China’s Voting Behavior on the U.N. Security Council: 
An Analysis of Vetoes and Abstentions

On October 25, 1971, the United Nations General Assembly voted on Res. 2758 (“The restoration of the lawful rights of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations”). By a vote of 76 to 35 (with 17 member states abstaining, and three – China, the Maldives, and Oman – not participating in the voting at all), the resolution passed. The People’s Republic of China had joined the United Nations. By joining the United Nations, China had not only supplanted Taiwan’s seat in the General Assembly; it had also taken up Taiwan’s former seat on the Security Council. Curiously, however, the newest permanent member of the United Nations Security Council seemed reluctant to wield its considerable veto power; China seemed to abstain or not participate in voting at all as often as it voted in the affirmative, and unlike its neighbor, the USSR, China seldom used its veto power. This paper analyzes China’s voting behavior in the Security Council – specifically, its relatively frequent use of the abstention or non-vote compared to its infrequent use of the veto. How can China’s vetoes be explained in light of its abstentions, and how, if at all, have China’s voting habits changed in the past forty years of its Security Council membership?

This paper will begin with an overview of the Security Council, including its membership, voting structure, and evolution over the years of its existence; continue with a literature review; and then analyze China’s voting practices in the Security Council since 1971. The analysis traces factors that affect China’s voting behavior, from its desire to be seen as a leader of the Third World, to voting in line with its allies in a show of Socialist solidarity, to protecting its strategic and economic interests and presenting a positive face of public diplomacy, to underscoring China’s most prominent belief in the inviolability of
national sovereignty. Finally, the paper will conclude with implications that China’s voting behavior has for the Security Council in the future.

The U.N. Security Council: An Overview

The post-World War II refashioning of what had formerly been the League of Nations focused on creating an internal organ that would be able to respond to international peace and security crises in a more effective and flexible manner. To that end, the self-appointed Permanent Members of the Security Council – the Republic of China, France, the USSR, United Kingdom, and United States – granted themselves exceptional freedoms (most notably, veto power), designed the structure of the Security Council to be difficult to change (thereby ensuring the maintenance of this power), and wrote the U.N. Charter to reflect these facts. Article 24(1) reads

In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf.

Article 24 of the Charter continues

The Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter.

In effect, all the Members of the United Nations General Assembly are bound to the decisions of the much-smaller Security Council.

As might be expected, less powerful and therefore more vulnerable nations protested the high-handed management tactic orchestrated by the five Permanent Members (sometimes called the P5). Even though the ten non-permanent Members of the Security Council make up two-thirds of the membership, the ten non-permanent states are
elected by the General Assembly annually for a two-year term each, meaning that one-third of the Security Council membership changes every year. What influence can non-permanent Members hope to have over the ever-present P5, who also have veto power over resolutions? Yet Article 27 of the U.N. Charter states that

Decisions of the Security Council on all other matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members including the concurring votes of the permanent members; provided that, in decisions under Chapter VI, and under paragraph 3 of Article 52, a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting.

In other words, the non-permanent Members of the Security Council do have a “sixth veto” – “a capacity to deny a resolution the nine affirmative votes needed to pass.”1 Of course, such an occurrence would be highly unusual, since the Permanent Members are included in the nine affirmative votes; yet this voting structure allows the non-permanent Members to band together against the Permanent Members if the occasion calls for it.

Despite this image that this voting structure evokes of the Security Council as a contentious body, in reality the Security Council votes concurrently the vast majority of the time. One analysis shows that between January 1999 and September 2009, 93% of resolutions passed the Security Council unanimously.2 This near-perfect voting congruence reflects the fact that much of the work of the Security Council is performed prior to its convening, limiting the risk of the unknown in official meetings. It also highlights any instances of abstention or veto as an aberration to the default of an affirmative vote.

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Since 1971, when China replaced Taiwan in the U.N., the number of resolutions that the Security Council passes annually has steadily increased. The Security Council passed sixteen resolutions and vetoed four in 1971; by 2006, it had passed eighty-seven and vetoed two. While the Security Council has become more active over the years, it still passes the vast majority of resolutions, and the proportion of passed vs. failed resolutions has remained roughly the same. As the number of resolutions that the Security Council passes has increased, have China’s vetoes and abstentions increased correspondingly? Or has China’s voting behavior changed over time?

**Literature Review**

Most of the literature on China and the Security Council dates from the period in which Taiwan held both the General Assembly and the Security Council seats. Since 1971, studies have tended to focus on the Security Council as a whole, China in the Security Council during specific periods of time, or China on the Security Council through the lens of a specific issue. No study has examined the entirety of the People’s Republic of China’s voting record since it joined the U.N.

Perhaps the most thorough study of the veto in Security Council history was written by Anjali V. Patil; in examining each instance of the veto and performing a case study of each occasion, Patil analyzes not only the history of the veto, but also the history and evolution of the Security Council itself. However, this volume includes vetoes that were performed in closed sessions (most commonly used to elect a new Secretary-General,

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records of which are not available to the public), and furthermore the book’s analysis ends in 1990. These limitations make it difficult to fully understand China’s use of the abstention and veto in the Security Council. In his analysis of the veto across the Security Council’s history, Thomas Schindlmyer argues that, as controversial as the veto may be, it has actually strengthened the P5’s commitment to the institution and has prevented the escalation of conflicts, particularly between the Permanent Members themselves.\(^5\) However, his study examines the Security Council as whole and not China’s role in particular.

Yitzhak Shichor argues that, over time, China’s stated principles have given way to pragmatic interests; that is, that the “Chinese believed that the principle of requiring unanimity [among the P5] could prevent one-sided resolutions, particularly on the use of force... In retrospect, they probably felt uncomfortable when they realized that it was because of their veto... that Bangladesh was not admitted to the United Nations.”\(^6\) Sally Morphet, however, argues the opposite. In dividing China’s membership on the Security Council into four distinct stages between 1971 and 1999, she charts China’s development from non-participation to being a fully engaged member of the international community; she also argues that China’s main interest, demonstrated by its use of the veto over this time period, was “to ensure territorial integrity by making sure that Taiwan is not accepted into the international community as an independent state.”\(^7\) The vetoes that China has enacted since Shichor and Morphet’s papers may indicate whose theory is more accurate.

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\(^6\) Yitzhak Shichor, “China’s Voting Behavior in the UN Security Council,” *China Brief* 6, 18 (September 6, 2006).

Other studies isolate specific interests among China’s priorities. Trevor Houser and Roy Levy examine how China’s behavior in the Security Council reflects their energy policy, and find that, contrary to popular opinion, China does not vote alongside developing nations to protect Chinese oil interests; rather, China’s degree of concurrence with the U.S. has increased over time, and China diverges “out of a belief in the sanctity of national sovereignty, rather than a hunger for natural resources. In fact, this position on sovereignty is undermining, rather than enhancing, Chinese energy security.”

Scholars and journalists often emphasize the importance of Chinese national sovereignty to China’s foreign policy. Yet a not-insignificant portion of the literature on China’s behavior in the Security Council focuses on its evolving attitude and behavior toward U.N. peacekeeping operations, which interfere with a state’s national sovereignty. Philippe D. Rogers attributes this change to China’s post-Tiananmen state: “The People’s Liberation Army determined that it needed to restore a congenial relationship with the broader society and the world. The actions it chose included disaster relief, domestic security, and other measures, but also, very importantly, participation in UN peacekeeping operations.” Yin He also points to the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident as a turning point in China’s attitude toward U.N. peacekeeping operations, but unlike Rogers, He attributes this change to “the urgent task of breaking through the international isolation following the 1989 Tiananmen event” and “restoring a favorable international environment for its development-oriented modernization.

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strategy.”10 Stefan Stähle expands He’s analysis into coinciding changes in both Chinese foreign policy and U.N. peacekeeping operations:

the experience with wider peacekeeping in the 1990s convinced the Chinese leadership that robust peacekeeping was indeed necessary in certain cases and that large-scale atrocities required an international response. On the other hand, China’s acceptance of UNPKO rose when Beijing became more involved in the formulation of peacekeeping mandates and when the Brahimi Report addressed some of its key concerns.11

These studies raise almost more questions than they answer. How can China value national sovereignty and support U.N. peacekeeping missions at the same time, and why does China’s voting record not always reflect consistency in this area?

The studies most relevant to this one directly examine China’s voting behavior on the Security Council. Katie Lynch looks at each veto or abstention that China employs between 1999 and 2009, coming to the conclusion that China votes most often in congruence with Russia and least often with the U.S. or the U.K., but differs from Russia in its need to underscore the one-China policy and desire to represent the Third World.12

Since Lynch’s study, however, China has cast several crucial vetoes and abstentions in conjunction with Russia, with other states, and alone. How do these actions fit into Lynch’s theory that China votes with Russia except when China needs to emphasis the one-China policy and its role as a leader of the Third World, and do recent Security Council resolutions represent a change in China’s voting behavior? Joel Wuthnow’s examination of China-U.S. voting congruence across eight Security Council resolutions finds that “China’s

bargaining power is at its greatest when credible outside options exist and when there is a
division in attitudes towards the legitimacy of the preferences of the U.S. and its allies, and
weakest under the opposite conditions,” but the study faces a similar challenge of being
published prior to China’s vetoes on Syria-related resolutions.13

Because China’s domestic politics dictate how it conducts international relations,
China’s use of the veto and abstention has understandably changed with the country’s
leadership. Joe Hagan tracks China’s voting behavior in the U.N. General Assembly to 1984
based on its congruence to U.S. voting:

Even the voting shifts in post-Maoist Chinese foreign policy were visible:
Deng Xiaoping’s consolidation of power, along with the eviction of Hua
Kuofeng, caused opposing votes to drop from 80 to 54 percent and
agreement to grow from 14 to 20 percent, with abstentions increasing from 6
to 26 percent. These percentages suggest that if a regime change moves a
nation from one voting orientation to another – particularly between
opposite ends of the scale – then the effects of the change are substantively
significant and do not represent a statistical aberration.14

This change from what Hagan categorizes as a “moderately anti-U.S.” to a “moderately pro-
U.S. regime” could explain the drop in China’s non-affirmative votes in the early 1980s (see
Figure 1). Qimao Chen picks up where Hagan concludes his study; Chen examines China’s
post-Cold War foreign policy, in which China’s competitive relationship with the USSR
evolves into an alliance, and China turns to building strong regional relationships with its
neighbors, reform and opening up, and economic development.15 Because others have
written extensively on how China’s domestic leadership affects its international relations,
this paper will only make brief notes on when a domestic policy affects the outcome of a

Columbia University, 2011).
14 Joe D. Hagan, “Domestic Political Regime Changes and Third World Voting Realignments in the United
Security Council vote (as when China’s strategic and economic incursions into Africa and Latin America influenced its decision to veto a U.N. observer mission in Guatemala).

Of course, China is but one of five Permanent Members, and one of fifteen total Member nations, that sit on the Security Council at any given time. While China’s status as a veto-wielding Member gives it disproportionate power on the Security Council, the fact remains that whether resolutions succeed or fail when they come before the Security Council depends on more than the role of a single Member state. A Security Council composed of a significant number of China’s allies could, for example, all abstain from voting and deny a draft resolution the nine affirmative votes necessary for passage, thereby rendering a Chinese veto unnecessary. S/RES/1559 (2004), on the political independence and withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon, comes closest to such a case: Algeria, Brazil, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Russia all abstained from voting along with China, dividing the Security Council and allowing the resolution to pass with the bare minimum of nine affirmative votes. The question of whether and why China’s veto power comes into play, then, depends heavily on the makeup of the Security Council at the moment when a draft resolution comes to a vote.

In contrast to previous studies of China’s role on the Security Council, this study will examine China’s voting behavior across the entirety of its Security Council membership, from 1971 to the present. Because China has only vetoed eight resolutions in the past forty years, the rarity of each occasion deserves special emphasis. This paper will examine each veto individually, placing each in historical context as well as within the context of China’s abstentions on related resolutions. Then this study will discuss changes in China’s voting
behavior on the Security Council and the implications it has for future Security Council activity.

**Methodology**

Because U.N. voting records are kept in several different types of official documents, it was necessary to compile records from all of those sources in order to build a comprehensive record of China’s voting behavior. The *Index to the Proceedings of the Security Council*, which is released annually, contains “a comprehensive subject index to all the documents (reports, letters, meeting records, resolutions, etc.) issued by the body in question during a particular session/year; and... an index to speeches delivered before the forum in question during a particular session/year.”¹⁶ Beginning in 1976, the *Index* also appends a voting chart detailing how each Member (permanent and non-permanent) voted on each resolution for the year. Details on resolutions passed before 1976 and for the current year of 2012 had to be manually compiled via the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBISNET), using a search limited to Security Council Resolutions by vote date.

Over the course of my research, it became apparently that the *Index to the Proceedings of the Security Council* and UNBISNET’s records occasionally differed on the question of whether China had abstained from a vote versus declining to participate in the voting altogether.¹⁷ In these cases, I deferred to the official meeting record of the Security Council, found in the *Official Meeting Records of the Security Council* and accessed via the

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¹⁷ For S/RES/401 (1976), on extending the stationing of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus, UNBISNET states that China voted in the affirmative, whereas the *Index* records that China did not participate in the voting.
Official Document System of the United Nations (ODS). These official meeting records contain verbatim the entirety of each Security Council session (speeches, deliberations, etc.), as well as documenting any votes that arise. Because, practically speaking, an abstention and the refusal to participate in voting result in the same outcome in the calculus of Security Council voting, I have grouped them together under the category of abstentions in Figure 1.

Of greater concern were the occasions where UNBISNET records an affirmative vote where other records show an abstention. On these occasions I have again deferred to the official meeting records as the most authoritative source. Although I have only been able to find two instances in which these discrepancies in U.N. recordkeeping affect China’s voting behavior, it’s possible that I have missed other occasions over the course of China’s 1,743 votes since it joined the Security Council. To minimize this potential skewing of the voting record, I’ve used the official meeting record in my analysis of each resolution mentioned in this paper; not only are the official meeting records more authoritative, but the speeches given by each delegate also provide much-needed context to each vote.

Of course, the draft resolutions vetoed by the Security Council never make it into the various types of documentation described above (those records describe resolutions only, and draft resolutions that are vetoed never become Security Council resolutions). The U.N. provides an official veto list, covering 1946 to April 2004, in document A/58/47. For vetoes that occurred after April 2004, I consulted the list of Security Council actions

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18 For S/RES/1160 (1998), on the imposition of an arms embargo against Yugoslavia, UNBISNET records China’s vote as in the affirmative, whereas the Index shows an abstention.
recorded by year and provided by the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library Research Guide.

Figure 1. China’s U.N. Security Council Votes, 1971-2012*
### Table 1. China’s U.N. Security Council Votes, 1971-2012

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China’s Security Council Vetoes

*S/10771: Admission of new members [Bangladesh] (August 25, 1972)*

China’s first veto occurred a year after it took its seat on the Security Council, over the question of Bangladesh joining the United Nations. China’s rivalry with the USSR at the time caused it to view Indian and Soviet support of Bangladeshi independence as a threat to China’s national security, resulting in China’s siding with Pakistan against Bangladeshi independence.  

When Bangladesh gained independence despite China’s efforts, China used Bangladesh’s attempt to join the United Nations as an opportunity to denounce the USSR and India; the Chinese representative to the U.N. accused the USSR and India of “distort[ing] the principles of the Charter,” “harbor[ing] ulterior motives,” and “maintain[ing] and aggravat[ing] the tension on the South Asian subcontinent so as to gain profit therefrom.” In response, China was “compelled to fulfill determinedly our sacred duty and vote firmly against the unreasonable demand of the Soviet Union and Indian delegations, so as to defend the prestige and authority of the United Nations and the Council.”

This speech provoked a host of negative reactions from the other delegations, some of which were downright hostile. Despite this antagonism, China persisted in casting the sole negative vote against the resolution to admit Bangladesh to the United Nations

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22 Ibid.
(Guinea, Somalia, and Sudan abstained). The 1972 resolution did not pass because of China's veto, yet Bangladesh joined the United Nations in 1974. What happened in the intervening two years to change China's opinion of the situation? Apparently, China's fears that an Indian-Bangladeshi relationship would present a national security threat were unfounded. On the contrary, “military rule in Bangladesh was not so friendly towards India and harbored nostalgia for Pakistan which... facilitated closer China, Pakistan and Bangladesh relations.”23 When resolution S/11316 came before the Security Council on June 10, 1974, China cited “new developments... in the situation on the South Asian sub-continent” that “created favorable conditions for the normalization of relations among countries of the sub-continent” as its reasons for supporting Bangladesh’s U.N. membership.24 The draft resolution was adopted by consensus, without a vote.

China’s role in Bangladesh’s attempts to join the U.N. illustrates China’s willingness to act unilaterally, if necessary, to protect what it sees as threats to its own national security interests. It also underscores China’s commitment to its allies (in this case, Pakistan) even while facing resistance from the more developed superpowers; China’s championing of a less-developed country also reinforces its role as a member and leader of the Third World.

_S/10786: The situation in the Middle East [calling for a cease-fire] (September 10, 1972)_

During the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, members of the Israeli Olympic team were taken hostage and eventually killed by the Palestinian paramilitary organization

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Black September. In retaliation, Israeli planes bombed ten Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) bases in Syria and Lebanon on September 8, 1972. The Security Council met on September 10 to discuss the language in various draft resolutions condemning the outbreak of violence.

Guinea, Somalia, and Yugoslavia submitted draft resolution S/10784, which reads:

_The Security Council,_
_Deeply concerned_ at the deteriorating situation in the Middle East,
_Call on_ the parties concerned to cease immediately all military operations and to exercise the greatest restraint in the interest of international peace and security._25

Belgium, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom submitted amendments to the above draft resolution as resolution S/10786, which made the following changes:

1. Insert a second preambular paragraph as follows:
   _“Deploring deeply all acts of terrorism and violence and all breaches of the cease-fire in the Middle East,”_
2. In the operative paragraph:
   (a) Replace “the parties” by “all parties”;
   (b) Delete “cease immediately all military operations” and substitute “take all measures for the immediate cessation and prevention of all military operations and terrorist activities”._26

These three amendments to the original draft resolution were voted on individually, and China used its veto power to reject each one. Guinea, Sudan, and Yugoslavia voted with China against the first amendment; they were joined by another veto power, the USSR, in rejecting amendment 2(a); these countries were additionally joined by India in voting against amendment 2(b). China’s rejection of these slight changes were motivated by its relations with the PLO and refusal to recognize Israel as a sovereign nation. Even though

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Israel was one of the first countries, in 1951, to recognize Beijing and not Taipei, and even though Israel established this diplomatic connection “despite American and Western opposition,” China did not return Israel’s diplomatic recognition until 1992.\textsuperscript{27} China and the PLO, on the other hand, had enjoyed close ties for years. China was “the first non-Arab country in the world to recognize the PLO as an independent entity,”\textsuperscript{28} and May 15 is celebrated as Palestine Solidarity Day in China. Therefore, as a supporter of the Third World and Third World liberation movements in particular, China vigorously supported Palestine and went so far as to point out during this Security Council meeting that “this draft resolution fails to condemn Israeli Zionism for its aggressive acts against the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon.”\textsuperscript{29}

Like China’s first veto, this one may be seen as an example of China’s willingness to act unilaterally (in the case of vetoing the first of the three amendments) in order to support allies, especially when facing opposition from Western powers. Having demonstrated its position so clearly on this draft resolution, China had more leeway to show disapproval of various situations in the Middle East by abstaining from voting. When resolutions pertaining to violent conflict in the Middle East came before the Security Council in 1973 and 1974, China indicated disagreement with abstentions.

In April 1973, for example, when the Security Council voted on Resolution 332 on military attacks conducted by Israel against Lebanon (part of the continued retaliation for the Munich massacre), the Chinese delegate pointed out that the language in the draft resolution was “ambiguous [and]... failed to draw a distinction between the right and the


\textsuperscript{29} U.N. Security Council, 27\textsuperscript{th} Year. \textit{1662nd Meeting}. 10 September 1972 (S/PV 1662). Official Record.
wrong and between the aggressor and the victim of aggression and, therefore, might be
used by the Zionists and imperialists to oppose the Palestinian people.”

Despite this objection, which bears a striking resemblance to the criticism that China used to veto the
1972 draft resolution S/10786, China abstained from voting and therefore let this
resolution be adopted.

When the Yom Kippur War broke out in October 1973, the Security Council met
three times in quick succession to call for a cease-fire and to create a U.N. Emergency Force,
which consisted of military observers from member states excepting the P5, and was
meant to increase U.N. presence on either side of the cease-fire line. Following precedent
and using similar language as it had in the past, China refused to participate in the voting
for Resolutions 338, 339, and 340. All other fourteen Members on the Security Council
voted in the affirmative, allowing all three resolutions to pass despite China’s non-
participation. These abstentions, non-participations, and the veto reinforce China’s stance
at the time as willing to act unilaterally in defense of its allies. They also showcase China’s
developing principle of non-interference: a reluctance to interfere with what China views
as internal issues, or matters under the purview of national sovereignty, despite threats to
regional or international peace and security. In cases where the latter is truly threatened
(as in the case of the Yom Kippur War), China moves to show its disapproval via abstention
– thus letting the resolution pass – rather than exercising its veto power.


A quarter-century passed before China cast its next veto. As thirty-six years of civil
war in Guatemala drew to an end, the U.N. assisted the peace process in the form of the

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United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights and of Compliance with the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights in Guatemala (MINUGUA). This resolution called for MINUGUA’s attachment to a group of military observers and medical personnel to verify the cease-fire over the course of a three-month period.\(^{31}\) Although the Members of the Security Council were overwhelmingly in support of this resolution, and despite the additional endorsements from Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Venezuela (who were not Members of the Security Council but were invited to participate in the discussion), China cast the sole non-affirmative vote against the resolution. China’s veto had very little to do with the peace process in Guatemala and everything to do with Guatemala’s diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Not only had Guatemala refused to recognize Beijing rather than Taipei, but it had also acted aggressively on the issue of Taiwan’s admission to the U.N. As a result, “China vetoed the peacekeepers to punish Guatemala for being one of roughly a dozen countries that have consistently voted over the past four years to bring the issue of Taiwanese representation to the General Assembly.”\(^{32}\)

At the Security Council meeting, the Chinese delegate accused Guatemala of supporting “activities aimed at splitting China at the United Nations” and warned Guatemala that it could not “expect to have the cooperation of China in the Security Council while taking actions to infringe upon China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. No country’s peace process should be at the expense of another country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.”\(^{33}\)


\(^{33}\) U.N. Security Council, 52\(^{\text{nd}}\) Year. 3730\(^{\text{th}}\) Meeting. 10 January 1997 (S/PV 3730). Official Record.
These last few statements make clear China’s confidence in a particular principle of its foreign policy: that of national sovereignty and territorial integrity even at the expense of peace, and especially when China’s strategic and economic interests are at stake. This doctrine was not a sudden development; China had abstained from a number of U.N. resolutions involving peacekeeping forces and/or U.N. Emergency Forces since Turkish and Greek hostilities in Cyprus gave China the opportunity to do so beginning in 1972. In defense of its territorial integrity, China has also showed disapproval of states that violate the one-China policy by abstaining when the question of their admission to the U.N. comes to a vote. Draft resolution S/1999/716 (June 25, 1999) dealt with the admission of the Republic of Nauru to the U.N.; although China showed its disapproval of Nauru’s established diplomatic relations with Taiwan by abstaining from the vote, it nevertheless allowed the draft resolution to pass. China used nearly identical language to explain its abstention for Tuvalu, another country that maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan, when it requested to join the U.N.

These tiny Pacific Islands may have posed a small threat to China’s concept of territorial integrity with their refusal to accept the one-China policy, but Guatemala deliberately flaunted the question of Taiwanese representation before the U.N. In addition, Guatemala posed a threat to China’s strategic and economic interests: China had begun courting African and Latin American countries for strategic and economic partnerships, most recently succeeding in South Africa when President Nelson Mandela agreed to recognize Beijing instead of Taipei just the month prior to the Guatemala vote. A conciliatory vote for Guatemala would have been a step backward for China’s strategic and
economic interests in Latin America. China’s veto, then, was the rational choice to protect its territorial integrity and strategic and economic interests.


\textit{S/1999/201: The situation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (February 25, 1999)}

China’s belief in national sovereignty came to the fore when a draft resolution related to the U.N. Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP) in the former Yugoslavia came before the Security Council. The draft resolution would have extended the UNPREDEP presence in the former Yugoslavia for an additional six months, with the explicit purpose of “deter[ring] threats and prevent[ing] clashes, to monitor the border areas, and to report to the Secretary-General any developments which could pose a threat
to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.”\textsuperscript{36} In what seems like a direct appeasement toward China, the draft resolution also reaffirms the Security Council’s “commitment to the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.”\textsuperscript{37}

This language – almost word for word what China used in defense of its past vetoes – did little to sway China’s decision. In explaining its veto, China simply said, “we have always maintained that United Nations peacekeeping operations, including preventive deployment missions, should not be open-ended.”\textsuperscript{38} This position was consistent with China’s vote on several other U.N. peacekeeping-related resolutions: China had abstained from Res. 1101 (1997) [on the establishment of the multinational protection force for the humanitarian assistance to Albania] and Res. 1114 (1997) [on temporary extension of the operations of the Multinational Protection Force in Albania]. In addition, China would, after vetoing this draft resolution, abstain from Res. 1239 (1999) [on relief assistance to Kosovo refugees and internally displaced persons in Kosovo, the Republic of Montenegro and other parts of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] and Res. 1244 (1999) [on the deployment of international civil and security presences in Kosovo]. The difference as explained by the Chinese delegate was that, at the time that this draft resolution came before the Security Council, “the situation in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has apparently stabilized… Africa and other regions are still plagued by conflict and need greater attention and contributions from the United Nations.”\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, China abstained on prior

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} U.N. Security Council, 54\textsuperscript{th} Year. 3982\textsuperscript{nd} Meeting. 25 February 1999 (S/PV 3982). Official Record.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
resolutions that violated their principle but did not veto them in acknowledgement that peacekeeping forces were necessary to stabilize the region. Afterwards, China abstained from resolutions that were based on humanitarian need (to aid refugees) and that assisted regions still in conflict (Kosovo). At the same time, China was not above pointing out the needs of certain regions (in the above case, Africa) as a way to reinforce its status as a leader of the Third World.

**S/2007/14: On the situation of human and political rights in Myanmar (January 12, 2007)**

After a 2006 General Assembly report revealed large-scale human rights violations in Myanmar, the Security Council moved to address these concerns. This draft resolution called on the Government of Myanmar “to cease military attacks against civilians in ethnic minority regions and in particular to put an end to the associated human rights and humanitarian law violations against persons belonging to ethnic nationalities,” “to begin without delay a substantive political dialogue, which would lead to a genuine democratic transition,” and “to take concrete steps to allow full freedom of expression, association, and movement,” among other demands.\(^{40}\) The above three, however, would have been the most alarming to China. Human rights groups reported in 2006 that China was responding to the increased number of incidents with greater force,\(^ {41}\) and a Congressional Research Service report from the same year indicated that “recent protest activities have been broader in

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\(^{41}\) “January 2006: China responds to greater social unrest with greater repression,” *Human Rights in China*, http://hrichina.org/content/4113.
scope, larger in average size, greater in frequency, and more brash than those of a decade ago.”

It’s hardly surprising, then, that China viewed the potential acceptance of this draft resolution as a dangerous precedent to set and a threat to its own national sovereignty. The Chinese delegate even “engaged in extensive discussions and consultations with all Council members, especially the sponsor, in an effort to prevent a vote on it.” Despite his efforts, the vote on the draft resolution was held, and China, Russia, and South Africa all voted against it (with Congo, Indonesia, and Qatar abstaining). The veto, then, was hardly a unilateral action on China’s part. However, China had a more complex reason for voting against the draft resolution than did Russia or South Africa. Russia vetoed the draft resolution because it believed that the situation in Myanmar “does not pose any threat to international or regional peace,” in addition to having concerns that the draft resolution exceeded the bounds of the Security Council and would be better addressed by the U.N. Human Rights Council. South Africa concurred with this second reason and voted against the draft resolution on those grounds.

China, on the other hand, elaborated on its veto and stated what is practically a manifesto of its belief in the infallibility of national sovereignty:

the Myanmar issue is mainly the internal affair of a sovereign State... No one would dispute the fact that Myanmar is, indeed, faced with a series of grave challenges related to refugees, child labor, HIV/AIDS, human rights, and drugs. But similar problems exist in many other countries. If, because Myanmar is encountering this or that problem in the areas to which I referred, it is to be... included on the agenda of the Council and be the subject of a draft resolution, then the situations in all other 191 United Nations

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44 Ibid.
Member States may also need to be considered by the Security Council. Such an approach is neither logical nor reasonable.\(^{45}\)

The “grave challenges” that Myanmar faced, according to China’s above statement, are also problems that exist within China itself. China’s emphasis on the fact that, “as an immediate neighbor of Myanmar and a Security Council member from the Asia-Pacific region, [China] attaches no less importance to the situation in Myanmar than do other States,”\(^{46}\) could also be seen as a state of alarm over encroaching threats to China’s own national sovereignty. In the context of China’s own increased levels of internal unrest, China’s “consistent position that... The international community can offer all kinds of constructive advice and assistance, but should refrain from arbitrary interference”\(^{47}\) can only logically result in a Chinese veto.

**S/2008/447: On the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer of arms and related material to Zimbabwe (July 11, 2008)**

In 2008, Zimbabwe held a series of presidential and parliamentary elections, which, because of a lack of a majority winner in the first round of voting, were forced into a second round. Before the second round of voting could occur, however, political violence broke out that specifically targeted the opposition movement to longtime president Robert Mugabe. Contemporaneous news reports state that “113 of [opposition Movement for Democratic Change] activists have been killed since March,”\(^{48}\) some in horrific ways. Opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai pulled out of the election because of “the absurdity of holding

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{46}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
a vote while dozens of opposition members were being beaten, arrested, and killed." 49 In addition, the Southern African Development Community, Pan-African Parliament, and African Union Observer missions to Zimbabwe declared that “the elections fell short of accepted African Union standards, did not give rise to free, fair, or credible elections, and did not reflect upon the will of the Zimbabwean people.” 50

Along with Liberia and Sierra Leone, a number of Western countries drafted a resolution that “would have instituted a travel ban on Mugabe and others in his government, frozen many of their assets and imposed an international arms embargo on their regime.” 51 Although China vetoed this resolution, the explanation it gave for doing so struck a rather conciliatory tone: it emphasized that “China has always believed that negotiation and dialogue are the best approach to solving problems,” 52 and while China’s statement did not mention national sovereignty directly, it alluded to it by saying that “the situation in Zimbabwe to date has not gone beyond the realm of internal affairs.” 53

While national sovereignty was almost certainly a concern for China, a more pressing reason for the Chinese veto might be found in the strength and nature of China-Zimbabwe relations. Chinese and Zimbabwean military ties are “among the closest on the African continent”; China has sold military aircraft, vehicles, a radar system, and other kinds of military equipment to Zimbabwe since 2005. 54 Contemporaneous news reports also point to evidence that China may have been supplying Zimbabwe with the arms it used

49 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
in putting down the political opposition movement during the 2008 elections. On April 17, 2008, the *Guardian* (UK) reported that a Chinese cargo ship carrying 77 tonnes of small arms had docked at Durban, South Africa, en route to its shipment to Zimbabwe.55 The ship’s documentation showed that “the weapons were sent from Beijing to the ministry of defense in Harare. Headed ‘Dangerous goods description and container packing certificate,’ the document was issued on April 1, three days after Zimbabwe’s election.”56

China’s veto of sanctions against Zimbabwe, therefore, might be seen as a method of protecting national interests against sanctions, as well as aiding an ally, in addition to reinforcing its prior interest in maintaining national sovereignty. As in several past situations when China has occasion to its veto, China did not act unilaterally. Russia also used its veto power against this resolution (citing an overreach of Security Council powers, though it may also have vetoed as part of its alliance with China), and non-permanent members Libya, South Africa, and Vietnam also voted in the negative. Libya voted negatively on this draft resolution in deference to the South African Development Community and the African Union’s efforts in resolving the situation; South Africa voted negatively for the same reasons, in addition to the South African government’s position as mediator in the talks between Zimbabwe’s rival political parties; Vietnam did not find the situation in Zimbabwe to “constitute a threat to regional or international peace and security,”57 and therefore also voted in the negative. It seems that China’s decision to veto

56 Ibid.
the resolution stemmed from slightly different reasons than China’s co-dissenters, and was unique in its combination of defense of national sovereignty and national self-interest.


Almost a year after a wave of revolutions commonly known as the Arab Spring began in Tunisia and continued to sweep across the Middle East, the revolutionary unrest in Syria began. Alarmed by the military crackdown that began in April 2011 and continued without showing signs of leniency, as well as by the host of human rights violations being reported from within Syria, France, Germany, Portugal, and the U.K. drafted a resolution condemning the violence and calling for an immediate cessation of force. This draft resolution proved to be somewhat controversial when it reached the Security Council: China and Russia vetoed it, and Brazil, India, Lebanon, and South Africa abstained from voting.

China’s veto in this case is a complicated matter, not least because the violence in Syria is still ongoing, and any explanations that diplomats can provide for the internal workings of the Security Council usually come after a violent situation has resolved. China’s veto can also be seen as somewhat confusing in light of its abstention on an earlier resolution related to Libya – a similar situation in which China’s abstention marked a change in its typical firm stance on national sovereignty. When the Security Council met on March 17, 2011, to vote on draft resolution S/2011/142, Libya had been swept up in the Arab Spring and much of the international community was focused on Qadhafi’s

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suppression of the Libyan uprising. The draft resolution in the Libya case demanded a cease-fire, authorized external troops to act in Libya for the protection of civilians, established a no-fly zone in Libyan airspace, enforced an arms embargo, and froze the assets of certain leaders of the Qadhafi regime. The existence of any one of these stipulations, let alone the sum of them in concert, would have been sufficient under normal circumstances for China to wield its veto. However, China had conflicting interests in Libya that included “demand at home for prompt action to ensure the safety of more than 35,000 Chinese working in the country; widespread support among (China-friendly) Arab countries for tough action against Muammar Qaddafi; and economic interests in Libya that might be threatened by supporting the wrong side.” In addition, China saw this resolution as being supported by a number of non-Western powers; as the Chinese delegate said during the Security Council meeting, “China attaches great importance to the relevant position by the 22-member Arab League on the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya. We also attach great importance to the position of African countries and the African Union.” China calculated that compromising enough on its non-interference policy to abstain from voting, particularly on a resolution that had garnered plenty of non-Western, Third World support, would generate a positive result for its own self-interests. China therefore abstained from voting and the draft resolution passed, becoming U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 (S/RES/1973).

Unfortunately, China calculated incorrectly:

When Beijing urged the [Libyan National Transition Council] to protect its oil interests last summer, it was shocked and humiliated by the public announcement from the Libyan oil company AGOCO that “they don’t have a

problem with Western countries, but may have political issues with Russia and China.”  

China failed to protect its oil interests, then, with its abstention on Libya. Meanwhile, China’s abstention had cleared the way for NATO troops to intervene in Libya, and “at home and abroad, the abstention was seen as China’s short-sighted compliance to the West... Domestic nationalists criticized Beijing for ‘compromising its principles’ and ‘acquiescing to Western demands.’” After China’s fiasco of an experience in Libya, it was leery of once again violating its principle of national sovereignty and non-interference.

China’s veto on the draft resolution pertaining to Syria, then, can be seen as part of the fallout from Libya. The Chinese delegate resorted to the language China had traditionally used to justify vetoes on questions of national sovereignty: “The international community should provide constructive assistance... In the meantime, it should fully respect Syria’s sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity... The Chinese Government’s position on those questions has been consistent and firm.”


By the time a second draft resolution came before the Security Council, the uprisings and harsh military crackdowns in Syria had been occurring for nearly a year. This time, the Arab League had drafted the resolution with the support of several Western countries, and when the resolution was put to the vote, every country except Russia and China voted in its favor. Russia and China’s vetoes on this resolution elicited widespread denunciation. On

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62 Yun Sun, “Syria: What China has Learned from its Libya Experience,” _Asia Pacific Bulletin_ 152 (February 27, 2012).
63 Ibid.
the Security Council itself, the U.S. Permanent Representative said the United States was “disgusted that a couple members of this Council continue to prevent us from fulfilling our sole purpose here”; the U.K. Permanent Representative was “appalled by the decision of Russia and China to veto an otherwise consensus decision”; and the Moroccan representative expressed “great regret and disappointment.” U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay “deplored the ongoing assault on the Syrian city of Homs and stressed the ‘extreme urgency for the international community to cut through the politics and take effective action to protect the Syrian population.’” That China would face widespread condemnation for its veto could hardly have come as a surprise, given that most of the Security Council’s work occurs before the official meetings. Why, then, did China vote in a way almost guaranteed to attract negative international attention?

    China’s experience with Libya may be one reason for its veto. Another reason, and one that generated widespread commentary, was that China vetoed the second Syria resolution because of its relations with Russia. Minxin Pei writes that

    the Russia-China axis of obstruction at the Security Council has now become a critical variable in the council’s decision-making process. The two countries seem to have reached a strategic understanding: they will act to defy the West together, so that neither might look isolated. China will defer to Russia on matters critical to Moscow (such as Syria) while Russia will do the same on issues China cares about (such as Zimbabwe or Burma).

While that may be true, blind cooperation with Russia is not the sole reason for China’s veto. China had its own self-interests in Syria; it “ranked as Syria’s third-largest importer in

65 U.N. Security Council, 67th Year. 6711th Meeting. 4 February 2012 (S/PV 6711). Official Record.
2010, according to data from the European Commission.” Furthermore, China has vetoed resolutions without Russia’s support in the past, as it did with the resolutions pertaining to Guatemala and the former Yugoslavia. Rather, an abstention on Libya was costly to China while a veto on Syria cost nothing and potentially could have benefitted China – it strengthened China-Russia relations and prevented another NATO-like intervention in Libya, which would have set a dangerous precedent rather than being an exceptional case in China’s eyes. A combination of all of these factors was probably what prompted China to veto rather than abstain from this particular resolution. China’s own explanation for its veto – “the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria should be fully respected” – could be the entirety of the explanation, a partial explanation, or not an explanation for its actions at all.

After the May 25 attacks on villagers (including women and children) in Houla, the Security Council faced international pressure to act. Rather than passing a binding resolution that would have been disagreeable for both Russia and China, the Security Council issued a statement condemning

in the strongest possible terms the killings... in attacks that involved a series of Government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood... The members of the Security Council extended their profound sympathies and sincere condolences to the families of the victims, and underscored their grave concern about the situation of civilians in Syria... The members of the Security Council demanded that the Government of Syria immediately cease the use of heavy weapons in population centres and immediately pull back its troops and its heavy weapons from in and around population centres and return them to their barracks. The members of the Security Council reaffirmed their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity

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69 Yun Sun, “Syria: What China has Learned from its Libya Experience,” Asia Pacific Bulletin 152 (February 27, 2012).

70 U.N. Security Council, 67th Year. 6711th Meeting. 4 February 2012 (S/PV 6711). Official Record.
and territorial integrity of Syria, and to the purposes and principles of the Charter.\textsuperscript{71}

This statement allows China to save face on the international stage – to condemn the violence in Syria and call for the Syrian government to enact a cease-fire, while the non-binding nature of this Security Council statement also allows China to protect its own interests in national sovereignty and its alliance with Russia.

**Trends in China’s Voting Behavior**

While eight vetoes presents a rather small sample size for an analysis of trends, these eight vetoes represent the entirety of China’s negative voting record in its forty years on the U.N. Security Council, and deserve close analysis because of their infrequency. Looking at them within their historical context as well as within the context of related abstentions provides a somewhat more nuanced perspective on China’s voting behavior. China’s voting behavior in the Security Council seems to be most strongly affected by several core principles: its desire to be seen as a leader of the Third World, its relationship with allies (sometimes as members of the Third World, other times in a show of Socialist solidarity), protecting its strategic and economic interests, presenting a positive face to the world, and the inviolability of national sovereignty. Especially prominent over recent years has been China’s belief in non-interference and national sovereignty, especially as pertains to human rights and external military interventions, although China will show its disapproval of a draft resolution by abstaining from voting rather than exercising its veto power when the circumstances present a major threat to regional or international peace and security. China will likewise abstain from voting rather than veto when an issue

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presents a threat to its own territorial integrity – that is, when a nation does not recognize the one-China policy. However, China will veto for the sake of the one-China policy when the resolution also threatens its strategic and economic interests (as in the case of Guatemala).

China’s voting behavior is also highly influenced by its need to protect its economic self-interest, as in the case of Zimbabwe. Similarly, China’s bilateral relations with certain countries and its ties to the Third World (particularly the African Union and the Arab League) influence its voting behavior on certain resolutions; China’s abstention on Libya broke its non-interference policy in part because of the Arab League’s support, whereas China’s vetoes on Syria were at least partially influenced by its alliance with Russia. These trends in China’s voting behavior indicate that China will view any draft resolutions pertaining to Latin America or Africa, where China has significant economic and strategic ties as well as a Third World affinity, with particular wariness; if the draft resolution infringes on China’s interests or crosses the line into violating national sovereignty, it’s a fair bet to guess that China will abstain from voting on or even veto that draft resolution.

The ongoing situation in Syria provides an opportunity to observe China’s voting behavior on the Security Council under a unique set of circumstances; although no resolution similar to the two that China vetoed has come before the Security Council since the most recent one, in February 2012, the Security Council did unanimously pass a resolution that established a 90-day United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (in conjunction with Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan). Evidently China decided that Syria presented enough of a threat to regional and international security to violate its own

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principle of non-interference; whether China continues to do so remains to be seen as the U.N. monitors the changing situation in Syria.
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