

On the Reconstruction of the UN Governance Paradigm by the Human Rights System

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If the world prior to World War II was one where all continents and countries acted on their own volition, the post-WWII world has evolved into an interconnected global community bound by intercontinental interdependence, with the United Nations (UN), founded in 1945, serving as its driving force. The UN system aspires to transcend the various imperial systems backed by military force and faith-based religious systems in human history, and to establish an international order grounded in international law, with the purposes and principles of the *Charter of the United Nations (UN Charter)* as the fundamental norms governing international relations. Among these fundamental norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the *UN Charter*, respect for and protection of fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person shall occupy the position of an ultimate objective. They lay the justificatory foundation for the purpose of shaping international relations with the UN at the core, provide value guidance for the progressive development of law in constructing an international order based on international law, and establish a benchmark for the legality of international conduct that underpins the UN's practice of global governance.

Nevertheless, fundamental human rights, human dignity and worth were completely overlooked within the UN system during the Cold War era. The 80-year history of the UN can be roughly divided into two phases of 40 years each, demarcated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the drastic changes in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The first 40 years of the UN coincided with the Cold War between the two major blocs, a period in which the human rights system remained generally dormant and suspended. If the first four decades of the UN's history unfolded around the contest over security and development models amid the Cold War, the latter four decades have witnessed the mainstreaming of human rights in the UN's undertakings. As human rights became aligned with security and development as the three pillars of the UN, with the advancement of the human rights mainstreaming movement, the human rights system has gradually cemented status as the justificatory foundation for the purpose of the UN's operations. The UN has thus transcended its original positioning as a mere instrument for reconciling inter-state interests, and evolved into a regulatory force and constructive mechanism bearing on the common well-being of humanity. This constituted the first reconstruction of the UN governance paradigm by the human rights system.

At present, the world is undergoing an epochal transformation unseen in a century, and the global governance system is confronted with an overlapping confluence of deficits — a peace deficit, a development deficit, a security deficit and a governance deficit. Under such circumstances, the UN governance paradigm demands another reconstruction. In the process of advancing the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. The human rights system stands as a pivotal variable

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driving this reconstruction. From the perspective of the proposed community with a shared future for mankind, underpinned by the four Global Initiatives that China has put forward, a more equitable, just, reasonable, and inclusive international human rights system will deconstruct and transcend the traditional governance logic of unipolarism.¹ It will further propel the human rights-based reconstruction of the UN governance paradigm, and realize the transformation of the UN from a tool for hegemonic unipolarism into a governance mechanism for the community with a shared future for mankind.

I. The Human Rights System Establishes the Justificatory Foundation for the Purposes of the UN's Founding

The *UN Charter* has laid down its purposes and principles that take respect for and protection of human rights as their ultimate purpose, and security and development as their functional goals. The human rights system serves as the ultimate purpose and ethical benchmark underpinning the underlying logic of the *UN Charter*; it endows the UN with authority and moral strength that transcend national interests. Moreover, the human rights system exercises normative and critical effects on the UN's policies on security and development, and constitutes the fundamental source of legitimacy and authority for all its actions.

The human rights system forms the profound value system of purpose embedded in the *UN Charter*. The "Preamble" to the *Charter* sets forth the foundational values of purpose, as well as the functional purposes and principles for the establishment of the UN in two paragraphs. The second paragraph articulates the functional purposes and principles of the UN:

"to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and
to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and
to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and
to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, ..."²

While the first paragraph establishes the values of purpose that underpin the functional purposes and principles stated in the second one:

"to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and
to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and
to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, ..."³

¹ The "governance logic of unipolarism" as referred to in this paper specifically denotes an interventionist governance narrative and practice led by the United States under the unipolar international structure after the end of the Cold War, in which the US monopolizes the so-called "universal values" to serve its geopolitical hegemony.

² The UN Charter, available at the UN official website, accessed October 21, 2025, <https://www.un.org/zh/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

³ Ibid.

It is thus evident that “fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person” constitute the foundational starting point of the *UN Charter*. Scholars specializing in the *Charter* have pointed out that the framers of the *Charter* adopted the mild expression of “to reaffirm,” hoping to rally world opinion through the “Preamble” to uphold the ideals and aspirations enshrined in the *UN Charter*.⁴ In essence, this means affirming the legitimacy of human rights, and infusing the *UN Charter* and even the entire UN system with the shared ideals and aspirations of respecting and protecting fundamental human rights, and the dignity and worth of the human person. Some scholars note that, based on the recognition that war constitutes a gross violation of human rights, the international community has further come to realize that respect for and protection of human rights are inextricably linked to the maintenance of peace, and that human rights should serve as the foundation of post-war international peace and a shared value objective of the international community.⁵ Therefore, compared with the functional purposes and principles of security and development, the adequate protection of human rights and people’s well-being not only embodies the ethical response of the post-war international community to the shared destiny of humanity, but also stands as the core value of purpose that underpins the underlying logic of the *UN Charter*.

The teleological value of human rights provides a spiritual impetus and ethical benchmark for the *UN Charter*. All security policies and development practices established by the *UN Charter* shall ultimately be measured by whether they serve to respect and protect fundamental human rights, as well as the dignity and worth of the human person. Kofi Annan, former secretary-general of the UN, incisively elaborated on the nexus between human rights and security and development: “we will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights.”⁶ Security constitutes the foundation for people to live free from fear and have their subsistence guaranteed; without the prerequisite of peaceful and stable security, economic and social development would be out of the question, and human rights protection would be even more unattainable.⁷ Development aims to eradicate scarcity and transform the social underpinnings where conflicts breed. Most global conflicts stem from material deprivation and resource competition; development can eliminate such destabilizing factors, achieve security and order, and create essential conditions for the advancement of human rights. It is thus clear that security and development ultimately serve the realization of universal enjoyment of fundamental human rights, and the dignity and worth of all people. Should security policies be divorced from the goal of protecting fundamental human rights — the dignity and worth of the human person —

⁴ Second Meeting of Committee I/1, Documents of the United Nations Conference on International Organization, vol. 6, San Francisco, 1945, page 277.

⁵ Jan Herman Burgers, “The Road to San Francisco: The Revival of the Human Rights Idea in the Twentieth Century,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1992): 474.

⁶ Statement by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the United Nations General Assembly: “In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All,” available at the UN official website, accessed October 24, 2025, <https://docs.un.org/zh/A/59/2005>.

⁷ Liu Qing, “Implications of the Global Security Initiative for Human Rights Governance,” *International Studies* 1 (2023): 2.

they risk degenerating into mere coercive control. Should development practices deviate from the goal of realizing the all-round and free development of human beings and the well-being of people, they may lead to a grave imbalance between growth and equity. Therefore, within the profound value system of the *UN Charter*, human rights, as a teleological value, perform normative and critical functions for the goals of security and development. They require that the entire course of security and development must take respect and protection of fundamental human rights — the dignity and worth of the human person — as their spiritual impetus and ethical benchmark. This teleological value of human rights serves as the ultimate yardstick of international justice, and it plays an indispensable role of spiritual guidance and ethical restraint in preventing all countries and the UN organs from exploiting the *UN Charter* to slide into hegemonic polarization and unjust aberrations.

The human rights system furnishes the UN with authoritative moral strength for the exercise of its functions. The UN is the most universal and authoritative intergovernmental international organization in the world today, and the fundamental driving force for its establishment, survival and development stems not only from the practical needs of sovereign states to uphold international peace and security, but also, more profoundly, from its teleological pursuit of fundamental human rights — the dignity and worth of the human person. During the Cold War, the confrontation between the two major blocs and the contest over development models put the UN system in jeopardy. Nevertheless, the UN system did not collapse precisely because the human rights system acted as its “last bulwark.” If security and development have provided sovereign states with utilitarian motivations to participate in international affairs, the teleological value of human rights has checked the selfish interests and hegemonic polarization impulses of all countries. “Despite the divergences among the diverse concepts, institutions and models of human rights in the international community, human rights values and principles constitute the greatest common denominator therein.”⁸ The human rights system endows the international community with an intrinsic morality that transcends national interests, and this constitutes the ultimate source of legitimacy and authority for the UN system, which lacks coercive enforcement power.

II. The Human Rights System Provides Value Guidance for the Reconstruction of the UN Governance Paradigm

The international order with the UN at its core must be grounded in international law, rather than yielding to the “individual rules” advocated by hegemonic states out of self-interest. This constitutes the cornerstone for safeguarding the legitimacy, legality and authority of the UN system.⁹ In the first 40 years of the UN’s history, although the main framework of the international human rights law system with the *International Bill of Human Rights* at its core had already taken shape, human rights issues remained latent and obscured amid the Cold War confrontation between the two blocs and geopolitical constraints, and the human rights system was generally

⁸ Mao Junxiang, “The Relativity of the Human Rights Universality,” *Social Sciences in China* 1 (2025): 138.

⁹ Cai Congyan, “On ‘International Law-Based International Order’,” *Social Sciences in China* 1 (2023): 24.

suspended in practice. During this period, the UN system primarily served the interests of Western countries. By monopolizing the power to formulate, interpret and enforce UN rules, these countries wielded the UN to dictate to the rest of the world, turning their selfish interests into superficially legitimate norms of international conduct, all for the fundamental purpose of maintaining their unipolar dominant status and the global expansion of capital.¹⁰ As the UN entered its four-decade development phase after the end of the Cold War, Western hegemonic powers seized upon “human rights” as a new moral high ground and instrument of intervention. Nevertheless, this objectively triggered the movement of human rights mainstreaming in the UN’s undertakings. The UN’s human rights legislation has been continuously improved, and its human rights-related mechanisms have become increasingly refined. All major reform initiatives of the UN have repeatedly reaffirmed human rights as its core value orientation, and the human rights mainstreaming movement in the UN’s work has gained unstoppable momentum. For instance, the 1993 *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*¹¹ explicitly mandated that human rights should be accorded priority status and cross-institutional coordination within the work of the UN system. With the further advancement of the UN’s human rights mainstreaming movement, China, together with the vast number of developing countries, has upheld the philosophy that human rights are historical, concrete and realistic in nature, and successfully counterbalanced the so-called “natural human rights theory” espoused by the West. Gradually, the UN has transcended its positioning in its first 40 years as a mere instrument for hegemonic powers to contend for and confront over interests, and evolved into a regulatory force and constructive mechanism bearing on the common well-being of humanity. This constituted the first reconstruction of the UN governance paradigm by the human rights system. A defining feature of this reconstruction is the progressive development of international law under the value guidance of human rights, which has guided the UN to return to the teleological values enshrined in the *UN Charter*.

The international system with the UN at its core and international law as the foundation of the international order are two facets of the same reality. The international system provides the authority and organizational vehicle, while international law constitutes the normative foundation for its existence. In essence, international law is the birth certificate, the legal basis for survival and the ground for action of the UN. “The UN was established and exercises its functions in accordance with international law.”¹² All interpretations and understandings of the UN system that deliberately circumvent international law run counter to the overarching purposes of the *UN Charter*, and are invariably pursued for the sake of establishing an order grounded in hegemony. Such an order is, in essence, an externalization of power politics, with its rules serving the selfish interests of dominant states and bearing arbitrary and coercive traits. Lacking a universally recognized moral and legal

¹⁰ Sun Meng, *China and the UN Human Rights Mechanism* (Beijing: China University of Political Science and Law Press, 2020), 20.

¹¹ World Conference on Human Rights, “Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action,” note/by the Secretariat, A/CONF. 157/23, 1993.

¹² Zeng Lingliang, “The Role of the United Nations in Promoting the Development of International Rule of Law,” *Studies in Law and Business* 2 (2011): 113.

foundation, this order can hardly garner broad consensus, and is bound to elicit resistance from other actors, plunging the system into persistent instability characterized by “the unbridled arbitrariness of the strong and the perpetual anxiety of the weak.” At best, it can only achieve a fragile coercive equilibrium. On the contrary, as an impersonal authority, international law first endows the international order with credibility through the principles of sovereign equality, transparency of rules and procedural justice, furnishing all countries with clear and stable behavioral expectations.¹³ It then channels power into the rule of law through institutional constraints, ensuring that the rights and obligations of all countries are clearly defined and effectively safeguarded. Ultimately, it elevates interactions among states from a power-based zero-sum game to a sound competition and cooperation underpinned by international law.

The human rights system provides value guidance for the progressive development of international law. In recent decades, together with the vast number of developing countries, China has advanced the transformation and restructuring of the international legal system from one centered on interstate coexistence to one oriented toward global cooperation. In the process of improving the international legal system, international human rights law has not only developed rapidly as an independent branch of international law, but also provided fundamental value guidance for legislating in the UN’s core functional areas, driving international law toward a transition to substantive justice. The progressive development of international law has gradually moved beyond the traditional isolated issues of security and development, and instead been anchored in the broader and more profound foundations of fundamental human right — the dignity and worth of the human person. Security rights and development rights themselves have also been recognized as inalienable fundamental human rights. International law is no longer merely a tool for balancing national interests; respecting and protecting fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person has become its ultimate objective. Take international humanitarian law as an example: its long-established principle of protecting civilians inherently echoes the principles of the right to life and dignity enshrined in human rights law.¹⁴ In the field of international environmental law, the right to development and the right to a healthy environment are intertwined, prompting climate change negotiations to focus on intergenerational equity and climate justice for vulnerable groups.¹⁵ In international trade and investment law, human rights standards have become an important consideration in interpreting the “public morality exception” clauses. Attention to issues such as business and human rights, as well as labor standards, has also grown steadily, seeking to strike a balance between economic development and social justice.¹⁶ In the field of children’s rights, countries have

¹³ Song Yunbo, “Rethinking and Reformation on ‘Rules’ of the ‘Rule-Based International Order’,” *Journal of Political Science and Law* 5 (2025): 114.

¹⁴ The rules (mainly Rules 1-6) and practices on the distinction between civilians and combatants under customary international humanitarian law (IHL), available at the IHL Databases, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/zh/customary-ihl/v1>.

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly, “The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment,” A/RES/76/300, July 28, 2022.

¹⁶ Ursula Kriebaum, “Human Rights and International Investment Law,” in *Research Handbook on*

embedded the principle of the best interests of the child into their domestic laws and policies, integrated children's rights into the entire process of public governance, and established institutional and procedural safeguards. This trend has in turn promoted the growing independence and universality of children's rights protection in international law.¹⁷ In summary, one of the main threads running through the refinement of international lawmaking in recent decades is the shift of human rights values from the periphery to the center. Core principles such as dignity, equality, non-discrimination and accountability provided by human rights legislation have acted as a red line of values, guiding international law's evolution from a formalized set of rules into a more inclusive global legal order that takes human well-being as its ultimate purpose.

International law guided by human rights values has provided institutional support for the UN to expand its functions, and laid the benchmark for the legality of international conduct in the UN's practice of global governance. The functions and work priorities of the UN are not set in stone; instead, they need to adapt to the times and respond to the structural transformations of the international community. All actions of the UN — whether it be the intervention decisions adopted by the Security Council to uphold international peace and security, the policy coordination implemented by the Economic and Social Council to promote development, or the daily administrative tasks of the Secretariat — must ultimately be carried out on the basis of international law, and subject to the ultimate test of whether they serve to respect and protect fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person. When the UN's actions conform to and advance the cause of human rights protection, its legitimacy is strengthened; conversely, it will face moral questioning and a legitimacy crisis.

In recent years, beyond security issues, the UN has markedly increased its emphasis on the integration of development and human rights, stressing the priority of protecting the common interests of all humanity and individual dignity. The UN has placed growing emphasis on the protection of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as “joint and several rights” such as the right to development and the right to a healthy environment, so as to address the common challenges facing humanity in the era of globalization, including poverty, inequality, and climate change.¹⁸ The continuous improvement of the UN's human rights mechanisms and the standardization of its human rights work are the concentrated manifestations of this shift. The UN has established a vast and sophisticated “universal” human rights protection mechanism, including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Special Rapporteur system, various human rights treaty monitoring bodies and the Human

Human Rights and Investment Yannick Radi ed. Edward Elgar, 2018, page 13-40.

¹⁷ Liu Huawen, “The Role of International Human Rights Law in Grassroots Governance: An Example of Children's Rights,” *Local Legislation Journal* 5 (2021): 134-136.

¹⁸ Qi Yanping, “On Institutional Protection of the Right to Development,” *Study & Exploration* 2 (2008): 100. For another example, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development closely links goals such as poverty eradication, inequality reduction and climate action with human rights principles. See United Nations General Assembly Resolution “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” September 25, 2015, available at the UN official website, accessed October 1, 2025, <https://docs.un.org/zh/A/RES/70/1>.

Rights Council, translating abstract human rights ideals into concrete monitoring, promotion and protection actions.¹⁹ The work of UN specialized agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is, in essence, the fulfillment of the mission to respect and protect fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person in specific fields. Mainstreaming is based on the premise that there are no so-called “technical” solutions to issues such as underdevelopment, poverty or food insecurity; these issues are inherently linked to human rights.²⁰ Such functional practices rooted in human rights protection have enabled the UN to act as a provider of global public goods and a guardian of the common interests of humanity, thereby garnering extensive recognition and support.

In conclusion, international law guided by human rights values has continuously expanded its connotation amid sustained development, providing the internal driving force and interpretive framework for the reconstruction of the UN governance paradigm. From the first-generation human rights that initially focused on civil and political rights, to the second-generation human rights that emphasized economic, social and cultural rights, and further to the third-generation human rights that concern collective rights such as the right to development and the right to a healthy environment, every expansion of the connotation of human rights has driven the UN to continuously broaden its agenda and governance functions.²¹ This has made human rights the value foundation for the UN’s agenda-setting and institutional innovation, as well as the strategic fulcrum for the UN to gain governance legitimacy, enhance institutional resilience and expand the boundaries of its actions. While guiding the UN’s development direction, international law based on human rights values has also endowed the UN with moral appeal and operational legitimacy that transcend utilitarian calculations.

III. The Human Rights System Guides the UN Toward Transformation into a Mechanism for Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

The human rights mainstreaming movement within the UN, which began in the 1990s, has driven the transformation of UN governance from a “security — development paradigm” to a “security — development — human rights paradigm.” Nevertheless, it has yet to completely break free from the constraints of Western hegemonic unipolarism.²² At present, as the world undergoes an unprecedented

¹⁹ Mao Junxiang, “The Generative Logic of the International Human Rights Mechanism,” *Contemporary Law Review* 6 (2022): 56.

²⁰ Gerd Oberleitner, “A Decade of Mainstreaming Human Rights in the UN: Achievements, Failures, Challenges,” *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2008): 388.

²¹ Lu Guangjin, “The Historical Position and Value Dimensions of Human Rights Civilization,” *The Journal of Human Rights* 1 (2024): 19-20.

²² Its main characteristics are manifested as follows: politicizing and instrumentalizing human rights to serve geopolitical hegemony; monopolizing the interpretation of “universal values” through Western standards; advocating “human rights above sovereignty” to provide an excuse for interventionism; and practicing selectivity and “double standards” in practice.

transformation unseen in a century, the UN governance paradigm is ushering in a process of “reconstruction” led by Global South countries and guided by the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. The “reconstruction” requires replacing hegemonic unipolarism with a community with a shared future for mankind at the worldview level, adhering to “taking human rights as a method” at the methodological level, and upholding “promoting human rights through development.”

First, the human rights system drives the transformation of the UN’s traditional security functions into human rights-based security functions. The traditional conception of security takes international peace and security as its goal, focusing primarily on resolving international disputes and halting acts that threaten or undermine peace and constitute aggression against other countries. Under this paradigm, the tools employed by the UN to perform its security functions mainly consist of political mediation, economic sanctions and even military intervention, embodying a “negative peace and security” concept oriented toward conflict response. To address the peace deficit and security deficit in an era fraught with changes and turmoil, the UN’s human rights mainstreaming movement needs to be upgraded and advanced. It should not only elevate fundamental human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person to the status of the ultimate goals of the UN’s peace and security functions, but also advocate “taking human rights as a method” to reorganize the UN’s security practices.

Security and human rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.²³ There exists an inherent connection between “respecting and protecting human rights” and “upholding peace and security,” because systematic violations of human rights have increasingly become the root cause and trigger of modern interstate conflicts and wars. Genuine and complete peace and security are not merely negative peace and security free of war; they must also be positive peace and security where all countries uphold and implement the principles of international human rights protection. Modern UN peacekeeping mandates often include such authorizations as protecting civilians and promoting human rights.²⁴ In this context, security is understood as a form of “positive peace and security” that needs to be sustained through the rule of law, governance and human rights protection, rather than mere peace and security enforced by military force. Building effective human rights accountability mechanisms and judicial remedy institutions for human rights is regarded as the cornerstone of constructing durable peace. Therefore, the focus of security work has extended from conflict resolution to post-conflict justice and reconciliation.²⁵ This shift has broken the one-dimensional linear thinking of “security first, governance later.” It requires that all UN interventions — from conflict prevention to humanitarian assistance, and from

²³ Liu Qing, “Implications of the Global Security Initiative for Human Rights Governance,” *International Studies* 4 (2023): 1; Yu Tiejun, “Safeguard Human Rights Through Security,” *Study Times*, June 16, 2023, 2.

²⁴ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1894 (2009), S/RES/1894 (2009), November 11, 2009. This resolution reaffirms that the protection of civilians is an important mandate of peacekeeping missions.

²⁵ For more information, see Department of Peace Operations, the United Nations, “Protection of Civilians,” available at the UN official website, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/zh/protecting-civilians>.

peacekeeping to development projects — must take the respect and protection of human rights as their ultimate goal and fundamental method. In doing so, it has achieved an in-depth reorganization of the UN's security functions at both the value and practical levels.

Second, the human rights system drives the transformation of the UN's traditional development concept centered on unipolar economic growth toward the paradigm of “promoting human rights through development.” The traditional development concept regards development as a one-dimensional, linear, technical process, focusing primarily on quantifiable indicators such as infrastructure construction and economic growth. In an era fraught with changes and turmoil, the development deficit and human rights deficit are mutually reinforcing. China has elevated the intellectual alignment between the discourse on development and that on rights to a new level, arguing that human rights protection is inseparable from economic and social development,²⁶ asserting that development holds the key to resolving all issues,²⁷ and calling for the advancement of human rights through development.

The *UN Declaration on the Right to Development* affirms that the right to development is an inalienable human right and that development itself constitutes a human right, whose process must conform to human rights standards.²⁸ This means that development goals (e.g., poverty alleviation) must be achieved through human rights-compliant approaches (e.g., participation, non-discrimination, accountability), and all subjects of development are entitled to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives: as duty-bearers, states and other actors are obligated to respect, protect and fulfill the right to development. The distributive justice of development outcomes requires addressing systemic inequalities and discrimination, and establishing accountability mechanisms to hold authorities responsible for the consequences of development policies. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development takes “no one will be left behind” as its core pledge, which essentially translates the right to development into actionable global goals and closely links states' obligations for economic development with individuals' enjoyment of rights.²⁹ This demonstrates that the UN is seeking to explore a new governance path of “promoting human rights through development” by deeply integrating human rights and development, and to build a more inclusive and sustainable global development model. This “reconstruction” guided by the path of promoting human rights through development is driving the UN's development policies to evolve from a process focused on pursuing economic outcomes to a rights-based practice that advances social justice, enhances human capabilities, and safeguards human dignity.

²⁶ Liao Yi, “Knowledge Alignment Between Development and Discourse of Rights — On the ‘Jurisprudential’ Analysis,” *Law Science* 9 (2025): 16.

²⁷ Institute of Party History and Literature of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2021), 47.

²⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration on the Right to Development*, A/RES/41/128, December 4, 1986.

²⁹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” September 25, 2015, available at the UN official website, accessed October 1, 2025, <https://docs.un.org/zh/A/RES/70/1>.

Third, the human rights system is driving the transformation of the UN from an instrument of hegemonic unipolarism into a mechanism for building a community with a shared future for mankind. The proposal of the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind has created possibilities for the renewal of the worldview of the international community amid an era fraught with changes and turmoil. If a selfish and fragmented worldview is adopted, it will inevitably lead to a confrontational and zero-sum strategy of action. The vision of a community with a shared future for mankind has not only provided a theoretical foundation for the iterative development of human rights in the international community, but also reshaped the value hierarchy of international law, improved the framework of “joint and several rights,” balanced the relationship between sovereignty and human rights, and strengthened the international rule of law and world order. In doing so, it has significantly elevated the priority of human rights values in international law,³⁰ driven the reconstruction of the value foundation and functional logic of international law, and furnished normative force and institutional support for the UN to transform and reconstruct itself from an instrument of hegemonic unipolarism into a mechanism for building a community with a shared future for mankind.

The traditional UN governance paradigm was premised primarily on Western-centrism and underpinned by the governance logic of hegemonic unipolarism. In the long-term process of countering hegemonic unipolarism, China, together with other developing countries, has upheld the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind, adhered to the foundation of international law, advocated the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs, rejected unilateralism and hegemonic intervention, and jointly safeguarded the authority of the UN as the most universal and representative international organization. As Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, noted: “Countries should uphold the international system with the United Nations at its core, the international order underpinned by international law and the basic norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the *UN Charter*.”³¹ China advocates building a community with a shared future for mankind, promotes the reform of UN organs including the Security Council, increases the representativeness and voice of developing countries, and commits itself to redressing the long-standing power imbalance within the UN. These efforts aim to make the UN better reflect the multipolar reality of the international landscape in the 21st century and enhance the resilience and long-term soundness of the UN system.

At present, the global governance system is confronted with an intertwined predicament of “peace deficit, development deficit, security deficit, and governance deficit.” In response, Chinese President Xi Jinping has successively put forward the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization

³⁰ Liang Kaiyin, “The Expression of the Concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind in International Law,” *China Legal Science* 4 (2025): 8.

³¹ Xi Jinping, “Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China at the Conference Marking the 50th Anniversary of the Restoration of the Lawful Seat of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations,” available at the official website of the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, accessed October 1, 2025, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-10/25/content_5644755.htm.

Initiative, and the Global Governance Initiative.³² The Global Development Initiative advocates putting people at the center and pursuing universal benefit and inclusiveness; the Global Security Initiative calls for abiding by the purposes and principles of the *UN Charter* and resolving differences and disputes between countries peacefully through dialogue and consultation; the Global Civilization Initiative champions respecting the diversity of world civilizations and upholding the equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness of civilizations; the Global Governance Initiative emphasizes sovereign equality and people-centeredness. It is evident that these four Global Initiatives are deeply rooted in the purposes and principles of the *UN Charter*. The propositions such as putting people at the center and people-centeredness fully embody the spirit of fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person enshrined in the *UN Charter*. The systematic propositions of the four Global Initiatives, including the above-mentioned key points, break through the traditional logic based on confrontation over national interests. Areas such as security, development, and human rights are no longer treated in isolation; instead, they function in an integrated and coordinated manner, forming a synergy for structural transformation.

China and other developing countries are actively leveraging the UN mechanisms to translate the governance logic embodied in the four Global Initiatives into concrete international norms. In terms of norm-setting, resolutions promoted by China at the Human Rights Council in recent years, including “The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human Rights,”³³ “Promoting Mutually Beneficial Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights,”³⁴ and “Human Rights and Unilateral Coercive Measures,”³⁵ have all garnered overwhelming support from Global South countries. These resolutions have reshaped the priorities of the human rights agenda at the level of international law-making. Together, they constitute the normative expression of the four Global Initiatives within the UN human rights framework. In terms of supervision practice, China, together with other developing countries, has advanced the UPR mechanism on the basis of equality and non-confrontation. This has effectively counterbalanced the inherent selectivity, political confrontation and double standards of the “Country Mandates” — a legacy of the former Commission on Human Rights — that targeted specific countries, usually developing nations. In terms of special procedures, particularly “Thematic Mandates,” countries of the Global South are actively promoting the establishment and support of special rapporteurs for mandates such as “the adverse impact of unilateral coercive measures on the

³² Xi Jinping, “Promoting the Implementation of the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative, and the Global Governance Initiative,” *Qiushi Journal* 20 (2025).

³³ Resolution “The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human Rights,” (A/HRC/RES/59/19), adopted by the Human Rights Council on July 8, 2025. Notably, this marks the first time the resolution has been adopted by consensus rather than by vote since 2017.

³⁴ Resolution “Promoting Mutually Beneficial Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights” (A/HRC/RES/37/23), adopted by the Human Rights Council on March 23, 2018.

³⁵ Resolution “Human Rights and Unilateral Coercive Measures” (A/HRC/RES/45/5), adopted by the Human Rights Council on October 6, 2020.

enjoyment of human rights”³⁶ and “issues of the right to development.”³⁷ They leverage the independent reports of these mandate holders to catalyze the critique and rectification of the unjust traditional international order, countering the one-sided emphasis on civil and political rights under the traditional governance paradigm. This not only echoes the call to oppose unilateral sanctions in the Global Security Initiative, but also aligns with the priority attached to the right to development in the Global Development Initiative. In this process, the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind and the human rights perspective underpinned by it have been increasingly embedded in the UN’s governance practices. This is conducive to fundamentally deconstructing and dismantling the traditional governance logic of unipolarism, and driving the UN’s governance toward greater equity, justice, openness, and inclusiveness.

In summary, the human rights system has driven the UN to keep pace with the trend of building a community with a shared future for mankind through continuous self-renewal and the reconstruction of its governance paradigm. At present, humanity is accelerating its entry into a digital-intelligent society, where human rights protection faces new opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, digital technologies provide new tools for enhancing the capacity for human rights protection — for instance, big data analysis and intelligent monitoring can more efficiently identify humanitarian crises, prevent conflicts and advance development agendas. On the other hand, issues such as the digital divide and algorithmic discrimination may exacerbate global inequality and impact the existing human rights protection framework. Amid a global landscape fraught with uncertainties, the UN needs to evolve from an institution centered on security cooperation into a global governance hub oriented toward “benefiting the vast majority of the world’s population.”³⁸ Only by upholding the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind, respecting and protecting fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person, and advancing the reform of its governance paradigm on a “human rights-based” foundation, can the UN — as a mechanism for building a community with a shared future for mankind — forge international consensus, continuously gain the recognition and support of its member states and their peoples, and effectively address common challenges including emerging digital-intelligent risks.

(Translated by *LI Donglin*)

³⁶ For the resolution establishing the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, see Resolution “Human Rights and Unilateral Coercive Measures” (A/HRC/RES/27/21), adopted by the Human Rights Council on October 3, 2014.

³⁷ For the resolution establishing the Special Rapporteur on the right to development, see Resolution “The Right to Development” (A/HRC/RES/33/14), adopted by the Human Rights Council on September 29, 2016.

³⁸ Ding Huang, “On ‘What Makes Governance Work’ in Global Governance,” *Social Sciences in China* 3 (2025): 112.