

5 Sweden's antithesis: China in United Nations development work

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This chapter examines China's engagement with the United Nations (UN) development work through a comparison with Sweden. Both countries are UN member states, but differ on most indicators, including development experiences and trajectories as development cooperation providers. The chapter provides an overview of China's and Sweden's general profiles and compares funding practices, strategic priorities and approaches to multilateral cooperation.

From a Swedish perspective, the features of China's approach relative to Sweden's engagement point to areas of concern, particularly regarding China's challenge to the relative autonomy of UN bureaucracies and the human rights agenda. At the same time, there might be potential opportunities for closer coordination – notably with regard to the two countries' complementary funding practices – in a moment of extraordinary upheaval at the UN.

Introduction

China's expanding engagement with the United Nations (UN) system – including its development pillar – has attracted considerable attention (Fung and Lam, 2022; Haug et al., 2024). This chapter discusses China's engagement with UN development work through a comparison with Sweden in order to highlight commonalities and/or differences and support Swedish stakeholders with evidence-based decision-making.

China and Sweden have both endorsed the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for multilateral development cooperation, as two of the UN's 193 member states. They are both members and stakeholders of the various entities that belong to the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG). At the same time, China and Sweden differ on a vast number of indicators – from the size of their respective population and economy to their geographic location and regime type – that provide the backdrop for and condition their engagement patterns with UN development work.

This chapter first provides an overview of China's and Sweden's general profiles in the UN development pillar (section 1) and then zooms in on their financial contributions to the UN system (section 2), their strategic priorities (section 3), and their respective approaches to multilateral cooperation (section 4). It ends by identifying areas of concern, as well as opportunities for closer coordination, and discusses potential ways forward in a context where an at least partial retreat of the United States challenges the financial and political foundations of the UN system (section 5).

General profiles

Nordic donor (Sweden) vs. developing country superpower (China)

Sweden has long been a champion of multilateralism. Analyses past and present, as well as representatives of Sweden and its partners, highlight the country's "long-standing commitment to the United Nations" (Ruth, 1984, p. 67). As a member of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and a relatively small European country (about 10 million inhabitants in 2024), Sweden has long punched above its economic and political weight at the UN. In 2023, it was the 10th largest member state contributor to the UN system (see section 2). Relative to its size, Sweden has also been well represented among UN staff. In 2024, 0.4 percent of the main UN workforce were Swedish nationals. Compared to Sweden's share of the world's population (0.1 percent) – which is an imperfect but informative reference – Sweden has indeed been overrepresented.

Still, the current Swedish government has explicitly emphasized the need to "ensure that more Swedes serve in strategic positions in the UN, including through strategic secondments" (MFA, 2023, p. 36). Together with Denmark, Finland, and Norway, Sweden often presents itself and – among member states and UN staff – is generally perceived as a "Nordic donor", i.e., a liberal democracy and generous supporter of UN development entities that follows a strong and explicit normative agenda committed to universal values.

In many ways, Sweden epitomizes the stereotypical good international citizen, with some even attesting it a "moral superpower" (Emmerson et al., 2024, p. 778) that has been able to frame itself as a constructive and progressive force when it comes to promoting human rights and good governance, including at the UN. In UN negotiations, Sweden usually coordinates closely with other Nordics and its fellow European Union (EU) member states that, together,

are by far the most important providers of UN funding and have long had a decisive influence on how UN entities operate, and what their work focuses on (Baumann and Haug, 2024).

The People’s Republic of China, in turn, has experienced an exceptional economic transformation with important political consequences since taking over the Chinese UN seat in 1971. Then a relatively poor country, China is now a singular heavyweight among UN member states with a unique dual position as “developing country superpower” (Baumann et al., 2024, p. 59). As the world’s second largest economy (after the United States, with a GDP of roughly 1.4 billion USD in 2024), second most populous country (after India, with 1.4 billion inhabitants in 2024) and one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, China is also a member of the Group of 77 (G77) – the UN’s developing country grouping – and a UN programme country.

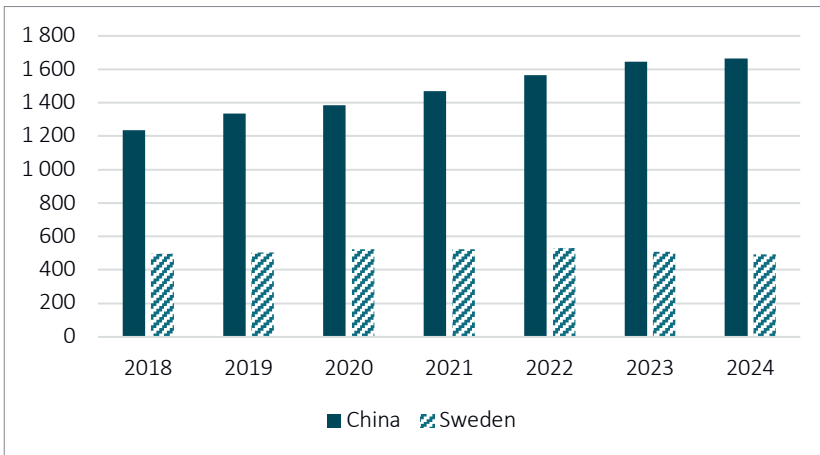
The latter status means that, from the late 1970s, a considerable number of UN development entities have had country offices in Beijing and still accompany the Chinese government with domestic development-related concerns today. In addition, this UN support has also come to include backing for Chinese development-focused collaboration with partners across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Its successful domestic poverty reduction measures, in particular, have bolstered China’s legitimacy as a global development actor. As the world’s most prominent – and for some most notorious¹– provider of South-South cooperation (Huang et al., 2019), China has joined hands with a number of UN development entities to expand its development-related engagement across the so-called developing world. Policy transfer partnerships, for instance – where China partners with a UN body to share Chinese development experiences with third countries – have become an increasingly prominent feature in China’s cooperation with the UN development system (Haug and Waisbich, 2024). A number of China-sponsored trust funds have

¹ For an early contribution that referred to Chinese assistance as “rogue aid”, see Naim (2009).

been the Chinese government's mechanism of choice for the targeted provision of what have so far – compared to major Western donors – remained limited levels of voluntary funding for UN development work.

With regard to its representation among UN staff, China has increased its presence steadily over recent years in absolute terms. From 2018 to 2024 alone, the number rose by more than 400 (i.e., about 35 percent) from 1,235 to 1,664 (Figure 1). In particular, the increase of Chinese nationals in UN leadership positions has led to wide-ranging discussions about China's expanding footprint across the UN system (Lam and Fung, 2024). In relative terms, however, and contrary to Sweden, China remains underrepresented, both with regard to the UN Secretariat's representation key and when compared to China's share in the world's population (17.2 percent in 2024, according to World Bank figures). In 2024, Chinese nationals made up 1.3 percent of the main UN workforce, a figure thwarted by the representation levels of not only the United States (4.2 percent) but also a number of smaller member states, such as Kenya (3.4 percent) or Ethiopia (2.7 percent).

Figure 1. Chinese and Swedish staff in the UN system, absolute numbers, 2018-2024



Source: Author; based on UNSCEB (2025a).

Overall, staff figures are part of a larger picture where China's engagement with the UN system has expanded considerably over the last two decades. While the nature of that expansion has been uneven, recent research shows that China's bid for multilateral leadership is markedly more pronounced today than it was 10 years ago, with Beijing effectively – if unevenly – influencing UN fora and processes in direct and indirect ways (Haug et al., 2024; see Baumann et al., 2024; Foot, 2024).

Table 1. China and Sweden compared

	China	Sweden
Population (2025)*	1.4 billion	10.6 million
Population-based ranking among UN member states (2025)**	2 nd	89 th
GDP (current USD)* in 2000	1.22 trillion USD	263 billion USD
GDP (current USD)* in 2024	18.74 trillion USD	610 billion USD
GDP/capita (current USD)* in 2000	969 USD	29,633 USD
GDP/capita (current USD)* in 2024	13,300 USD	57,723 USD
Political regime type (2025)***	Closed autocracy	Liberal democracy
UN regional group**	Asia-Pacific States	Western Europe and other States

Source: Author; based on * World Bank 2025, ** Zhu 2025, *** V-Dem 2025, and **** UN 2025.

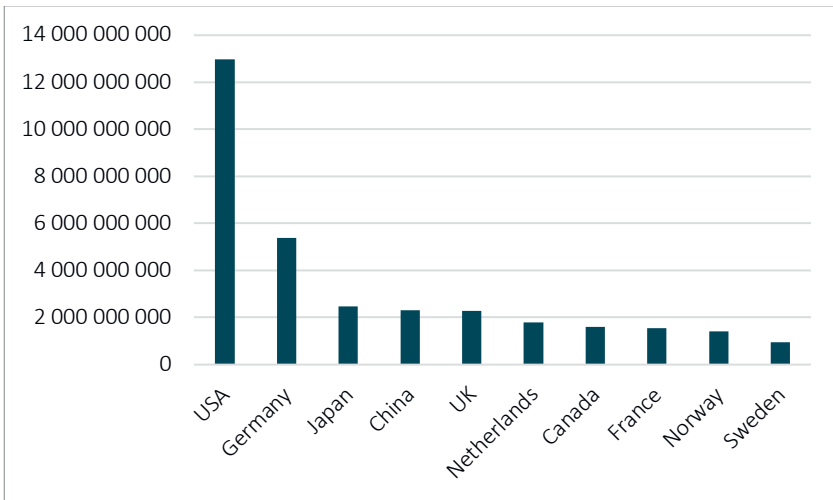
China and Sweden, then, differ significantly with regard to their engagement patterns and on most indicators used to distinguish between UN member states. While both see the UN as a central pillar of the multilateral system, Dragon and Moose, so to say, seem to have had two rather distinct general UN profiles (Table 1). The following sections probe and compare their positions and engagement patterns in more detail and depth with regard to funding flows, thematic priorities, and the two countries' approaches to and understandings of multilateral cooperation.

Funding practices

Voluntary contributions champion (Sweden) vs. assessed contributions champion (China)

Funding flows provide a key window into gauging member states’ engagement patterns with the UN. A comparison of China’s and Sweden’s financial contributions to the UN system – covering a focus on both system-wide flows and contributions to individual UN development entities – points to at least three key insights.

Figure 2. The 10 largest government donors to the UN system 2023, in USD in 2023



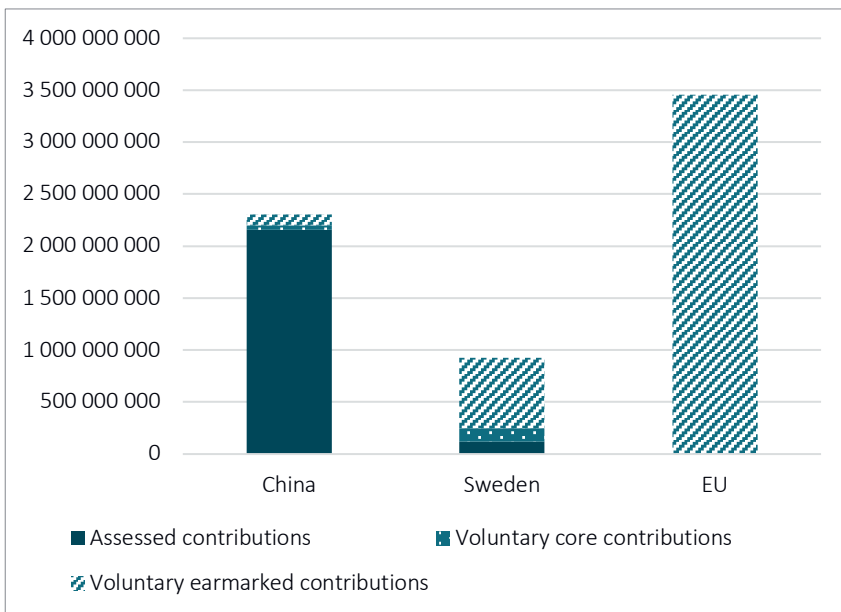
Source: Author; based on UNSCEB (2025b).

First, China and Sweden are among the top UN member state contributors (Figure 2). In fact, both have been among the top-ten donors since 2015.² Despite significant differences in size and outlook, China and Sweden thus belong to a relatively small group of member states that cover the bulk of the UN system’s finances

² Latest numbers suggest that as of 2024, Sweden is no longer among the top ten.

(Baumann and Haug, 2024).³ In 2023, the top-ten contributors together provided more than 70 percent of all government contributions received by the UN that year (i.e., more than twice as much as contributions by all other 183 member states combined), with China being the only non-DAC country in that list. In light of the absolute size of its population and economy, Sweden is thus clearly punching above its weight in the UN funding context.

Figure 3. China, Sweden and the EU: composition of financial contributions to the UN system 2023, by funding modality, in USD



Source: Author; based on UNSCEB (2025b).

While the bulk of China's funding mix (more than 90 percent in 2023) consists of assessed contributions – i.e., fees UN member states have to pay qua their membership in line with a formula based on a country's economic weight (Haug et al., 2022) – most of Swe-

³ At the same time, China is a UN programme country and therefore still a recipient of UN development funds. In 2020, UN development entities collectively spent 144.9 million US dollars in China (Baumann et al., 2022, p. 11).

den's funding to the UN system (more than 85 percent in 2023) consists of contributions provided voluntarily. Although the majority of Sweden's voluntary contributions are earmarked, meaning that funds are attached to pre-specified purposes (thematically and/or geographically), a considerable share is also provided as voluntary core contributions, i.e., without strings attached: UN entities can use core funds as they wish in line with their mandates. What is more, if funders beyond UN member states are taken into account, the EU Commission – partially funded by Sweden as EU member state – was the overall third largest contributor to the UN system in 2023, providing exclusively voluntary earmarked funding and thwarting China's overall contributions by more than 1 billion USD (Figure 3).

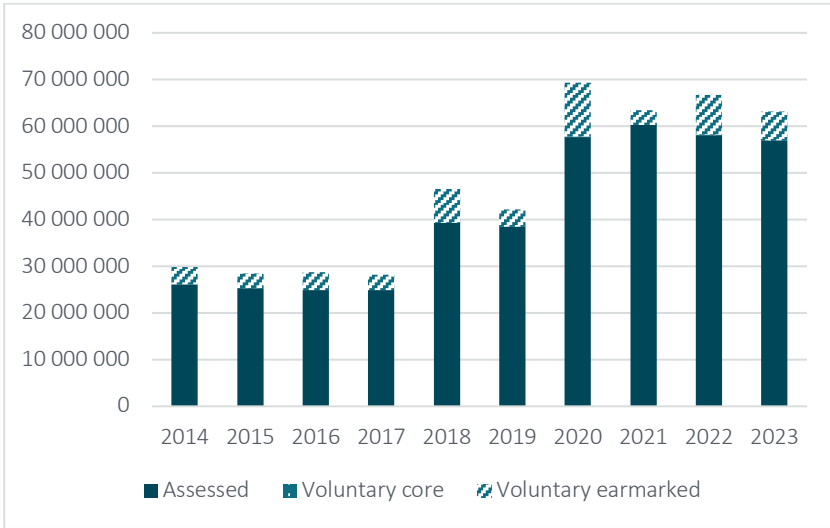
Second, China's and Sweden's primary funding modalities differ. While there is a certain overlap with regard to the main destinations of Chinese and Swedish funding in the UN system, the nature and logic behind their flows vary. There are two UN development entities – i.e., members of the UN Sustainable Development Group⁴ – that were among the top-ten recipients of both countries in 2023: the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) – currently headed by a Chinese national – and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Both FAO and UNESCO are UN specialized agencies with normative and operational mandates, where states pay membership fees (i.e., assessed contributions) and provide voluntary resources at their discretion.

In 2023, FAO was not only among the top-ten UN entity recipients of both Chinese and Swedish contributions but China (6th) and Sweden (10th) were also both among the top-ten government donors to FAO. The substantial relative growth of the Chinese economy over the last decades has meant that China's share of assessed contributions has increased significantly, while its voluntary funding levels have remained modest (Figure 4). Sweden, by contrast, has had

⁴ The UN Sustainable Development Group is currently comprised of 38 member entities, including the UN Development Programme, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Health Organisation (see UNSDG, n.d.).

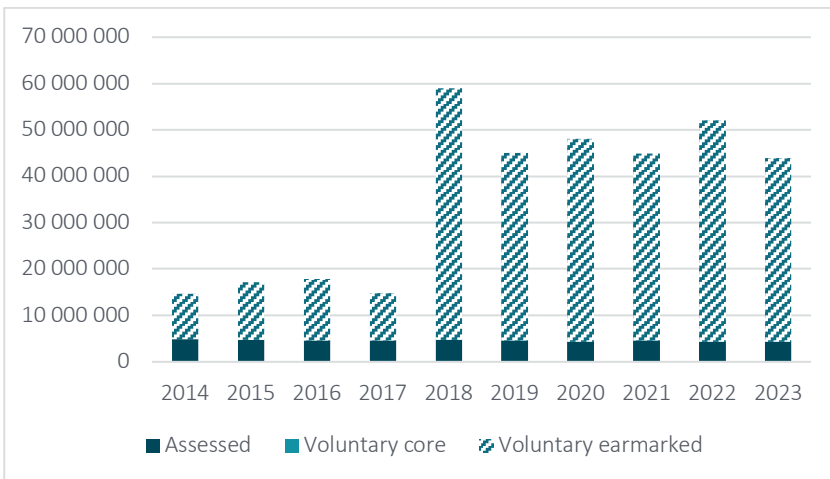
a relatively stable level of assessed contributions, while the bulk of its contributions to FAO – at least 90 percent annually since 2018 – has come as voluntary resources.

Figure 4. China’s contributions to FAO in USD 2014-2023



Source: Author, based on UNSCEB (2025b).

Figure 5. Sweden’s contributions to FAO in USD in 2014-2023



Source: Author, based on UNSCEB (2025b).

China's and Sweden's support for UNESCO has followed similar logics (Figure 5) – with China's emphasis on assessed and Sweden's focus on voluntary contributions – but has been even more pronounced in relative terms: in 2023, both countries were among the top-five government donors (China 1st and Sweden 4th). Funding patterns over time for FAO and UNESCO thus illustrate a more general pattern where China's share is dominated by assessed contributions – in line with its weight in the world economy – and a general restraint to provide voluntary funding, while large parts of Sweden's share stem from voluntary contributions.

Third, China's and Sweden's differing approaches to voluntary core funding – i.e., discretionary funding that comes with no strings attached (see above) – offer another important insight into the nature of the two countries' engagement with the UN system. Among UN member states, Sweden is part of a group of DAC members that have championed core contributions as a modality of choice to support the core functions of UN entities and provide them with leeway to decide flexibly about the use of resources in line with their mandates. Sweden has long been among the top-ten providers of voluntary core contributions to the UN system and ranked first or second on that list from 2014 to 2021 (Table 2).⁵ Since 2022, Sweden has reduced its emphasis on core funding, resonating with the current Swedish government's explicit emphasis on combining core contributions “with softly earmarked support directed towards Swedish policy priorities and targeted project support where the UN has clear added value” (MFA, 2023, p. 35). While this arguably reflects a context where traditional donors – inspired by China and other Southern providers – have been moving closer to a more explicitly interest-focused logic of development cooperation (Mawdsley, 2018), so far Sweden has remained among the top-ten core contributors and in 2023 provided more than 13 percent of its total contributions to the UN system as core funding (UNSCEB, 2025b). What is more, most

⁵ In absolute terms, Sweden's voluntary core contributions since 2018 have ranged between USD 126 million in 2023 (the lowest amount) to USD 1.2 billion in 2021 (the highest amount).

of Sweden’s earmarked funding is “softly” earmarked: instead of tightly controlling how funds are spent, Sweden tends to earmark in broad terms, e.g., by contributing to multi-provider trust funds that have a general thematic focus but do not pre-specify the use of funds in more detailed ways.

Table 2. Top 20 providers of voluntary core contributions to the UN system (2014–2023)

	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
1	USA	Sweden	Sweden	Sweden	USA
2	Sweden	UK	Norway	USA	Netherlands
3	UK	USA	Netherlands	Germany	Germany
4	Norway	Norway	UK	UK	UK
5	Denmark	Switzerland	Germany	Norway	Norway
6	Switzerland	Netherlands	USA	Denmark	France
7	Japan	Japan	Japan	Switzerland	Japan
8	Netherlands	Germany	Denmark	Belgium	Canada
9	Canada	Australia	France	Japan	Sweden
10	Germany	Canada	Switzerland	Netherlands	Italy
11	Finland	Denmark	Canada	France	Denmark
12	Belgium	Belgium	Finland	Finland	Finland
13	Australia	Italy	Italy	Canada	Ireland
14	Saudi Arabia	Finland	Ireland	Italy	Switzerland
15	Italy	France	Australia	Australia	Rep Korea
16	France	China	UAE	Ireland	Australia
17	Ireland	Ireland	Belgium	Luxembourg	Belgium
18	Luxembourg	Luxembourg	N Zealand	Qatar	China
19	Rep Korea	Rep Korea	China	Kuwait	Spain
20	India	UAE	India	China	India

Source: Author, based on UNSCEB (2025b).

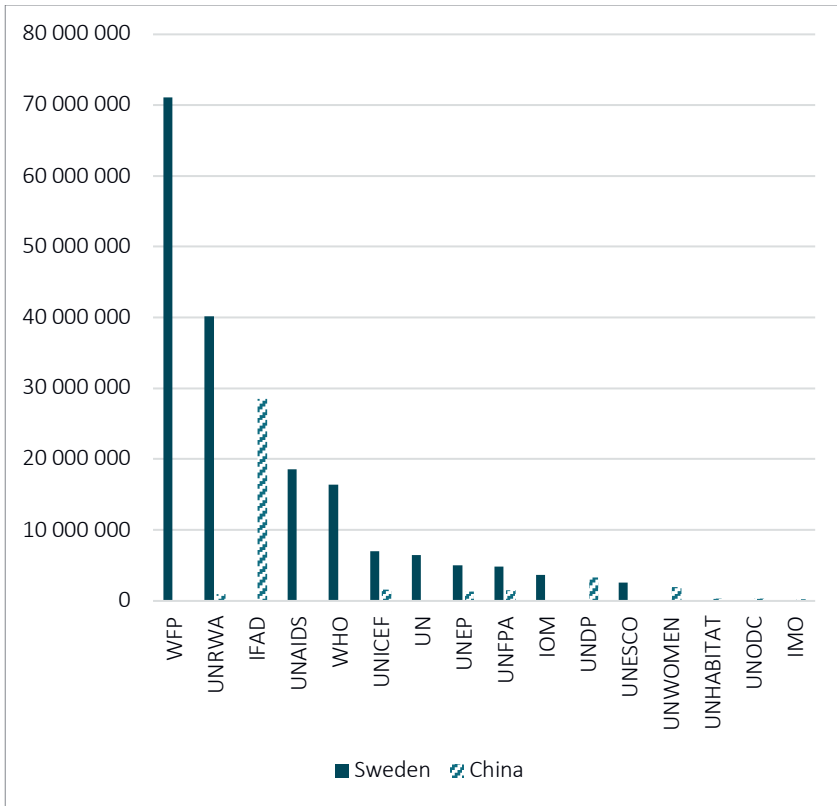
China, in turn, has been a significantly less prominent provider of core funding than Sweden – in both absolute and relative terms – but is one of the few non-DAC countries that has made it repeatedly

to the top-20 list of UN core contribution champions.⁶ The share of core contributions in China's funding portfolio has remained limited, amounting to less than two percent in 2023 (UNSCEB, 2025b).

What is more, the vast majority of China's funds marked as core by UN statistics over the last decade have gone to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a UN specialized agency that is also an international financial institution. IFAD is funded through replenishment cycles, with central UN statistics counting replenishments as core contributions. If China's contributions to IFAD are discounted, its core funding portfolio is reduced significantly and, for 2023, drops to 0.5 percent of its overall contributions. While IFAD has long – and by far – been China's primary recipient of core funding, Sweden's core contributions are usually spread somewhat more evenly across a larger number of UN entities. In 2023, the most important recipient of Sweden's core contributions was WFP. That year, there were four UN development entities that received core funding from both China and Sweden – the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) – although China's core contributions to these four entities were significantly more modest than Sweden's (Figure 6). Overall, then, Sweden's longstanding emphasis on voluntary (core) contributions contrasts with China's elevated levels of assessed contributions as well as Beijing's tendency to (tightly) earmark the – limited levels of – voluntary funding it provides to the UN system.

⁶ In addition to India, the only other G77 members on that list have been Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar; the Democratic People's Republic of Korea scored 16th in 2014 due to a contribution to UNICEF.

Figure 6. UN entities in receipt of Chinese and/or Swedish core contributions in USD in 2023 for both countries respectively



Source: Author, based on UNSCEB (2025b).

Strategic priorities

Good governance champion (Sweden) vs. economic development champion (China)

Beyond the analysis of funding flows, what matters most is arguably what that funding is used for. Sweden has a long list of priorities for its development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, reflecting the broad sustainable development approach championed by the SDGs. In addition to a focus on poverty reduction, education,

health, migration, and climate-related work, the Swedish government has emphasized its commitment to “promoting freedom and fighting oppression” (MFA, 2023, p. 15) as one of the defining features of its development-related engagement. In line with widely used classifications and its self-perception, Sweden is one of the world’s few truly liberal democracies (the Sweden-based V-Dem Project only found 21 strong liberal democracies in its 2024 mapping of 179 countries, see V-Dem 2025, 14). In many ways, Sweden’s emphasis on democracy and individual human rights thus resonates strongly not only with its vision of what a good society looks like but also with the general image of the good governance agenda traditionally promoted by a number of DAC – and particularly Nordic – donors. The following quote from the Swedish foreign ministry’s development cooperation strategy paper epitomizes that stance:

Respect for democracy and the rule of law is key to the enjoyment of human rights and freedoms. Democracy is crucial for freedom, peace and security, and to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Free elections are the foundation of democracy. Development cooperation plays an important role in efforts to counter the democratic backsliding in many parts of the world. Sweden will be a strong voice and actor for democracy, human rights, freedom and the rule of law, in order to increase people’s freedom and combat oppression. (MFA 2023, 17)

Relatedly, the emphasis on women’s empowerment and civil society support in partner countries complements the thematic focus on governance-related questions (MFA, 2023).

This emphasis in official rhetoric has also been reflected in Swedish funding figures. ODA data suggest that between 2014 and 2023, slightly more than 25 percent of Sweden’s earmarked contributions to the UN system each year were spent under the “government and civil society” category, which includes democracy, human rights and election support, among others. Embedded in the logic of the 2030

Agenda, Sweden has thus been a staunch supporter and champion of the focus on “peace, justice and strong institutions” under SDG 16.

China also holds that it contributes to the implementation of SDG 16, but follows a somewhat different interpretation of what that goal stands for. For Beijing, SDG 16 is mostly about strengthening institutional frameworks that ensure the implementation of other development goals (Taggart et al., forthcoming; see CIKD, 2024). Concerns with an autonomous civil society or individual human rights – elements that stand at the centre of Sweden’s engagement – do not figure on China’s development cooperation agenda, reflecting domestic configurations: in the V-Dem classification published by Sweden’s University of Gothenburg, China has long ranked in the lowest category of “closed autocracies” (V-Dem, 2025).

Instead, China’s engagement with UN development work has put a strong focus on core elements of the traditional development agenda – often reflecting the logic of the Millennium Development Goals rather than the more inclusive approach of the SDGs – with a focus on poverty reduction, the fight against hunger and, most importantly, economic development. This has been complemented by attempts to align UN work more closely with China’s infrastructure-focused Belt and Road Initiative (Haug, 2024). Throughout, China’s own (also recent) domestic development experiences have played a central role in Beijing’s engagement with UN entities. China has partnered with different UN development bodies – including FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP), and IFAD – to set up trust funds and other mechanisms that promote South-South exchanges and policy transfers. The latter often promote so-called Chinese “solutions,” i.e., Chinese experiences and technologies that are presented as having proven useful domestically, and support Southern member states through UN-sponsored activities (Haug and Waisbich, 2024). These “solutions” tend to center on improving economic productivity – rather than social inclusion, for instance (Waisbich and Haug, 2022) – and highlight China’s primary concern with economic development.

This emphasis is also reflected in China's normative stance on development-related matters. For Beijing, the right to development – established by the UN General Assembly through a resolution in 1986 – is presented as foundational (Oud, 2024). Social and particularly economic development, China's argument (and that of many other G77 members) goes, is the prerequisite for flourishing societies and should be of primary relevance – also and particularly vis-à-vis civil and political rights as well as the good governance agenda championed by Sweden and others – in how multilateral entities support their developing country membership. Where Sweden emphasizes the importance of individual human rights, China underlines the preeminence of collective rights with states – represented by their governments – as subjects. The emphasis on the collective nature of development efforts geared towards state stability – contrary to the rights-based approach to human development primarily concerned with individual wellbeing – is woven through China's engagement with UN development work. The cooperation frameworks set up between Beijing and UN entities operating in China domestically, for instance, do not mention individual human rights or the importance of supporting the autonomy of civil society organisations (Baumann et al., 2022). Instead, China tries to adapt established UN language to its own views and priorities. With regard to the established UN phrase of “leaving no one behind,” for instance, that expresses the international community's commitment to the needs of the poorest and weakest, China usually adds (or replaces it with) “leaving no country behind,” again highlighting Beijing's state-based understanding of international cooperation that can also be found across other UN pillars (see Foot, 2024).

China and Sweden, then, both operate under the 2030 Agenda as a joint umbrella for development-related efforts but have differing – and partly opposing – views on a number of key thematic elements of UN development work. Although both countries' rhetoric highlights concerns with economic development challenges and climate change, they have contrasting – and in many ways conflicting – views on the key subjects of development and development cooperation as well as the normative frameworks that should guide development efforts.

Approaches to multilateral cooperation

Multilateralist (Sweden) vs. inter-governmentalist (China)

The strategic differences discussed in the previous section resonate with China's and Sweden's diverging approaches to what multilateral cooperation for development is and how it should unfold. As mentioned above, Sweden presents itself and is widely perceived as a committed multilateralist: multilateral cooperation is assumed a good in and of itself, and multilateral bureaucracies should be endowed with the resources and political autonomy needed to implement their mandates. As a small country with an ambitious foreign policy agenda, Sweden has an interest in working with and through a strong UN system. During interviews, Swedish government officials repeatedly underlined that “we trust the UN” – to implement mandates, to act in line with donor preferences, or to do what is humanly possible when faced with unforeseen circumstances in day-to-day operations. Sweden's traditional championing of voluntary core contributions (see section 1) is a concrete expression of that belief in and commitment to the UN. While Sweden's assessed contributions – in line with the size of Sweden's economy – are limited, the generous provision of voluntary (core) funding enables the Swedish government to strengthen the leeway of UN development entities. The latter are often desperate for unearmarked funding they can use at their own discretion, e.g., when trying to strengthen their thematic profile or adapt to changing circumstances on the ground.

Sweden also promotes this “multilateralist” approach among other member states. At UNEP, for instance, it has been one of the champions of the organization's Voluntary Indicative Scale of Contributions that applies the formula used to determine member state contributions to the UN regular budget (i.e., a scale of assessments, see Haug et al., 2022) to UNEP's budget, trying to motivate states to provide more funding to an organization that almost entirely de-

depends on voluntary contributions (see UNEP, n.d.). Throughout Sweden's engagement with UN development work, this focus on a more reliable flow of voluntary resources is intended to strengthen UN bureaucracies that, in turn, are expected to function as a multi-lateral lever for Sweden's presence and influence. For Stockholm, there is a clear added value in being a strong supporter – financially and politically – of a strong and relatively autonomous UN system.

China, in turn, follows a different understanding of multilateral cooperation. Although Beijing regularly puts the UN front and centre in its vision of what the international order should look like, strategy documents and statements on China's global engagement mechanisms – such as the Global Development Initiative (Taggart et al., forthcoming) – suggest that a more autonomous UN bureaucracy is not part of its multilateral vision.⁷ To the contrary, the UN China has in mind is much more subservient to its member states. The “UN-centered world” (Xinhua, 2022, n.p.) that Chinese leaders regularly refer to is supposed to replace the “US-centred world” that has prevailed since the end of the Second World War through a “democratization of international relations” (Wang, 2025, n.p.). The latter refers to a process where the developing country majority among UN member states – and China as its *de facto* leader – take over a substantive part of decision-making power that has traditionally been in the hands of the United States and its allies. In all this, the UN is first and foremost an inter-governmental mechanism that provides fora for inter-state negotiations and implements decisions taken by the majority of states (Haug, 2025). A more autonomous UN bureaucracy – like that emanating from Sweden's approach – would only undermine this inter-governmental understanding of UN multilateralism and, importantly, the influence of the most powerful member states.

This is one of the reasons why China prefers assessed contributions (see section 1) that reflect member states' relative economic might

⁷ For a discussion of this and other key features of China's engagement with the UN system, see Foot and Haug (forthcoming).

over voluntary resources, and why it has refrained from expanding its core funding portfolio: Beijing expects UN entities to closely align their actions with member states, also and particularly China. Where Sweden and other DAC donors are strong supporters of multi-provider trust funds, for instance, Beijing provides tightly earmarked resources through China-led mechanisms, like the Peace and Development Trust Fund established with the UN Secretariat or smaller funds with FAO and WFP. These funding mechanisms are directly controlled by Chinese government representatives, often with the support of Chinese nationals within the UN system and member state partners on the ground that are keen to benefit from Chinese economic prowess (Haug and Waisbich, 2024).

This emphasis on more direct control over UN cooperation processes also applies to UN staff: instead of following the logic of the UN Charter that foresees international civil servants to act as impartial representatives of the world organization, Chinese representatives have been more explicit than others in highlighting their close allegiance with their home country (Baumann et al., 2022). What is more, the Chinese government has explicitly tried to not only expand the number of Chinese nationals working in the UN system but also make sure those nationals are closely aligned with the Chinese Communist Party's worldview and act in line with Beijing's interests (Lam and Fung, 2024). Whereas Sweden's attempts to increase its footprint at the UN through voluntary funding and Swedish staff have been embedded in a strong commitment to a UN bureaucracy relatively autonomous vis-à-vis individual member states, China has used these channels for establishing or expanding more direct forms of control over multilateral cooperation. The "UN-centered" world Beijing has in mind is one where China has a range of effective means to steer the world organization in directions that align with Chinese interests, without UN representatives posing challenges to member state preferences.

China as Sweden's antithesis: implications and way forward

The above discussion highlights the extent to which China can be referred to as Sweden's antithesis – not only in terms of the country's general profile among UN member states (section 1) but also with regard to its funding practices (section 2), its thematic priorities in UN development work (section 3), and its understanding of and approach to UN multilateralism (section 4; see Table 4 for a summary). While not exhaustive, these antithetical features help appreciate the fundamental differences in how the two countries engage with the UN system. They condition China's and Sweden's positions in debates about the normative framework for and organisational contours of UN multilateralism and are set to be reflected in future discussions ranging from attempts to redefine the human rights canon to preparations for a post-2030 development agenda.

Table 3. In a nutshell: key features of China and Sweden in UN development work

	China	Sweden
General profile	<p><i>Developing country superpower</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Second largest economy (after the US) with second largest population (after India) - G77 member, UN programme country and South-South cooperation 	<p><i>Nordic donor</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DAC member and small European country - Considerable footprint as UN development donor, punching above its political and economic weight
Funding practices	<p><i>Assessed contributions champion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emphasis on membership fees as financial backbone of UN multilateralism (i.e. automatic dominance of a larger economy) - Limited and earmarked voluntary contributions that allow for direct control 	<p><i>Voluntary contributions champion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Voluntary funds as a tool and multilateral lever for a wealthy country - Voluntary core and softly earmarked contributions as support for a strong UN
Strategic priorities	<p><i>Economic development champion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong focus on the primacy of economic development - Advocate of the state as main subject of UN development work 	<p><i>Good governance champion</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong commitment to the good governance agenda, including human rights and the autonomy of civil society - Promoting a rights-based approach to development, focusing on individual well-being
Approach to multilateralism	<p><i>Inter-governmentalist</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In favour of a UN bureaucracy aligned with and subservient to member states - UN multilateralism as a means to project China's power as developing country leader 	<p><i>Multilateralist</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supporter of strong and autonomous multilateral bodies, e.g. through core contributions - Investment in UN multilateralism as a strategic lever for Sweden as a small country

Overall, Chinese and Swedish engagement patterns across the UN system suggest that opposites indeed do not attract. Against the backdrop of broader and evolving frictions between Beijing and Stockholm (Börjesson, 2023), areas of particular concern in the near and more distant future are set to centre around human rights in UN development work and beyond, as well as the role of China and other major powers in UN reform processes. In the context of the UN Secretary-General's UN80 initiative directed at making the UN leaner, more efficient and more effective, China and Sweden – as major contributors – share an interest in increasing UN efficiency. However, the strengthening of a more inter-governmentalist approach as promoted by China and other major powers – including the current US government – would put Sweden's long-term priorities at and with the UN in peril. A UN with stronger “Chinese characteristics” (Foot and Haug, 2026) does not bode well for Sweden, requiring Stockholm to invest in its coordination with partners from across the EU and the DAC. This includes a potential reinvigoration of smaller formats such as the informal Utstein grouping with Germany, Norway, and other like-minded donors, or even more concerted actions with its Nordic partners. Together, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have long been key supporters of the UN development system – as reflected in their elevated levels of voluntary and particularly core contributions – and, in unison, have a strong voice in UN reform processes as a potential counterweight to the logics of great power inter-governmentalism.

At the same time, there are also instances where China and Sweden might be able to work closer together. The current US government's shift away from established foreign aid practices and at least partial retreat from the UN system (Haug et al., 2025) offers an opportunity to identify potential areas for collaboration or at least closer coordination. Contribution figures discussed above (see section 1) suggest that there might be a certain level of complementarity emerging from extant funding practices. As discussed with regard to China's and Sweden's contributions to FAO and UNESCO, China's emphasis on assessed contributions and Sweden's focus on voluntary contributions could be part of a joint effort to strengthen the funding base

of UN entities, particularly vis-à-vis attempts by the United States and others to undermine the UN's capacity to act. Although such coordination has its limits – notably when it comes to defining the capacities and roles of UN bodies in more detail – jointly responding to the US retreat from UN development work could consist of increasing both core (Sweden) and earmarked (China) contributions to entities whose mandates are under threat. In fact, three of the four UN development entities that received core contributions from both China and Sweden in 2023 – UNRWA, UNEP, and UNFPA – currently stand at the centre of the US government's disdain for UN work in Palestine, the climate change agenda, and progressive family planning policies. China and Sweden might want to jointly call other member states supportive of these UN bodies – notably UNEP and UNFPA⁸ – to the table to decide about a way forward, circumventing a one-sided focus on US priorities. A concrete mechanism for Sweden to engage China might be UNEP's Voluntary Indicative Scale of Contributions that China has so far failed to comply with. Together with other member states from different world regions that already provide funding according to the voluntary scale, Sweden could encourage China to do the same and coordinate with UNEP headquarters to put forward proposals on how increased levels of China's (also tightly) earmarked contributions would be put to use.

While China's and Sweden's positions in and approaches to the UN system differ significantly, and although their normative and strategic priorities vis-à-vis UN development work are hardly aligned, their joint interest in UN multilateralism provides at least a basis for engaging in conversations about what the future of the UN could and should look like. For those in favour of strong multilateral bureaucracies and individual human rights, Swedish attempts to co-shape China's "UN-centered world" are direly needed.

⁸ In light of Sweden's decision in late 2024 to defund UNRWA over concerns related to the war in Gaza (Reuters, 2024), UNRWA-related coordination efforts between China and Sweden are currently unlikely but could play a role once the Swedish government decides to reengage.

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