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Publication Date

2024-09-13

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are within the manuscript.

Peer reviewed

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

Lucie Lu

Abstract

Authoritarian states are often vulnerable to naming and shaming for their human rights abuses. This paper shows that China uses its economic clout to influence United Nations (UN) member states overseeing its human rights reviews, shielding itself from severe criticisms within the UN system. I argue that paying for lenient reviews is possible, but its effectiveness depends on the extent to which reviewing states prioritize economic benefits over normative principles. Using text-based coding of over 90,000 UN Universal Periodic Review reports, I demonstrate that countries with strong economic ties to China through Chinese overseas development projects tend to offer more lenient reviews of China's human rights record. This effect, however, is conditional: it is pronounced in "middle" countries whose stance on human rights norms is neither too aligned with nor too distant from China's. Another "distant" group, which is furthest from China's human rights vision, is resistant to providing lenient reviews in return for economic favors. Contrary to the conventional belief that human rights monitoring mechanisms are deeply politicized, I find that the peer-review monitoring system does have normative resilience: that commitments to democratic values and human rights matter. There is a nuanced interplay between economic interests and norms in states' interactions: authoritarian great powers using economic incentives in exchange for favorable human rights reviews do not always succeed in doing so.

Keywords: international organizations, economic development, human rights, authoritarianism, norms

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Stephan Haggard, Iain Johnston, Xinyuan Dai, Stephen Chaudoin, Andy Nathan, Scott Althaus, Scott Kastner, Courtney Fung, Rafael Mesquita De Souza Lima, Matt Winters, Lula Chen, Sarah Leffingwell-Kim, Shuyuan Shen, Chris Fariss, Meina Cai, Francesca Parente, Hao Zhang, Zoe Xincheng Ge, Songying Fang, Jamie Gruffydd-Jones, Aditi Shetty, participants at MPSA 2024, annual conference of China and the World Program 2024 at Harvard University, the public lecture hosted by China and the World Program 2023 at Columbia University, the Student-Faculty Seminar at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 2023, MWEPS 2023 at the 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.

Suggested Citation

Lu, Lucie. 2024. *Be My Friendly Reviewers: How China Shapes its UN Human Rights Reviews*. IGCC Working Paper No 6. escholarship.org/uc/item/3vp5p6pv

Authoritarian states are often targeted for naming and shaming due to rights abuses. Both state and non-state entities from the Global North use various tools to monitor these states' violations of human rights. However, China has been protected from such monitoring within the multilateral UN human rights regime. Instead, it receives mild criticism, gentle suggestions, and even support for its welfare-based human rights principles. According to anecdotal evidence, during a pivotal Universal Periodic Review (UPR) session—where, like all UN member countries, China undergoes peer reviews every five years—China lobbied non-Western countries to “praise” its human rights conditions (Farge 2024).

China is an important financier of development projects in the Global South. Its material influence can strengthen its lobbying efforts in international organizations. I argue that trading economic benefits for lenient reviews in the UPR is possible, but its effectiveness depends on how reviewing states value those benefits over normative principles. The more the Global South relies on Chinese financing, the more inclined they are to refrain from criticizing its human rights practices.

However, recipients' support for China is neither unconditional nor unlimited. States' willingness to provide lenient reviews is bounded by their predispositions toward human rights norms. Based on those predispositions, states are categorized into three groups: distant, middle, and close. Only those in the middle group are swayed by China's financial incentives to provide more lenient reviews. The close countries already show leniency toward China to begin with, while the distant countries remain critical even if they receive development financing from China.

The current norm-based human rights regime is designed to discipline norm-defiant states. However, when states have the opportunity to review each other's human rights performance in a multilateral setting at the UN—rather than relying on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media—the regime is deeply politicized, as states show leniency toward allies and strictness toward adversaries (Kim 2023; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023; Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018). This pattern is unsurprising, as scholars have found that large countries, such as the United States, often utilize financial incentives to influence the votes of smaller countries in the UN General Assembly (Dreher, Nunnenkamp, and Thiele 2008; Vreeland and Dreher 2014).

Recently, there has been growing concern over how powerful authoritarian regimes like China and Russia, as well as countries experiencing democratic backsliding, have sought to undermine well-established liberal norms within international organizations (Binder and Payton 2022; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023; Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023). Considering China's dual agenda of promoting alternative norms while leveraging its vast economic influence, the challenge to liberal norms within international

organizations is significant. Recent studies focusing on the UN indicate that countries receiving substantial aid or loans from Beijing or experiencing a surge in exports to China tend to align their voting behavior more closely to China's positions (Brazys and Vadlamannati 2021; Dreher et al. 2022), a phenomenon often discussed in the literature on vote buying.

When norms conflict with interests, many believe that material interests will take precedence. However, this ignores the enduring importance states place on values. Small states and middle powers have played an important historical role in establishing and expanding human rights norms into the present. Latin American countries united to support including language on human rights in the UN Charter and advocated for adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Cerna 2014; Sikkink 2017). New democracies in post-war Europe were more eager to commit to the European Court of Human Rights than established democracies after the Cold War (Grewal and Voeten 2015; Moravcsik 2000). The Global South united to overturn the proposal by powerful countries to set up an *ad hoc* international court and instead helped consolidate a permanent International Criminal Court (Simmons and Danner 2010). More recently, small states including Ecuador have been active in promoting new and progressive business-related human rights to constrain the actions of large corporations (Ruggie 2013).

This paper engages with an important question in the literature of political economy and human rights: can financial power influence the human rights regime? The simple answer is yes, but only conditionally. Previous work highlights that the vote alignment of smaller states can be influenced by their economic relationships with more powerful counterparts (Dreher et al. 2022; Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey 2009), and shows how smaller countries resisted economic coercion by a great power, the United States, in response to the creation of the International Criminal Court (Kelley 2007). In parallel, this paper shows that when smaller states are attached to human rights norms, they are less susceptible to economic influence from a rising great power, China.

This finding is surprising. Writing a lenient review to appease a country's major economic partner, donor, or financier seems relatively costless, while a harsh review on a public platform may have significant consequences. This study shows that despite the potential economic repercussions, countries that consistently uphold liberal principles still prioritize human rights norms over material interests.

This research challenges some important findings on the UN human rights regime. Recent studies suggest that states' reviews in the UPR are products of geopolitical maneuvering, cheap talk, or window-dressing (Kim 2023; Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018). My research illustrates that this state-to-state review mechanism reflects more complex calculations, as countries balance normative

principles, geopolitical dynamics, and economic incentives. The UPR is more than political theater; it is a platform where human rights norms are actively contested.

This study leverages state reviews of China conducted within the UPR, a mechanism administered by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to assess the human rights records of all UN member states. The UPR provides a valuable opportunity for investigating how reviewing states articulate their assessment of the state under review and how, over time, states under review craft a desired image within the international human rights regime. Across the three completed cycles of the UPR, countries have collectively made 90,938 recommendations to states under review. During each cycle, every country has a chance to undergo review and to review other countries. Hence, it is possible to systematically analyze states' behaviors as reviewers and their performance when being reviewed.

I apply text-mining techniques to measure the content of these reviews and the dyadic relationships between reviewers and states under review. Specifically, I develop two measures from the UPR texts: a *review harshness score* to quantify how harsh state A reviews state B; and a *cosine similarity* to gauge the similarity or divergence between a state's reviewing record with a baseline reviewing record. These two measures allow analysis of the dyadic relationship between any country pair. The study anchors one end of the dyad to China and examines how other countries' reviews of China evolve over time.

The paper also investigates the degree to which the leniency of countries' reviews changes in response to external economic incentives from China. These incentives include overseas development finance, projects, and debt relief. This set of information is extracted from the latest version of AidData that documents Chinese overseas development projects (Custer et al. 2023).

Leveraging the time lags between reviews, the study models the effect of economic incentives on states' review leniency. Its findings indicate that countries receiving larger amounts of aid inflows from China's overseas development initiatives tend to provide more lenient reviews of China's human rights record compared to those receiving less or no aid. I also find that China gets additional economic leverage by initiating new projects or proposing debt relief negotiations with countries that already depend on Chinese financing. Those receiving larger economic incentives are more inclined to write lenient reviews to China. However, not all countries are susceptible to such influence. Countries which are committed to liberal principles of human rights have a strong tendency to prioritize norms over material interests.

Human Rights as China's Achilles' Heel

China has become a prominent financier of development projects in the Global South. Since 2013 when China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has invested heavily in various projects in BRI member countries. The BRI officially includes 147 countries as of 2022 (Nedopil 2022). China began financing overseas development projects even before BRI, and since 2000, about 21,000 projects covering natural resources, infrastructure, cybersecurity, and other sectors have been undertaken across 165 low and middle-income countries (Parks et al. 2023, 1). From 2008 to 2021, Chinese overseas development finance programs committed approximately 83 percent of the total amount lent by the World Bank and partnering banks in the same period (Global Development Policy Center 2023).

China is clearly expanding its influence in the Global South. Outpacing G7 countries, China has become the world's single-largest source of development finance in developing countries, providing grants and loans of around \$80 billion per year before 2021 (Parks et al. 2023, 1). Despite a recent, more domestically focused economic policy turn at home and a more cautious plan to invest overseas after the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing has locked in other countries' dependence upon it for their future economic development.

China's power as a development financier translates to influence over other areas of international cooperation. China's aid and loans are so-called "easy money," with little or no political conditionality. Unlike Western donors who typically attach conditions related to human rights, democracy, and good governance to their aid packages, China provides aid and lends to almost all countries, including those characterized as corrupt or at high risk of bankruptcy. With many developing countries turning to China for financing, Western donors are witnessing diminishing influence in the Global South.

China's economic power also permits it to establish new rules, clubs, and followers. China has invested in establishing alternative multilateral financial institutions. It founded the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as an alternative to the World Bank, attracting over 100 members (Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023). China also hosted several summits for organizations such as the BRICS to foster closer cooperation within the Global South and provide a counter to Western norms. Finally, across all UN General Assembly votes cast between 2000 and 2021, the Global South's votes align with China's position 75 percent of the time, as opposed to only 25 percent with the United States (Dreher et al. 2022).

China has demonstrated its ambitions in shaping the international order and asserting greater global leadership. However, shaping the liberal-based human rights regime is a

challenging task. Human rights have been a sensitive issue for rising authoritarian regimes like China. That issue poses a challenge for its foreign and domestic policy, as the very term “human rights” is often seen in China as a code word for subverting non-democratic regimes (Nathan 1997). Consequently, there exists an inherent incompatibility between China’s political system as an authoritarian regime and the international liberal norm of universal human rights, which emphasizes civil and political rights. Authoritarian leaders find it unappealing to fully integrate into the UN system by embracing the liberal principles of the human rights regime.

Despite China’s resistance to the underlying principles of the human rights regime, it actively seeks recognition and global leadership in this area due to the high political salience of human rights. China cannot simply walk away from the well-established international human rights regime because it serves as a symbolic anchor for China to show it can adhere to global rules and norms expected of great power. Indeed, it has been cooperative and engaged in the UN-based human rights regime (Inboden 2021).

Human rights can be likened to an Achilles’ heel for China’s rise in both its global and domestic governance. Hence, China’s rhetorical approach has involved a delicate balance between asserting state sovereignty while acknowledging the universality of human rights, aimed at minimizing the political costs of taking unpopular stands (Weiss 2019).

While China’s authoritarian nature might suggest difficulties in its participation in the existing human rights regime, this assumption overlooks China’s capability to influence how that regime functions. The human rights regime is composed of many non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch that constantly monitor states’ human rights conditions. But China is much less vulnerable within the UN, where it enjoys significant decision-making power (Fang, Li, and Sun 2018; Fung and Lam 2021). Similar to many councils and working groups in the UN, the UN Human Rights Council is an inclusive multilateral forum where small member states can play key roles. This embedded norm of inclusiveness motivates China to emphasize the importance of working and seeking a leadership role within the UN (Inboden 2021).

Expectations

Drawing inspiration from the classic work, *The Political Economy of the United Nations Security Council: Money and Influence* (Vreeland and Dreher 2014), I begin from the following expectations about states' reviewing behavior when economic interests clash with norms. The governments of powerful countries with economic leverage, such as China, care about how their human rights review appears at the UNHRC. In contrast, countries from the Global South care more about obtaining new infrastructure projects or unconditional loans from donors to appease their constituencies. They may also seek new sources of funding for unfinished projects or request extensions for repayments of existing obligations. These economic concerns may well take precedence over writing critical recommendations to fulfill the countries' human rights commitments.

When writing human rights reviews, delegates from countries receiving economic benefits from China do not necessarily need to lie or misrepresent their preferences. As reviewers, countries only need to select areas where recommendations are light or encouraging to the state under review, or remain silent on sensitive issues that the state under review finds shameful to address in a public forum.

Countries can disregard liberal norms when reviewing China and instead opt for an alternative standard to inflate the country's human rights performance. Autocratic countries with similar visions of human rights may genuinely believe that China has made improvements in alleviating poverty and improving the welfare of its citizens. China may also be a model that their country can or has already followed. In this case, there is no obvious trade-off because these countries' normative principles are already aligned with China's. Economic incentives would do little to change their behaviors.

For countries more critical of China's human rights conditions, using a standard that is more lenient toward China does not necessarily imply a complete rejection of liberal norms. They may prioritize continuing to receive China's aid packages over publicly shaming China on the international stage. Consequently, they choose to focus on other legitimate aspects of human rights norms that portray China more positively. These countries may also refrain from commenting altogether.

Hence, this paper advances two hypotheses. First, economic incentives can co-opt countries to engage in mutual exchanges in a low-cost peer review setting—mitigating reputational risks associated with accusations of dishonesty, norm-breaking, or complicity in disrupting a norm-based institution.

H₁ (Mutual Exchange): Economic assistance from China makes countries less critical of China’s human rights conditions.

The effects, however, are heterogeneous and conditional. Economic incentives do not always work as intended. I divide countries into three groups based on their predisposition to core liberal human rights norms. The first is the “close group” of countries who are natural followers with views that are proximate to China’s development-based human rights norms and that may find China’s model of development inspiring and appealing. Countries in the close group will write lenient reviews to China sincerely—the nudge of economic incentives is not necessary. The second is the “distant group.” These countries strongly value and commit to liberal human rights norms, so material incentives may never be high enough for them to deviate from normative principles. The third group is the “middle group,” which is neither strongly committed nor opposed to liberal norms. In many instances, these countries share similar perspectives on human rights norms with China or have not traditionally been strong advocates for liberal human rights norms or specific human rights in global platforms. These countries are more likely to be swayed by the economic inducements from a major donor like China, and often find it more convenient to draft lenient reviews.

H₂ (Swaying the Middle): Countries without strong attachments to liberal human rights norms are more receptive to China’s economic incentives.

The UPR as a laboratory

These hypotheses will be tested using the Universal Periodic Review. The UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review system holds member states accountable through their peers' recurrent reviews of the treatment of their domestic population. The UPR is a comprehensive and elaborate multilateral human rights mechanism where states are the primary actors in reviewing each other's human rights practices. The monitoring power lies in a formal forum-like peer review institution to "give equal treatment to all the countries and allow them to exchange best practices" (UN News - Human Rights 2018). States' peer reviews, based on regular assessments of policy performance and compliance with UN rules, have the potential to push states to make real changes (Carraro, Conzelmann, and Jongen 2019). In its ideal version, the UPR, like other international institutions, can provide a "neutral, depoliticized, or specialized forum" for comments, critiques, and recommendations for improving human rights (Abbott and Snidal 1998, 10).

In practice, the UPR is far from neutral (Terman and Búzás 2021; Terman and Byun 2022). The actual contents of recommendations range from praise to shaming in a wide rhetorical continuum. For that reason, the UPR is a laboratory we can use to test the power dynamics among states whether as a reviewing state or a state under review. As a recurrent monitoring mechanism, multiple cycles of reviews provide reliable data to detect changes in states' review records over time.

There have been three complete cycles of Universal Periodic Review as of 2023.¹ Each UPR cycle lasts approximately five years. Each cycle consists of 13 sessions, with three sessions occurring each year. At each session, about 14 countries are reviewed. Every five years or so, on a rotational basis, all 193 UN member states undergo an interactive review of their human rights situation, with 100 percent participation so far.

When a state is under review, delegations from all other countries have the opportunity to review and issue recommendations. A body of information is made available to reviewing states before they issue their recommendations. It includes factual documents from a self-assessment report compiled by the state under review, observations and comments compiled by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the human rights conditions in the state under review, and opinions from other stakeholders, including NGOs and national human rights institutions. Reviewing states are encouraged to meet with NGOs and local stakeholders in the state under review to gather information.

¹ Cycle 1 (2008–2012), Cycle 2 (2012–2016), and Cycle 3 (2017–2021)

During a typical 3.5-hour review session, reviewing states can ask oral or written questions and make recommendations. During the UPR, each reviewing state has 45 seconds to provide recommendations to the state under review, although they also provide written commentary.

Since reviewing states have limited space to ask questions and issue recommendations, they 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, which typically reflects the most critical and meaningful problems in the country under review from the perspective of the reviewing state. Following the review sessions, a report is compiled to summarize the discussions, capturing the key comments and recommendations made by the reviewing states. This report serves as a resource for the state under review, allowing them to choose which recommendations to implement before the next review cycle. The written report is then made available on the UNHRC website.

The timeline of sessions for the ongoing cycle is publicly available, enabling states to anticipate when they will be under review and prepare accordingly. Recommendations from the first session in April 2008 through the 37th session in November 2020 are accessible on the *UPR Info* database (UPR Info 2023), covering the full data of three complete cycles. China was under review during sessions in 2009, 2013, and 2018 (United Nations Human Rights Council 2023).

In sum, the Universal Periodic Review captures recurring interactions wherein states have one opportunity per cycle to be reviewed, but multiple chances to give recommendations to other countries. It serves as a unique mechanism that addresses a comprehensive array of human rights issues, as opposed to a treaty monitoring mechanism that focuses on specific rights. It is also an inclusive multilateral mechanism where all UN member states participate and give peer reviews to each other, as opposed to experts making recommendations or NGOs publicly shaming rights-abusive states. Therefore, the UPR mechanism provides a special vantage point to study how states communicate and advocate their vision of human rights norms, while also considering the geopolitical and economic ties between countries.

Converting Text to Number: Quantifying Information in the UPR

The analysis below is based on over 90,000 recommendations from three complete cycles in the UPR, using a number of text-mining tools to explore the meaning of countries' reviews. While the data set provides ample opportunities to study reviews at the dyadic level, I primarily analyze the reviews China received. I also measure countries' predisposition to human rights norms based on their reviewing records of all the other countries. By comparing the reviewing records of various countries with those of China, this paper assesses the degree of similarity or divergence in their invocation of human rights norms during the review process.

Measuring Recommendations' Leniency

This paper analyzes the data compiled by *UPR Info*, a non-profit organization that supports access to information for all stakeholders involved in the UPR process (UPR Info 2023). The data includes all recommendations made during the three cycles of the UPR. For each recommendation, *UPR Info* records information about the time of the review session, reviewer, state under review, the verb choices used in each recommendation conveying the necessary level of changes, and the specific issues addressed from a set of 56 non-mutually exclusive issue tags hand-coded by *UPR Info* researchers. Each recommendation may address multiple issue tags. *UPR Info* also publishes their codebook to justify why different issue tags are attached to the recommendation.² Following Terman and Byun (2022), the study clusters the 56 issue tags into eight issue topics.³ Each recommendation can cover more than one issue topic. In sum, the textual information in each recommendation is succinctly encapsulated through different issue topics.

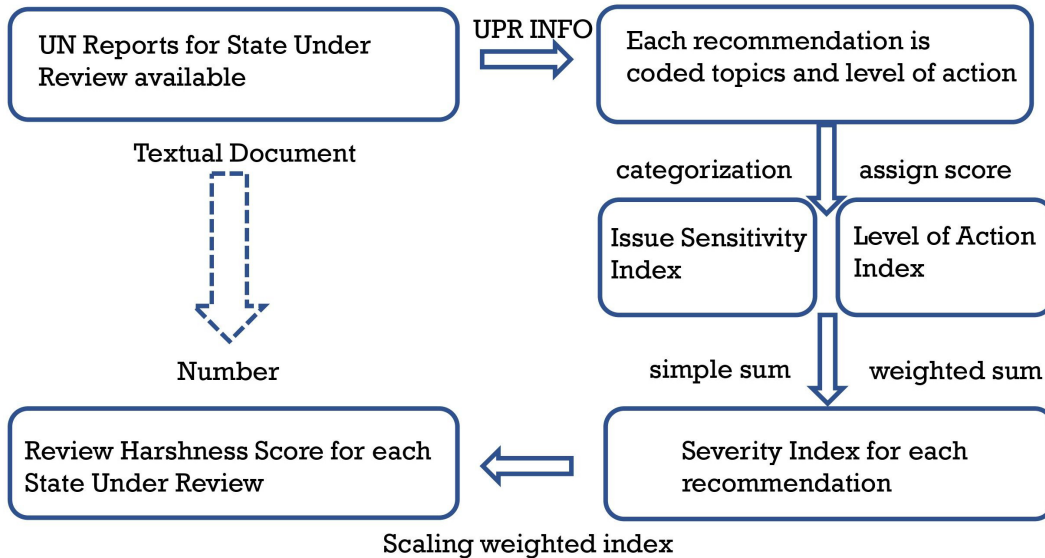
Figure 1 summarizes the complete process of using text-based coding to identify instances of harshness in UPR reviews. The objective is to systematically turn the texts in public UN reports into comparable numerical scales for each of the states under review. This hypothetical score can reflect how well the state under review has protected its citizens' rights in the past five years, from the perspectives of its peers in the UN.

² The codebook can be found here: https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/general-document/2022-05/Database_Issues_explanation.pdf.

³ (1) Civil and Political rights, (2) Governance and Public Services, (3) Migration and Workers, (4) Physical Integrity Rights, (5) Racial, Ethnic and Religious Minorities, (6) Social and Economic Rights, (7) Protection of Vulnerable Populations, and (8) General/Other. Appendix I shows which issue tags fall into different issue topics.

At the recommendation level, I constructed the *Recommendation Severity Index* as a composite measure with two components: issue sensitivity and level of action. The issue sensitivity index ranges from 1 to 3, with 3 indicating the most sensitive issue topics from a Chinese perspective. Civil and political rights; physical integrity rights; and racial, ethnic, and religious minority rights have a high issue sensitivity score of 3. These types of rights are often classified as negative rights—including freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from torture or cruel treatment, and the right to a fair trial—and are closely related to core liberal principles (Qi and Nathan 2014). Migration and labor, protection of vulnerable populations, and the protection of vulnerable individuals have medium sensitivity, scoring 2 because they are related to specific groups of populations rather than concerning the entitled rights of the general population. These two types of rights are also emerging issues in the human rights regime. Since the topics of socioeconomic rights, governance and public services, and “general/other” do not have impacted persons but are more concerned with the state’s obligations to fulfill people’s needs and desires, these topics of positive rights have low sensitivity, scoring 1. Note that each review recommendation can cover one or multiple issue topics.

Figure 1. From Text to Number: The Process of Creating the *Review Harshness Score*



For example, the Czech Republic recommended that China “review laws and practices in particular with regard to ensuring protection of the freedom of religion, movement, [and the] 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 with the following issue tags: “freedom of movement,” “freedom of religion and belief,” and “minority rights.” These fall into three higher-level clusters of issue topics identified in this study: “civil and political rights,” “migration and workers,” and “racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.” Each topic was assigned a pre-defined score of issue sensitivity. The issue topics in this particular recommendation have “high,” “medium,” and “low” sensitivity, respectively. The final issue sensitivity score is determined by the maximal, meaning that a review recommendation will receive a score of 3 if one of its issue topics has the highest issue sensitivity score. This implies that as long as a recommendation mentions a right closely related to liberal principles and protected by a democratic regime, it will receive the highest issue sensitivity score. In this specific example, this review’s issue sensitivity score is 3. The same process is reiterated to calculate the issue sensitivity score for each recommendation.

Each recommendation begins 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 conduct minimal or no action, to specific action for policy changes. Based on the level of action, each recommendation receives an action category score: a recommendation that receives a 3 entails a high level of action, recommending the state under review to conduct policy change or a specific action to improve the country’s human rights conditions. Recommendations receiving a 2 entail a medium level of action, usually related to a general element of improvement. Lastly, in cases where a recommendation pertains to sharing information, providing technical assistance, or emphasizing continuity of current practice, it receives a 1, indicating a low level of action.

The severity of each recommendation is determined by a composite index, calculated as a simple weighted sum of the issue sensitivity score (70 percent) and the level of action score (30 percent). A lower severity index indicates a more lenient recommendation. I assign a higher weight to the issue sensitivity score because it largely influences whether the recommendation is a sincere criticism or a diplomatic gesture. For instance, when China receives reviews from other states regarding racial, ethnic, and religious minorities—a topic with a high sensitivity score—the reviews are very likely to be critical, suggesting a need for significant action. It is rare to observe countries complement China on this issue topic; if they intend to offer praise—suggesting a low level of action—they typically raise other issues, such as providing social welfare to the population, a topic with a low sensitivity score. Hence, issue topic plays a crucial role in determining the severity of each recommendation.

To illustrate what lenient reviews look like, here is an example of recommendations given by Thailand.

Thailand recommended that China:

- “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)

Thailand tends to be very supportive of China in its UPR reviews.⁴ In Cycle 2, the focus was primarily on issues related to governance and public services. In Cycle 3, Thailand expanded its scope to include the topic of protection of vulnerable populations, making it a slightly more critical reviewer compared to the previous cycle. It is worth noting that the level of action is continuously minimal, encouraging China to “continue efforts” to protect persons with disabilities. Furthermore, Thailand also praised China for its facilitation of South-South cooperation, again, a topic with low sensitivity to human rights. Throughout both cycles, Thailand predominantly used suggestive and positive verbs such as “look into,” “keep up the efforts,” “continue efforts,” and “further enhance,” which read more like compliments. Hence, these recommendations are light, easy to embrace, and positive.

Aggregation: Review Harshness Score 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 of each recommendation can vary greatly, potentially leading to either an overemphasis on quantity or an underemphasis on quality in the aggregation process. In other words, there is an asymmetry of the variations between the quantity and the quality of the reviews. A country can receive anywhere from over

⁴ Note that after the 2014 *coup d’etat* ousting the democratically elected government, Thailand underwent a significant period of military government and an authoritarian turn. The coup occurred in between China’s review sessions of Cycle 2 and 3.

200 reviews and as few as 20 reviews, while the quality of its review, as defined by the review severity index, only ranges from 2 to 6 or 0 to 1. To address this issue, the analysis uses a scaling weighted index to calculate the review harshness score for each state under review.

The crucial step in calculating the review harshness score, which combines indices with different matrices, is to rescale the number of reviews each state receives so that they fall within a comparable range to the severity index. This rescaling step ensures that the final score is based on a fair comparison so that a mice and an elephant are not placed on the same scale. After rescaling, the numbers of reviews range from 1 to 3. For example, Egypt received 321 review recommendations in Cycle 2. To calculate the scaled weighted index for Egypt in Cycle 2, the analysis rescales the number of reviews from 321 to 1.85 and calculates the average weighted severity index of the review recommendations, resulting in 2.2. The final score for Egypt is the sum of the scaled numbers of total reviews and the weighted severity index, resulting in a final score of 4.05.

When using the country-level review harshness score, I can directly answer the following question: how harsh is country A's review of China compared to country B's? Although this study primarily focuses on the reviews China receives, this series of measures opens many opportunities to compare countries' behaviors, both in terms of how a reviewing country reviews others and in terms of how it is reviewed by others.

Measuring States' Predisposition to Human Rights Norms

After extracting all the topics covered in each recommendation, I create a state-topic vector by grouping the topics by all the reviewing states to model the reviews that countries give of China's human rights performance. Each state-topic vector represents the number of topics covered in the aggregated recommendations that reviewing states make in different cycles. In this manner, each reviewing state's review record is translated into a state-topic vector. Specifically, I extract topics from China's review record to construct a vector as the baseline.

To measure similarity in countries' review records, I conduct text similarity analysis based on countries' reviewing record vectors. In particular, I calculate a cosine similarity between each pair of reviewing states and China by first constructing a matrix where the distribution of each country's state-topic vector is compared to that of China's state-topic vector, and then calculating the cosine similarity between the two vectors of a country pair: China and the reviewing state.⁵

⁵ A cosine value of 0 means that the two vectors are orthogonal and have no match. The closer the cosine value to 1, the smaller the angle and the greater the match between vectors.

Table 1. How China and the United States Reviewed Other Countries Over Three Cycles

| Terms | China as Reviewer | United States as Reviewer |
|--|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Public Services | 21 | 151 |
| General and Others | 35 | 40 |
| Migrant and Labor Rights | 49 | 72 |
| Physical Integrity Rights | 99 | 468 |
| Protection of Vulnerable Populations | 180 | 471 |
| Race, Ethnicity, and Religious and Minority Rights | 75 | 152 |
| Social and Economic Rights | 377 | 61 |
| Civil and Political Rights | 3 | 345 |

Table 1 is an example of a matrix of topic distributions of a country pair: China as reviewer and the United States as reviewer. I highlight two specific rights in blue and red for comparison purposes. China as a reviewer has issued recommendations that mention social and economic rights 377 times, whereas the United States has done so only 61 times. Conversely, China only issued recommendations related to civil and political rights 3 times. The United States, by contrast, devoted significant space to these core issues. The cosine similarity between the United States' and China's reviewing records is 0.51, suggesting a low similarity level and little overlap in terms of topic distributions. Cosine similarity formalizes comparison of two states' human rights records by modeling each as a point in a multidimensional topic space. The closer two states are in this space, the closer the cosine of the angle between these two vectors, and therefore, the more similar their normative positions are.

By repeating this process, I obtain a review similarity score for each country pair: China and each reviewing state. Reviewing records' cosine similarity here serves as a measure of the similarity between the reviewing states' aggregated human rights reviewing record and China's. A high similarity score in the China-country pair signifies highly aligned interpretations of human rights norms between the two countries.

Model Specification

In this study, the dependent variable is the *review harshness score* as illustrated in the preceding sections, while the independent variables are aid flows and economic incentives constructed with two dimensions between cycles of the UPR. I use the latest data collected by AidData's *Global Chinese Official Finance Dataset 3.0* for Chinese aid inflows by country during the five-year periods correlating with UPR review cycles (Custer et al. 2023).⁶ This dataset has been broadly used by scholars to study Chinese aid (Blair and Roessler 2021; Brazys and Vadlamannati 2021; Dreher et al. 2021, 2022; Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018). I use the *total Chinese development flows per capita* based on 2010 population figures, measured in constant U.S. dollar prices in 2021, capturing both overseas development assistance (ODA) and other official flows (OOF) for recipient countries annually over the 2000-2021 period.

A second set of independent variables include the increase of newly initiated overseas finance projects, or the total amount of debt relief negotiated for current development projects financed by Chinese government institutions between cycles. The information is coded from the detailed project descriptions available from AidData's *Global Chinese Official Finance Dataset 3.0* (Custer et al. 2023). I categorize the recipient countries into three groups based on the changes in the distribution of Chinese new overseas finance projects: a group receiving zero or negative net increase, and groups receiving "small" or "large" increases in development projects, distinguished by whether the net project increase is more or less than the median of the total new projects. Countries receiving large increases in development projects are candidates for the binary variable, *large economic incentives*.

The variable *debt relief* is a categorical variable for total debt relief measures or negotiations by country. A Chinese debt relief program could involve wiping out the country's debt altogether if the country is close to bankruptcy. More specifically, a debt relief program may include renegotiating a lower interest rate, settling the debt with alternative assets, or rescheduling payment. It was relatively uncommon for China to grant debt relief before 2018, the start of Cycle 3. Therefore, the amount of debt relief is relatively small. However, those countries that receive debt relief are considered the beneficiaries of large economic incentives in this study. In short, the binary variable, *large economic incentives*, is coded as 1 if a recipient country receives debt relief or large increases in the number of new development projects from China.

⁶ Chinese aid flow per capita for pre-Cycles 2: Aggregated Chinese development flow per capita between 2008 and 2012 (pre-Cycle 2). Chinese aid flow per capita for pre-Cycles 3: Aggregated Chinese development flow per capita between 2013 and 2017 (pre-Cycle 3)

The other key independent variable measures the proximity of states' normative dispositions toward human rights norms with that of China's in the UPR, illustrated in section 5.3. To measure countries' differences in views of human rights, I use the cosine similarity method to calculate the distances between each pair of reviewing states and China on their reviewing records. A high similarity score in the China-country pair is indicative of a high degree of alignment between the two countries' stances on human rights norms. A country's cosine similarity of aggregated recommendations over three cycles can be classified into the "distant" group with China's reviews (below the 33rd percentile of cosine similarity), the "middle" group (between the 34th and 66th percentile of cosine similarity), and the "close" group (above the 66th percentile). The full set of countries with cosine similarity is included in Appendix B.

The covariates include data extracted from the existing data sets. To measure the ideological proximity between countries, I use the average voting distance with China in the UN General Assembly (Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey 2009). Countries' regime type is extracted from data by the V-Dem Institute, which classifies regimes into four categories: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy (Coppedge et al. 2020). The Political Terror Scale (PTS) measures violations of physical integrity rights perpetrated by state actors, as documented by reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. State Department, and recoded by experts in this domain (Political Terror Score 2023). The construction of PTS in our models also follows the same choices as above: the average PTS scores for three prior cycle-review sessions respectively. A country's economic condition measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is also taken into consideration since some countries might be economically powerful enough that they are less influenced by Chinese economic incentives.

In sum, the unit of analysis in this dataset is the country-cycle. Each reviewing country will appear three times in the stacked dataset by cycles. Since the review sessions for China happen every 5 years, the constructed variables have different time dimensions. For example, the dependent variable, the *review harshness score*, is primarily calculated from the raw scores based on recommendations the states provide to China in the three cycles. The independent variables are the averages of the economic incentives in between the two cycles (or 5 years before cycle 1), and similar for other control variables where yearly count data are available. In other words, the time lags in this design are the key: the independent variables lag before the data-generating process of the dependent variables. The latent variable, cosine similarity, however, does not vary across cycles.

To test hypothesis 1, in equation 1, $Y_{i,t}$ is the review harshness score of review country i in cycle t , $X_{i,t-1}$ is an indicator for total Chinese development flows per capita of review country i in the pre-cycle period, and $COV_{i,t-1}$ are voting distance in the UNGA, PTS score, GDP per capita, regime type. In addition, ϵ is the error term. I expect the coefficient β_1 to be positive.

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i,t-1} + COV_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t-1} \quad (1)$$

To test hypothesis 2, in equation 2, same as above, $Y_{i,t}$ is the review harshness score of review country i in cycle t , $Z_{i,t-1}$ is a binary indicator for economic incentives (whether the reviewing country receives a large economic incentive or not in the pre-cycle period), T_i is a dummy variable for cosine similarity measuring countries with different dispositions to human rights norms with respect to China (countries are divided into three groups: distant, middle, and close), and $COV_{i,t-1}$ are the same set of covariates in the previous analysis.

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 Z_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 (T_i \times Z_{i,t-1}) + COV_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t-1} \quad (2)$$

I implement a series of ordinary least-squares models to estimate the effect of economic incentives on review leniency to China. Economic incentives are modeled as either a long-term relationship between the two countries or a short-term treatment variable in between review cycles, where states are in different strata of the proximity of perceptions of human rights with China. In all models, I include fixed effects for different review cycles to take into account the long span between different cycles of reviews, and use standard errors that are robust toward arbitrary heteroskedasticity.

Results

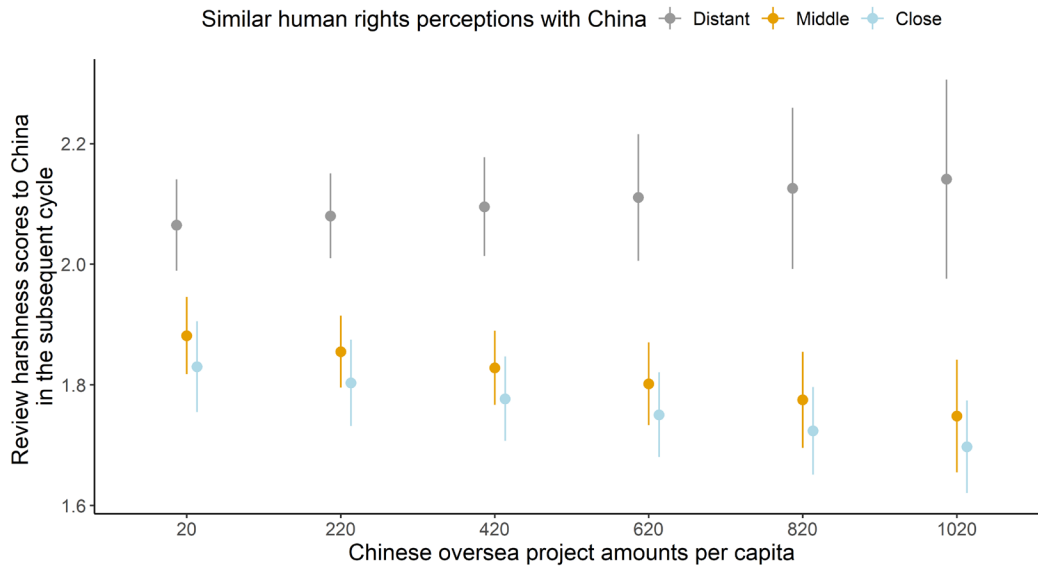
Testing the “Mutual Exchange” Hypothesis

Model 1 in Table A2 supports the hypothesis that countries receiving larger Chinese aid inflows per capita, on average, give lower review harshness scores to China in the subsequent review cycle. This indicates that the extent to which countries receive larger financial assistance from China improves China’s human rights reviews in the UPR. The marginal effects are substantial. One standard deviation increase of the mean in Chinese aid inflow per capita, which is \$2,765 per person in the recipient country, will lead to a decrease in review harshness score by 0.35 relative to its mean value of 1.9 out of a total of 3. To put this result in perspective, countries with a review harshness score of 1.55 (1.9–0.35) are in the lenient group of reviewers, falling below the 33rd percentile of the review harshness score.

Model 2 considers covariates only. Comparing Model 2 and Model 1, all the coefficients in covariates have the same directions but slightly different effect sizes. Adding the key independent variable of interest adds to the existing explanations of how countries behave when giving human rights reviews to their peers.

Model 3 reports the results of Chinese overseas finance project flow conditional on countries’ proximity of perceptions in human rights norms (illustrated in Figure 2). Consistent with the findings in Model 1, particularly for middle and close countries, when they receive higher Chinese overseas project investment amounts per capita before the review cycle (ranging from 0 to 1000 dollars in the X-axis of Figure 2), countries’ review harshness scores decrease. There is no significant statistical differences between the close and middle group: both tend to respond with less critical reviews of China after receiving more Chinese aid per capita. For the middle group, if countries receive more than \$600 per capita in project aid, the country’s harshness score drops to the baseline review level of the close group. The distant group, on the other hand, behaves differently. Confidence levels increase as the project amount increases because there is a risk of extrapolation for the distant group; very few countries in the distant group actually receive such a high level of Chinese overseas development projects (a distribution graph is shown in Figure 4). The review harshness score tends to marginally rise as Chinese project inflow increases in countries categorized under the distant group. Hypothesis 1, stating that countries receiving high levels of economic assistance per capita from China tend to be less critical of China’s human rights conditions, is generally supported.

Figure 2. Chinese Aid Inflow Per Capita and Recipient Countries’ Review Harshness Scores Towards China



Testing the “Swaying the Middle” Hypothesis

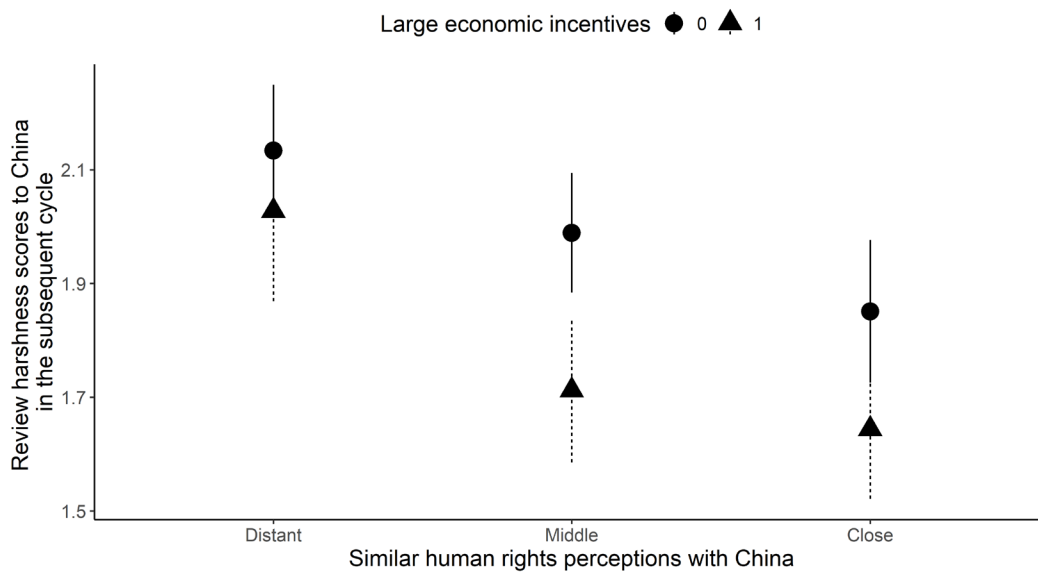
The subsequent analysis tests hypothesis 2: countries having a strong predisposition against liberal human rights norms are more receptive to China’s economic incentives. Conversely, countries with a strong predisposition to support liberal human rights norms are harder to sway. Figure 3 shows the heterogeneous effects of the material incentives on norm shifts. The full result and model specification for this regression model are included in Model A3 in Appendix C. In particular, I report that the influence of large economic incentives on review harshness scores is conditional on the proximity of countries’ perceptions of human rights norms. I control for the covariates that can impact whether countries either receive economic incentives or provide less critical reviews. Those are the pre-incentive review harshness score in the previous cycle, political terror score, UN voting distance with China, GDP per capita, and regime type. I also implement fixed effects on cycles.

Figure 3 supports the hypothesis that reviewing countries respond to large economic incentives with more lenient reviews of China on its human rights conditions in the subsequent cycle. The effects hold across the board: countries with large economic incentives, measured by larger amounts of new overseas development projects and the occurrence of debt relief negotiations, review China less harshly in the subsequent review cycle than those without large economic incentives from China in between the review cycles. The magnitudes of effects are conditional on the extent to which

countries share similar perceptions of human rights norms with China. Countries in the distant group are more critical of China’s human rights conditions, followed by the middle group and close group.

Although countries receiving large economic incentives tend to be more lenient toward China on average, countries in the middle group are the most sensitive to such incentives. The drops in the review’s harshness score are not only statistically significant, there is also a pronounced effect size: their reviews of China are now as lenient as the average reviews in the close group. In other words, reviewers around the median of proximity to China’s perception of human rights norms are most responsive to large economic incentives from China. They are less critical of China’s human rights conditions than those not receiving similar levels of economic incentives.

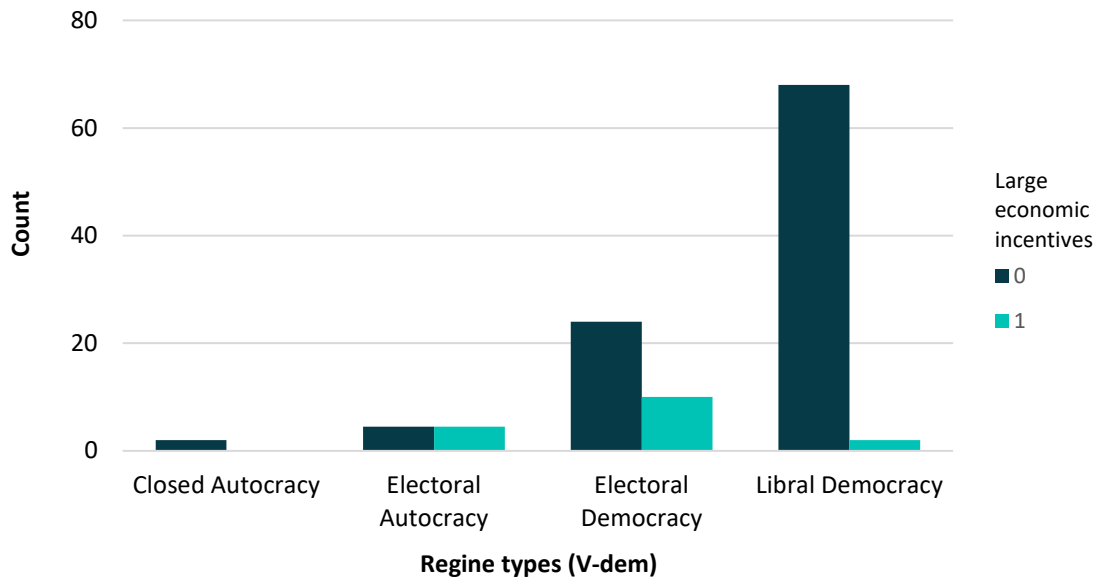
Figure 3. Correlations between Large Economic Incentives and Countries’ Review Harshness Scores, Conditional on Dyad Proximity on Human Rights



For countries in the close group, there may have already been significant Chinese aid inflow (aid inflow per capita is a control variable in this model, Model (1) in Table A3), so there is not much room for a higher increase in the number of new development projects. However, the second component of economic incentives and debt relief negotiations still provides China with a high degree of economic leverage with countries in financial distress. Despite this leverage, there is limited room for change in leniency from already close reviewers. Given these reviewers already exhibit a low degree of harshness in their reviews, they have little flexibility to become even less harsh.

For the distant proximity group, economic incentives do not change the severity of their reviews much. These countries are less responsive to China's financial influence when formulating their human rights assessments of China. Many of them adhere to their own human rights frameworks, which diverge from China's, leading to a critical view of its human rights situation. They are reluctant to write lenient reviews of China even after receiving large economic incentives. Both countries with and without large economic incentives maintain a critical stance, suggesting that their perceptions are resistant to change even in the face of monetary inducements.

Figure 4. Distant Group Regime Type and Economic Incentive Distribution



One may wonder what key characteristics countries which are in the distant proximity group share with each other. In Figure 4, I show one obvious feature of these 60 countries: regime type as measured by V-dem (2020). The majority of these countries are liberal democracies and most of them do not receive China's large economic incentives, either in terms of new development projects or debt relief negotiations. Yet, a handful of these distant countries that champion the liberal principles of human rights are not classified by V-dem as liberal democracies, but rather electoral democracies or even autocracies. Latin American countries, like Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay that have a tradition of actively promoting universal human rights in the UN and beyond are in this distant proximity group. Post-Soviet Union countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Romania are also in this group, possessing a more liberal view of human rights.

They are in the category of “electoral democracies” while also receiving large economic incentives from China. Although countries in the distant proximity group have various levels of liberal democracy as measured by V-Dem, they are not sensitive to China’s economic incentives due to their strong commitment to the liberal principle of human rights norms.

The empirical findings provide a deeper understanding of states’ reviewing behavior in the context of UPR. By considering the proximity of their original perception of human rights norms with China, I show that large economic incentives do not necessarily sway individual states’ reviewing behaviors in favor of China, while holding other relevant factors constant. “Distant” reviewers are too hard to influence, and “close” reviewers exhibiting leniency have less room to move. Only those in the middle are more susceptible to changes in their review leniency responding to material incentives. Importantly, these changes can be significant enough to align their reviews with those of close reviewers, indicating the strong influence of China's economic leverage on “swing” reviewers as represented in the middle group.

Does the UPR Matter? A Case of UN Resolution Votes

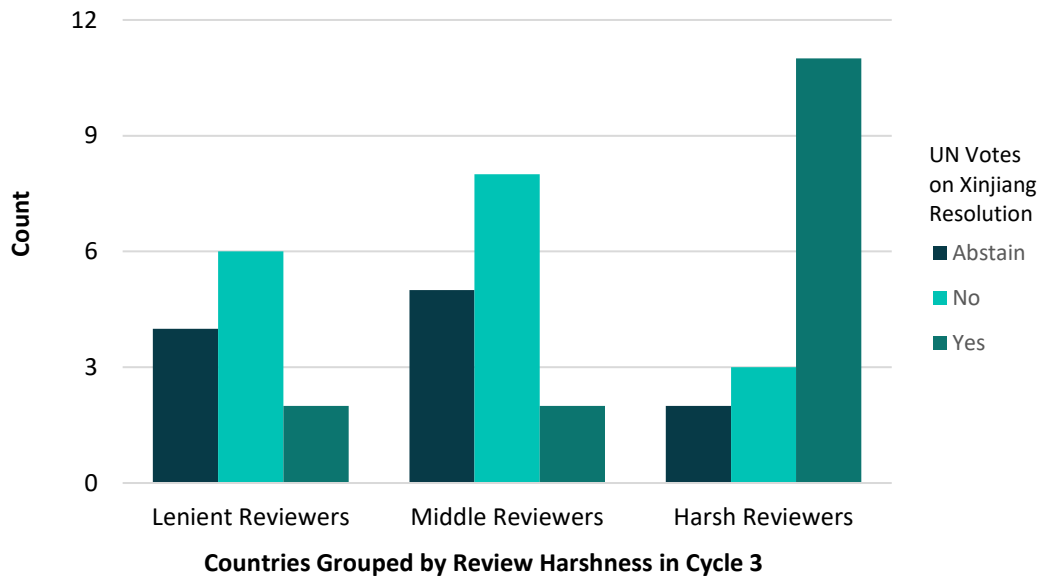
The global perspective on China's human rights issues varies significantly, with viewpoints differing outside the United States and its allies. China's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Chen Xu, confidently told a reporter in September 2022 that "the developing world will reject all anti-China initiatives initiated by Western countries" (The Straits Times 2022). This indeed turned out to be the case. On controversial human rights issues, UN member states' votes reflect their allegiance in the geopolitical rivalry between China and the West.

In October 2022, the United States and its allies attempted to pass a resolution on China's alleged rights abuses against Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The UN Human Rights Council rejected the draft resolution in a vote of 17 in favor, 19 against, and 11 abstentions (Rakhmat and Purnama 2023). The proposal to keep this issue on the agenda failed to secure a majority vote (Wintour 2022). This vote marked a major diplomatic victory for Beijing and a setback for the West's ability to use the UN to enforce human rights norms. This open ballot underscored China's political influence over the international human rights regime.

Many parties expressed frustration with respect to some Muslim-majority countries' votes on this Western-led motion. Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uyghur Congress, said "we are really disappointed by the reaction of Muslim countries," many of whom voted "no" and effectively supported China's blocking of further discussions in the UN (Farge 2022). Among 19 countries voting "no" to the draft, seven countries are among the Human Rights Council members representing the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC): Indonesia, Somalia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Sudan. Five of the 11 countries which abstained were also in the OIC: Benin, India, Gambia, Libya, and Malaysia.

Can reviewers' leniency in the recently completed Cycle 3 of UPR predict how they cast votes on this sensitive UN resolution for China? Figure 5 presents the relationship between how countries voted on the UN resolution regarding Xinjiang and how these countries reviewed China in Cycle 3 of UPR.

Figure 5. Countries’ Leniency Toward China in UPR Cycle 3 and their Votes in the UN Resolution on Xinjiang



Based on countries’ review harshness scores, these 47 countries are divided into “lenient,” “middle,” and “harsh” reviewers.⁷ Harsh reviewers predominantly voted “yes” to the resolution. Middle and lenient reviewers were more likely to vote “no” or abstain, with only two outliers voting “yes” to the resolution. The distribution of votes on this resolution showcases that countries’ sentiments in UPR are correlated with their degree of support to China in UN voting on issues China deems sensitive. The UPR is only one of the many venues in which China is seeking to influence the UN human rights regime. Genuine followers and middle countries susceptible to China’s financial influence support its initiatives contesting liberal human rights norms.

Conclusion

I use the UN Universal Periodic Review as a laboratory to examine how China leverages its economic influence to shape other states' reviews of China's human rights record. Previous work shows that this UPR peer review system is inherently political, with reviews primarily driven by states' bilateral relationships. Here I show that reviews can also be shaped by economic power, but with constraints.

Using text-based coding, I convert publicly available UN reports into a numerical scale, capturing instances of leniency in these reviews. Each recommendation receives a severity index score. Then I balance the quantitative and qualitative differences of the recommendations each state receives, enabling comparison of the review harshness scores at the dyad level. This set of measurements enables us to examine and compare the behaviors of countries from two perspectives. First, we can analyze how a country, acting as a reviewer, assesses and reviews other states. Second, 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 between countries, shedding light on their interactions and relationships within the peer review process.

In this study, first, I show that China is not necessarily vulnerable in the UN-based multilateral human rights regime. While the UPR system opens opportunities for countries to advocate their vision of human rights norms and exercise their monitoring power as peers, their reviews and interactions are influenced by economic, geopolitical, and normative considerations.

Using original text-as-data measures and a research design that capitalizes on the time lags between review cycles, I demonstrate that countries receiving more financial assistance from China tend to be less critical of its human rights record. Considering different levels of economic incentives between the review cycles, I find that reviews from countries receiving more new China-funded development projects or debt relief considerations tend to offer less critical reviews than countries that do not enjoy similar levels of economic incentives from China. However, the influence of economic incentives on reviews is contingent upon reviewers' underlying perceptions of human rights norms and values. Countries closer to liberal principles of human rights exhibit greater reluctance to adjust their reviews in response to China's economic incentives. Those in the middle are more sensitive to financial incentives.

So far, I have presented additional evidence that when countries participate in the UN Universal Periodic Review system, they consider factors beyond the human rights conditions of the state under review or the relationship between reviewer and

reviewee. Reviews conducted in the UPR are shaped by the vested interests of the reviewing states. When China is under review, many of its main aid beneficiaries refrain from taking critical stands on sensitive issues that may antagonize the Chinese government, such as civil and political rights or ethnic minority and religious rights. Instead, they praise China or simply urge it to continue its efforts to enhance economic rights that the government is proud of. These recommendations can be seen as a form of reciprocity, akin to “scratching China’s back.” Furthermore, we observe these types of light recommendations are more common among countries receiving greater economic incentives from China between review cycles.

However, this study also highlights the limitations of using financial incentives to influence normative decisions within human rights regimes. It is exceedingly challenging to manipulate countries’ human rights reviews through economic incentives when those states strongly adhere to liberal principles of human rights. Even though China is a dominant economic power providing projects, loans, and assistance to many recipient countries, delegates from liberally inclined countries are reluctant to write lenient reviews or offer disguised praise for China.

It is surprising to observe that the UPR state-to-state review system is not entirely politicized. Not all states are co-opted, despite China being the largest trading partner for over 100 countries in the world. Some states still take their commitments to the international community seriously and strive to uphold international norms (Chayes and Chayes 1993; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Kelley 2007). As seen in numerous instances within the human rights regime, economically powerful countries do not always get what they want in a normative setting.

Future research can delve into why these country delegates might opt to risk unsettling their country’s primary economic partner or financier, particularly when there are no apparent benefits to remaining faithful to human rights principles within the UPR. It would also be valuable to explore the broader network of states’ reviews beyond China within the UPR framework. The UPR text data may enable an investigation of a network of reviews that could illuminate the key players in driving the politicization of UPR, thereby uncovering the intricate interplay between norms and geopolitics in the state review process. In other words, we have the opportunity to identify sincere reviewers and strategic reviewers, and quantify under what conditions their choices converge or diverge. The network analysis can revolve around the great powers as the central node, revealing which reviewers tend to be lenient or harsh and the extent of their 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 connections may evolve over time. Adopting this network approach will enrich our understanding of the complex dynamics of states’ interactions within international organizations, especially when norms and interests collide.

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Appendix A. Tags Under Each Issue Topic

- **Civil and political rights:** “CP rights - general, Civil society, Elections, Freedom of association and peaceful assembly, Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of the press, Freedom of movement, Human rights defenders”
- **Public services:** “Corruption, Public security, Human rights education and training, Counter-terrorism, Privacy, National Human Rights Institution”
- **Migrants and labors:** “Asylum-seekers - refugees, Freedom of movement, Labor, Migrants, Internally displaced persons”
- **Physical integrity rights:** “Justice, Death penalty, Detention, Enforced disappearances, Extrajudicial executions, Human rights violations by state agents, Impunity, Torture and other CID treatment, Disability rights”
- **Race, ethnicity and religious minority:** “Freedom of religion and belief, Minorities, Racial discrimination, Indigenous peoples, Statelessness and the right to nationality”
- **Social and economic rights:** “Environment, Right to land, Right to water, Economic, social and cultural rights, Right to development, Poverty, Right to education, Right to Food, Right to health, Right to housing, ESC rights - general, Business and Human Rights”
- **Protection of vulnerable population:** “Disabilities, HIV - Aids, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Rights of the Child, Trafficking, Women’s rights”
- **General and others:** “Special procedures, Technical assistance and cooperation, UPR process, General, Others”

Appendix B. Cosine Similarity with China

Table A1. Summary of text similarity between China’s human rights scripts and other countries’ scripts when they review other countries across three cycles

| | Reviewers | Cosine all | Cosine C1 | Cosine C2 | Cosine C3 |
|----|--------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | China | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| 2 | Cuba | 0.99 | 0.94 | 0.97 | 0.96 |
| 3 | Venezuela | 0.99 | 0.95 | 0.96 | 0.94 |
| 4 | Brunei Darussalam | 0.97 | 0.90 | 0.97 | 0.97 |
| 5 | DPR Korea | 0.97 | 0.94 | 0.84 | 0.94 |
| 6 | Oman | 0.96 | 0.87 | 0.91 | 0.96 |
| 7 | Saudi Arabia | 0.96 | 0.92 | 0.88 | 0.96 |
| 8 | Vietnam | 0.96 | 0.99 | 0.94 | 0.95 |
| 9 | Dominican Republic | 0.93 | 0.76 | 0.84 | 0.89 |
| 10 | Eritrea | 0.93 | | 0.89 | 0.88 |
| 11 | Solomon Islands | 0.93 | | 0.73 | 0.87 |
| 12 | Yemen | 0.93 | 0.94 | 0.90 | 0.83 |
| 13 | Cambodia | 0.92 | 0.98 | 0.88 | 0.85 |
| 14 | Bangladesh | 0.91 | 0.84 | 0.93 | 0.79 |
| 15 | Equatorial Guinea | 0.91 | 0.67 | 0.91 | 0.95 |
| 16 | Fiji | 0.91 | | 0.75 | 0.91 |
| 17 | Haiti | 0.91 | 0.75 | 0.74 | 0.87 |
| 18 | Palestine | 0.91 | 0.86 | 0.93 | 0.82 |
| 19 | Syria | 0.91 | 0.93 | 0.63 | 0.86 |
| 21 | Ethiopia | 0.90 | 0.79 | 0.87 | 0.90 |
| 22 | Libya | 0.90 | 0.91 | 0.79 | 0.93 |
| 23 | Singapore | 0.90 | 0.94 | 0.90 | 0.90 |
| 24 | Mauritius | 0.89 | 0.79 | 0.67 | 0.94 |
| 25 | Qatar | 0.89 | 0.92 | 0.81 | 0.88 |

| | Reviewers | Cosine all | Cosine C1 | Cosine C2 | Cosine C3 |
|----|----------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 26 | Sri Lanka | 0.89 | 0.96 | 0.90 | 0.84 |
| 27 | Algeria | 0.88 | 0.81 | 0.83 | 0.89 |
| 28 | Bhutan | 0.88 | 0.97 | 0.89 | 0.79 |
| 29 | Iran | 0.88 | 0.89 | 0.83 | 0.89 |
| 30 | Laos | 0.88 | 0.93 | 0.84 | 0.83 |
| 31 | Malaysia | 0.88 | 0.78 | 0.88 | 0.90 |
| 32 | United Arab Emirates | 0.88 | 0.84 | 0.90 | 0.81 |
| 33 | Angola | 0.87 | 0.92 | 0.83 | 0.86 |
| 34 | Kuwait | 0.87 | 0.89 | 0.88 | 0.72 |
| 35 | Zimbabwe | 0.87 | 0.94 | 0.73 | 0.65 |
| 36 | India | 0.86 | 0.73 | 0.80 | 0.88 |
| 37 | Marshall Islands | 0.86 | | | 0.86 |
| 38 | Myanmar | 0.86 | 0.96 | 0.93 | 0.78 |
| 39 | South Sudan | 0.86 | | 0.88 | 0.81 |
| 40 | Sudan | 0.86 | 0.98 | 0.78 | 0.81 |
| 41 | Tanzania | 0.86 | 0.84 | 0.79 | 0.63 |
| 42 | Bahamas | 0.85 | | 0.52 | 0.85 |
| 43 | Guinea | 0.85 | | | 0.83 |
| 44 | South Africa | 0.85 | 0.88 | 0.85 | 0.79 |
| 45 | Trinidad and Tobago | 0.85 | 0.68 | 0.90 | 0.79 |
| 46 | Djibouti | 0.84 | 0.87 | 0.87 | 0.81 |
| 47 | El Salvador | 0.84 | 0.66 | 0.85 | 0.80 |
| 48 | Bolivia | 0.83 | 0.87 | 0.66 | 0.76 |
| 49 | Cameroon | 0.83 | 0.78 | 0.23 | 0.84 |
| 50 | Maldives | 0.83 | 0.82 | 0.82 | 0.82 |
| 51 | Pakistan | 0.83 | 0.86 | 0.82 | 0.79 |
| 52 | Uzbekistan | 0.83 | 0.81 | 0.84 | 0.82 |

| | Reviewers | Cosine all | Cosine C1 | Cosine C2 | Cosine C3 |
|----|------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 53 | Barbados | 0.82 | 0.88 | 0.29 | 0.80 |
| 54 | Comoros | 0.82 | | 0.78 | 0.76 |
| 55 | Holy See | 0.82 | 0.86 | 0.85 | 0.57 |
| 56 | Tajikistan | 0.82 | 0.92 | 0.77 | 0.51 |
| 57 | Bahrain | 0.81 | 0.88 | 0.88 | 0.73 |
| 58 | Jamaica | 0.81 | 0.60 | 0.84 | 0.85 |
| 59 | Monaco | 0.81 | 0.69 | 0.88 | |
| 60 | Somalia | 0.81 | 0.73 | 0.78 | 0.55 |
| 61 | Turkmenistan | 0.81 | | 0.79 | 0.65 |
| 62 | Afghanistan | 0.80 | 0.78 | 0.77 | 0.78 |
| 63 | Lebanon | 0.80 | 0.94 | 0.80 | 0.73 |
| 64 | Nigeria | 0.80 | 0.88 | 0.86 | 0.65 |
| 65 | Peru | 0.80 | 0.77 | 0.65 | 0.84 |
| 66 | Portugal | 0.80 | 0.82 | 0.82 | 0.79 |
| 67 | Azerbaijan | 0.79 | 0.80 | 0.64 | 0.77 |
| 68 | Egypt | 0.79 | 0.85 | 0.83 | 0.58 |
| 69 | Kazakhstan | 0.79 | 0.85 | 0.74 | 0.77 |
| 70 | Madagascar | 0.79 | 0.70 | 0.75 | 0.76 |
| 71 | Mauritania | 0.79 | 0.86 | 0.84 | 0.63 |
| 72 | Belarus | 0.78 | 0.71 | 0.75 | 0.84 |
| 73 | Gabon | 0.78 | 0.77 | 0.74 | 0.72 |
| 74 | Republic of Congo | 0.78 | 0.84 | 0.83 | |
| 75 | Serbia | 0.78 | 0.77 | 0.71 | 0.83 |
| 76 | Democratic Republic of Congo | 0.77 | 0.85 | 0.65 | 0.78 |
| 77 | Iraq | 0.77 | 0.76 | 0.75 | 0.72 |
| 78 | Kenya | 0.77 | | 0.73 | 0.75 |
| 79 | Nicaragua | 0.77 | 0.80 | 0.68 | 0.64 |

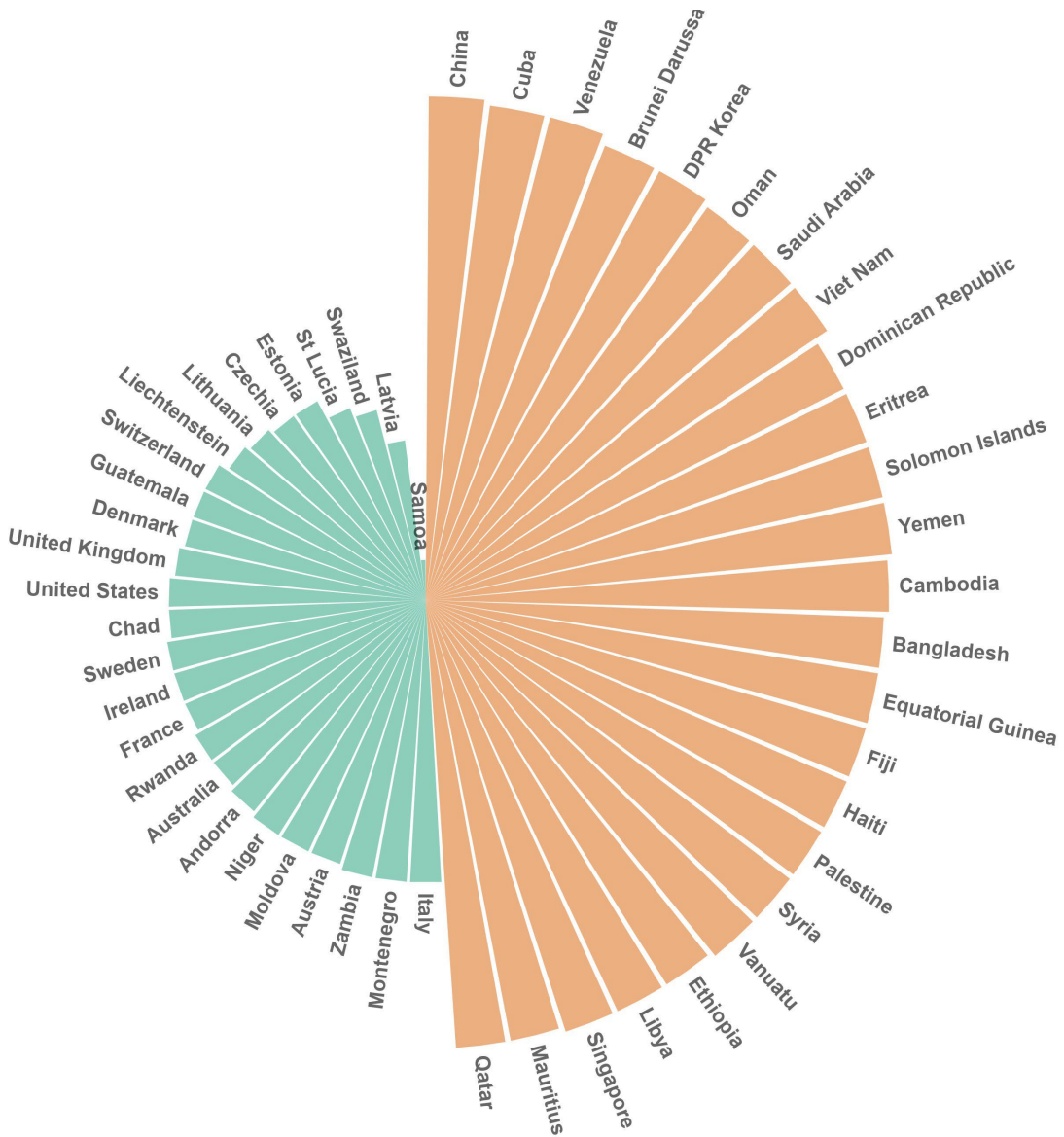
| | Reviewers | Cosine all | Cosine C1 | Cosine C2 | Cosine C3 |
|-----|-------------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 80 | Senegal | 0.77 | 0.80 | 0.80 | 0.72 |
| 81 | Seychelles | 0.77 | | 0.64 | 0.75 |
| 82 | Thailand | 0.77 | 0.71 | 0.81 | 0.77 |
| 83 | Finland | 0.76 | 0.77 | 0.78 | 0.64 |
| 84 | Kyrgyzstan | 0.76 | 0.85 | 0.84 | 0.66 |
| 85 | Guyana | 0.75 | | | 0.75 |
| 86 | Indonesia | 0.75 | 0.82 | 0.74 | 0.74 |
| 87 | St Vincent and the Grenadines | 0.75 | | 0.75 | |
| 88 | Burundi | 0.74 | 0.92 | 0.80 | 0.60 |
| 89 | Cape Verde | 0.74 | 0.72 | 0.69 | 0.80 |
| 90 | Morocco | 0.74 | 0.81 | 0.70 | 0.73 |
| 91 | Bulgaria | 0.73 | 0.79 | 0.77 | 0.71 |
| 92 | Lesotho | 0.73 | 0.69 | 0.49 | 0.75 |
| 93 | Russian Federation | 0.73 | 0.89 | 0.72 | 0.65 |
| 94 | Turkey | 0.73 | 0.79 | 0.76 | 0.67 |
| 95 | Ecuador | 0.72 | 0.73 | 0.78 | 0.69 |
| 96 | Nepal | 0.72 | 0.81 | 0.68 | 0.65 |
| 97 | Timor-Leste | 0.72 | 0.76 | 0.79 | 0.66 |
| 98 | Colombia | 0.71 | 0.81 | 0.76 | 0.64 |
| 99 | Cote d'Ivoire | 0.71 | 0.78 | 0.66 | 0.64 |
| 100 | Tunisia | 0.71 | 0.88 | 0.54 | 0.66 |
| 101 | Jordan | 0.70 | 0.75 | 0.63 | 0.70 |
| 102 | Panama | 0.70 | 0.74 | 0.74 | 0.70 |
| 103 | Albania | 0.69 | 0.73 | 0.78 | 0.65 |
| 104 | Armenia | 0.69 | 0.77 | 0.77 | 0.57 |
| 105 | Benin | 0.69 | 0.76 | 0.68 | 0.70 |
| 106 | Honduras | 0.69 | 0.81 | 0.68 | 0.67 |

| | Reviewers | Cosine all | Cosine C1 | Cosine C2 | Cosine C3 |
|-----|--------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 107 | North Macedonia | 0.69 | 0.70 | 0.73 | 0.60 |
| 108 | Sierra Leone | 0.69 | | 0.75 | 0.63 |
| 109 | Japan | 0.68 | 0.66 | 0.65 | 0.73 |
| 110 | Mexico | 0.68 | 0.57 | 0.74 | 0.72 |
| 111 | Namibia | 0.67 | 0.70 | 0.77 | 0.57 |
| 112 | Philippines | 0.67 | 0.86 | 0.63 | 0.64 |
| 113 | Israel | 0.66 | 0.66 | 0.73 | 0.67 |
| 114 | Republic of Korea | 0.66 | 0.75 | 0.67 | 0.69 |
| 115 | Togo | 0.66 | | 0.70 | 0.63 |
| 116 | Uganda | 0.66 | 0.77 | 0.70 | 0.57 |
| 117 | Burkina Faso | 0.65 | 0.79 | 0.70 | 0.61 |
| 118 | Spain | 0.65 | 0.59 | 0.71 | 0.63 |
| 119 | Botswana | 0.64 | 0.86 | 0.57 | 0.67 |
| 120 | Brazil | 0.64 | 0.63 | 0.69 | 0.60 |
| 121 | Central African Republic | 0.64 | 0.69 | 0.56 | 0.68 |
| 122 | Ghana | 0.64 | 0.79 | 0.63 | 0.59 |
| 123 | Luxembourg | 0.64 | 0.67 | 0.63 | 0.60 |
| 124 | Paraguay | 0.64 | 0.70 | 0.67 | 0.63 |
| 125 | Slovenia | 0.64 | 0.57 | 0.71 | 0.63 |
| 126 | Ukraine | 0.64 | 0.78 | 0.69 | 0.58 |
| 127 | Romania | 0.63 | 0.78 | 0.71 | 0.58 |
| 128 | Bosnia and Herzegovina | 0.62 | 0.55 | 0.72 | 0.58 |
| 129 | Greece | 0.62 | 0.81 | 0.69 | 0.55 |
| 130 | Iceland | 0.62 | 0.67 | 0.60 | 0.61 |
| 131 | Malta | 0.62 | 0.66 | | 0.60 |
| 132 | Uruguay | 0.62 | 0.73 | 0.62 | 0.64 |
| 133 | Cyprus | 0.61 | 0.75 | 0.56 | 0.64 |

| | Reviewers | Cosine all | Cosine C1 | Cosine C2 | Cosine C3 |
|-----|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 134 | New Zealand | 0.61 | 0.57 | 0.67 | 0.57 |
| 135 | Georgia | 0.60 | 0.67 | 0.60 | 0.57 |
| 136 | Hungary | 0.60 | 0.65 | 0.58 | 0.62 |
| 137 | Costa Rica | 0.59 | 0.76 | 0.59 | 0.64 |
| 138 | Mozambique | 0.59 | 0.76 | 0.58 | 0.52 |
| 139 | Netherlands | 0.59 | 0.54 | 0.62 | 0.63 |
| 140 | Canada | 0.58 | 0.50 | 0.63 | 0.61 |
| 141 | Chile | 0.58 | 0.65 | 0.63 | 0.55 |
| 142 | Croatia | 0.58 | 0.71 | 0.63 | 0.57 |
| 143 | Germany | 0.58 | 0.58 | 0.62 | 0.59 |
| 144 | Mongolia | 0.58 | | 0.50 | 0.57 |
| 145 | Slovakia | 0.58 | 0.53 | 0.63 | 0.52 |
| 146 | Argentina | 0.57 | 0.58 | 0.57 | 0.60 |
| 147 | Mali | 0.57 | 0.75 | 0.61 | 0.49 |
| 148 | Norway | 0.57 | 0.57 | 0.63 | 0.56 |
| 149 | Poland | 0.57 | 0.57 | 0.61 | 0.58 |
| 150 | Belgium | 0.56 | 0.51 | 0.59 | 0.57 |
| 151 | Italy | 0.56 | 0.54 | 0.63 | 0.52 |
| 152 | Montenegro | 0.56 | | 0.50 | 0.59 |
| 153 | Zambia | 0.56 | 0.71 | 0.66 | 0.53 |
| 154 | Austria | 0.55 | 0.58 | 0.57 | 0.54 |
| 155 | Moldova | 0.55 | 0.50 | 0.58 | 0.56 |
| 156 | Niger | 0.55 | 0.79 | 0.47 | 0.46 |
| 157 | Andorra | 0.54 | | 0.71 | 0.49 |
| 158 | Australia | 0.53 | 0.61 | 0.57 | 0.54 |
| 159 | Rwanda | 0.53 | 0.69 | 0.60 | 0.48 |
| 160 | France | 0.52 | 0.46 | 0.53 | 0.58 |
| 161 | Ireland | 0.52 | 0.52 | 0.62 | 0.48 |

| | Reviewers | Cosine all | Cosine C1 | Cosine C2 | Cosine C3 |
|-----|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 162 | Sweden | 0.52 | 0.48 | 0.58 | 0.52 |
| 163 | Chad | 0.51 | 0.75 | 0.53 | 0.34 |
| 164 | United States | 0.51 | 0.57 | 0.56 | 0.47 |
| 165 | United Kingdom | 0.50 | 0.62 | 0.51 | 0.51 |
| 166 | Denmark | 0.49 | 0.50 | 0.45 | 0.54 |
| 167 | Guatemala | 0.49 | 0.71 | 0.56 | 0.42 |
| 168 | Switzerland | 0.49 | 0.56 | 0.51 | 0.53 |
| 169 | Liechtenstein | 0.47 | 0.81 | 0.50 | 0.43 |
| 170 | Lithuania | 0.46 | 0.57 | 0.52 | 0.39 |
| 171 | Czechia | 0.45 | 0.45 | 0.47 | 0.44 |
| 172 | Estonia | 0.45 | 0.72 | 0.42 | 0.49 |
| 173 | St Lucia | 0.41 | | 0.44 | |
| 174 | Swaziland | 0.39 | 0.59 | 0.26 | |
| 175 | Latvia | 0.32 | 0.29 | 0.42 | 0.28 |
| 176 | Samoa | 0.08 | 0.22 | | |

Figure A1. Top 25 countries sharing high proximity (close in orange) and low proximity (distant in green) with China’s vision of human rights



Appendix C. Results: Complete Models

Table A2. Correlations between Chinese aid inflow per capita pre-cycles and recipient countries' review harshness scores to China in UPR

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Review harshness score to China | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Chinese aid flow per capita | -0.0001*** (0.00005) | | 0.0001 (0.0002) |
| Cosine similarity (middle) | | | -0.179* (0.103) |
| Cosine similarity (close) | | | -0.231* (0.120) |
| Political Terror Score | -0.102*** (0.040) | -0.084** (0.039) | -0.090** (0.040) |
| UN Voting Distance with China | 0.030** (0.013) | 0.031** (0.013) | 0.023* (0.014) |
| GDP per capita | 0.00000 (0.00000) | 0.00000 (0.00000) | 0.00000 (0.00000) |
| Regime type (V-dem) | 0.785*** (0.162) | 0.878*** (0.160) | 0.580*** (0.186) |
| Aid flow * middle group | | | -0.0002 (0.0002) |
| Aid flow * close group | | | -0.0002 (0.0002) |
| Constant | 1.658*** (0.171) | 1.514*** (0.166) | 1.883*** (0.207) |
| Cycle Fixed Effects | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 221 | 221 | 221 |
| Log Likelihood | -169.615 | -163.926 | -184.232 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 355.230 | 341.852 | 392.465 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 382.416 | 365.640 | 433.243 |

Note A-7 *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A3. Correlations between large economic incentives and countries' review changes to China in UPR, conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions of human rights norms with China

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> Review harshness score |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Large economic incentive | -0. 238 (0.155) |
| Cosine similarity (middle) | -0.301** (0.117) |
| Cosine similarity (close) | -0.373*** (0.133) |
| UN voting distance | 0.023 *(0.01) |
| Political Terror Score | -0.096*** (0.036) |
| Chinese aid flow per capita | -0.0001* (0.0001) |
| Incentives*similarity (middle) | 0.021 (0.184) |
| Incentives*similarity (close) | 0.012 (0.189) |
| Constant | 2.366*** (0.151) |
| Regime fixed effects | ✓ |
| Observations | 224 |
| Log likelihood | -160.723 |
| Akaike inf. crit. | 343.446 |
| Bayesian inf. crit. | 380.974 |
| <i>Note:</i> | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |