

Executive summary: an analysis of China's influence over the UN human rights treaty body system

A new briefing paper highlights the powerful role of China over the UN human rights treaty bodies (UNTBs), identifying the ways in which China deploys influence, from an official discourse that consistently focuses on restricting their scope of work to direct threats to independent NGOs who wish to engage with the UN experts. Through three examples, the paper exposes the impact of Chinese government efforts on the functioning of these bodies and their ability to receive and discuss independent information about the scale of human rights violations in China.

The [ten human rights treaty bodies](#) (UNTBs) are a fundamental component of the international human rights architecture. Their purpose is to monitor State compliance with the core international treaties. Their independence from undue influence is crucial to getting States to uphold basic international human rights norms, such as the prohibition of torture, or the right to freedom from discrimination, and to keeping them accountable if and when they fail to do so.

China has ratified or acceded to six of these core treaties and is thus entitled to having a national expert sitting in their respective compliance bodies¹. UNTBs are one of the few human rights mechanisms where Chinese laws, policies and practices are held up to scrutiny on a regular basis, and where direct engagement of Chinese activists remains possible. For precisely these reasons, the Chinese government has made a substantial effort to control and restrict the treaty bodies' functions.

This report identifies and analyses the ways in which China deploys its influence over the UNTBs, from an official discourse that consistently focuses on restricting their scope of work to direct threats to independent NGOs who wish to submit vital information about human rights violations in China. The paper also looks at Chinese government efforts to deter inputs from independent NGOs, while encouraging participation by government-aligned organisations (or GONGOs).

¹They are: the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Convention against Torture and Other Forms of Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment (CAT); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

UNTBs are meant to be composed by independent experts. While experts are nominated and elected by States that are parties to their corresponding treaties, they are expected to adhere to a set of [guidelines](#) to ensure impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest. This paper provides an overview of Chinese members of UNTBs over the past ten years and shows that all of them have formal, deep, and long-standing affiliations with the Chinese government or the Chinese Communist Party. This is not only a clear risk to their impartiality, but in some cases has given rise to concerns about the role these experts and others play in constraining progressive or assertive actions by the UNTBs to better fulfil their mandates.

Chinese official statements and positions at the UN in Geneva and New York reveal a concerted effort to limit the powers of the treaty bodies, to exercise strict control over their members' activities and those of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which plays the role of Secretariat. This includes attempts to enhance the weight of State parties' statements in UNTB processes, to reduce the scope of members' actions by formulating strict codes of conduct, and to discard information submitted by independent activists as 'unverified material' from 'unconfirmed sources'.

This paper also looks at efforts by Chinese representatives to restrict, control and censor independent civil society engagement with the UNTBs. This includes attempts to deter the publication of independent NGO reports on OHCHR website, and documented acts of reprisals, intimidation and harassment against individuals or groups that have engaged with the UNTBs or who have sought to do so in relation to China.

Simultaneously, Chinese authorities have discreetly but robustly supported the participation of GONGOs. These groups actively promote China's supposed human rights achievements and work hand-in-glove with official Chinese discourse. Their participation undermines the credibility of UNTB review processes, reduces the time and space available for independent groups, and creates a chilling effect that deters independent NGOs and activists from directly engaging.

The paper also explores three specific incidents that illustrate Chinese efforts to twist the treaty bodies' arms. It concludes with recommendations to strengthen the UNTBs and mitigate efforts by China and other States to instrumentalise them. These include actions by States to ensure transparent elections for the Treaty body and thus more qualified candidates; by treaty body members to 'self-regulate', based on their strong founding principles of independence; and by OHCHR to strengthen its efforts to resist undue State pressure over the expert mechanisms it hosts.

This is ISHR's third briefing note on the Chinese government's influence over UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, following the 2021 briefing paper mapping [Chinese presence in the United Nations' Economic and Social Council \(ECOSOC\)](#) and its subsidiary bodies and agencies and the 2020 paper 'Feeling for stones: how China found its footing at the UN's Human Rights Council', available in the Amnesty International compilation '[Shifting Power and Human Rights Diplomacy: China](#)'.