Contesting the digital world order: China's national role strategy in changing the norms of global internet governance

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Abstract

This article aims to understand China's national role conceptions and strategy within the context of the World Internet Conference (WIC). The Chinese government uses this conference to promote its model of internet governance known as cyber sovereignty. The foreign policy behaviour of China (role performance) as well as role prescriptions from the US are also analysed. A novel approach based on frame analysis is taken to uncover China's national role conceptions. The related frames in this article are then categorized into national roles. China performs four national roles as part of its strategy to reshape international internet governance norms: developer, global village member, global leader, and law-abiding citizen. This article concludes that the national roles in the WIC are aimed at developing and emerging countries in order to increase China's power and win gradual support for the cyber sovereignty model.

Keywords

China; Cyber Sovereignty; Global Governance; Institutions and Norms; Internet Governance; Multistakeholderism; National Roles; World Internet Conference.

Introduction

In November 2018, the fifth World Internet Conference (WIC) was held in the city of Wuzhen, China. Since its inception in 2014, the WIC has hosted some of the world's top tech leaders. Previous speakers at the WIC include Alibaba's Jack Ma, Apple's Tim Cook and even Google's Sundar Pichai. The theme of the fifth conference was "Creating a Digital World for Mutual Trust and Collective Governance – Toward a Community with Shared Future in Cyberspace". This theme is not unique; each conference has had nearly identical themes hinting at the restructuring of global governance norms. The objective of these conferences is not sharing technological innovations so much as it is about creating a stage to discuss the global norms of Internet governance. The WIC is hosted by the Zhejiang Provincial People's Government and the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the government's central internet regulatory agency, making the conference useful for analysing the Chinese government's foreign policy in global internet governance (GIG).

This article uses national role theory as conceptualized by Holsti (1970) to determine how the Chinese government is using the WIC in order to reshape the GIG structure. National role theory posits that nation-states often behave in certain ways (role performance) to increase their decision-making power in international relations. This article also analyses to what extent these strategies have been successful. The article argues that China performs four distinct roles within the WIC: developer, global leader, global village member, and law-abiding citizen. These roles are used in varying circumstances to influence developing and emerging countries to adopt China's preferred governance model – cyber sovereignty. This strategy falls immensely short of influencing any changes in the current liberal GIG structure because it has no impact on nations with the most decision-making power. Instead, however, the WIC is part of a gradual approach by China to build its international influence within the GIG regime by winning the support of countries with developing or emerging economies.

This article is structured as followed. First, the literature on the GIG structures is reviewed with respect to two competing GIG models: multistakeholderism and cyber sovereignty. China's domestic governance concerns in relation to foreign policy are also discussed. Then a brief narrative of China's message at the WIC is provided to begin the analysis of China's national roles in the WIC. In this section, the method and its application to national role theory is explained. As a preface for the reader, each of the four roles discussed in this section contain multiple frames. The fact that there are several frames in a role implicitly shows that role conception and performance is multilayered. When someone plays the role of a leader in daily life, for example, there can be multiple dimensions to that role, such as being decisive, but at the same time willing to listen, trust and compromise. Comparably, there are also multiple dimensions to diplomatic roles, such as those

performed by China with respect to GIG. The next section is an analysis of China's role conceptions and role performance in the WIC. Finally, the impact of China's role performance in contesting global governance norms is examined.

The multistakeholder model vs. cyber sovereignty

The literature on China's interactions within the Global Internet Governance structure overwhelmingly tells the story of a power struggle between the Chinese government and the current US-dominated Internet governance model (Arsène, 2016; Galloway and He, 2014; Liu, 2012). This struggle is largely predicated on one question: "Who should be in charge of governing the Internet?" China believes nations should hold the decision-making power in the GIG regime (Cai, 2018; Galloway and He, 2014; Jiang, 2010). This model of governance, known as cyber sovereignty, comes from the traditional Westphalian concept of sovereignty (Demchak and Dombrowski, 2013). This model is at odds with the current multistakeholder governance model, which gives governments, civil society and the private sector equal roles in the GIG regime. The official definition of Internet governance, which legitimates the multistakeholder model, states that:

> Internet governance is the development and application by governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet (WGIG, 2005: 4).

China actively contests this model, often on the basis of improving cybersecurity (Chenou and Radu, 2014). In contrast, a report by the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) states that "measures taken in relation to the Internet on grounds of security or to fight crime can lead to violations of the provisions for freedom of expression" (WGIG, 2005: 7). The US continues to use this argument in support of the multistakeholder model (Kruger, 2016) while Chinese academics claim that this model increases the power of the US to force its will on other nations (Arsène, 2016). China, therefore, supports the formation of an intergovernmental agency "in which it will have greater power and remove US hegemony" (Galloway and He, 2014: 86), a statement corroborated by other scholars (Cai, 2018; Liu, 2012). To reach this goal, China has learned to moderate its stance in order to avoid alienation in decision-making processes (Galloway and He, 2014: 75). The Chinese government continues to adapt its strategy through moderation and adoption of some aspects of the liberal, multistakeholder model (Hart and Johnson, 2019), albeit with a distinctively Chinese interpretation (Cai, 2018). Yet, the US still dominates the GIG regime, and some believe the system simply cannot be changed because it would involve adapting the policies of all nations to a single locale (Mueller, 2010: 186).

China, along with most of the developing world, has supported cyber sovereignty as a better alternative to multistakeholderism, whose proponents[1] are actually in the minority (Weber, 2014). States supporting cyber sovereignty often do so on the grounds that the status quo favours a US-led, techno-imperialist regime at odds with democratic decision-making, which "allows the US to enforce rather easily its domestic policies, at times with extraterritorial effects" (Hill, 2014: 86). This can be disastrous for the political legitimacy of authoritarian states like China. Cyber sovereignty is not only a way to firmly establish cyber territoriality based on a country's own borders, but also to diminish the hegemonic power of the Western-led, liberal order. Deng states that, for China, sovereignty "constitutes the key ingredient for a truly new world order of equality, peace, and justice," (Deng, 2001). Therefore, China continues to promote multilateralism in favour of states, democracy in terms of international decision-making processes, and transparency in a way that makes the rules of GIG available and applicable to all states (Cai, 2018). China does not want to overhaul the entire GIG regime, but rather to tweak the system in the favour of states.

China's domestic Internet governance concerns

Understanding China's domestic concerns develops a more complete picture of the government's foreign strategy. The Chinese government sees solving its domestic Internet governance issues as a necessary prerequisite to participating in the GIG regime (Cai, 2018: 69). In China, domestic stability and national security are more important than individual freedoms, and this influences the government's position on GIG norms (Jiang, 2010; Cai, 2018). Scholars have also stressed the importance of domestic structures and political contestation in national role theory (Brummer and Thies, 2015; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012), which is the central framework of this article.

The most obvious form of political contestation in China is between the government and the masses. The government has been active in addressing citizen complaints, and although social unrest in China tends to be high, it does not pose a threat to the government's legitimacy (Göbel and Ong, 2012). This is partly because online political contention rarely materializes in the real world (Yang, 2008), and the Chinese government's domestic strategies and institutions are adaptable and responsive to public opinion, reducing the need for protest mobilization (Dickson, 2005). Li (2007) predicted three possible scenarios for China's government in 2020, namely: democracy, chaos, or business as usual. As that time has nearly arrived, it seems safe to say that it is business as usual in Beijing.

Jiang notes that "Beijing's cyber approach and practices are inseparable from its promotion of legitimacy in five major areas: the economy, nationalism, ideology, culture, and governance" (Jiang, 2010: 72). Some observers have claimed that the Internet would lead to Chinese democracy

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[1] This includes most liberal countries such as the US and member states of the European Union.

(Endeshaw, 2004) while other scholars note that China has more concrete power thanks to the Internet (Jiang, 2010; MacKinnon, 2011; Qin, Strömberg and Wu, 2017). China's domestic internet policies help generate legitimacy in the form of economic growth, social stability and national identity (Jiang 2010: 82). These policies implicitly require cyber sovereignty, which makes it easier to regulate foreign influence. Cyber sovereignty also gives the Chinese government the legal basis to censor the internet on grounds of national security (Jiang, 2010: 83), which is often the basis for contention among supporters of the multistakeholder model (Freedom House, 2018; Kruger, 2016; WGIG, 2005). Thus, China's domestic governing strategy often conflicts with its desire to change international norms (Kahler, 2013).

Another point that ties China's domestic and foreign policy together is its desire to become an Internet superpower (Creemers, 2017; Wübbeke et al., 2016). Zhao (2009) predicted a political legitimacy crisis for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) due to China's slowing economy, but the domestic policies of Internet Plus and Made in China 2025 highlight the CCP's awareness of averting this crisis. Internet Plus, which focuses on the development of big data and the Internet of Things, has even generated significant economic growth in the household appliance industry (Ling, 2015). Made in China 2025 is currently China's largest national economic strategy, which aims to substitute foreign tech companies in China with indigenous companies and to develop an "industrial Internet" (Wübbeke et al., 2016). Cyber sovereignty is essential for the success of these policy goals. It is being vigorously studied by Chinese scholars who emphasize that cyber sovereignty has been widely recognized (Zheng and Zheng, 2018), and that, as a concept, it has the power to solve most major political issues in cyberspace (Zhu et al., 2016).

Galloway and He (2014: 72) note a gap in the literature on China's policy and strategy to change the structure of GIG. This article hopes to help fill this gap. Aside from looking at how China uses national roles to increase its norm-making power in the global order, it also serves as an in-depth look into China's foreign policy frames with respect to cyber sovereignty.

Role performance in the WIC – generating support for cyber sovereignty

The government's message at the WIC is basically the same every year. China promotes a vision to transform the current GIG regime based on the following principles: respect of cyber sovereignty, safeguarding peace and security, stimulating open cooperation, and building a good order (Xi, 2015). Xi Jinping has also put forward five positions in order to "jointly build a community of common destiny in cyberspace." These five positions were built on State Council Vice Premier Ma Kai's speech at the first WIC and later published in a document known as the "Wuzhen Initiative." This document was made available through the WIC website (CAC, 2015); the position points include:

1. Imperative to promote Internet deployment and development;

2. Fostering cultural diversity in cyberspace;

3. Sharing the fruits of Internet development;

4. Ensuring peace and security in cyberspace;
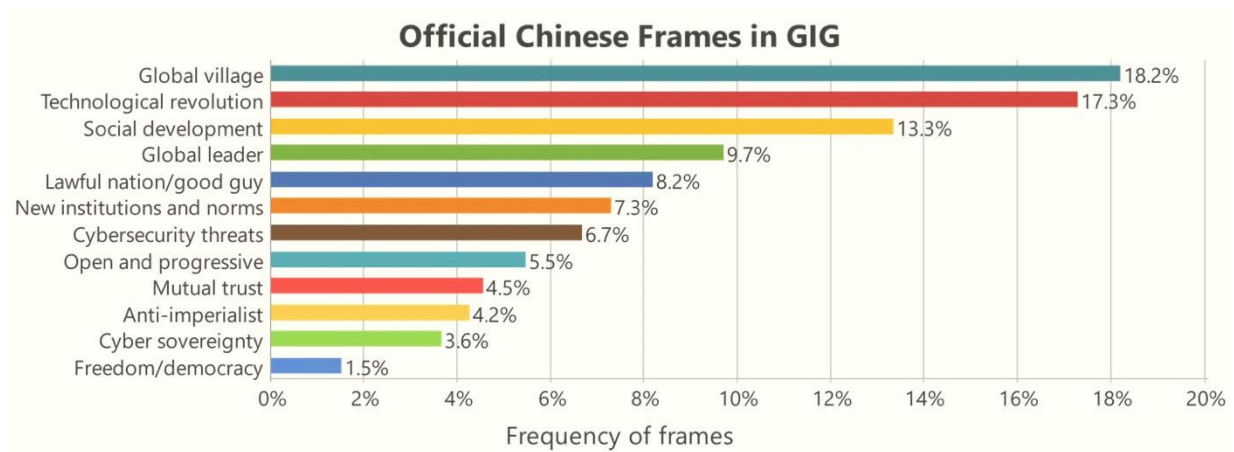
5. Improving the global Internet governance.

These positions are easily digestible for an audience that favours the GIG status quo. The principles and positions above have been repeated year after year at each WIC. There have only been slight tweaks to verbiage and articulation of these positions, indicating strong consensus and a decisive strategy on the part of the CAC and the Chinese government in general. These principles and positions can be found in many of the frames and roles uncovered below.

How does China frame global Internet governance?

Frame analysis and open coding of official speeches given at the WIC were used to uncover the national roles conceived by the Chinese government. Taking clauses as a base unit of analysis served the purposes of deconstructing frames to their smallest parts (individual words) while also producing a larger number of coded segments from a limited source (WIC speeches and documents). This method was influenced by Bondes and Heep (2012) who adapted frame analysis from social movement theory in order to analyse how the CCP frames ideology to generate political legitimacy. Frames can be defined as discursive structures constructed by an actor to justify a particular concept or system. Bondes and Heep (2012: 7) also state that frame analysis is "a useful tool for analysing the efforts of the ruling elites in authoritarian regimes to shape people's perceptions of political reality". As framing is largely connected to persuasion, it is also logically consistent to assume that governments also use framing to shape the perceptions of governmental and non-governmental actors in the global order as a means to change norms of international governance. Furthermore, the discursive nature of frames makes official speeches a direct source for analysing national role behaviour. Building on Bondes and Heep, who use official frames to explain how the central government creates a form of persuasion-based legitimacy, this research holds that the central government uses similar framing techniques to legitimize its stance on cyber sovereignty and increase its discursive influence.

Open coding resulted in twelve frames (see Chart 1), which exhibit how the Chinese government constructs issues of domestic and foreign internet governance. These frames are later divided into China's national roles in the WIC.

Chart 1. Official Frames in Chinese Internet Governance

Official Chinese Frames in GIG

Frame	Frequency
Global village	18.2%
Technological revolution	17.3%
Social development	13.3%
Global leader	9.7%
Lawful nation/good guy	8.2%
New institutions and norms	7.3%
Cybersecurity threats	6.7%
Open and progressive	5.5%
Mutual trust	4.5%
Anti-imperialist	4.2%
Cyber sovereignty	3.6%
Freedom/democracy	1.5%

Frequency of frames

Source: Author.

To demonstrate how frame analysis helps uncover implicit strategies and motives, it is worth looking at Xi Jinping's fundamental view on GIG in the following statement from his speech at the second WIC:

> We should respect each country's rights to choose its online development path, its network management model, its public internet policies and equal participation in international cyberspace governance, not engage in cyber hegemony, not interfere in other countries' internal affairs, and not engage in, tolerate or support online activities harming the national security of other countries. (Xi, 2015).

China has already explicitly stated its principles and positions via official speeches and the Wuzhen Initiative, all of which fall into a specific frame; however, there are more subtle frames in the quote above. "Harming the national security" is a *cybersecurity threats* frame, and "respect each country's rights" and "not interfere in other countries' internal affairs" are *cyber sovereignty* frames. An *anti-imperialist* frame is found within the clause "not engage in cyber hegemony."

Among the twelve frames uncovered in this analysis, the *global village*, *technological revolution*, and *social development* frames comprised approximately half of all coded segments, heavily suggesting that Chinese leaders stress these points more than contentious frames such as *anti-imperialist* and *cyber sovereignty*. Each of these frames reconstruct specific issues of GIG in ways meant to persuade global actors to adopt new governance norms. These frames are defined and explained in the following section.

Official frames

The *global village* frame stresses cooperative governance of the internet by all nations. The term "global village" itself is a signifier of this frame as are articulations of cooperation, commonness and togetherness, the importance of the internet in relation to mankind, and shared development.

The *technological revolution* frame shows China's commitment to developing a digital economy. This frame looks purely at the issue of the domestic digital economies. Clauses relating the economy to technology, innovation and research signify this frame.

The *social development* frame is tied to ideas concerning cultural exchange and abstractions related to the improvement of society. Articulations of this frame reference improvements to livelihood in terms of culture and spirit[2], social development and stability, efficient administration and even, in some cases, big data.

The *global leader* frame is often accompanied by strong language that highlights China's power and will. Frequent references to size, netizen population and leadership roles in developing technology are used to legitimate China's authority as an international norm-maker and institution builder.

The *lawful nation/good guy* frame uses the ethos of international legal institutions (lawfulness) and the pathos of victimization (good guy) to justify why China has earned the right to be heard. Frequent references to respect of international law and willingness to cooperate with other countries define this frame. The *good guy* part of this frame is a reference to the tone and verbiage used to describe China's policy – the predicate "is willing to" indicates a tone that, despite an unfair balance in world order, China will take the high road, seeking no recompense for these inequities all for the sake of common progress.

The *new institutions and norms* frame uses a cooperative tone to suggest new governing institutions and rules that would apply to all nations. This frame often highlights China's solution to the current inequity in the system by stressing its "community of shared destiny in cyberspace."

The *cybersecurity threats* frame uses amped up language, discussing security concerns as both global and existential threats. This frame is expressed in phrases that use security, terrorism, attacks, and an overall tone that frames cyberspace as a warzone. This frame is an appeal to emotion.

The *open and progressive* frame appeals to the multistakeholder, liberal governance regime. This frame seeks to obscure China's domestic political realities, instead showing how China is a global team player, open to free trade, foreign investment and the basic principle of economic collaboration.

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[2] In Ma Kai's speech at the first WIC conference, he says "We will better use the Internet to strengthen the dissemination of excellent culture, strengthen the overall strength of the cultural industries, and effectively satisfy the people's various spiritual and cultural demands" (Ma, 2014).

The *mutual trust* frame is used by China to overcome realist, zero-sum game interpretations of international relations and diplomacy. The phrases "mutual trust" and "mutual respect" signify this frame as well as the language pointing to win-win situations and cooperation.

The *anti-imperialist* frame is used to criticize, though not directly naming, the cyber hegemony of the US. This is an active framing of the issues regarding the imbalance of power within the GIG regime. This frame is different than the *new institutions and norms* frame, which proposes suggestions rather than criticisms.

The *cyber sovereignty* frame is articulated by any reference to national sovereignty, cyber or otherwise. It correlates to text segments that contain "cyber sovereignty" or alternatively states the term in another way.

The *freedom/democracy* frame articulates freedom and democracy as tools to tackle the issue of social stability. Online freedom itself is expressed as being an important aspect of a flourishing internet – of course, with limits. In this frame, "democracy" refers to the structure of the global order; it is not in reference to individual freedom, as Cai has explained (Cai, 2018: 652). This frame is predominantly found in Xi Jinping's speech and the Wuzhen Initiative.[3] Later speeches abandon the use of this frame opting instead to work with the *open/progressive* frame. This is likely because the Chinese *freedom/democracy* frame is too inconsistent with Western conceptions of freedom and democracy.

Uncovering China's role conceptions

Each of the frames above contains a specific definition that guided the coding of additional segments of text. Yet, it was impossible to pull national role conceptions from each frame. While the *global village* and *global leader* frames were exceptions, other frames, like the *cyber sovereignty* frame, pose issues when attempting to interpret them as a national role.[4] Rather, these frames operate *within* a national role. To solve the issue of explaining China's conceptual framing of GIG issues in terms of national roles, it was necessary to search for a common ground between each of the frames. Essentially, frames alone are insufficient to describe China's strategy of influencing GIG norms within the framework of national role theory because role conception and performance can use multiple framing perspectives simultaneously.

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[3] Other than these documents, the *freedom/democracy* frame is mentioned only one more time in the 1st WIC speech, which as mentioned previously, is a reference to democratic structures of global governance. The decision to abandon this frame is the only major strategic shift made in the context of the WIC.

[4] To put it bluntly, a nation can be a member of a global village or a global leader, but it cannot be a "cyber sovereignty", a "technological revolution" or any other such abstract concept. I would further point out that the concept of a role and a frame are quite distinct, and thus it is logical to conceive that playing a role may influence how a nation uses multiple frames simultaneously.

Thus, a pattern was found in how the frames were combined in terms of role conception and performance. A single statement often contains several frames, illustrating how multiple frames can be projected within a single role. As an example, the *cyber sovereignty* frame is directly connected to frames such as the *anti-imperialist* and *social development* frames. The *cyber sovereignty* frame is indirectly connected to other frames since cyber sovereignty is seen by the Chinese government as a prerequisite for things like openness, mutual trust and new norms. And while there is a difference in the definition and articulation between the *cyber sovereignty* and *new institutions and norms* frames, they have an obvious relationship in the fact that cyber sovereignty is an institution[5] in itself. A category was created for those frames which call for new governing norms in GIG on the basis of fairness – and thus the Law-abiding Citizen role was established.

This process uncovered that, in the context of the WIC, Chinese leaders rely on four national roles: Global Leader, Global Village Member, Law-abiding Citizen, and Developer (see Appendix). Although China almost certainly projects more than four roles in global governance institutions generally, the roles discussed in this article satisfy the purpose analysing China's strategy in changing the GIG regime.

China's national role conceptions and performance

Role conceptions include China's national interests, attitudes, political values, and its socioeconomic needs (Holsti, 1970: 245), which have already, to a large extent, been analysed in the frame analysis above. Now we can look at how these frames intertwine and fit within a role.

One of the main roles that China projects is that of the Developer. Positioning itself as a developer allows China to be near the head of the table when it comes to issues affecting its domestic situation. This role helps China reap the benefits of economic growth and social stability that are vital for its political legitimacy (Jiang, 2010: 72, 77; Zhao, 2009) through collaborative development with other countries.[6] The *technology revolution*, *social development* and *cybersecurity* frames are all present within this role. This is a passive role, which is apparent from the language surrounding this role's frames; this includes a willingness and need to embrace, but not necessarily lead, global development in internet infrastructure, e-governance and cybersecurity. On the issue of cyber sovereignty, China, as the Developer, behaves in a logical, unemotional manner, treating this issue as purely socioeconomic, rather than political.

The next role conceived by China in the WIC is the Global Village Member. Here China positions itself as a willing and cooperative member of the existing GIG regime. Knowing that securing its domestic needs hinges on its bargaining power in the GIG regime, China plays a non-

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[5] This is according to Douglass North's (1991) definition of institutions as structures of political, social and economic organization.
[6] China's Belt and Road Initiative is one of the most obvious examples of this role in action.

confrontational role in order to find a voice. This is a strategy of "alter-casting," as described by He and Walker (2015: 377), in which China adopts language of the alter (the liberal West) in order to influence the discourse on international cyber policy. Another piece of evidence showing that China is only playing a role to improve its position, rather than truly taking the norms of the alter, is the limited activity of civil society organizations at the WIC (McKune and Ahmed, 2018: 3846). As civil society plays an important part in the multistakeholder model, statements that allude to this model without inclusion of civil society actors are empty. The *global village*, *open/progressive*, *freedom/democracy*, and *mutual trust* frames, which often adopt the discourse of the alter, can be found in this role conception. This role also has a passive dimension as China only plays this role as a participant. The following roles are more active conceptions.

China is beginning to view itself as an international decision maker that is to be respected and trusted. Zhang also calls China, "the second among equals in the Great Power club" (Zhang, 2016: 797), so it is unsurprising that China has conceived a Global Leader role for itself. The *global leader* frame clearly encompasses nearly all of the sources of this role conception (China's rise, size, and increasing technological development); however, the *mutual trust* and *new institutions and norms* frames are also present in this role. The *mutual trust* frame in this role signifies China's desire to lead benevolently. The *new institutions and norms frame* is used by China to reassert its intention to alter the existing system, namely its opposition to liberal solidarism (Zhang, 2016). As a global leader, China also sees itself as an institution builder (Ren, 2016). For instance, just as the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) successfully provided an alternative to the liberal institutions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Ren, 2016), the WIC is meant to replace institutions such as the multistakeholder Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the main decision-making institution in the GIG regime. China's behaviour in this role is that of a nation reestablishing itself in the liberal hierarchy within which it must operate when bargaining for new norms.

Finally, China also views itself as a Law-abiding Citizen. This role contains the most frames, but nevertheless they all have a common aspect that unite them under this role conception: fairness under the law. This role is somewhat counterintuitively active. Part of the identity of this role lies in its position as a victim to an unfair world order; however, in this role, China conceives itself as a nation that aims to correct this imbalance. China's self-awareness of being the "other" in the liberal hierarchy (Zhang, 2016: 806) is key to how this role is performed. This role is mainly a reaction to US hegemony. The role also highlights the righteousness of China, and thus, is meant to justify its foreign policy position. This role creates a strong basis for China to demonstrate its shared identity

with other developing nations. The *lawful nation/good guy, anti-imperialist, new institutions and norms, cybersecurity,* and *cyber sovereignty* frames are present in this role.

The speeches and documents analysed in this article are not only essential for analysing role conceptions, but also for looking at China's role performance. Role conceptions and performance are linked since "the fact of sovereignty implies that foreign policy decisions and actions (role performances) derive primarily from policymaker's role conceptions, domestic needs and demands, and critical events or trends in the external environment" (Holsti, 1970: 243). Role performance has already been touched on with respect to the activeness or passivity[7] of the conceived roles above. But how do these roles play out for China diplomatically?

Cyber sovereignty is a concept that many countries in the developing world can get behind. This includes the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to which Russia and India are partners, and "is perhaps one of the most successful examples of multilateral embrace of digital authoritarian norms and practices" (McKune and Ahmed, 2018: 3841). For these countries, China has used both its Developer and Law-abiding Citizen roles in advocating for cyber sovereignty. China as a Developer is attractive to developing nations who have an interest in social order and economic development, while the Law-abiding Citizen role is attractive to nations like Russia who oppose US cyber hegemony. China also attempts to influence the developed world via the Global Leader and Global Village Member roles. Offensively, as a global leader, China claims a legitimate place in setting global norms and demands to be taken seriously. Defensively, as a member of the global village, China highlights its commitment to a GIG regime that is mutually beneficial to all nations as well as an open and progressive internet. Still, developed nations seems unaffected by China's national role strategy. China's foreign internet policies have led to outcries from human rights organizations (McKune and Ahmed, 2018: 3841), indicating major resistance to the cyber sovereignty model from the developed world. Also, a report on the 2nd WIC attended by Xi Jinping published by a Hong Kong-based website, pessimistically describes the event as being a who's who of Third World nations, implying that the "developed nations in the West have not bought into China's multilateral program[8]" (Fang, 2015). Therefore, the question remains, if the developed nations of the world are not buying into China's promotion of norms at the WIC, then who is?

Conclusion: Has the WIC helped China to improve its position?

It is difficult to say whether the WIC has registered an impact on China's overall ability to influence global norms on Internet governance yet. Each year, the tone of the speeches given by

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[7] Holsti (1970: 286) provides an "activity-passivity" scale in his seminal work on national role theory.
[8] Here the "multilateral program" refers to cyber sovereignty and participation of governments, not civil society or private actors, in GIG (Cai, 2018: 652).

officials at the WIC seem to become softer in tone, more concise, and yet more definitive and consistent in purpose. That is to say, the speeches are articulated in a vastly different way than typical CCP party language, which uses specific phrases and terminology as part of a language "game" to adapt Marxist ideology (Holbig, 2013). This suggests, in part, China's use of alter-casting as a strategy. Still, by all accounts, China's foreign policy strategy within the WIC has had no impact on the status quo.

The US actively opposes any foreign policy to change the current GIG regime; that is, it considers supporters of cyber sovereignty to be revisionists.[9] Last year, the White House released a whitepaper that details the US commitment to maintaining the status quo in GIG, including promotion of the multistakeholder model and active prevention of "attempts to create state-centric frameworks" (White House, 2018: 25). A whitepaper from two years prior by the US Department of State (2016: 6) uses this exact terminology, showing consistent US foreign policy across two very different presidencies. Additionally, in the last meeting of the IGF, the Secretary General of the UN reaffirmed the commitment of the UN members to the multistakeholder model (United Nations Secretary General, 2018). Western media's analysis of the WIC also provide insight into China's role with one author calling the WIC "hilariously farcical and unsettling" (Shu, 2014). Freedom House's yearly "Freedom on the Net" reports are widely cited and annually castigate China for its internet policies, which is a sign that Western civil society also remains unaffected by China's role performance. If anything, the WIC may be having a negative impact on China's image among Western countries. China's roles within the WIC are, however, framed in such a way as to avoid being labelled a revisionist power in the global order; the Global Village Member role most obviously illustrates this point.

So far, we can be sure that China is willing to accept the multistakeholder model for now due to its performance in the Global Village Member role. Yet, although it is dedicated to cooperation over conflict, and despite a focus on cooperation and a repudiation of realist interpretations of the current global order, China actively seeks to reduce the power of the US, as seen in China's Global Leader role performance. Although there is little to no effect on budging the US and Europe's stance on GIG norms, China's influence is growing in Southeast Asia, developing countries in general, and nations with an interest in building a Chinese style Internet at home (McKune and Ahmed, 2018). This suggest that geographic location and shared interests are also

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[9] Looking at the official statements from the White House and State Department, it is apparent that the US prescribes a Revisionist role to promoters of cyber sovereignty. China has clearly countered this role prescription with its Law-abiding Citizen role, which reframes the issue into one in which the US is the revisionist because it does not respect the concept of sovereignty in international law. These differences are due to divergence in official interpretations of GIG. It is acknowledged here that this article is limited in its discussion of role prescriptions, which is due to the large scope of understanding China's role conceptions and performance.

significant factors in China's influence. The US remains the most influential power in GIG, but as the US removes itself from world affairs, a vacuum is likely to open up for China to promote cyber sovereignty to developing countries (Segal, 2017: 2). Although China has called for a formal institution within the United Nations to govern the global internet, this is apparently not China's predominant strategy in the WIC. Rather, the roles conceived and performed in the WIC target smaller states over which China either has economic influence, as a Developer, or political influence, as a Global Leader, in the wake of vacuums created as the US retreats from certain foreign affairs issues.

The political influence of the China's role as a Law-abiding Citizen and Global Village Member must also not be understated. The Law-abiding Citizen role is useful for attracting nations opposing US hegemony and also those who support the cyber sovereignty model. Russia is the prime example as several authors have already made clear (McKune and Ahmed, 2018; Segal, 2017; Zaagman, 2018). Other nondemocratic governments have a clear interest in the cyber sovereignty model as well. The Global Village Member role, as an alter-casting role, targets developing nations who have democratic institutions, such as Sri Lanka, an important member of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and even India, now a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In essence, it is clear that China's strategy via the WIC is not to influence the status quo directly, but rather to gradually win over allies largely from the developing world. This is similar to China's strategy in reforming the global economic governance structure (Zhang, 2016: 813); however, a key difference is that these economic reforms took place within the IMF, an institution that has participation from all the global powers, including Western liberal nations. But the WIC is meant to be different than Western, liberal-led institutions like the IMF. The WIC's existence in itself is a statement that global norms can be developed in non-Western institutions. China's foreign policy in the WIC is the promotion of a message to the developing world: China is an alternative to a hegemonic internet power that does not share the economic benefits of its technological prowess.

As a last note, there are two consideration this article does not have space to touch on, which are areas for potential future research. Firstly, a micro-evaluation of the role prescriptions of the liberal order on China would shed more light on China's role performance, not just in the WIC, but also within other institutions. Next, this article considers only very broadly the concept of the alter. The alter is broadly taken as the US and EU-led liberal order, cramming other private and civil society actors into this order. As the multistakeholder model also includes civil society and private business, it would be worth analysing China's role performance in individual dealings with these actors.

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Appendix

National Role Conceptions and Performance in the World Internet Conference

Roles	Frames	Definition	Role performance
Developer	Technology revolution; social development; cybersecurity	Using the Internet to improve livelihood in economically, socially and culturally positive ways; particularly to reduce dependence on the West	Passive; takes apolitical stance on GIG; only practical socioeconomic and security issues are relevant
Global Village Member	Global village; open/progressive; freedom/democracy; mutual trust	Desire and willingness to participate in and improve a free and open internet "governed by all" in the name of existing global internet governance order	Passive; accepting norms of the multistakeholder model; alter-casting; different interpretations of "democracy" and "multilateral"
Global Leader	Global leader; mutual trust; new institutions/norms	Citing dominance and productivity in information technology to claim a seat at the rule-making table	Active; heavily norm-making role; providing developing countries with alternative to US-led GIG order
Law-abiding Citizen	Lawful nation/good guy; anti-imperialist; new institutions and norms; cybersecurity; cyber sovereignty	Pointing blame at hegemonic power while citing self-righteous, law-abiding nature to fight criticism and justify position	Active/reactive role; refer to international law to justify position; acts as victim of US GIG hegemony

Source: Author.