Be My Friendly Reviewers: How China Shapes the International Human Rights Regime

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05 April 2023

Abstract

Research to date has shown that the international human rights regime is politicized. Despite claiming to uphold the normative standard, states tend to review their allies' human rights records less harshly than those of their adversaries. I argue that the politicized human rights regime is a product of the major powers exploiting the review system. How can a major power like China improve its standing in the international human rights regime without improving its domestic compliance record? I demonstrate that China, a major power with little intention to comply with liberal-based norms, can use economic rewards to influence reviews of its human rights record, thus bypassing the human rights norms underlying the international monitoring system. By leveraging the time lags between sessions of the UN Universal Periodic Review, a recurring human rights monitoring institution, I show that China uses economic rewards to stimulate lenient reviews of

its own record. After receiving development projects and debt relief, countries tend to be more lenient in their reviews of China's human rights record. In contrast with the conventional wisdom that the authoritarian power's hands are tied in a liberal norm-based regime, the Global South is more receptive to China's voices in the human rights regime than expected.

Introduction

China has expanded its economic power on a global scale. Since 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative and invested heavily in various projects in BRI member countries. 147 countries are officially part of the BRI as of 2022 ([Nedopil 2022](#)). From 2008-2021, Chinese overseas development finance committed approximately 83 percent of the total amount lent by the World Bank and its partnering banks in the same years ([Center 2023](#)). China is expanding its influence in the Global South, and has become a prominent financier of development in developing countries. Over 150 countries view China as their largest trading partner, making China the world's largest trading power ([Hass 2023](#)). Despite a more statist economic policy turn at home after Covid, China has gained leverage by locking in other countries' dependence upon it for future economic growth in the past decade. China, at this moment, is a growing global economic power who is determined to gain leadership abroad.

China's human rights violations against the Muslim minority in Xinjiang have sparked global outcries, with protests calling for action against China's investments in their countries. Protests abound to push back China's investments in their countries. In response to these abuses, governments and multinational companies in Western countries have implemented sanctions against Chinese businesses to demonstrate their disapproval. Additionally, China's crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong and tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea have caused concern among the United States and its allies.

Western countries grabbed a lot of headlines about China's disdain for its human rights records. The discussion around China's human rights practices is often presented as a "morality play" between good versus evil ([Hass 2023](#)). In the context of international relations, it is important to examine how different audiences, especially the globe's middle powers that benefit from China's oversea development, process, interpret and respond to this morality play. Do they align with the liberal, right-based agenda, or the

alternative illiberal, development-based human rights approach promoted by China?

China's Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva Chen Xu told reporter confidently in September 2022, "The developing world will reject all anti-China initiatives initiated by Western countries" (Times 2022). It indeed turned out to be the case. In October 2022, the United Nations has voted to reject an American-led call for a debate on the report that accused Beijing of serious human rights abuses. As eleven countries abstained from voting, the proposal to maintain this issue on the agenda failed to secure a majority vote (Wintour 2022). By itself, it was a display of Chinese political power in the human rights regime as of today.

More specifically, I ask: How can a major power like China improve its standing in the international human rights regime without improving its domestic compliance record? I argue that China wields its economic power to influence states' reviews of its own record. I find that countries dependent on Chinese overseas development tend to be lenient reviewers of Chinese human rights records. Development projects and debt relief serve as effective incentives to elicit more lenient reviews in the subsequent cycle, while their effectiveness vary in some countries than others. China plausibly leverages its economic ties to influence and co-opt other states to jeopardize the current norm-based regime. As a result, the Global South is more receptive to China's voices in the human rights regime than we expected.

I suggest that a major power resistant to international norms can use monetary influence to alter the game. China, amajor authoritarian country, is particularly resistant to liberal-based human rights norms. Nevertheless, it strives to achieve recognition and global leadership in this issue area because the high political salience of human rights is an Achille's heel for an its global and domestic governance. I identify three potential ways to improve a state's status and standing in this liberal-based regime: 1) be a sincere player to improve its human rights records within the current game, 2) influencing other states in its favor to cheat the current regime, and 3) proposing an alternative

narrative and set of rules to replace the regime. Given China's domestic interests and its still-rising power status, it has not succeeded in the first and the last tactics thus far. While China faces a dilemma between a desire for global status and reluctance to comply with liberal-based norms, this research demonstrates how China has pursued the middle path. I explore China's subtle uses of power over other states in the peer review system of the international human rights regime.

Complying with International Human Rights Regime

What motivates states to comply with international law is an age-old but challenging question. In the area of international human rights, states may comply with the regime for instrumental or normative reasons. Through socialization, states learn the expected costs and benefits of defection, becoming more cooperative due to material concerns (Chayes and Chayes 1993; Gilpin 1981; Keohane 1984). From a normative perspective, states learn and mimic "good citizens" in the international community and eventually internalize the norms of that community (Finnemore 1996; Risse 2000).

In addition, the perspectives of major powers are underplayed in studying how the international human rights regime evolves. Scholars anticipate that international institutions are constructed to constrain the states, not vice versa (Keohane and Martin 1995). Although the international system imposes restraints on the behaviors of all states, powerful states can seek to alter the system in its favor (Gilpin 1981). Cutting-edge work reveals that the international human rights regime is "deeply politicized," meaning the political interests of individual states are at stake in states' interactions when practicing norms (Terman and Byun 2022). However, how a rising power, with little intention to conform with the liberal-based principles, can meddle with this politicized regime to advance its interests is still overlooked.

Socialization is central to understanding states' compliance with international norms

and rules at the international level. States structure and use formal organizations to create and implement norms and assist in enforcing their commitments (Abbott and Snidal 1998). Forum-like international institutions allow states to express principles, discuss common issues, and interact with each other. The main purpose of socialization is to hold some states accountable for eliciting norm-conforming behavior. There are two camps to explain why socialization incentivizes state compliance: one believes states internalize the norms, and the other believes states are more sensitive to the external incentives of compliance after socialization.

To constructivists, in an ideal scenario, states internalize the human rights values and norms with a character of "taken-for-grantedness" (Risse 2000, 6). States are persuaded; as a result, their interests and identities change. Internalization is achieved through socialization, where the leading states and international organizations actively "teach" the novice states what is good and appropriate (Finnemore 1996). States comply with the norm because "it is the right thing to do" (Johnston 2008, 22), but the condition of internalizing norms is quite demanding.

On the other end of the spectrum, no beliefs change when we observe states' behavioral change. Here, for neorealists or institutionalists, socialization does not necessarily change states' attributes, identities or underlying preferences. What international institutions do is change the strategic calculations of governments (Moravcsik 1997, 513). States comply not because they sincerely care about protecting the human rights practices of other countries. Part of the reason is they desire to establish a reputation for compliance (Erickson 2015; Kelley 2017; Simmons 2000). They want to be seen as embracing human rights, even if they have no interest in upholding human rights per se (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007). Governments care about how they are perceived by their citizens and members of the international community (Wendt 1999, 236–37). Hence, states have strong incentives to establish a reputation as global human rights defenders for domestic and international legitimacy.

Building off the mechanism that socialization motivates states for reputation concerns, I argue that socialization can be imposed from one state on other states. A major state power can shape and socialize other actors' behaviors to converge with its own interests. States' multiple interactions can result in common knowledge such that states reevaluate the rules of the game being played and shaped by the major power. Here, the "rules of the game" under the influence of the major power are implicit – they have to be learned over time. In particular, states sensitive to material interests may quickly converge with the interests of the major power in the normative institution. I argue that the leading major power can actively change the calculations of other states through an implicit strategic use of carrots or sticks in socialization. If the major power is a norm defector, its material sanctions and strategic behavior may produce feedback that frames the key actor as a norm complier. I define this kind of socialization as *strategic socialization*: states' behaviors are influenced by the subtle use of power under the guise of shared norms.

China's Dilemmas in Pursuing Moral Leadership

What Dilemmas?

China is pushing for subtle and significant changes in international regimes. For decades, it had often abstained from votes in the United Nations Security Council, but its neutrality and low profile have decreased significantly. Given China's increasing weight in economic imperative and global politics, it has shed its humble and reactive posture and shifted to a more provocative and aggressive stance. In the international human rights regime, China had been an outsider, a passive taker of criticism for years. However, now it seeks to blunt the impact of liberal-based human rights norms. Any major country is expected to have a negotiating position to influence and shape an international regime (Nathan 2014). China is no exception. Nowadays, China is ready to be a shaper

of human rights norms in the international community. It has proposed a welfare and development-based human rights vision, emphasizing the importance of economic and social development in promoting human rights (Xinhua 2019).

We have observed Chinese rhetoric of human rights norms for a long time, but it has not been taken seriously in investigating its success. There are two possible reasons for this. Empirically, this kind of rhetoric is prevalent in human rights abusive countries to defend themselves against international naming and shaming. This argumentative discourse with the international community is a preliminary step towards being receptive to the socialization of liberal norms if other facilitating factors are in place (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). While the spiral model has so become influential since its introduction, the world has changed significantly into a so-called world "safe for autocracy" (Weiss 2019). If we still think that the efforts of a global economic power in shaping liberal norms as mere window-dressing and reactive posture, then we risk overlooking a critical dynamic of shifts.

Shaping the liberal-based human rights norm is a challenging task. Human rights have been a sensitive issue for a rising authoritarian regime like China, and they pose the toughest challenge for its foreign and domestic policy, as the term often serves as a code word for subverting non-democratic regimes (Nathan 1997). Consequently, there is an inherent incompatibility between its political system as an authoritarian regime and the underlying liberal value of universal human rights that features civil and political rights. History tells the entangling association between the idea of human rights and the possibility of democratization and Westernization. Nonetheless, as the oldest and most established international regime, the international human rights regime is critical to serving as a symbolic anchor for China to show that it adheres to world rules and norms as a great power should. In addition, state's failure to keep promises can be interpreted as a "sign of incompetence and/or outright disrespect of the law," resulting in citizens' disapproval of the government (von Stein 2016, 659). Hence, tensions arise from its for-

eign policy goal of being a respected and credible actor in the world community and its deteriorating treatment of domestic citizens in upholding universal standards and norms.

China's approach to human rights has been balancing between the principle of state sovereignty and the universality of human rights, to avoid the political costs of taking unpopular stands (Weiss 2019). And yet, compared to its peers or other issue areas such as environment or international political economy, China is strikingly less embedded and reluctant to integrate into the international human rights regime (Dai and Renn 2016). Perhaps it is because the norms underpinning such a regime do not conform to the goals of the Chinese government, but instead resonate with the political sophisticates (Kent 1999, 2). Embracing the ideas of human rights presents a challenge to the resilience of a leading authoritarian regime. However, it is nearly impossible to become a global leader without being recognized as a cooperative player in this norm-based international regime. Therefore, given China's status and ambitions in the world community, it is critical to study China's approach to global governance on the issue of human rights. Examining how it attempts to resolve the dilemmas would make for an intriguing case.

How to Find a Way Out?

I identify three possible alternatives for China to seek moral leadership roles in this liberal-based regime: 1) be a sincere player to play by the rule to improve its human rights records, 2) influence other states in its favor in the current regime, and 3) propose an alternative narrative and set of rules to replace the regime. Given China's domestic interests and still-rising power status, the first and the last options have been undesirable or unfeasible thus far.

China's human rights conditions have deteriorated amid the global wave of democratic backsliding. To examine the extent of degradation in civil liberties, according to V-dem, China's freedom of torture indices were observed to be consistently low, placing the country in the worst quantile between 2009 and 2022. Similarly, its freedom of politi-

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cal killings declined from the second quantile to the first quantile during the same period. In the issue domain of civil and political rights, China's three cycles of human rights review before the U.N. Human Rights Council in 2009, 2013, and 2018 were described as periods of "cautious hope, increasing uncertainty, and alarm," respectively (Lewis 2020, 137).

Since Xi assumed power, China has actively resisted compliance with the civil and political rights underpinning current liberal-based norms. Topics such as universal values, citizens' rights, and freedom of the press are prohibited for research and teaching at all levels of education, as these discussions are viewed as a threat to China's political system (Economy 2014). Official narratives often relegate civil and political rights, seen as values underpinning democracies, to lower importance. They instead place greater emphasis on economic rights that may be supplied by technocrat autocracies (Ji 2022). China's selective prioritization of these norms appears to resonate with its domestic audience and serve as a foundation for exerting influence beyond its borders.

As China seeks to undermine shared understandings of liberal norms and promote its version of human rights ideals, it is believed to appeal to like-minded autocracies and efficient technocrats. Although China aspires to global leadership and invests in normative power to challenge the current system, it is still far from sufficient to propose a full-fledged alternative order to challenge the substance of the existing liberal one (Zhao 2018). Suppose China aims to eventually replace the current American-led human rights regime and establish a new norm-based "club" that cheers for its own human rights ideals. It is unfeasible thus far.

Challenges of creating new institutions in the human rights regime are much greater than in other issue areas. In the international economy, given China's economic strength and influence, it is relatively easier to build and consolidate leadership. A prominent example is China's establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as a viable alternative to the World Bank (Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023/ed). The current liberal-

based human rights regime has less to do with money but more to do with the appeal of widely endorsed universal norms (Simmons 2009). Principles, values and ideas take priority. While states may vary in their degrees of compliance with the regime, none openly challenge the principle that protecting individuals' civil and political rights "is the right thing to do" (Johnston 2008; Risse 2000). In other words, the liberal-based human rights norms are not openly contested. State and non-state actors across international, national and domestic levels deeply engage in and defend this dense network (Risse 2000). Hence, it is particularly challenging for an authoritarian regime to claim leadership in the human rights realm and to attract other club members to sign up for a hypothetical new norm-based club at this stage. Nevertheless, the key to evaluating the success of a new, stand-alone institution is how much it garners support among other states (Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2015). Motivated by moving up to the hierarchy of prestige, a rising power may aim to replace the current rules and rights embodied in the system, but such "systemic change" is hard to realize (Gilpin 1981, 41–43).

Recognizing the conflicting domestic interests of following the liberal norms, and the inherent difficulties of replacing the existing normative order, I propose to look at how China has sought the middle path: influencing other states in the current system. We see evidence that the Chinese official narratives relegate civil and political rights to much lower importance and place economic rights to the highest rank. To what extent it starts to shake the substance of the existing order? I will show that China's counter-narratives have been channeled through its economic influence to inspire (or coerce) a number of other countries to align with.

Since the human rights regime by no means requires a standard of strict compliance, as long as states are perceived to have an "acceptable" level of overall compliance, they can stay comfortable (Chayes and Chayes 1993). Agreements in the human rights regime rarely have formal enforcement mechanisms of its own to ensure that state commitments are respected (von Stein 2016; Simmons 2009; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2007). At the

international level, what motivates states to abide by international obligations in the human rights arena is mainly reputational concern. Achieving a mediocre standing and distancing itself from the worst offenders in the peer review system seem to be modest and realistic goals for China. This project will showcase how a global power like China can use economic rewards to influence states' behaviors to achieve this goal.

To summarize, I outline three potential approaches available to a rising authoritarian power seeking to navigate the international human rights regime. The first one is undesirable, while the third one is unfeasible in the short run. The second alternative, which lies in the middle, has yet to be thoroughly examined. Despite China currently faces challenges in safeguarding citizens' civil and political rights and lacks the normative power to replace the current liberal regime, its rising economic power is being directed to shape the norm-based regime in a way that aligns with China's efforts to unsettle the previously American-dominated norm regime. I investigate how an emerging power like China, aiming to improve its standing in the human rights domain, can take advantage of the politicized UN human rights review system. Major power like China can use economic rewards to elicit lenient reviews from its peers. This misuse of power may further dampen the integrity of the review system.

Argument and Expectations

I propose that a major actor can use economic influence to shape the behaviors of others within a norm-based regime. Specifically, if the major power is in fact a norm defector, states under influence can make the major power appear as a norm complier in order to achieve a better standing in the peer review system in human rights institutions. This is a subtle use of power under the guise of shared norms.

The power dynamics in the states' reviews interactions imply that China can use economic influence to incentivize states to give lenient reviews. The effects, however,

are heterogeneous. China's friends or allies may have already colluded with China to provide lenient reviews from the beginning. Material incentives will not dampen the integrity of the 'noble' states that always uphold human rights norms and standards and give China harsh reviews. Hence, only those swaying in critics and dependent on the Chinese economic imperative may change their reviews dramatically. More specifically, this group of states may not have good human rights records and be financially reliant on Chinese oversea development projects.

I expect states dependent on Chinese overseas finance tend to be lenient reviewers of China. Between the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) peer review sessions, states reciving larger numbers of new investment from China and debt relief deal tend to review China more leniently in the subsequent cycle. The effects are more pronounced in countries that do not inititally offer the most lenient reviews.

Research Design

Laboratory to Test the Proposed Mechanism

The UN human rights regime allows states to socialize through communication, exchange and reflection to diffuse the predominantly normative practices in human rights. In particular, the UN Human Rights Council has set up a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) system that holds all states accountable to their peers' recurrent reviews of the treatment of the domestic population. The monitoring power lies in a formal forum-like institution for states' socialization. The idea is to "give equal treatment to all the countries and allow them to exchange best practices" (Human Rights 2018). In its ideal version, the UPR can provide "neutral, depoliticized or specialized forums" for comments, critiques and recommendations for improvement (Abbott and Snidal 1998, 10). In practice, the UPR is far from neutral (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018). States tend to review selectively, condemning their adversaries harshly while going easy on their

friends and allies ([Terman and Byun 2022](); [Terman and Voeten 2018]()). That said, the UPR is a laboratory to test the power dynamics in socialization because it is a recurrent monitoring mechanism that elicits reputational concern in forum-style interactions. Moreover, multiple cycles of reviews can reveal changes in a single state's review record over time.

There have been three cycles of Universal Periodic Review so far. In each cycle, all countries are under review; however, each country will be assessed in a specific review session. About 14 countries are reviewed in each session, three times a year. Every five years or so, on a rotational basis, all 193 UN Member States undergo an interactive review of the human rights situation. When China was under review, the review sessions occurred in 2009, 2013 and 2018, respectively ([OHCHR 2022]()). The State under review writes a self-assessment of its human rights practices, and is given a chance to explain the actions they have taken, or plan to taken, to address the issues presented. Reviewing states provide comments and issue recommendations for the state to improve upon, and the state under review can choose to accept or take note of the recommendations. Since reviewing states have limited space to ask questions and issue recommendations, states tend to use their monitoring power selectively to mention issues they are most concerned about. They reduce the complex reality of five years in a country to a condensed statement with comments and recommendations of its human rights conditions. Through this selection, we can infer that the statement reflects the most critical and meaningful problems in a country under review from the perspective of the reviewing states. After the review sessions, a report is prepared to provide a summary of the actual discussion. It is available on the UN Human Rights Council.

With 2-3 sessions per year, each cycle requires about 13 sessions to cover all countries. Data is available from the first session in April 2008 through the 37th session in November 2020, covering the full data of three cycles ([Info 2023]()). To show that China attempts to exert power over other states' regarding the reviews it receives, I collect and compare two episodes for each China-country X pair. First, China receives its review from country X in

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Cycle 2 in October 2013, where 125 countries issued 284 recommendations to China's human rights records[1], where I distinguish harsh versus lenient reviewers. Then, country X reviews China again in Cycle 3. Cycle 3 occurred in November 2018, where 135 countries issued 387 recommendations.

Measuring Review Leniency

Recommendation Level

During the review session, each country receives reviews when it is their turn to be under review. For each review recommendation, there are two state actors: one actor is the state under review, while the other is the reviewing state who provides comments and recommendations. I assess each review recommendation and determine its level of leniency. Each review starts with a comment, acknowledging the country's significant progress in selected issue areas and critiquing the most concerning ones for immediate improvement. Then it ends with a number of recommendations. There is a wide spectrum of comments and recommendations in substantive issue areas and action levels in states' review recommendations. UPR Info, an NGO aiming to raise awareness and provides tools to promote human rights, has published a data set that classifies 56 issue themes covered in the reviewing states' recommendations (Info 2023). It also provides information on the verb choices used in each recommendation, conveying the necessary level of changes. Terman and Bynn (2022) clustered the 56 issue themes into 7 issue topics. Building off the existing typologies in the human rights literature (Park, Greene, and Colaresi 2020), I adapted Terman and Bynn (2022)'s framework and clustered the issues themes into 9 issue topics[2].

Review leniency is a composite measure with two components: issue sensitivity and

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[1]The reason that I skip Cycle 1 is because there were only 47 countries participated in the review process. The sample size discrepancies make it hard to compare Cycle 1 with Cycle 2 and 3.

[2]1) Civil and Political rights, 2) Governance and Public Services, 3) Migration and Labor, 4) Physical Integrity Rights, 5) Racial, Ethnic and Religious Minorities, 6) Socio-Economic Rights, 7) Protection of Vulnerable Populations, 8) International Commitment and 9) General/Other

level of action. I create the issue sensitivity index ranging from 1 to 3, with 3 indicating the most sensitive issue topics. Civil and political rights, Physical integrity rights, and Racial, ethnic, and religious minorities have high issue sensitivity, scoring 3. Migration and labor, Protection of vulnerable populations seeking to protect vulnerable individuals, have medium sensitivity, scoring 2. Since the topics of Socio-economic rights, International commitment, Governance and public services and General/other do not have impacted persons, these topics have low sensitivity, scoring 1. Note that each review recommendation can cover one or multiple issue topics. For example, Czechia recommended China to "review laws and practices in particular with regard to ensuring protection of the freedom of religion, movement, protection of the culture and language of national minorities, including Tibetans and Uyghurs" (Info 2023). Based on the UPR Info classification, this recommendation was coded as covering the following issue themes: "Freedom of movement," "Freedom of religion and belief," and "Minority rights." Then each falls into three broader clusters of issue topics: "Civil and political rights," "Migration and labor," and "Racial, ethnic and religious minorities." Each topic was given a pre-defined score of issue sensitivity; in this case, the issues topics have high, medium and high sensitivity. The final issue sensitivity score is determined by the maximal rule, meaning that a review recommendation will receive a score of 3 if one of its issue topics has the highest issue sensitivity score. In this specific example, its issue sensitivity score is 3.

On the level of action, each recommendation starts with a verb to indicate the urgency and level of action needed for the state under review to change its course. Recommendations range from requesting the state under review to conducting minimal action (i.e. continuing the course) to conducting specific action for policy changes. Based on the level of action, each recommendation receives an action category score: a recommendation that receives 3 entails a high level of action, recommending state under review to conduct policy change or a specific action to improve the country's human rights conditions. 2 entails a medium level of action, usually related to a general element of im-

provement. Finally, in cases where a recommendation pertains to sharing information, providing technical assistance or emphasizing continuity of current practice, it receives 1, indicating a low level of action.

Country Level

Since each state under review can receive hundreds of review recommendations in one session, measuring review harshness at the country level requires aggregating the severity index for each recommendation. However, a key challenge in this aggregation process is balancing the quality and quantity of reviews. The number of reviews each state receives and the severity index of each review recommendation can vary greatly, which may result in an over-counting of quantity or under-counting of quality in the aggregation process. To address this issue, I design two ways to calculate the review harshness score for each state under review. The first method is to use the scaling weighted index, and the second method is to use the adapted H-index.

The crucial step of the first method is to rescale the number of reviews each state receives so they fall within a comparable range to the weighted severity index. This rescaling step ensures that the final score is based on a fair comparison. After recaling, the numbers of reviews range from 1 to 3. For example, Egypt received 321 review recommendations in Cycle 2. I calculate the average weighted severity index of the review recommendations, which is 2.2. To calculate the scaled weighted index for Egypt in Cycle 2, I rescale the number of reviews from 321 to 1.84. The final score for Egypt is the sum of scaled reviews total and weighted severity index, resulting in a final score of 4.05.

The second method is inspired from the h-index, a common measure of authors impact across fields and generations. It is designed to balance the quantity and quality of publications. To make a fair comparison between young and senior scholars, the h-index takes into account the productivity and citation impact of publications (Hirsch 2005). To adapt the h-index in this scenario, it solves the problem of balancing the number of re-

views (quantity of publications) and the severity index of reviews (citation impact of each publication). To calculate the adapted h-index, I first calculate the total sum of the un-weighted severity index[3] from the review recommendations of each reviewing state. For example, China received a country-sum score of 7 from Algeria, 30 from Australia and 15 from the U.S.. Simply by looking at these scores, we can infer that Australia issued higher numbers of recommendations than Algeria, and each of them are relatively harsh. The next step is to rank the country-sum severity indices in descending order. Then I find the score of at least X numbers of countries reviewing it larger than X score. According to this formula, China has an h-index of 11. It means that at least 11 countries reviewed China with the country-sum score higher than 11. By repeating these steps, I am able to derive all the h-index of the states under review and compare them accordingly.

There are two reasons why I have developed these two methods to calculate the review harshness. First, as illustrated, it can be challenging to combine the indices with different matrices in a meaningful way. Second, having two methods allows for cross-checking and increases confidence that the measures largely reflect the nuances of the review recommendations. By using the country-level review harshness measure, I can compare countries' reviews at two levels. First, at the dyad level, I have direct evidence of the following question: How harsh is country A's review of China compared to country B's? Second, at the aggregate level, I can analyze how harsh the reviews China receives in comparison to those given to other countries.

NA is Special

I treat NAs as special cases in this specific design. I assume that countries give a lot of reviews to other countries but no review to China often means that they are silent with intention. I treat them by giving the "most lenient" review and assign 0 to its country-sum severity index.

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[3]The unweighted severity index is used because the h-index requires integers, and the number of citations in evaluating publications is always an integer.

First, I count reviewing countries that give zero recommendations to China, recommendations in both cycles, recommendation in Cycle 2 or Cycle 3 only. We can see 39 countries did not issue recommendations to China in both cycles. I further investigate who these countries are and whether they tend to be silent players in the UPR process.

	None	Both Cycles	Cycle 2 Only	Cycle 3 Only
Country Counts	39	107	14	22

Recommending states	Recs in Cycle 2	Recs in Cycle 3	Number of Projects
Bosnia and Herzegovina	48	66	29
Burkina Faso	97	117	0
Israel	173	173	15
Kazakhstan	277	259	124
Nicaragua	259	112	1
Turkey	447	213	59
Panama	161	112	8
Somalia	39	47	50

After analyzing the data, it turns out that 39 countries did not make any recommendations to other countries in the review process. These countries are marked as NAs because they are true silent players. Countries that commented on China's human rights conditions during one cycle but remained silent during the other cycle were given a severity index of 0, which is the lowest possible severity index in the silent cycle. There were 8 countries that were active in the UPR review system, but still remained silent to China in both cycles. Although the specific reasons for this silence are unknown, silence may be due to economic or political reasons, as they may not want to say anything that could
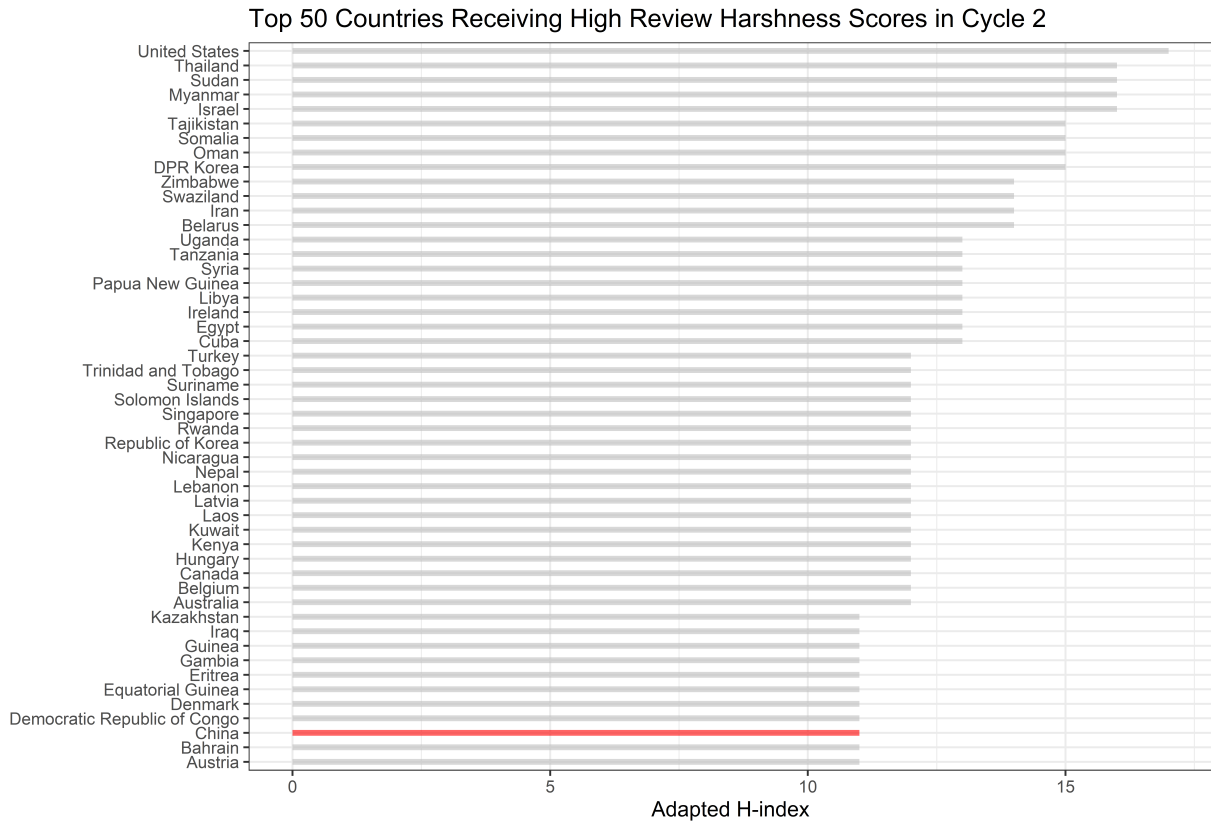
Figure 1: Top 50 Countries Receiving High Review Harshness Score in Cycle 2

potentially increase tensions with China. The table below shows the selected countries that did not review China and the total recommendations they made to other countries in Cycles 2 and 3, as well as the number of China-funded projects in those countries. Kazakhstan, one of the most active reviewing states in the UPR system, remained silent regarding China in both rounds. China supported approximately 124 development countries in Kazakhstan between 2000 and 2017, which is also in the upper tail of countries China assisted. Overall, I infer that when countries remain silent in the review process, particularly when considering China seems to be a special case in their review patterns, it suggests leniency towards China.
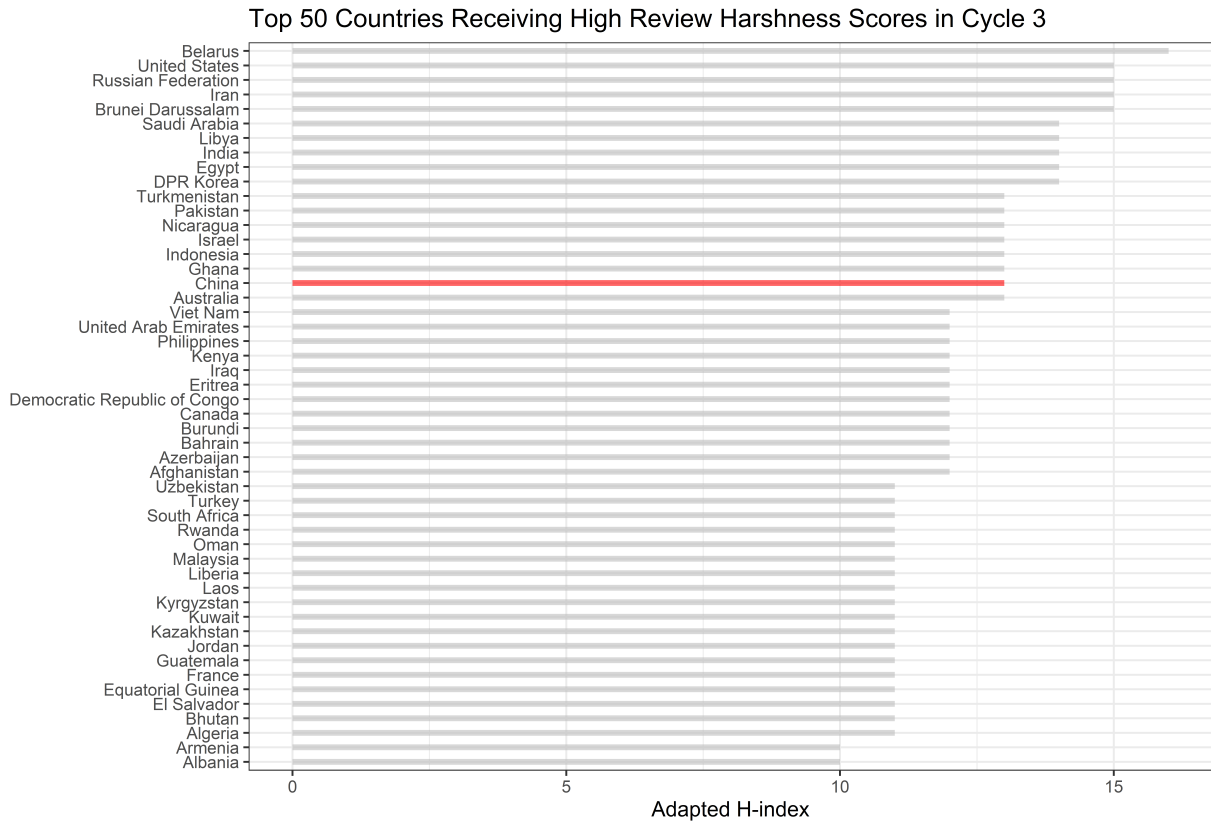
Figure 2: Top 50 Countries Receiving High Review Harshness Score in Cycle 3

Closer Look

How well did China perform? From the perspective of its peers, it appears that China is not the worst human rights offenders among the international community. Figures @ref(fig:ranking_c2) and @ref(fig:ranking_c3) show that China was ranked 42th in Cycle 2 and 12th in Cycle 3. The changes in the review harshness scores of both cycles reflect that the human rights conditions in China have worsened. However, surprisingly, China performed much better than the United States, from the perspectives of other countries. While the analysis of the substance of the reviews that the U.S. received is beyond the scope of this article, it is intriguing to note that the U.S. received the harshest reviews among all the countries under review in Cycle 2 and only slightly improved in Cycle 3 (the second harshest reviews collectively). Notably, it received the same adapted h-index

review harshness score as Russia, Iran and Brunei in Cycle 3. This suggests that there is no evidence of the U.S. being recognized as a leader in the human rights realm, despite its claims. Moreover, considering China's alarming human rights conditions, it receives mediocre scores according to the views of other countries. Its presumed goal has been achieved.

To illustrate what lenient reviewers look like, here are two examples of lenient review recommendations given by Senegal and Thailand:

Senegal recommended China to:

"Improve access to education for disadvantaged people." (Cycle 2)

Continue actions to address the needs of persons with disabilities." (Cycle 2)

"Strengthen its cooperation and continue the process of ratifying the appropriate international instruments." (Cycle 3)

Thailand recommended China to:

"Look into the possibility of establishing the national human rights institution in China." (Cycle 2)

"Keep up its efforts in raising awareness among law enforcement officers and security personnel throughout the country." (Cycle 2)

"Continue efforts to develop measures to eliminate discrimination against persons with disabilities, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities." (Cycle 3)

"Further enhance international cooperation in the field of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, including through technical cooperation and capacity-building and South-South cooperation." (Cycle 3)

Regarding issue areas, Senegal addressed issues in Protection of Vulnerable Populations and International Commitment, which have medium and low issue sensitivity. Regarding level of actions, Senegal uses "improve access," "continue actions," "strengthen its cooperation," and "continue the process," suggesting the continuation of the current practices and lightest possible action plans for China to move forward. Senegal only provided one to two recommendations, making it one of the most lenient reviewers in both cycles. Similarly, Thailand is very friendly to China. In Cycle 2, the focus was on issues related to Governance and Public Services, as well as International Commitment. In Cycle 3, the topic of Protection of Vulnerable Populations was added, making it a slightly harsher reviewer compared to the previous cycle. In both cycles, Thailand mainly used suggestive and positive verbs such as "look into," "keep up the efforts," "continue efforts," and "further enhance." They read closer to compliments. Hence, these recommendations are light, easy to embrace, and positive.

Other Variables

I have categorized the countries that reviewed China into three groups based on their review harshness scores in Cycle 2. Countries whose scores fall in the first tertile are categorized as lenient reviewers, while those falling in the second and third tertiles are considered middle and harsh reviewers, respectively. This categorization, which I refer to as the nature of reviewers, will be included as a moderator variable. The dependent variable is the review leniency change. I capture the changes using two variables: raw differences, which is the difference between review harshness scores in Cycle 3 and 2. I also create a binary variable to summarize the changes: review leniency change. There are two criteria to capture the range of changes: if the raw score drops by any amount, then the binary review leniency change equals to 1. A stricter case is when the raw score drops by half a standard deviation, then I count those cases as review leniency change.

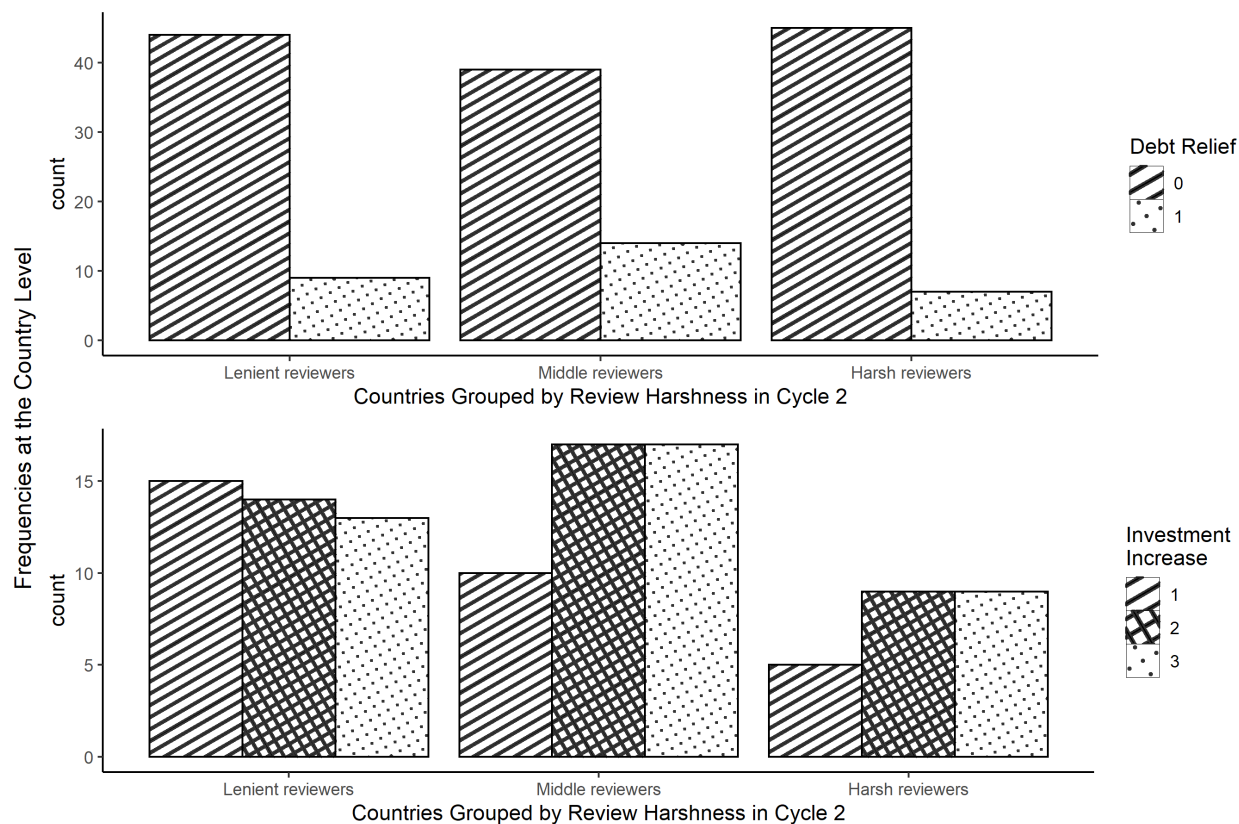The independent variable in this study is economic rewards between cycle 2 and 3 of

Figure 3: Distributions of Countries Receiving Debt Relief, Investment Increase and Review Harshness

the UPR. Specifically, I measure the increase of newly initiated overseas finance projects and the total amount of debt relief negotiated within the current development projects financed by Chinese government institutions between 2014 and 2017 from AidData (2021). The variable "investment increase" captures the number of new development projects. I divide recipient countries into three groups based on the distribution of Chinese new overseas finance projects: small investment increase, medium investment increase, and large investment increase. The variable "total debt relief" is a categorical variable for total debt relief by country. For example, Angola receives 2 debt relief deals between 2014 and 2017. The bar chart at the top of Figure 3 shows that it is relatively uncommon for China to grant debt relief, and that the total number of debt relief is relatively small. Among the three types of reviewers, middle reviewers tend to receive relatively more debt relief

than the other two. The bar chart below shows that harsh reviewers are much less likely to receive investment increase, perhaps because many of these harsh reviewers are OECD members that do not receive any form of Chinese aid from the beginning. Middle reviewers, on the other hand, tend to receive more new investment in total. Countries classified as lenient reviewers are equally likely to fall into any of the three categories based on the level of investment increase they receive, whether it is small, medium, or large. Finally, I include a pre-treatment covariate, the number of China-funded oversea projects up to 2013 in the models.

Preliminary Analysis

Table 3: Bivariate relationships between review harshness score and the number of Chinese oversea development projects up to 2013 and 2017

	Dependent variable:	
	Harshness Score (C2)	Harshness Score (C3)
	(1)	(2)
Projects till 2013	−0.017***	
	(0.005)	
Projects till 2017		−0.017***
		(0.004)
Constant	4.544***	5.943***
	(0.376)	(0.415)
Observations	158	159
Residual Std. Error	3.476 (df = 156)	3.778 (df = 157)
F Statistic	10.210*** (df = 1; 156)	17.665*** (df = 1; 157)
Note:		**p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

Table 3 shows some evidence of a positive relationship between the numbers of projects China invest in developing countries from 2000 to 2013 and their leniency in reviewing China's human rights records in Cycle 2. Similar relationship persists for de-
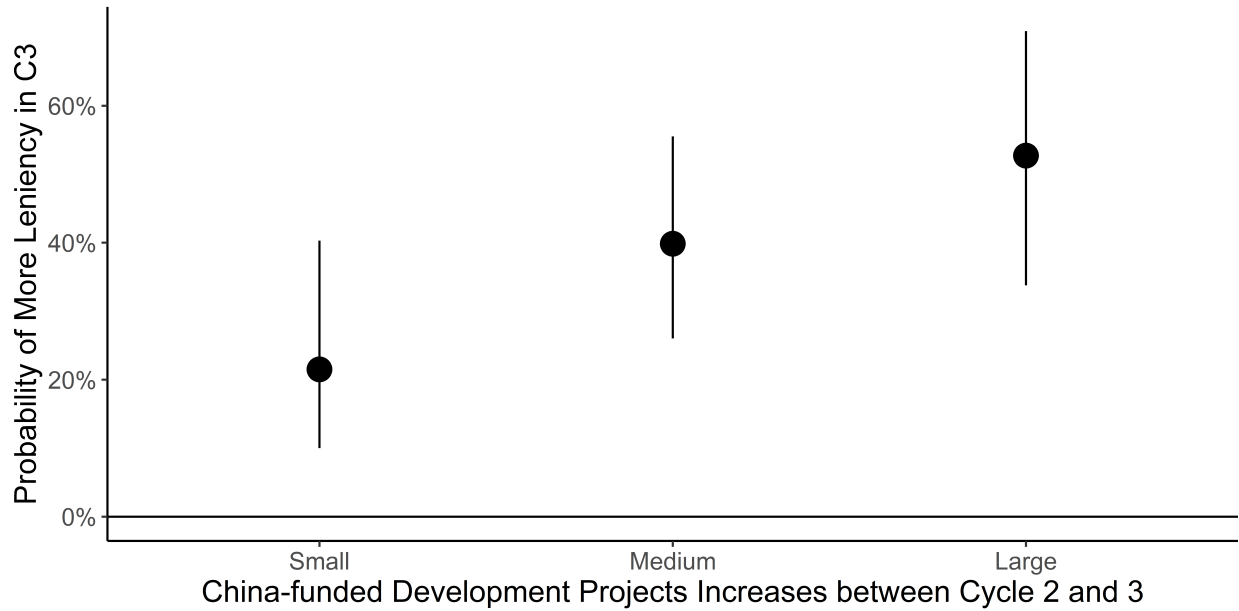
Figure 4: The relationships between New China-funded Development Projects and the probability of increased leniency in Cycle 3

velopment projects invested from 2000 to 2017 and countries' leniency in reviews of Cycle 3. When countries receive more financial assistance from China, they tend to give less severe reviews to China. The average number of Chinese development projects is 66. The effect of projects is substantial: when the project increases by 66, the Harshness Score decreases by around 1.12 on average in both cycles. This piece of evidence shows that the review system is quite politicized. When countries review China's human rights records, they may consider how heavily China has invested on the ground. If it has strong economic cooperation with China, it tends to give more lenient reviews on its human rights performance. This table provides strong evidence that the UPR review system is politicized based on the geo-economic relationships between reviewing countries and China.

Figure 4 shows suggestive evidence that there is positive relationship between China's new investment in recipient countries and their more lenient reviews in return. The dependent variable is a binary variable of review leniency change, capturing whether there is a drop of harshness score in Cycle 3 compared to Cycle 2. The x-axis is a categorical variable, capturing how many newly initiated projects China invest in
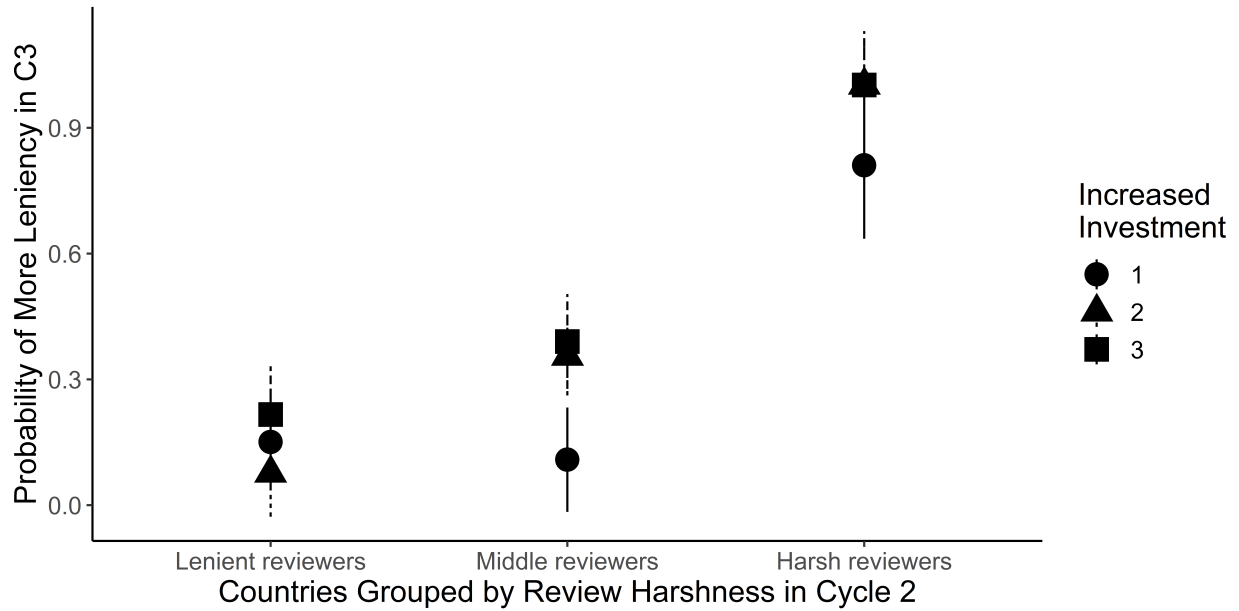
Figure 5: The relationships between New China-funded Development Projects, nature of reviewers and the probability of increased leniency in Cycle 3

the recipient countries. The findings suggest that the more projects recipient countries receive (from small increase to large increase) in between two cycles, countries' reviews are more likely to be more lenient in Cycle 3.

Figure 5 illustrates the addition of an interaction effect between new investment and nature of reviewers. The x-axis now represents the nature of reviewers in Cycle 2. Lenient reviewers are less likely to experience drops in harshness score between the two cycles, possibly due to a ceiling effect in countries that have already reviewed China leniently in Cycle 2. Middle reviewers are more likely to give China lenient reviews, especially when they receive higher numbers of increased investment. The most interesting change, however, is observed in the group of harsh reviewers. China's new projects significantly increase the likelihood of giving less harsh reviews in Cycle 3,with a substantial marginal effect. This could be attributed to the high baseline of the harshness score, making it relatively easy to reduce it.

Let us now turn our attention to the second component of economic rewards: debt relief. Figure 6 illustrates the overall positive effect of debt relief on both lenient and harsh
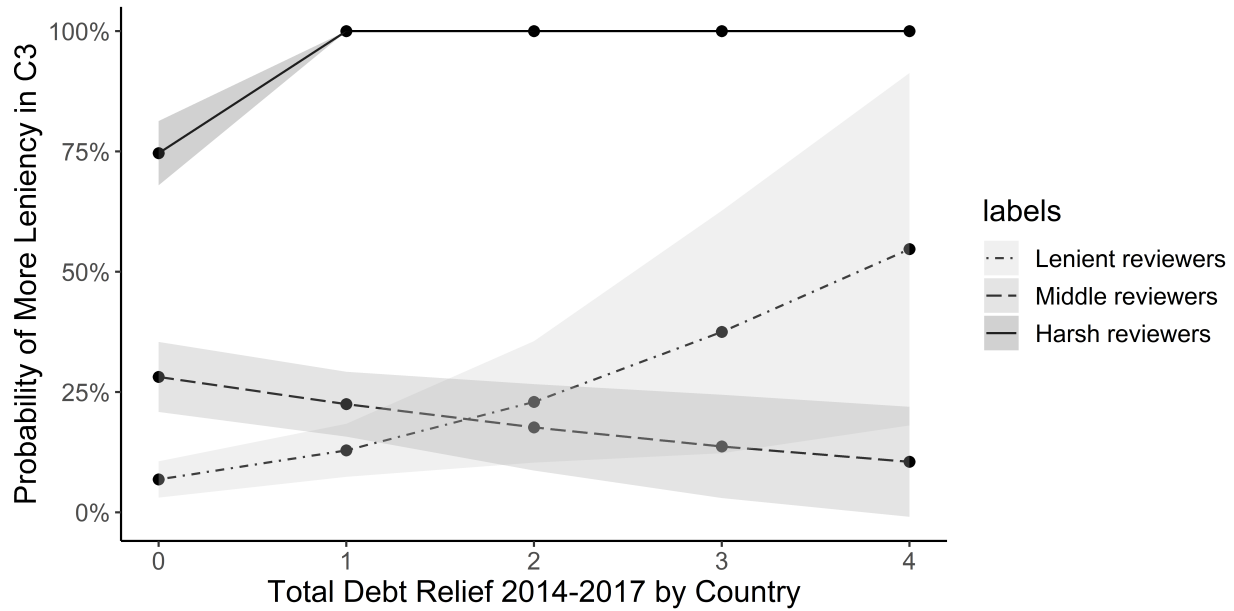
Figure 6: The relationships between debt relief and the probability of increased leniency in Cycle 3

reviewers. Interestingly, middle reviewers become less likely to give lenient reviews to China as they receive more debt relief. For harsh reviewers, the effects of debt relief across the board are the strongest and most deterministic. The key takeaway is that harsh reviewers in Cycle 2 are highly responsive to debt relief offered by China. Once they receive debt relief, it is highly likely that they will give more lenient reviews to China in Cycle 3.

Remarks

To summarize, I use the UN Universal Periodic Review as a laboratory to test how China uses economic imperative to influence other states' reviews in the human rights regime. While China is experiencing a downturn in protecting civil rights and is short of normative power to replace the liberal norms, its rising economic power helps it shape the norm-based regime in its favor. I propose three possible alternatives for China to claim moral leadership in the human rights regime, and I investigate the middle path:

to influence other states' reviews. I show that, using an adapted h-index I developed, in both cycles, China's reviews are not too bad. It was ranked 42 in Cycle 2 and 12 in Cycle 3 in terms of review harshness score at the country level. In contrast, the U.S. received the harshest reviews from its peers in both cycles.

I also find that countries with a high level of economic dependence on Chinese overseas development projects tend to be lenient reviewers on average. Examining the economic rewards between two cycles, I find that countries receiving more new China-funded development projects are more inclined to give lenient reviews to China in Cycle 3 compared to Cycle 2. Moreover, an increase in debt relief deals incentivizes countries to review China more leniently, with the exception of middle reviewers. Overall, receiving either type of economic rewards increases the likelihood that harsh reviewers display some leniency in the next cycle, more so than the other two groups.

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