Dragons and Doves: The Effects of China's Leadership of UN Agencies[*]

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Abstract

Although many speculate about China's motivations, China seems well positioned to be able to change institutional goals as Secretary General of many United Nations (UN) agencies. Does China successfully wield leadership of these bodies to further its own national interests? China's rise relates to a broader debate about the extent to which leaders of IOs act as faithful Secretaries, as rational design theories predict, or whether leaders have the capacity to steer the organization in a new direction as a General. We test these theories through the case of China's leadership to determine whether a rising power uses the position to reward like-minded states. We leverage a comparative case study approach of 11 different IOs to examine these effects, combining original data collection of 12,481 IO country-projects from 1988-2022, an ethnographic case study of the ITU, and an elite conjoint survey experiment with IO staff. Despite China's more assertive grand strategy, we find that the distribution of IO benefits under China's leadership reflects the Secretary rather than General model, which has implications both for the way that we interpret China's motivations toward the international order, the independence of IOs, and the broader vitality of IOs in the midst of power transitions.

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Introduction

In many ways, China appears strategically positioned to influence international order from within by assuming the top post of international organizations. China now leads four of the 15 specialized United Nations (UN) agencies (Trofimov, Hinshaw, and O'Keeffe 2020), and this institutional authority could be instrumental in marshaling resources, distributing benefits to supporters, and burnishing China's reputation as a leader of the global order. Western powers portray China's leadership of international organizations as a major threat to the status quo.[1] For example, the United States recently accused the World Health Organization, a UN agency, of being a propaganda tool for China to positively shape how the global community perceives its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of these accusations, the Trump administration paused United States funding pending a review of how China influences the organization.[2]

Gaining leadership of international organizations offers a pathway to change world politics by reforming rather than overturning established institutions. China has stated a desire to shape global governance through a more assertive grand strategy Doshi 2021; Goldstein 2020; Yan 2014. This motivation matches theoretical expectations that rising powers are motivated to contest established orders to better align international rules with domestic preferences.[3] Rising powers' are dissatisfied with the Western-led multilateral system because they lack influence and status, and have a different vision of norms and principles (Binder and Payton 2022, 382). Dissatisfied rising powers, and especially China, which has undergone the largest increase in power in the past decade, can seek to change institutions from within through staffing and executive leadership to conduct "institutional statecraft" and "rules-based revolution" (Ikenberry and Lim 2017; Goddard 2018).

In many ways, it would be natural to expect China to use the leadership of inter-

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[1] Wall Street Journal, How China is Taking Over International Organizations.

[2] NPR, National Security Adviser O'Brien Alleges WHO Is 'Propaganda Tool For The Chinese'

[3] See also Organski (1958); Huntington (1993); Gilpin (1981); Acharya (2018).

national organizations to reward its friends and allies, acting as a "General " and shifting the status quo distributions oriented toward liberal states (e.g., Vreeland 2019; Hall and Woods 2018; Tallberg 2010). China would not be the first state to use IOs to reward close allies, following an established pattern set by the United States (e.g., Dreher, Sturm, and Vreeland 2009; Clark and Dolan 2021; Andersen, Hansen, and Markussen 2006; Kersting and Kilby 2016). Much previous research on international organization, however, expects international organization staff to act as neutral agents on behalf of state, which pressures the executive head to operate as a faithful "Secretary" (e.g., Abbott and Snidal 1998; Pollack 1997; Nielson and Tierney 2003). If elections offer member states the opportunity for impartial division of agency spoils, the international organizations (IOs) risk losing their legitimacy.

As a state motivated to take on a more prominent role on the world stage, China offers a useful analytical lens to test whether IOs operate according to the General or Secretary model. If IOs are designed to be independent, do changes in leadership matter when staffed by the nationals of a rising power with goals to influence world politics? China is investing significant resources in obtaining the top leadership positions of United Nations agencies, suggesting Beijing values the possibilities for international influence these positions hold. But does China's assumption of the Secretary-General position of UN agencies change the way they operate? Do IOs begin to conform to China's interests in shifting the status quo and if so, through which channels?

To test the expectations of the General and Secretary models, we employ a multi-method approach. First, we construct an original dataset, the IO Project Database, which tracks projects of 11 different UN agencies from 1988-2022, allowing us to examine the effects of executive head elections on project allocation and funding. This dataset includes 12,481 original observations of funding and capacity building projects distributed from the IO to member states. We use this dataset descriptively to observe whether China's like-minded states begin to receive greater distributions of benefits after China assumes office. Second, we examine the theoretical expectations and mechanisms in an ethnographic case study of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) that includes interviews and

observations during the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in 2022, where states elect new officials of the organization. Finally, we conduct a conjoint survey experiment on an elite sample of IO staff to probe the impact of executive head nationality and agenda-setting on staff project decision-making.

Despite concerns from Western states about Chinese activism through executive leadership, we find support for the Secretary hypothesis. In our observational analysis, we discover that China's allies do not gain more benefits from the organization when China leads the organization, and in fact, non-allies are more likely to gain projects under China's tenure. In our ethnography, employees discussed the institutional constraints that prevent the Chinese Secretary-General from departing from the mandate. An elite interview with the ITU Secretary-General Zhao also adds evidence of the degree to which leaders value identities as impartial international civil servants. Despite signs that states greatly value the leadership role and invest considerable time and resources into election campaigns at the international level, we find that overall, leaders are constrained from assuming a General role. Although China calls for fulfilling a Chinese dream by gaining status on the world stage, these efforts seem to be driven by a desire for prestige rather than using this authority to reward supporters. We find limited evidence that China is systematically wielding leadership of the United Nations to reward friends and allies.

This project contributes to important debates in international cooperation, including the importance of executive heads in IOs (e.g., Hall and Woods 2018; Tallberg 2010; Copelovitch and Rickard 2021), the role of individuals in international policymaking (e.g., Heinzel and Liese 2021; Heinzel 2022; Clark and Zucker 2023; Clark and Dolan 2022). It also contributes to literature on change in international order and the extent to which rising powers like China can change the international order through IOs (e.g., Fung and Lam 2021; Voeten 2021). As China seeks an increasingly prominent role in global governance, the importance of understanding such dynamics is evident. More importantly, our findings suggest that IOs are well positioned to maintain their crucial independence and neutrality (Abbott and Snidal 1998), which strengthens arguments of IO legitimacy even in the face of power transitions Hurd (2008).

Executive Heads and IOs

While international relations scholars have given great attention to the design, effectiveness, and influence of IOs, the role of IO heads and their influence on institutional outcomes is much less well understood (Manulak 2017; Hall and Woods 2018).[4] We outline two dominant expectations by which countries motivated to expand their influence, including rising powers, may seek to use IOs through the organization's top leadership position. One body of work expects executive heads to achieve influence, whereas the other expects institutional design to thwart and mitigate impulses for revisionism.

Executive Head as a "Secretary"

Under both realist (e.g., Mearsheimer 1994) and rationalist-institutionalist (e.g., Abbott and Snidal 1998) theories, IO outputs are determined by the preferences of state principals, leaving limited room for executive heads to change the direction of the organization. As the agent, the institution itself—including the executive head—has little room to deviate from these preferences and can thus be largely written off in understanding the political outcomes.

Institutional design is meant to constrain bureaucratic shirking. Specific design features like monitoring (Pollack 1997; Nielson and Tierney 2003) and limited institutional control over budgetary and staffing matters (Pollack 1997) are built into IOs from their inception to create formal constraints on bureaucratic agency. The United Nations Secretary-General, for instance, has limited legal and policy-making authority. Likewise, in the European Union, the dominance of large member states limits the agency of the executive head and constrains institutional reform Moravcsik (2018). For these reasons, many argue that the leaders of international organizations are merely figureheads that fall short of the power commanded by the political leaders of countries and other organizations.

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[4]But see Cox (1969); Schechter (1987) for early work on the topic.

Executive Head as a "General"

However, independence is a critical characteristic that enables IOs to accomplish the cooperative goals that states have in establishing the IO in the first place (Abbott and Snidal 1998), which may create latitude for executive influence. The "General" model suggests that executive heads should be able to use this independence to direct resources towards like-minded states *directly* and shift resources of international organizations. Executive heads influence key financial decisions in IOs, manage institutional relationships with members (Cox 1969), and coordinate agreements amongst members (Hall and Woods 2018). Executive heads are involved in raising institutional funds, including core funds that are not earmarked for specific purposes (Hall and Woods 2018) and coordinating the contributions from member states (Manulak 2017). Executive heads can also exert political influence over the allocation of programmatic spoils. For example, Carnegie and Marinov (2017) find that states direct more foreign aid to their former colonies when they hold the presidency of the Council of the EU.

Leaders also hold the power of information and ideas to compel the IO to change. Idiosyncratic factors, such as the leader's personality or charisma, impact the power he or she holds over the organization. This "quality of executive leadership may prove to be the most critical single determinant of the growth in scope and authority of international organization," Cox (1969, 205). While Eric Drummond, the League of Nations Secretary-General, acted as a quiet, behind-the-scenes administrator, establishing an extremely limited role for the League in international politics, Dag Hammarskjold, the Secretary General of the United Nations, more boldly sought to enlarge the mandate of the organization and its missions, establishing an activist organizational role (Kille and Scully 2003).

Executive heads can also influence the policy outputs of international organizations through agenda control, through which leaders influence the likelihood of achieving solutions to bargaining problems, define issues and construct focal points, avoid issue cycling, and shape distributional outcomes (e.g., Pollack 1997; Tallberg 2010). Similarly, executive heads set institutional priorities, defining and implementing strategic plans

(Schroeder 2014). For example, the existing staff of the institution may shift their activities in response to the preferences of the executive head without any direct application of executive power. Executive heads signal their commitments through speeches, policies, and joint collaborations. Copelovitch and Rickard (2021) note that the autonomy of World Bank Managing Directors allows them to set new agendas through country-level visits, contacts with ministers, and joint collaborations.

Existing employees of the organization interested in promotion and self-advancement could prioritize projects in accordance with the interest of the agency head (Clark and Dolan 2021). The employees of any organization consider the interests of their superiors and seek to execute these preferences out of concern for career advancement. Although it is tempting to think of the staff and experts of international organizations as neutral civil servants, Voeten (2021, 70) notes that the expertise is "rarely neutral amid ideological conflict." If leaders influence staff behavior through agenda-setting activities, staff can observe these explicit signals and adjust their behavior accordingly. Additionally, staff can anticipate the leader's preferences without an explicit signal, anticipating their preferences through knowledge of their country's foreign policy priorities ('pleasing the principal'). Under either mechanism, the observable implications are the same: one would observe a shift in institutional activities toward countries that support similar values as the executive head.

China's Rise and International Organizations

China's rise presents an ideal lens for analyzing the unresolved debate between the Secretary and General models. Beijing has aggressively pursued positions of leadership within international organizations, and Chinese nationals hold a remarkable number of the top leadership positions at international organizations. China advocates for the hiring and promotion of Chinese nationals within IOs (Fung and Lam 2021) and actively encourages its nationals to participate in UN standard setting and working groups (Voo 2019).

China and the General Model

By acting as a General, Chinese executive heads may redirect organizations' focus to better reflect its unique ideology and worldview. Its leaders may be motivated to align international programs with an alternative ideology from the currently dominant liberal approach. Ideology entails prescriptions about how international institutions should work and the purposes of international collaboration, containing propositions about "how issues should be resolved" and "who should resolve them" (Voeten 2021, 17). It defines what is good, how resources should be distributed, and where power resides. Ideologies thus have distributional consequences by offering prescriptions about who should benefit. (Voeten 2021).

China's ideology is oriented toward supporting the rights of states. In contrast to liberalism's focus on individuals, statism "emphasizes self-determination as ethically good, reserves a prominent role for the state in domestic political economy, favors redistributing resources away from the West, and advocates for the restoration of non-interference in the domestic affairs of states" (Voeten 2021, 24). China's emphasis on non-interference in internal affairs is evident in institutions in which it exercises significant influence—such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The AIIB provides financing conditions without demanding changes in domestic political institutions, while similar institutions where Western states have greater influence—such as the International Monetary Fund— often require domestic reforms in exchange for funding. China emphasizes a departure from a focus on conditionality tied to changes in domestic regimes to emphasize a lighter "statist" ideology. This pattern suggests that Chinese leadership of IOs could entail, at minimum, changing the distribution of goods within organizations away from the status quo emphasis on regime type in lending decisions and creating what it perceives to be greater fairness by reallocating resources away from the West. Others speculate that China could use organizations to shore up support from distant supporters for its vision of order and its leadership leadership (Kaya, Kilby, and Kay 2021).

Given Beijing's different ideological orientation, China's leadership could entail distributional changes. Experts and leaders are rarely neutral, but bring with a set of

values and preferences to their role. Great powers oversee the distribution of benefits within regimes and can dole out privileges to those with similar needs and interests when they hold positions of authority in international organizations. The United States, for instance, has long used its power to reward friends and limit the benefits of enemies and to advance the US vision of protecting the rights and freedoms of individuals (Kelley 2017). Scholars studying organizations ranging from the International Monetary Fund to the World Bank, where institutional rules privilege US influence, report on the subtle means of US influence to influence the distribution of benefits in a way that benefits US foreign policy and ideological goals (Thacker 1999; Kersting and Kilby 2016; Clark and Dolan 2021). At the World Bank, Copelovitch and Rickard (2021) find the political ideology of the Managing Director shapes loan conditionality. In a similar fashion, under the General framework, one might expect China—as a country with a different ideology from many reigning liberal states—to implement significant distributional shifts in IO programs and capacity building efforts.

H_1: **Chinese leadership of international organizations will increase the number of IO projects and activities directed towards China's like-minded countries.**

China and the Secretary Model

Institutional design theories expect that, due to designs that constrain the agency of executive heads, Chinese leaders of IOs would have limited influence and operate under the Secretary model. These effects on Chinese executives may also flow through socialization processes, which create norms of appropriateness for executive conduct (Johnston 2014). Executive heads are expected to behave as neutral agents without biases, and Chinese executives may be particularly sensitive to such criticisms. Several Chinese leaders respond to press inquiries about their role that they are neutral civil servants rather than political entities. The Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization,

Dongyu Qu argued, "I'm not [a] political figure; I'm FAO DG." [5] The umbrage that leaders feel when claims of bias are directed toward China suggests that China's leaders could be socialized to the goals of the organization and their role as civil servants.

If China would not expect to extract benefits from its position as executive head, why else would it pursue such positions, given that candidatures for such roles are costly and difficult to run?[6] In other words, if the Secretary model holds, why would we still expect to observe China—and other states—expending resources to seek executive leadership of IOs? We consider reputational goals that might drive China to lead the United Nations without overhauling it.

One reason China could be expected to pursue leadership of international organizations under a "Secretary" model is reputational. China may simply be interested in the prestige associated with leading United Nations agencies rather than directly using the organization to further goals.[7] After all, China spearheaded the Belt and Road (BRI) and created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to further its foreign policy goals of lending and capacity building. Operating through the United Nations is not necessary and may even be counter-productive for China, resulting in a potential reputation of being heavy-handed within international organizations. China may value global institutions for domestic purposes. Chan, for instance, finds that the value of institutions such as the BRI lies in its domestic rather than foreign benefits. By working through the BRI, China can offload excess capacity.[8] This body of research suggests that China's international involvement should be viewed through the lens of the second image reversed: some participation, especially within the United Nations, might be more valuable to politics at home rather than abroad (Gourevitch 1978).

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[5] Politico, Chairman FAO: Western powers pressure China's UN food boss to grip global hunger crisis.

[6] For example, during its campaign for leadership of FAO, China forgave $78 million in outstanding debts to Cameroon, whose candidate for the post subsequently withdrew from consideration (Fung and Lam 2020).

[7] See also Malone (2000).

[8] Chan, Job Market Paper, 2022.

This rationale could explain why China may seek executive leadership of IOs even under the Secretary model when no material benefits would be expected to accrue.

> H_0: **Chinese leadership of international organizations will result in no discernible changes in the number of IO projects and activities directed to China's like-minded countries.**

Observational Data

To analyze the relationship between China's executive leadership and changes in international organizations' policies, we collect original data on IO projects. The *IO Project Database* captures country-year data on projects of 11 UN agencies, including funding, topic, participants, and funders. Our database contains 12,481 country-projects from 1988 to 2022. Our dataset allows us to look at variation in the allocation of goods through awarding contracts, initiating projects, and allocating funding. Kaya, Kilby, and Kay (2021) coin the term "supplementary multilateralism" as a condition when the great power uses multilateral benefits to reinforce and reward those who share close political alignments. In our case, projects rather than lending represents a form of supplementary multilateralism where the countries selected for capacity building, workshops, and funding, are those that the great power wishes to reward with spoils from the United Nations.

We organize our case studies to compare the positive cases where a Chinese national is elected to lead a specialized United Nations agency to control cases where the nationals of other member states lead. The organizations that China leads are the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and the United Nations Industrial Development (UNIDO) (Figure **??**. We compare the four positive cases where China leads the organization (FAO, ICAO, ITU, and UNIDO) to the other UN agencies that China has not led, though in these control cases, we are able to examine the elections of other member states as executive heads as placebo tests. This allows us to understand whether China uses its unique opportunity to contribute to shaping the organization, in

line with a General approach, or whether China merely desires the prestige associated with leading the organization, in line with a Secretary approach.

To determine whether there are any descriptive trends that match with the expectations of the General or Secretary theory, we begin by testing ideological alignments using the United Nations Ideal Point estimates Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017). We identify China's allies as the countries with ideal point distance from China in the smallest quartile. Figure 2 illustrates the results across our sample of IOs.[9] The treatment cases—i.e., IOs where China was elected as executive head—are shown in the left column. We can observe that across all of these cases, the election of Chinese nationals as executive heads does not substantively affect the trend of project allocations either towards China's allies (green trend lines) or away from non-allies (red trend lines). In our control cases, we observe no latent trends in project allocation that would provide an alternative explanation for these findings. This means that during the tenure of China's executive heads, the rate of project distribution to like-minded countries remains relatively flat whereas non-allies experience the greatest gains. These patterns provide initial support to a Secretary hypothesis: we witness limited direct evidence of Chinese Secretary Generals distributing spoils to allies and like-minded states, as the United States has done in the past.

We further probe these results, statistically comparing project allocation rates before and after China's elections in the treatment cases, and placebo tests of other nationals' elections as executive heads in the control cases.[10] To test these differences, we conduct a series of t-tests to compare the difference in means of project allocation in the three years before and three years after elections. We select this window to capture the time that maybe necessary for a new executive to implement changes to organizational priorities.

The results, shown in Table 1, largely corroborate our expectations that executive leadership has limited effects on trends in project allocation. Though the differences in

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[9]For the case of the WHO, we lack sufficient data to assess the effects of electoral outcomes.

[10]We lack sufficient data for statistical analyses in IAEA, WHO, and UNWTO.

Figure 1: Organizations with Chinese Leadership
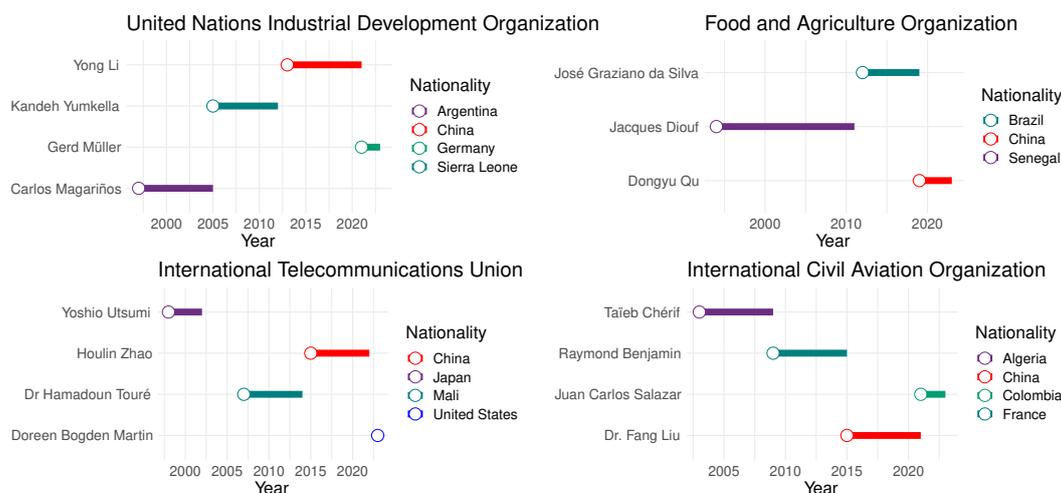
Note: For the positive cases that China leads, we map the length of the tenure and the other countries that previously led the organization.

project allocation between China allies and non-China allies is statically significant in three out of four treatment IOs—UNIDO, ITU, and ICAO—in the ITU and ICAO cases, it is actually non-allies who benefit the most from China's election, and in UNIDO, the substantive difference in project allocation to allies and non-allies differs only by 1 (12.72 vs. 13.56). Only in FAO do China's allies benefit from its election, gaining 3 additional projects post-elections, while non-allies suffer a loss of 54 projects. Even in this case, the benefits for China's allies are substantively small.

In the five control cases, we observe that China's allies do not fare significantly differently after the placebo election in two cases (UNESCO, FAO 2012), and fare better than non-allies in three cases (IMO 2012, IMO 2016, IFAD). It is clear that China's allies do not obtain greater benefits when China is elected as executive head, and surprisingly, seem to fare better when nationals from *other countries* are elected. Rather than evidence of "supplementary multilateralism," we find instead that Chinese tenure is associated with non-allies gaining more. This is consistent with the patterns that Kaya, Kilby, and Kay (2021) observes in the case of AIIB lending, and may suggest a broader strategy that China employs across different types of international institutions. The authors argue

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executive heads display "remedial multilateralism," in which China has motivations to reward distant states to avoid being perceived as a revisionist state bent on dramatically influencing institutions.

Though the evidence is fairly weak—only a 3-project increase in aid to allies—it may appear that FAO is a case of the General explanation for non-allies, who lose 53 projects. Further, in the control comparison when Brazil was elected as executive head in 2012, China's allies do worse, gaining 14 fewer projects. What explains this case? We speculate that these results are driven to a certain extent by the overall increase in projects over time at FAO. From 2006-2014, we observe an average of 7.5 projects per year, while from 2015-2020, we observe an average of 76.5 projects per year. But further research may be needed to understand whether a $50 million up-scaling of the FAO China South-South Cooperation Programme in 2014 diminishes the importance of non-China allies within FAO funding.[11]

## Case Study: the International Telecommunications Union

While our observational data analysis illustrates broad patterns in the project allocation across UN agencies, it cannot illuminate the mechanisms by which executive heads might influence these outcomes or be constrained from exerting change. To examine the mechanisms of potential Chinese executive influence in detail, we conduct an ethnographic case study of the ITU, a United Nations technical agency led by Secretary General Houlin Zhao from China. Through observation and interviews at the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in 2022 (ITU PP-22), we analyze the importance of IO leadership from officials who arrived at the ITU for elections. Given how top of mind elections and the role of leadership is during PP-22, it is the ideal opportunity to gleam insights on how leadership impacts an organization.

Initial interviews and interactions provide support for the expectations of the General model, as Member states almost unanimously emphasized the importance of leadership of the ITU. During an interview with an official from the Bahamas, the official

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[11]See here.

Figure 2: Do China's allies obtain more benefits when it is elected as executive head?
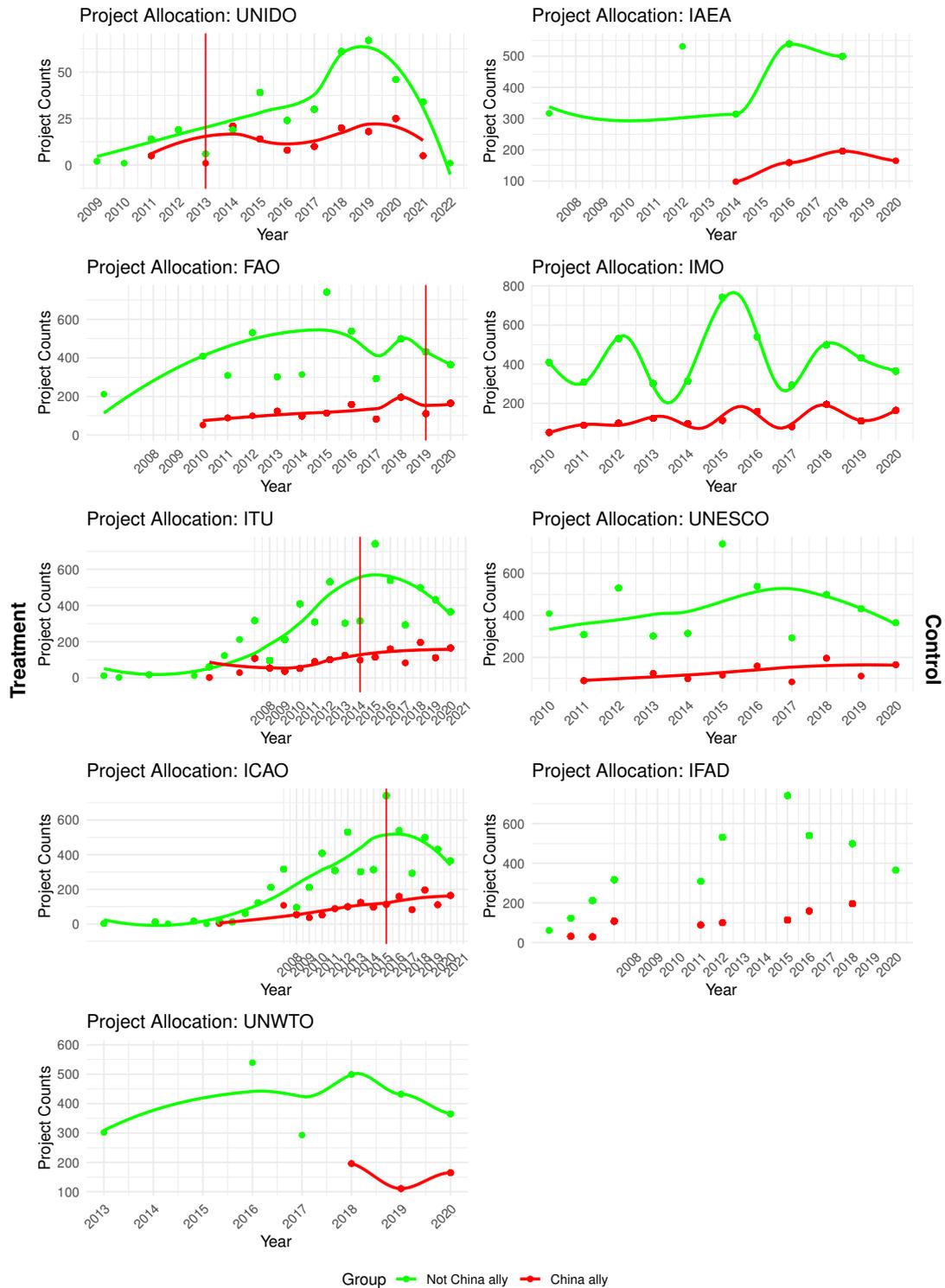
Note: Allies are countries with ideal point distance from China on UNGA voting (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017) in the smallest quartile. The red vertical line indicates when China was elected executive head of the organization. Treatment cases are in the left column; control cases in the right column. WHO is omitted because of data sparsity.

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Table 1: Results of IO Elections on Project Allocations: Three Years Pre- and Post Election

Organization	Condition	Group	Year	Difference	Post-Election Group Mean	Pre-Election Group Mean	P-Value	CI (Low)	CI (High)
UNIDO	Treatment	China Allies	2013	12.72	17.72	5.00	0.00	11.21	14.23
UNIDO	Treatment	Non-China-Allies	2013	13.56	29.97	16.41	0.00	10.34	16.77
FAO	Treatment	China Allies	2019	3.04	149.25	146.21	0.68	-11.66	17.73
FAO	Treatment	Non-China-Allies	2019	-53.47	392.97	446.44	0.00	-73.75	-33.20
ITU	Treatment	China Allies	2014	32.21	139.54	107.33	0.00	20.40	44.01
ITU	Treatment	Non-China-Allies	2014	141.06	597.18	456.12	0.00	105.70	176.42
ICAO	Treatment	China Allies	2015	16.07	125.72	109.66	0.01	4.43	27.71
ICAO	Treatment	Non-China-Allies	2015	177.11	583.29	406.17	0.00	139.62	214.61
UNESCO	Control	China Allies	2018	41.82	170.57	128.75	0.11	-13.27	96.91
UNESCO	Control	Non-China-Allies	2018	-115.52	444.41	559.92	0.04	-224.33	-6.70
FAO	Control	China Allies	2012	27.54	107.29	79.75	0.05	-0.43	55.52
FAO	Control	Non-China-Allies	2012	41.69	417.36	375.67	0.26	-32.99	116.37
IMO	Control	China Allies	2012	36.78	109.99	73.21	0.00	32.38	41.19
IMO	Control	Non-China-Allies	2012	-25.26	448.31	473.57	0.00	-42.62	-7.90
IMO	Control	China Allies	2016	37.59	150.26	112.67	0.00	30.90	44.28
IMO	Control	Non-China-Allies	2016	6.53	382.92	376.39	0.15	-2.42	15.48
IFAD	Control	China Allies	2017	58.96	196.00	137.04	0.00	54.05	63.88
IFAD	Control	Non-China-Allies	2017	-172.77	499.00	671.77	0.00	-181.23	-164.30

Notes: Comparison years in control conditions are selected when other states were elected as executive head (FAO 2012: Brazil; IAEA 2019: Argentina; IMO 2012: Japan; IMO 2016; Korea; UNESCO 2018: France; IFAD 2017: Togo). Insufficient data available to analyze elections in IAEA, WHO, and UNWTO. T-test results compare the number of projects allocated in the 3 years before and 3 years after elections.

underscored their perception of the influence of the Secretary General of the ITU noting, "a leader puts their DNA stamp on an organization."[12] The Bahamas saw the nature of the ITU as changing during the tenure of Secretary Zhao and China having a large impact, which was also an opinion that was shared by a United Kingdom official. More broadly, when the Caribbean ITU ambassadors and ministers were asked to speculate on China's influence through the Secretary-General position, many expressed surprise at our question as "of course leaders have influence."[13] Many Western PP-22 delegates referenced opportunities for China to influence the ITU through the linkage between the ITU and the Belt and Road Initiative.[14] Executive influence was not limited to the case of China: during the campaign of an American candidate, many from the Caribbean

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[12] Author's interview with Bahamas official, ITU PP-22.

[13] Author's attendance at ITU PP-22 Caribbean Telecommunications Union meeting.

[14] Author's interview with UK, Netherlands, France, and US officials, ITU PP-22.

speculated that if the United States takes the reigns of the ITU, programs dedicated to the Caribbean and Latin America will increase.

Ethnographic observations at PP-22 reinforce the widely perceived importance of the role of the executive among delegates. At the elections, each country campaigned for a seat and the opportunity to wield influence. This includes doling out gifts and boxes filled with souvenirs to delegates to encourage them to vote for their country. We also observed coffee breaks, luncheons, and dinners where national officials delivered speeches encouraging votes for their candidate and invested considerable resources in painting a favorable image of the nation and its candidate. In fact, before the second week of passing resolutions, the entire first week of the ITU PP-22 is dedicated to campaigns and elections, representing the significance of elections to the organization and its member states. Other signs and symbols of the importance of the election were evident in the high level of mainstream media coverage afforded to the results of the elections of an esoteric technical organization. *Wired* described the race for the Secretary General of the ITU between the United States and Russia as a vote that could "change the course of the internet's history," if a Russian official wins the election to take the helm of the ITU.[15]

Despite these initial indications of the important influence of the executive, deeper analysis reveals several of the means by which executive heads may be blocked from exerting influence. First, through our interviews with staff of the ITU, we learned there are institutional constraints to the Secretary General's ability to influence the distribution of funds. The ITU's institutional design contains a degree of checks and balances. The organization contains three different pillars: ITU-R, for radio communications, ITU-D, for development, and ITU-T, for technical standards. Each of these pillars is governed by a Director General that has great agency and independence. For instance, if an American heads the ITU-D but a Chinese leader is the Secretary-General, as was the case during Zhao's term, this creates institutional checks and balances. American Doreen Bogden Martin controlled the power of the purse and the distribution of benefits through the ITU's development arm and implemented her own "Partner to Connect" initiative. Staff

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[15] Ling, Wired, ITU Vote.

members speculate that Zhao's influence is constrained by the design of the organization.

Other mechanisms that constrain the impulse to use international organizations for geopolitical purposes include China itself. China gains from the legitimacy and reputational benefits of its national leading the ITU, which would be undercut if it appeared that the ITU was no longer an independent organization. Under Zhao's leadership, China partnered with the ITU on many projects to strengthen ties with the organization. One of the most important ties under Zhao's leadership was the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the ITU and China's Belt and Road Initiative.[16] Zhao also attends several global conferences hosted by China. For instance, he has attended and given speeches at China's World Internet Conference (WIC).[17] Perhaps most notably, the ITU has consistently partnered with the WIC as a co-organizer.

Finally, we find evidence suggestive of socialization effects, which compel the executive to embody a neutral agent. In the interview with Secretary General Zhao, he hoped he would be remembered for pushing the ITU to gain a reputation as an "agency of development" whereas previously the ITU was mainly seen solely as a standardization body. This point is remarkable when placed into context of the previous section: the countries that benefit most from Zhao's development push are those that are not ideologically aligned with China. In addition, Zhao bristled at suggestions that China gained any benefits from his involvement or he had used the organization to fulfill China's geopolitical interests—an argument he acknowledged is consistently levied at him by the international press. During the interview, Zhao spent time directing attention to his longstanding involvement with the organization and how he rose up through the ranks. The anger and palpable frustration at the consistent barrage of criticism is itself evidence that Zhao views his identity as an international civil servant.

This case study in the ITU illustrates in detail the ways in which the influence of an executive head can be constrained by the institutional design of the organization and

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[16] Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.

[17] Author's collection of WIC speeches.

specific needs within China to gain legitimacy from the organization. In the perceptions of member states, the executive head of the ITU clearly has influence, but the case of Secretary General Zhao illustrates how this influence is constrained by the factors of institutional design and China's own aims to use leadership for legitimacy rather than distributing gains.

Experimental Analysis

In our analysis of the IO project observational data, we observe non-China allies benefiting at higher rates. This might suggest that the staff of international organizations react in ways opposite to the traditional expectations of pleasing the principal and may decide to deviate from his or her mandate and undercut the principal when China is in office. However, any insights drawn from the observational data analysis are limited by potential concerns about alternative explanations and confounding variables. To assuage these concerns, we employ a multi-method approach, triangulating additional data from an experimental context in which we can control for such factors. More detail on the experimental design as well as the survey text can be found in the Appendix.[18]

We test the impact of the IO head on decision-making through a conjoint study with an elite sample of IO staff from the UN specialized agencies. If we observe null effects of executive influence in such a test, we can have greater confidence in our null findings, or in other words, that the executive operates according to the constrained 'Secretary' model. However, we may also find the reverse of the General model, finding that staff members are more likely to mobilize to protect the status quo when China holds office. In the sections below, we describe how the survey experiment tests our hypotheses with an experimental design that combines a between-subjects vignette, a within-subjects vignette, and a conjoint design.[19] This experimental design allows us to directly compare the effects of executive influence against object project-level features—

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[18]The survey experiment is currently in progress. Because the data collection is ongoing, we present our experimental design, but not results.

[19]To our knowledge, this is the first study to combine conjoint with between and within-subjects treatments.

including region, recipient regime type, priority, issue area, and collaborators—in the decision-making processes of IO staff.

Pleasing the Principal Treatment

We first test the 'pleasing the principal' mechanism. We consider principal-agent dynamics where the staff anticipate the preferences of the principal through the cues associated with a leader's nationality. One way this could occur is via the executive's nationality and the inferences that come from the foreign policy preferences of the Secretary General's home country. This mechanism operates indirectly without the direction of the executive head. Instead, the existing staff of the institution may shift their activities in response to the nationality of the executive head without any direct application of executive power. Existing employees of the organization interested in promotion and self-advancement could prioritize projects in accordance with the interest of the agency head (Clark and Dolan 2021). The employees of any organization may consider the interests of their superiors and seek to prioritize these preferences out of concern for career advancement. As staff members react to "please the principal" employees that execute programs could respond to satisfy the needs of the Secretary General. To test the pleasing the principal mechanism, we implement a between-subjects vignette treatment, informing respondents of the nationality of the executive head (American, Chinese, or Swiss). We include Swiss as our control condition. To increase the strength of the treatment, we ask respondents a comprehension check question about nationality and remind respondents of the nationality of the executive head in between rounds of conjoint tasks.

Agenda-Setting Treatment

We then test the mechanism of agenda setting. Executive heads attempt to convey impartiality as neutral civil servants. However, they can communicate their vision for the organization through speeches, statements, and even visits from officials made during tenure. We hone in on one mechanism of influence, which is signing memorandums of understanding. An emerging body of literature focuses on the connections and relationships between international organizations (e.g., Clark 2021). Staff are mindful of geopolitical

signals. For instance, collaborating with the World Bank—an American-led and Western-oriented organization—conveys different information about priorities than collaborating with the AIIB—a bank created by China.[20] To test the agenda-setting mechanism, we implement a within-subjects vignette treatment, randomizing the order of treatments across subjects to mitigate any potential order effects. The levels of the agenda-setting mechanism are cooperation with the AIIB or the World Bank, where the World Bank represents the control level. To increase the salience of both vignette treatments, the relevant information is highlighted in color, bold, underlined, and italicized.

Conjoint

After being presented with the vignette treatments, respondents are presented with a series of 5 paired technical cooperation projects, each on a new screen, and containing various levels of the attributes shown in Table 2. After each pair of profiles, respondents are asked to rate and choose between the projects. Respondents are then asked to select the attribute that was most important in making their decisions, as well as an open-end question in which they are asked to explain how they made their decision.

Conclusion

Leaders have long been thought to command an important role in all but international politics. In international organizations, IR scholarship has tended to discount the role of executive heads as mere figure heads[21], yet Western leaders have increasingly expressed concern about the potential influence that China's executive leadership may be having on the nature of global governance. Even in the perceptions of ITU diplomats themselves, we observed expressions that the executive heads wield a great deal of influence over institutions' agendas and activities through their messaging and relationship-building.

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[20]Although these organizations may not be familiar to the general public, we argue our elites will recognize these organizations.

[21]This relates to the first image of international relations that Waltz discounts, see Waltz (1954)

Table 2: Conjoint Design Specification

Attribute	Levels
Region	*Asia*
	Latin America
	Africa
Measure of Political Freedom	*Not free*
	Partly free
	Free
Project Priority	*Low priority*
	Medium priority
	Highest priority
Project Collaborator	*None*
	World Bank
	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
Project Focus	*Economic development*
	Climate change
	Women's empowerment

Notes: Levels used as baselines are italicized.

However, we show that such concerns appear to be overstated: while China is taking a larger leadership role in IOs, we do not observe systematic effects of this leadership on the activities of these organizations. Chinese leadership of IOs does not significantly shift the allocation of IO projects towards China's allies, and in fact, in many cases, we observe that China's allies do better when nationals from *other states* are elected, yet do worse when Chinese nationals are elected. Beyond the benefit to China's reputation as an engaged member and leader in the international community, then, we do not observe systematic changes in IO ideology or objectives. Our survey experiment will further probe these dynamics insofar as they relate to how executive leadership shapes IO staff decision-making over new projects.

While we have shown that China's executive leadership has little effect on the allocation of IO projects, other benefits of executive leadership remain unanswered questions. An emerging body of work is probing the domestic motivations—i.e., reputational enhancement—that China may have in assuming an outsized role on the world stage

to accrue. By achieving leadership of UN agencies, China symbolically leads the entire membership of 194 states. Rather than continuing China's 'century of humiliation', China fulfills a grand strategy of rejuvenation that places it at the top of the hierarchy of organizations. Future work should probe the effects of executive leadership on public and elite perceptions of China's standing and its role in the international community.

Our findings in support of the Secretary model also do not preclude that China may be using organizations for geopolitical purposes in ways that differ from the United States and the dominant scholarly findings that great powers can use institutions to reward allies. This calls for more research to understand why China makes such great investments in leading the United Nations rather than focusing on its own battery of institutions outside the UN. In addition to gaining reputational benefits at home from a domestic audience observing the fulfillment of Xi's "China Dream" (*zhongguo meng*), the United Nations offers legitimacy to many of China's emerging institutions through partnerships and endorsements. When the ITU partners with China's World Internet Conference, it adds credibility to China's vision of internet governance. Secretary-General Zhao is often in attendance and gives speeches at the event. By pursuing partnerships with United Nations agencies, China's Belt and Road gains greater status than if China pursued these partnerships alone. As China continually faces campaigns from the West designed to paint a "China threat", the United Nations could be a shield from the backlash by linking with an organization that enjoys global legitimacy.

We suggest that our findings bode well for the continued legitimacy of the United Nations.[22] Legitimacy is a necessary characteristic of IOs in order for them to hold authority in international politics. Yet if executive heads are able to hold disproportionate influence and contravene the general preferences of the membership, or violate the implicit principles of executive neutrality, this could result in the erosion of institutional legitimacy (Lenz and Viola 2017; Tallberg and Zürn 2019). By illustrating that the influence of the executive to change institutional priorities is limited, we illustrate that the

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[22]Legitimacy can be defined as "the normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed," (Hurd 2008, 34).

constraining nature of IO design is functioning reasonably well, and that member states can continue to have faith in the neutrality of their agents. As IOs confront increasing backlash, retrenchment, and member state withdrawal, (Walter 2021; Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019), such evidence is particularly important.

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Appendix

Experimental Design

Survey Flow

1. Survey Introduction

2. Pleasing the principal vignette (randomly assigned to one of three nationality conditions)

3. Agenda-setting vignette (randomly assign the order of one of two conditions)

4. Introduction to conjoint task

5. Conjoint round 1 (5 tasks)

6. Reminder of pleasing the principal condition

7. Agenda-setting vignette (randomly assigned to the other condition)

8. Conjoint round 2 (5 tasks)

9. Demographic questionnaire

Assignment to Treatment

Respondents are randomly assigned to receive one of the three treatment conditions in the pleasing the principal treatment and to one of two conditions in the agenda-setting treatment. Respondents receive 5 pairs of technical cooperation projects with attributes on all projects randomly assigned as is standard in conjoint experiments. Attributes are sampled according to a uniform distribution, and there are no restrictions imposed on the combination of attribute levels that may appear. The order of attributes is randomized across respondents, but is constant within respondents (i.e. across profiles).

Sample

We follow the methodology of Clark (2021) to recruit an international population of interest through the latest targeting innovations in digital advertising. In this study, the population of interest is international bureaucrats who have worked at international organizations. We field the experiment by advertising through LinkedIn. Specifically, we use LinkedIn's message advertising which allows us to send personalized messages to individuals working for the United Nations agencies in our dataset. Each employee is invited to participate in our brief survey. Our message reiterates that the survey is anonymous, non-identifiable, and privately administered through Qualtrics. There are roughly 40,000 employees working for United Nations agencies that use LinkedIn. Through our power analysis, we estimate that we need to recruit 377 employees. Because elites are generally found to be high-attention survey takers, we do not include any additional screener questions. We also are not concerned about bots taking the survey becasue of our targeted LinkedIn recruitment strategy. We will validate the robustness of the results by clustering by IO.

Questionnaire

Introduction

Thank you for participating in our short questionnaire! This questionnaire is part of a research study being conducted by the University of Pennsylvania. There are no political objectives of this study, and there are no anticipated risks resulting from your participation. This questionnaire is for academic research purposes only. Your responses are completely anonymous, and will not be identified with you in any way. We appreciate your time and participation!

Screeners

1. Do you currently work or have you recently worked for a multilateral organization?

   (a) Yes

   (b) No *(Screen out)*

Pleasing the Principal Treatment

"Imagine that a new executive head has just taken office in your organization. The new executive head is a national of [*China / Switzerland / the United States of America*]."

Comprehension check: What is the nationality of the new executive head of your organization?

Agenda-Setting Treatment

"Imagine that the new executive head of your organization has just signed a cooperation agreement with [*the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) / the World Bank (WB)*]." The executive head noted, "It is a great opportunity for our organization to work with our partners to promote development in the world."

Comprehension check: With what organization did the executive head sign a cooperation agreement?

Conjoint Task Instructions

"You are about to view a series of technical cooperation project proposals. Specifically, we will show you five pairs of projects proposed and vetted by experts. Next, we'll show you a sequence of such proposals and ask for your opinion about them in your capacity as a staff member of your organization.

Each proposal will contain several attributes, some of which may be important to you, while others may not (see below). Please carefully consider the characteristics listed in each table before responding to the subsequent questions as you might when working for your organization.

There are no right or wrong answers."

Attributes
Region: In what region of the world will the project take place?
Measure of Political Freedom: This is an impartial measure of access to political rights and civil liberties
Project Priority: How important is this project in accomplishing the organization's goals?
Project Collaborator: What organization will be the collaborator on the project?
Project Focus: What substantive topic area will be the focus of the project?

Outcome Measures

1. Do you support or oppose your organization providing funding for Proposal A? *(Asked after each of the five conjoint tasks)*

    (a) Strongly support

    (b) Somewhat support

    (c) Neither support nor oppose

    (d) Somewhat oppose

    (e) Strongly oppose

2. Do you support or oppose your organization providing funding for Proposal B? *(Asked after each of the five conjoint tasks)*

    (a) Strongly support

    (b) Somewhat support

    (c) Neither support nor oppose

    (d) Somewhat oppose

    (e) Strongly oppose

3. If you had to choose, which of these projects would you prefer your organization provide funding for?

    (a) Project A

    (b) Project B

4. Which attribute was the most important in making your choice of projects?

    (a) Region

    (b) Measure of Political Freedom

    (c) Project Priority

    (d) Project Collaborator

    (e) Project Focus

5. In just a few words, please explain your response to the previous question (Which attribute was the most important in making your choice of projects?) *(Asked after each of the five conjoint tasks)*

Between conjoint rounds, respondents are provided with a reminder of the pleasing the principal treatment, and the other level of the agenda-setting treatment.

Demographics (Post-Test)

1. For which organization do you or have you recently worked? Select from dropdown list of organizations

   (a) UNIDO

   (b) UNESCO

   (c) ITU

   (d) FAO

   (e) ICAO

   (f) IFAD

   (g) UNWTO

   (h) WHO

   (i) IMO

   (j) IAEA

   (k) UNDP

   (l) Other, please specify

2. For how many years have you worked or did you work for the aforementioned organization?

3. What is your gender?

4. What is your age?

5. What is your job title?

6. Which country are you from (your nationality)?

7. What country is the current organizational head from? (their nationality)?

8. Thank you very much for your time. Would you be willing to help University of Pennsylvania researchers learn more about your work in international organizations through a conversation about these topics? If so, please leave your email address below.