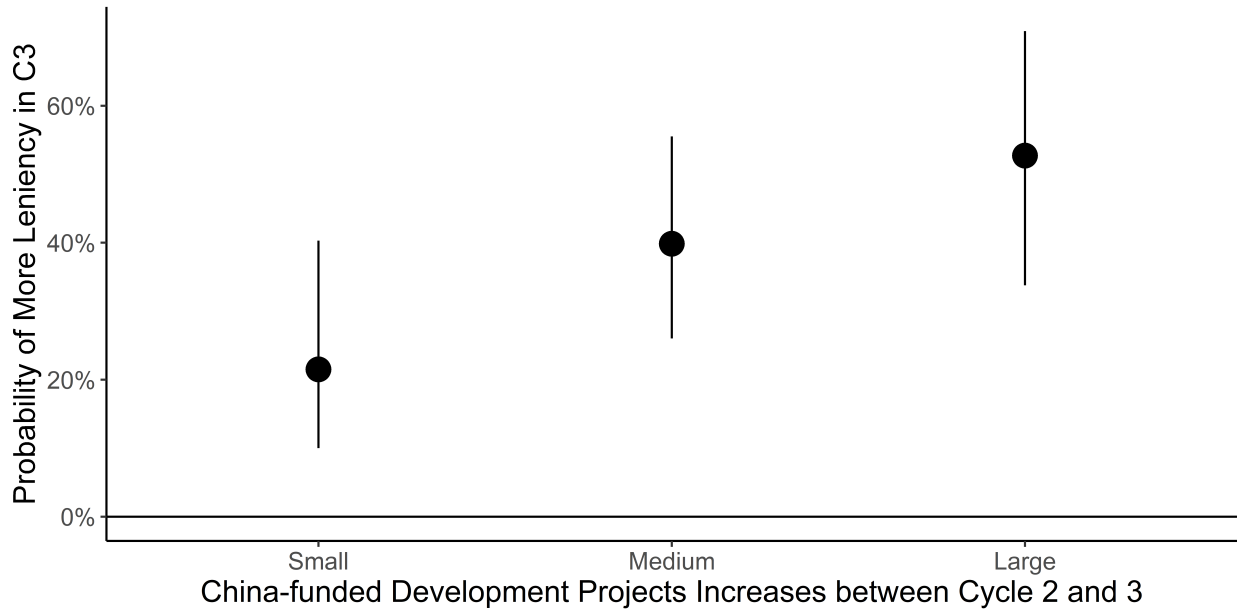


Figure 9: The relationships between New China-funded Development Projects and the probability of increased leniency in Cycle 3

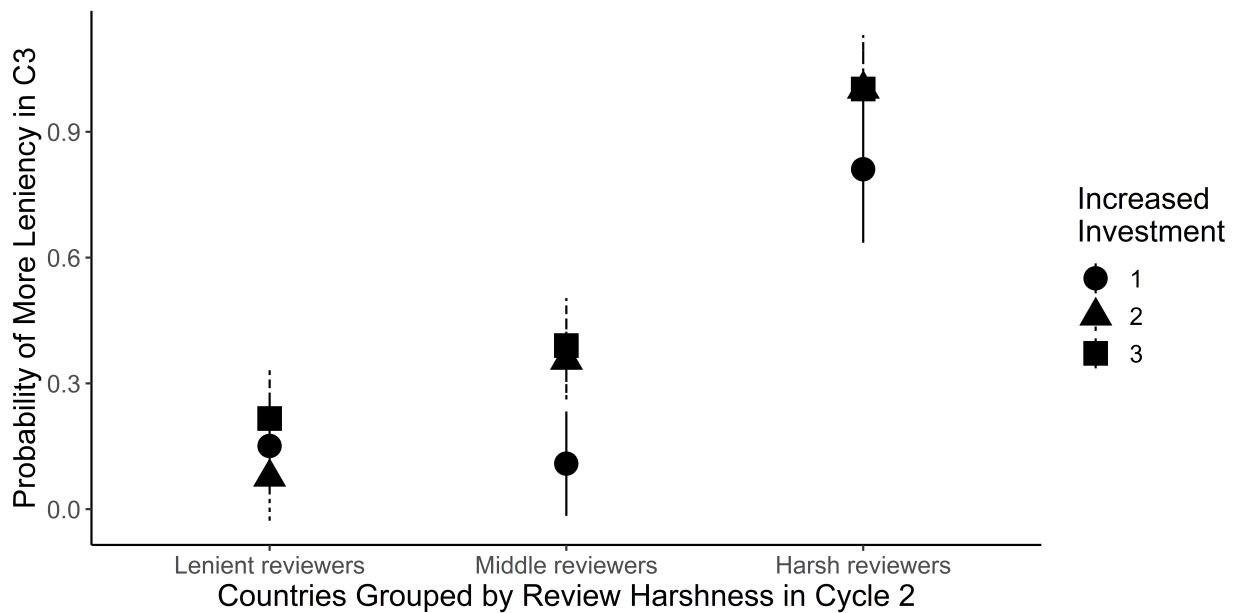


Figure 10: The relationships between New China-funded Development Projects, nature of reviewers and the probability of increased leniency in Cycle 3

Figure 10 illustrates the addition of an interaction effect between new investment and nature of reviewers. The X-axis now represents the nature of reviewers in Cycle 2. Lenient reviewers are less likely to experience drops in harshness score between the two cycles,

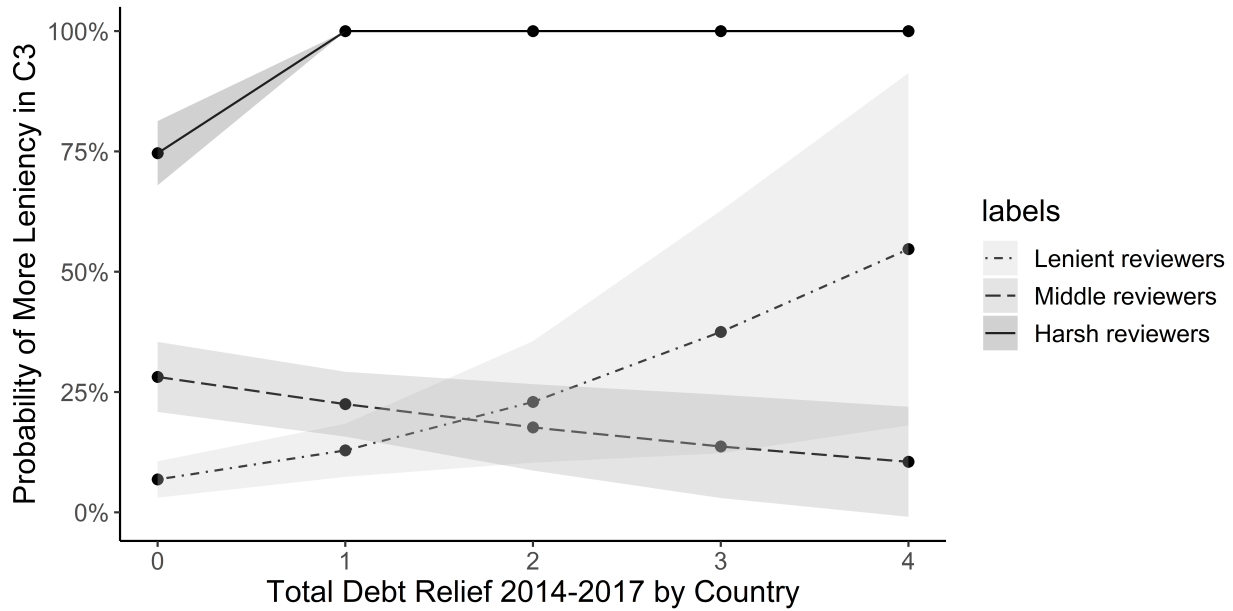


Figure 11: The relationships between debt relief and the probability of increased leniency in Cycle 3

possibly due to a ceiling effect in countries that have already reviewed China leniently in Cycle 2. Middle reviewers are more likely to give China lenient reviews, especially when they receive higher numbers of increased investment. The most interesting change, however, is observed in the group of harsh reviewers. China’s new projects significantly increase the likelihood of giving less harsh reviews in Cycle 3, with a substantial marginal effect. This could be attributed to the high baseline of the harshness score, making it relatively easy to reduce it.

Let us now turn our attention to the second component of economic rewards: debt relief. Figure 11 illustrates the overall positive effect of debt relief on both lenient and harsh reviewers. Interestingly, middle reviewers become less likely to give lenient reviews to China as they receive more debt relief. For harsh reviewers, the effects of debt relief across the board are the strongest and most deterministic. The key takeaway is that harsh reviewers in Cycle 2 are highly responsive to debt relief offered by China. Once they receive debt relief, it is highly likely that they will give more lenient reviews to China in Cycle 3.

6 A Closer Look at the Positions of Indonesia

While there has been a notable increase in anti-China sentiments, it is important to recognize that perspectives outside of the United States and its allies may differ significantly. China's Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) in Geneva, Chen Xu, told reporter confidently in September 2022, "The developing world will reject all anti-China initiatives initiated by Western countries" ([Times 2022](#)). It indeed turned out to be the case. On controversial human rights issues, UN states' votes reflect the geopolitical rivalries between China and the West. In October 2022, the U.S. and its allies sought to hold a debate on China's alleged rights abuses against Muslim Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The UN Human Rights Council rejected the draft resolution by a vote of 17 in favor, 19 against, and 11 abstained ([Rakhmat and Purnama 2023](#)). The proposal to maintain this issue on the agenda failed to secure a majority vote ([Wintour 2022](#)). This open ballot marked a major diplomatic victory for Beijing and a setback for the West's moral authority in human rights issue. By itself, it was a display of Chinese political power in the international human rights regime as of today.

Many parties expressed regret to some Muslim-majority countries' votes on this Western-led motion. One was Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uyghur Congress, said "we are really disappointed by the reaction of Muslim countries", and those who voted "no" had effectively supported China to block discussions in the UN ([Farge 2022](#)). Among 19 countries voted "No" to the draft, 5 countries are among Human Rights Council members representing the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC): Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan. 3 among 11 countries abstained: India, Malaysia, and Ukraine.

As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia's position is surprising because its reaction equivalently made an open statement not to defend its fellow Muslim groups. Its vote is also not surprising. Back in 2019, a senior presidential adviser in Indonesia said "Every country has the sovereign right to manage its own citizens, so the

Indonesian government will not meddle in the internal affairs of China”(Rakhmat and Purnama 2023). This statement is in contrast with the universal principle of the international human rights regime marked by the UN Universal Declaration on Human rights in the 1948, a design to hold government responsible for its internal activities. It is, in fact, more in line with the non-interference principle emphasized in China’s foreign policy principles. Note that China is also the largest trading partner and investor to Indonesia, as part of the crucial Belt and Road Initiative members in Southeast Asia.

Let us take a look at Indonesia’s reviews of China in both cycles. During Cycle 2, Indonesia’s review harshness score towards China was 3, which is lower than China’s average review harshness score of 4.8. This indicates that Indonesia’s recommendations to China were relatively milder than the average. In terms of ranking, Indonesia occupies the 44th position, suggesting a relatively lenient stance in their review of China (with lower rankings indicating greater leniency in the country’s review of China). Here are what Indonesia recommended China to work on in Cycle 2:

“Further guarantee children’s right to health and continue the trend to constantly reduce the mortality rate for children under five years of age.”

“Continue its progressive efforts and measures to implement the second National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP).”

The first recommendation falls under the category of “Protecting the rights of vulnerable populations” with a moderate level of sensitivity. The second recommendation pertains to a more general issue, resulting in the lowest sensitivity rating. Both verb choices, “further” and “continue,” indicate a relatively mild level of action and suggest minimal changes.

In contrast, during Cycle 3, Indonesia’s review of China exhibits an increased level of harshness with a score of 7.1. The average harshness score for Cycle 3 is 5.6. This places

Indonesia at rank 103, indicating that there are 102 countries that have provided China with reviews that are either more lenient or equally critical as compared to Indonesia.

Indonesia, in Cycle 3, recommended China to:

“Encourage China to consider ratifying the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, including for the Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions.”

“Continue to increase government investment in maternal and child health services.”

“Continue to strengthen the development of laws and systems for protecting freedom of religion or belief.”

In Cycle 3, we see a noticeable shift in Indonesia’s comments, as they address more sensitive issues, such as the rights of vulnerable populations and religious matters. However, the verbs used to convey these recommendations, namely “encourage” and “continue to strengthen,” convey a relatively mild tone. It appears that Indonesian representatives suggested that China has made significant progress thus far but could benefit from additional efforts in these specific areas. While Indonesia does touch upon sensitive topics, their recommendations refrain from adopting a critical stance. It also has no mention of racial ethnic minorities’ rights or civil and political rights. Nevertheless, based on the level of these recommendations, comparing to other countries, Indonesia falls within the category of reviewers offering medium to harsh assessments of China’s human rights conditions in Cycle 3.

7 Remarks

To summarize, I use the UN Universal Periodic Review as a laboratory to examine how China leverages its economic influence to shape the reviews conducted by other states in the human rights regime. China, in search for global leadership across issue domains, care about reviews and discussions at the United Nations Human Rights Council than it does about foreign aid, in particularly who gets what kinds of new development projects or who can get debt relief. Developing countries, by contrast, may care more about new sources of funding for unfinished projects or an extension for millions of repayments that they find no way to pay in time but lose its credit in the world's financial system, than about what a country could do better to treat its own citizens. While China is experiencing a downturn in protecting civil rights and is short of normative power to replace the liberal norms, its rising economic power enables it to shape the norm-based regime in its favor. I propose three potential alternatives for China to claim moral leadership in the human rights regime, and I investigate the middle path: to influence other states' reviews in the current regime.

Using text-based coding, I convert the publicly available UN reports into numerical scale to represent the instances of leniency in these review documents. Each recommendation receives one severity index. Then I use two methods to balance the quantity and quality differences of recommendations each state receives so that we can compare the review harshness scores at the dyad level. This set of measures enables us to examine and compare the behaviors of countries from two perspectives. Firstly, we can analyze how a country, acting as a reviewer, assesses and reviews other states. Secondly, we can evaluate how a country is reviewed by its peers in the international community. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and comparing the review dynamics among countries, shedding light on their interactions and relationships in the evaluation process.

By employing an adapted h-index, I present evidence demonstrating the relatively

moderate nature of reviews China received in both cycles. This is particularly noteworthy given the prevailing narratives that often attribute blame to China for its deteriorating human rights conditions and mistreatment of its citizens by certain governments in the West. When examining the review harshness score at the country level, China attained a ranking of 42 in Cycle 2 and 12 in Cycle 3. Despite a notable increase in rankings, indicating a tendency towards harsher reviews, the corresponding rise in the raw harshness score falls below 1 standard deviation. Surprisingly, the United States received the most critical reviews from its counterparts in both cycles. The introduction of the Review Harshness Score as a novel measure captures the intricate geopolitical dynamics that shape the reviews between states.

In addition to the descriptive work, I also find that countries with a high level of economic dependence on Chinese overseas development projects tend to be lenient reviewers on average. Taking into account the economic rewards between two cycles, I find that countries receiving more new China-funded development projects are more inclined to give lenient reviews to China in Cycle 3 compared to Cycle 2. Moreover, a debt relief deal also incentivizes countries to review China more leniently, with the exception of middle reviewers. Overall, receiving either type of economic rewards increases the likelihood that harsh reviewers display some leniency in the next cycle, more so than the other two groups.

8 Future Work

So far this project presents additional piece of evidence that when countries give reviews in the United Nations Universal Periodic Review system, countries take into account factors beyond the human rights conditions of the state under review. The reviews conducted in the UPR reflect vested political interests of the reviewing states. When China undergoes review, many developing countries refrain from delivering strong cri-

tiques on sensitive issues such as ethnic minority rights or religious rights. Instead, they employ positive language to endorse and encourage China to continue its efforts in enhancing certain human rights areas. Additionally, I have observed that countries that tend to provide lenient reviews to China are often recipients of China's foreign assistance. These recommendations can be seen as a form of reciprocation or favor, akin to "scratching China's back."

However, making a definitive causal claim that money buys influence is challenging. While the current empirical analysis indicates a correlation between countries receiving economic rewards and providing more lenient reviews, there is no direct evidence of intentional manipulation by China to exchange economic incentives for favorable reviews between review sessions. An alternative explanation is that these lenient reviews are unintended consequences resulting from China's financial contributions. It is possible that reviewing states, in general, tend to provide lenient reviews to all states, including China. To examine this alternative explanation, further investigation is required. It is also essential to assess whether China is an exception to another state that may be critical of most countries but particularly lenient towards China. A combination of cross-national studies and detailed case studies will be instrumental in elucidating the underlying mechanisms at play.

Another alternative explanation is that recipient countries use these reviews to signal that China has political leverage to influence their stances in the UN human rights regime. China might intend to use this UPR system to assess which countries are in its "inner circle" and which are not. It is plausible that even without changes in economic rewards between two cycles, we might still observe the same patterns. To partially address this issue, I need to develop a more fine-grained comparison about China's economic influence on different recipient countries. For certain countries, Chinese aid may be of utmost importance, leading them to refrain from making any statements that could offend the donor. However, for other countries, the stakes of criticizing China may be

lower. Similarly, for China, the significance of receiving lenient reviews varies for China as well: China may place more value on a positive review from a prominent country like Luxembourg compared to a lesser-known smaller country. If China indeed intends to use money to secure lenient reviews, it would carefully and selectively employ high-value carrots worth millions of dollars, engaging in this trade-off for reviews with countries it deems strategically important. Overall, while it is unsurprising that the UPR process is subject to politicization, with reviews driven by political motives, it remains challenging to definitively demonstrate whether lenient reviews are intentional outcomes or unintended consequences of China's aid efforts.

Lastly, I intend to enhance the measurement section by constructing a "backscratching" network using the UPR data. This network will provide insights into the affinity among states rather than solely reflecting on their actual human rights conditions. Hence, if we imagine another existing measure to construct and cross-check the validity of this review harshness score, it will be closer to the UN General Assembly Voting data (Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey 2009) than the Political Terror Score that reflects the human rights conditions based on U.S. State Department's and NGOs' reports (Gibney et al. 2017). By examining this network, we can identify both sincere reviewers and backscratchers within the UPR system. The network analysis will revolve around the state under review as the central node, revealing which countries tend to be lenient or harsh reviewers and the extent of leniency compared to others. Moreover, we can ascertain which countries demonstrate greater alignment with global powers such as China or the United States, and how these conditions and connections may evolve over time. The utilization of this network approach will enhance our understanding of the intricate dynamics within the UPR system and shed light on the intricate interplay between states' review behaviors and their relationships.

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