Reassessing Influence in Global Governance
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The question of how states exercise influence in global governance is particularly pertinent in times of power shifts and order transition. Our broader objective in this paper is to articulate a both richer and more nuanced account of voice, representation, and influence in international affairs. By influence, we simply mean the modification of preferences or behaviour of one actor by another. We argue that influence is not static but a highly dynamic process that occurs at multiple levels of analysis and entry points. In a nutshell, influence as a whole is more than the sum of accumulated incidents of influence pursued at single entry points.

I. Introduction: why reassess influence?

At the beginning of the 21st century, the 188 UN member states not being permanently represented on the Security Council enjoy greater opportunities for voice and influence, especially because of three fundamental challenges for global governance institutions.

First, there is the challenge of old multilateralism and waning U.S. hegemony. The post-1945 global governance architecture was essentially built around U.S. hegemony that included the industrialized Global North but largely excluded the developing Global South. It was held together by a very thin and exclusive version of multilateralism that largely ignored questions of voice and representation. However, with the global balance of power shifting to East and South, governance that lacks voice and representation from ‘the rest’ inevitably faces a serious legitimacy deficit.

The second challenge is the interrelationship between new multilateralism and regime complexity. 21st Century multilateralism is marked by a diffusion rather than concentration of power. This in turn has led to a diffusion of principles and preferences about how to address problems collectively. Liberal institutions have become challenged to adjust to those new realities. At the same time, many different channels of cooperation have emerged alongside the post-1945 liberal order, sometimes acting in parallel with existing institutions and sometimes acting in competition. In sum, the institutional pathways to exercise influence have become more diverse.

Third, as a result, institutional choice about where and how to exercise influence has gained central importance. At the same time, voice and representation are the sine-qua-non to generate procedural and substantive legitimacy in the pursuit of power.
Borrowing from Ruggie (1982), we start from the observation that international organizations (IOs) are embedded in a fairly complex system of global governance that can only be studied using multi-disciplinary approaches and across paradigms. Hence influence is exercised in multiple forms and at multiple levels in and around institutions. We call this diplomatic practice ‘embedded influence.’

II. 21st century influence and the UNSC

At the same time, the Council is embedded in a global order that is fundamentally challenged and contested. The world of new multilateralism offers therefore multiple pathways of collective action, with many more voice and representation opportunities for those without a seat at the table. Influence is not a linear process but a product of a dynamic and complex multi-level process evolving in a non-linear way. The tables of global governance have multiplied, with a whole array of different menus available for choice. States pursue influence in the world through many international channels. UN member states engage with the Council as one of several other institutional means to get what they want. Further, what states want is embedded in the broader context of international affairs; the actions of influence-seeking elected Council members are inherently connected to their actions and the actions of non-members outside the Council. In addition to direct effects, embeddedness and interconnectedness with the system produce indirect and delayed effects. The outcome of influence-seeking depends on how other actors in the system respond. Actions to seek influence may therefore not lead directly to an intended result.

If we accept the above analysis, then we require a new understanding of the Security Council itself. We advance an account of the Security Council with three distinctive characteristics. First, we see the Council as a political subsystem that is embedded in a much broader ecosystem of global governance. Second, the Council is much more than the sum of its formal features. The Security Council is an institution defined as much by its informal conventions and practices as by the formal authorities and responsibilities accorded it by the UN Charter. To study influence, then, we need to understand its formal and informal dimensions. Third, rather than focus on the Council’s role or impact in the world, we study the ways in which its decisions are reached, and the roles of and relationships between Council members to that end. This requires analysing Council dynamics, not static outcomes.

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3 This idea of exercising diplomacy within a system rather through a set of bilateral and plurilateral relationships is further substantiated in two recent special issues of Global Asia, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2016), ‘Finding a Way Forward: Strategic Diplomacy’s Role in Northeast Asia’, and of East Asia Forum Quarterly, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2017), ‘Strategic Diplomacy in Asia’, co-edited by the authors.
In sum, influence in global governance takes many shades of grey. Scholarly analysis of UNSC decision-making has overlooked many of the dynamics critical to the Council’s outcomes, resulting in shallow understandings of the multiple ways in which non-permanent members can wield influence. Current theory offers little explanation for such influence, informed by overwhelming focus on the P-5 to the neglect of the elected ten—or the non-permanent 188.

III. Illustrating ‘embedded influence’: Contemporary China

To illustrate our argument about ‘embedded influence’ as entailing the diversification of institutional channels of influence (not only the modes of influence) in order to create cumulatively a significant systemic impact, consider the instructive case of China’s current strategic and foreign policy initiative under the umbrella of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (née ‘One Belt, One Road’).

Introduced around 2013 by the current President, Xi Jinping, the BRI is an amalgamation of infrastructure-building projects to construct new continental and maritime ‘silk routes’ linking China to the Middle East and Europe, via Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. Much commentary on BRI focuses on debating Beijing’s apparent attempt to (a) replace existing western-dominated international financial institutions (IFI), especially lending agencies such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB); and (b) bribe neighbouring illiberal regimes by offering easy loans for infrastructure projects of dubious viability. But the commentary generally misses two important points about China’s effort at exercising embedded influence.

First, for Beijing, BRI is an umbrella covering a wider range of political and institutional agendas within a much broader ecosystem of national, regional, and global governance. For example, while it clearly contains foreign policy dimensions, it is impossible to understand BRI without taking into account its fundamental domestic political purpose of addressing uneven development and insurgency in China’s remote far western and southwestern provinces. At the foreign policy level, Beijing created an ‘ecosystem’ of mutually reinforcing though differentiated institutions of varying formality, scope and domain, to promote the BRI enterprise. While many focus on highlights such as the BRI summit and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Xi has also set up a well-resourced Silk Road Development Fund and various Central Government-provincial government funding mechanisms. Since 2012, Beijing has also harnessed other forums and institutional frameworks towards the infrastructure-building and OBOR agenda – partially re-purposing and optimizing as tools pre-existing forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the Bo’ao (investment) Forum for Asia; and newer channels like the BRICS-led New Development Bank. But China also continues to build upon its position within existing western-dominated institutions – it remains very active in the ADB as well as other IFIS.

Second, in terms of exercising Chinese influence, BRI is much more than the sum of its most obvious features, be they institutional or physical. Certainly, the construction
of roads, railways, pipelines, ports, dams, and electricity grids all create (often asymmetrical) interdependence and thus can offer China new modes of coercion and inducement over its weaker neighbours. But China’s potential influence is not necessarily just direct or dyadic; it is also structural and systemic. For example, the more significant effects of BRI lie in the regulatory implications of the ‘connectivity’: the stated aims of ‘facilities connectivity’, ‘unimpeded trade’, ‘financial integration’, ‘policy coordination’ and ‘people-to-people bonds’ entail a myriad of regulatory frameworks, including customs coordination, free trade agreements or zones, currency convertibility, legal frameworks for ownership and investment, and inter-state agencies to oversee them. Thus, even if only partially implemented, BRI will pluralise regional rules and norms of development financing and practices. At the same time, China offers these neighbouring countries a new development model that resonates with both their shared statist ideology and developmental imperative. Through their emphasis on political non-interference, bilateralism, and statist forms of economic regulation, BRI and other China-led regional trade and services agreements make regional regulatory coordination seem ‘non-political’ and thus “seemingly preserving government autonomy and control of the economy in target states”.

China thus exercises influence through “preference multiplying”, expanding the domain of regional consensus on the core value of state-centric developmentalism. Structurally, Beijing thus exercises influence by expanding the range of options available to others and giving them opportunities they otherwise would not have had. Over the medium term, Beijing’s growing institutional web underpinning shared developmentalist ordering principles may reinforce its older agenda of creating Asian institutions that exclude the United States.

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7 Evelyn Goh, ‘Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia,’ in G. John Ikenberry and Daniel Nexon, eds., The Politics of Hegemonic Order, manuscript under review
10 This point is drawn from Susan Strange’s concept of structural power in States and Markets (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).