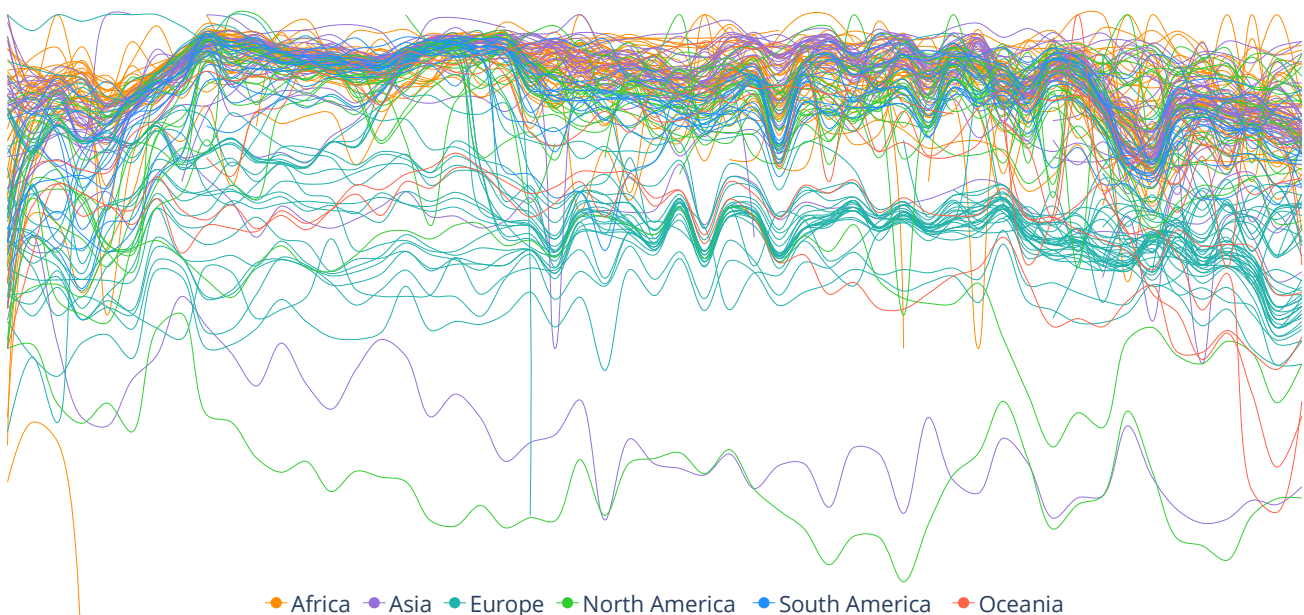# Visualizing Shifts in Global Voting Alliances:

A Case Study of China's Voting Coincidences in the UNGA Through Five Generations of Leaderships

Julius Pfundstein

Voting Coincidence of China with UN-Members between 1971 and 2024 by Region

Mao Zedong 毛泽东 1971 - 1978	Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 1979 - 1989	Jiang Zemin 江泽民 1990 - 2002	Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 2003 - 2012	Xi Jinping 习近平 2013 - 2024

Africa — Asia — Europe — North America — South America — Oceania

Abstract

This paper pursues a double-track agenda. On the one hand, a tool for visualizing UNGA voting data is presented. This tool allows the resolution data-set to be pre-sorted according to a selected period and one of six topics. An edgelist is created from the votings of all states and passed to three layers of visual analysis. (1) The **world map** shows the percentage of voting coincidence between a selected state and all other member states, (2) the **coincidence table** checks the coincidence between the selected state and all others for correlation with socio-economic factors and (3) the **network graph** doesn't feature a selected state but shows all relationships simultaneously. The tool is then validated with a case study on changes of China's voting alliances (RQ1) over time and (RQ2) over topics. The results show that Deng features the highest coincidence among the five generations of leadership while Mao and Xi mark the lowest medians. A consistently high level of agreement with the Global South can be observed, particularly for resolutions on the Middle East, economic development and the environment, with mixed results on issues of conventional and nuclear disarmament, as well as a tendency towards a cluster of sanctioned states on human rights issues.

1 Presentation of the Tool & Validation through Case Study

The United Nations General Assembly (from here: UNGA) performs a unique function in the realm of international relations: A vast majority of de facto states can participate in voting on contemporary politics. Not despite but precisely because of the purely symbolic nature of the resolutions, the voting results of the UNGA are regarded as a valuable source of authentic and, thanks to their standardized format, easily interpretable data on the web of opinions and alliances in the arena of international politics. [1][2] To make this data source accessible, a tool is presented that can be used to pre-sort, aggregate and visualize voting results of the UNGA. With the tool, users can pre-sort all resolutions by selecting the start and end time, as well as one of six sub-topics relevant to them. The resulting corpus can then be viewed through three layers of analysis. (1) The **world map** to view the voting coincidence (from here: coincidence) of the currently selected state to the remaining UN-member states, (2) the **coincidence table** to capture potential correlations between coincidence and socio-economic metrics and (3) the **network graph** to simultaneously display the totality of all voting coincidences and the resulting alliance dynamics.

To avoid arbitrary chery picking in the vast data-set and instead systematically test and evaluate the capabilities of this tool a coherent inquiry and corresponding research design are required. For this purpose, the presented tool will be employed to investigate the evolution of voting alliances of the People's Republic of China. Research of China counteracts the still dominant geographical bias towards North America and Europe and at the same time focuses on a state that brings its own set of norms, rules, institutions and narratives to the international community and is therefore of interest in terms of alliance policy.

A rich body of research shows that China is already considered a political heavyweight due to its large population and the means of production it has amassed since 1980. But observers largely refer to its economic, military and, most recently, technological clout. [3] In international alliance politics, however, China has long been described as a "leader in need of followers". [4] This is because China largely appeared as an applicant and a follower of existing institutions and frameworks. Under Deng, Hu and to some extent Jiang, observers argued that China's passivity is strategic in nature, to avoid open confrontation with the current status quo and thus guarantee the necessary geopolitical stability for its rapid economic expansion. [5] [6] With Xi Jinping's presidency, the People's Republic began to appear with increased determination and assertiveness and, for the first time, as the author of rules and their physical manifestations. [7] China is attempting to position itself as a leader in the representation of the Global South [8] [9], as a pioneer

of green technology [10] [11] and since the populist turn of the North Atlantic Democracies – as a stronghold of multilateralism [12].

This already impassioned debate on the evolution of Chinese alliance policy is sought to be enriched by data from the UNGA resolutions. To this end, the following questions are posed to the UNGA data-set:

RQ1: What changes in alliance structure for China can be derived from the voting coincidences of the UNGA resolutions between 1971 and 2024?

RQ2: How do the changes in the Chinese voting coincidence in the UNGA resolutions differ on the various topics of resolutions from 1971 and 2024?

Since a systematic time-series analysis has fixed time windows and a chronological progression as a premise, it is a well-established method in sinology and political science to divide China's contemporary history into five generations of leadership. It should be said in advance that the classification is informal and cannot be traced back to terms of office, legislative periods, 5-year plans or the like. Since, for example, Mao was only president until 1959, Deng was never general secretary of the party and Hua Guofeng held the highest offices without decisive authority, the division is best explained by the equally informal concept of the *Paramount Leader*. As the People's Republic of China only held the UN mandate after Resolution 2758 in 1971, the first period under consideration begins in this year. Despite reaching well beyond his death it is considered Mao's Generation of Leadership (1971-1978). This is followed by Deng Xiaoping (1979-1989), Jiang Zemin (1990-2002), Hu Jintao (2003-2013) and finally Xi Jinping (2013-2024).

To answer RQ1, the five leadership generations are each compared in their respective alliance structure for all resolutions of their period. For RQ2, the analysis is then repeated for the individual topics to further specify the results from RQ1.

2 Data Curation and Cleansing

To avoid time-consuming scrapes and to use the labels of the resolution's topics, the data-set of the Harvard Dataverse is used in the following. [13] The data-set is updated frequently – in the following the version published in June 2024 is used. It is already cleaned so that only those 6552 resolutions that have registered voting results are included. However, the dataset lists each resolution over n lines, where n is the number of states. Each line therefore only contains the vote of one state in one resolution. Possible parameter values for these votes are: In favor (1), against (2), abstention (3), absent (8) and no UN membership at the time of the resolution (9). As 68% of absences are followed by a second absence in the next roll-call on the agenda, it's likely to be a functional failure rather than a political statement and not considered in the calculus. [14] In addition, each resolution has six columns for the topic labels. These include (conventional) **disarmament**, **nuclear disarmament**, **Middle East** (Israel-Palestine), **economic development**, **human rights** and **environment**. These agenda items were manually cataloged and were intended to divide the UNGA corpus of 2012 into six relevant topics. [13] Resolutions can be assigned to several topics at the same time and a resolution is considered selected when one of its labels is toggled on the landing page. To prepare the data-set for the client-side calculation, the states were stretched on the Y-axis of the CSV using their 3 letter ISO codes and were thus able to reduce the memory requirement from 420 MB to 2.8 MB.[1]

Two additional data-sets are also used for the tool. A high-resolution GeoJSON was used for the world map

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[1] The stretched data-set was then extensively cleaned to eliminate inconsistencies in the naming, to remove NAs in the votes and to take geographical peculiarities into account. To be visible on a map with modern political borders, the Soviet Union was mapped to Russia, Yugoslavia to Serbia and Czechoslovakia to the Czeck Republic. The German Democratic

Republic and South Yemen are not considered, due to complete geographical overlaps with their predecessors. The PRC and RC are addressed independently to distinguish resolutions before and after 1971, even though they held the same mandate. The entire dataset can be found on GitHub.

and supplemented with some properties to identify the depicted countries. [15] Finally, there is a CSV file with all current UN members and some socio-economic indicators. The file is based on data from the UN and the Global Country Information Dataset 2023. [16] [17]

3 From Data-Set to Visualization

When the application is launched a landing page allows the user to crop the UNGA data-set by time and topic. To select start and end time of the investigated period the two ends of a slider must be moved per drag and drop. Below, the relevant topic of resolutions can be selected. [See Appendix 1]

In the first step, all rows that are not within the selected period are cut. Then all remaining rows are filtered for a TRUE value at the column of the selected topic. The trimmed data-set must now be transformed into an edgelist that contains three columns: Source and Target in which the states are made identifiable with their ISO codes and the coincidence (edge weight), which is calculated from the average agreement in the resolutions. For this purpose, all states are compared with all other states for each resolution. Due to its ease of interpretation, the most rudimentary similarity score is calculated:

$$coincidence\ (A,\ B)\ =\ \frac{a + (p/2)}{n}$$

where **a** is the number of resolutions in which state A and B voted the same;

p is the number of resolutions in which state A and B partly agree (one votes yes or no AND the other abstains);

n is the total number of resolutions in which both countries took part.

The resulting edge list must contain 18721 lines (n * n-1 / 2) to represent a fully connected graph in which each of the 194 states has a connection to every other state (194-1). Since the logic of coincidence describes an undirected graph, half of the connections are duplicates and can be excluded. The edgelist is then passed to the three layers of the visualization.

World Map: Here the degree of voting similarity between a selected state and all other states is visualized. Users can click on any state to update the map accordingly. Absolute values are shown in a dynamic hover-window and countries that haven't been UN-Members at any time of the selected period are greyed out. To make it easier to find extreme values, there is a table with the ten highest and lowest coincidence. There is also a table showing the internal coincidence within selected international organizations. [See Appendix 2]

Coincidence Table: Here states are arranged in ascending order by their coincidence with a selected state. The R^2 and Spearman's rank correlation are calculated on the relationship of coincidence and various socio-economic indicators. The latter measures the monotonic relationship of the ranks instead of the values themselves and is therefore particularly suitable for metrics with large spans of values. [See Appendix 3]

Network Graph: Here all states and their connections can be simulated simultaneously. For performance reasons and to spread out an otherwise quite dense graph, a slider is provided with which the user can define which edge weight must be exceeded to simulate the edges. The traction of edges is proportional to the coincidence. The nodes don't have weights, because there is no reasonable explanation for centrality measures in this context. [See Appendix 4]

The tool is thus an extension of the United Nations Digital Library in that it allows questions to be asked about the nature and evolution of alliances by systematizing, aggregating and visualizing voting results. To apply and evaluate the tool for the first time, we will now look at the case of the People's Republic of China.

4 Results

To systematically answer the two research questions, we will examine the five generations of Chinese leadership in detail below. For all five, we will first define the alliance structure across all resolutions (RQ1) and then look more specifically at the individual topics (RQ2). The emphasis is on recognizing patterns and outliers and their evolution over time.

4.1 Mao Zedong (1971-1978): Red Alliances in Global Struggle

After the deterioration of relations with the Soviet Union in the 1960s, China sought to relax tensions with the US. On the public stage, China presented a contradictory image: on the one hand, it advocated for the non-aligned movement, yet in contrast to the pragmatic pacifism of other proponents, China never fully abandoned Mao's continuous revolution and persisted to promote anti-colonial liberation struggles and communist revolutions. Alliances were formed with victorious liberation movements such as those in Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Angola, but also with Pakistan, North Korea and Albania. [18] [19]

RQ1 - In the given period, China has a coincidence of 0.8 with the states of the Soviet Union, 0.9 with the rest of the Global South and between 0.4 and 0.7 with the West. It is striking that of the ten states with the greatest coincidence five - Albania, Vietnam, Djibouti, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Algeria - were governed by socialist or communist parties. Less surprising is the fact that the smallest coincidences are observed with the apartheid regime in South Africa, followed by the USA, Israel and the political heavyweights of continental Europe. Except for the tendency towards a socialist international, however, China's voting behavior is largely interchangeable with that of any state in the Global South, which seeks community below the Brandt Line and tries to avoid strong affiliation with either Cold War bloc.

RQ2 - The presorting of the resolutions shows that Chinas voting alliances are by no means independent of the topic. For example, China leaves the "Third World" bloc on the issues of **conventional** and **nuclear disarmament** and forms a lonely stand-off with Albania. For the **Middle East** issue, there is a coincidence of over 0.95 with almost 100 states from Africa and Asia, while the gap to South and Central America is significantly greater for this topic than when all resolutions are considered. In resolutions on **economic development** and **human rights**, China votes together with the Soviet Union and the Global South.

4.2 Deng Xiaoping (1979 – 1989): Hide Strength and Abide Time

Deng Xiaoping was regarded as a pragmatist long before his rise to vice-chairman of the Communist Party. With a political style that can be characterized as "seeking truth through facts" (实事求是 shíshìqiúshì), he prevailed over Hua Guofeng's "two what-ever" and initiated China's economic opening and modernization. In foreign policy, he advocated utmost restraint to pacify relations with the West. China sticked to the global South where it could without angering Washington but diluted it's "iron-clad friendship" to some of the most diplomatically isolated countries. This strategy was named after the Chinese proverb 韬光养晦 (tāoguāngyǎnghuì), which can be translated as "hide your strength and abide your time". Today there is a lively debate about whether it was transitional in nature and already included a time after abiding. [3][20]

RQ1 - China's public relations under Deng as Paramount Leader show a departure from the special position of the socialist countries of the Global South. The average overlap with the international community of states is significantly higher than under Mao's influence, which is mainly due to the affiliation of South and Central America to the Global South and the appearance of new postcolonial states in the Global South. The Median coincidence with the Global South stands at 0.92, at 0.83 with the Sowjet Union and at 0.6 with the six founding members of the EU.

RQ2 - Under Deng, China loses its special role in resolutions on **conventional** and **nuclear disarmament**. Across all six thematic areas, more than 90 percent of the votes are in agreement with the Global South and, except for resolutions on the **environment**, also in agreement with the Soviet Union. Despite these high scores, the coincidence with the US has worsened by 0.1 to 0.31 in comparison with Mao. However, the cross-comparison shows that the decrease is due to a drifting apart of the USA and the Global South as a whole.

4.3 Jiang Zemin (1990 – 2002): Institutional Resilience

Jiang Zemin took office at a time in which many in the West believed that liberal democracy and global capitalism had prevailed as the ultimate principles of human civilization and thus introduced the "end of history". [21] Jiang countered the destabilizing spill-over effects of the Soviet Union's collapse by institutionalizing the political apparatus and increasing involvement in international organizations such as the UN and, in 2001, the WTO. Jiang's political style is often summarized as the "three representatives" (三个代表 sāngèdàibiǎo) which concludes with Mao's communist agrarian romanticism and proclaims the goal of a modern socialist state with a highly developed dynamic economy. In foreign policy, China continued Deng's course by accepting US-dominance and fostering pragmatic rather than political relations across the world. [22]

RQ1 - Under Jiang, China again had the highest coincidence with Southeast Asia, the Middle East and the African continent while the relationship with the OECD states worsened. In addition to continental Europe and the newly associated Soviet states of Eastern Europe, the emergence of the front line can also be seen in Japan, the new UN member South Korea, Australia, as well as the latest OECD member Argentina. Interestingly, for the first time in the observed period a majority of EU-member states have a higher coincidence with China than with the US.

RQ2 - An examination of the individual topics shows that the decline in agreement with India is primarily due to the topics of **conventional** and **nuclear disarmament**, in which India, alongside other regimes in search of weapons of mass destruction such as Iraq, North Korea and Pakistan, faces global disapproval. In resolutions on the **Middle East**, **economic development** and the **environment**, China is in broad agreement with the Global South, with only a few exceptions. In contrast, there is comparatively little agreement with the African continent on **human rights** issues and clear differences of opinion with Central and South America. This development cannot be explained by China alone, but also by the wide gap in the otherwise unified bloc. At the same time, the 'alliance of the sanctioned' is gaining strength. With Yemen, Cuba, Vietnam, Somalia, Myanmar, North Korea and Syria, India and Indonesia, 8 of the 10 states with the highest coincidence with China are subject to Western sanctions.

4.4 Hu Jintao (2003 – 2012): Technocratic Harmony

Hu Jintao originates from the Tuanpai faction, which is regarded as "center-left" in the Chinese political spectrum. Hu stands for a strong welfare state that enforces education, health, comprehensive insurance and environmental protection to mitigate the side effects of three decades of capitalist experiments. To stabilize energy imports, export markets, technology transfer and institutional participation, China increases its agency as proactive institutionalist. However, the fact that the paradigm of "peaceful rise" was changed to "peaceful development" could not keep Washington from embarking on a new trajectory with the "pivot to Asia" in 2012. This is less due to China's posture than to the perceived fear of the Thucydides' Trap, which is derived from a neo-realist zero-sum game. At the same time, China finds allies in the BRICS and the G20 in its criticism of a unipolar world order. [6]

RQ1 - Under Hu, the division of the world into the West and the rest is being completed with the inclusion of Eastern Europe in Western institutions and the disappearance of the former Soviet sphere of influence in Central Asia. Despite the pronounced divide, coincidence with the West has increased in comparison to the era of Jiang. Coincidence levels are at 0.65 and 0.55 with EU-members and the US respectively.

RQ2 - The firm alliance of the Global South is only undermined by differences of opinion on **conventional** and **nuclear disarmament** between the former Soviet republics and China, as well as some African outliers in resolutions on the **Middle East** and economic development. Once again, China's special path on **human rights** issues is also evident, which shows a clear contradiction with the West and encounters significant low points of coincidence with China in parts of West and Central Africa as well as Central and South America.

4.5 Xi Jinping (2013 – 2024): The China Dream

Domestically, Xi advocates above all the expansion of the role of the CCP. To this end, he intensifies party discipline and coopts external interest groups from the fields of economics, culture and technology. He wants to represent China confidently on the world stage and offers an alternative to the Washington consensus to the international community. With projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Made in China 2025, the Petroyuan, the Chinese space program and an industrial policy that subsidies once western-dominated industries, the era of "hiding strength" is coming to an end. Diplomatically, China is increasingly decoupled from the West and seeks cooperation with non-Western regional powers. Under the large umbrella of the AIIB, China primarily ties developing countries to it financial and economic system and positions itself infrastructurally and institutionally at the center of world trade outside the transatlantic community. [23]

RQ1 - The average global agreement with China has decreased under Xi. Highest values amount to 0.9, with an median of 0.85. It is noteworthy that regional differences appear to have become more important across the globe. The uniformity of the Southern bloc, which we were already able to observe under Jiang and He, has been dented by minor differences between Latin America, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Even within the African continent there are some differences. Possible explanations for this are the resurgence of pro-American right-wing populists in Latin America as well as the emergence of the conflict line between regional powers and threatened "small states". The EU has moved further away from China with an average score of 0.6 and is now after Jiang and Hus exception closer to the US than to China again.

RQ2 - The new disagreements can be explained in part by a further decline in agreement on resolutions on **conventional** and **nuclear disarmament**. Here, China has gained a good 0.1 agreement with the West compared to the Hus era and thus lost agreement with the rest of the world. In addition, there is a wider gap in resolutions on **economic development** and the **environment** than under Jiang and Hu. The picture is somewhat different for

human rights issues: Here, Asia and Africa, with a few Central African exceptions, vote together with great consensus, while in Central and South America the four socialist states (Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Bolivia) vote with China and many other of the states vote closer to the West as part of the return of the right-wing populists.

5 Conlusion

Before the research questions can be answered conclusively, a few caveats are required.

Localization of the agency: A numerical recording of coincidences is not able to make alliance political circumstances tangible in their substantive dimension. A change in two states' coincidence can thus be explained equally by political changes in either state. Even a state that remains consistent in its voting principles is subject to changes in the principles of other states and can thus be transfigured into an alliance changer.

Differentiation of alliance- and agenda-changes: The coincidence is not only a testimony of the political position, but also of the issues discussed. Even by choosing among topics, some sessions can be dominated by issues of great consensus, while others reveal clear lines of conflict.

Despite these limitations, some robust patterns and features were identified and plausibly explained. After looking at the individual leadership generations, the entire period of Chinese UNGA membership will now be reviewed to answer the research questions.

RQ1: What changes in alliance structure for China can be derived from the voting coincidences of the UNGA resolutions between 1971 and 2024?

China's diplomatic alliances over the entire period are characterized by a high coincidence with the Global South. Changing leadership generations and global political events are visible, yet they were never able to challenge the dominance of this structural element.

Significant changes over the period can be summarized as follows: Under Mao Zedong, China primarily cultivated relations with states that were committed to the projects of socialism and anti-imperialism in a broader sense. Since this is a largely non-geographical variable and alliances are not as pronounced at this period as at later points in time, it is inappropriate to speak of an allied region or institutional body of states. China's average level of agreement with the rest of the world is significantly lower under Mao than under the three subsequent generations of leaders. Under Deng Xiaoping, the average coincidence with all UN members increases considerably. High values are not only to be found in relation to the Global South, but also to some Western countries, thus testifying to China's harmonious foreign policy. Under Jiang Zemin's leadership, the Soviet Union disintegrates and China's status as a remaining superpower without any intention of liberalization renders it a geopolitical target of NATO. This is reflected in the UN resolutions with a clear decline in agreement with the West. At the same time this is the starting point for China's high coincidence with North Korea, Iran, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and other countries sanctioned by the West. Under Hu the relations with the West were relaxed and the voting alliance of the Global south was expanded by the former Soviet states. Under Xi Jinping, the tension with the West again continues to escalate and the Global South starts to show minor divisions. Coincidences with both blocs dropped significantly.

RQ2: How do the changes in the Chinese voting coincidence in the UNGA resolutions differ on the various topics of resolutions from 1971 and 2024?

An analysis at the level of individual topics shows significant differences across the six labels. While China shows high coincidences with the Global South and considerable differences with the West on resolutions concerning the **Middle East**, **economic development** and **environmental** issues over the entire period. On resolutions of **conventional** and **nuclear disarmament**, China often takes a special path that does not allow it to be firmly assigned to any group of states. This circumstance points to the low level of institutionalization of multilateral regimes for the coordination of strategic issues by China.

China, together with a group of sanctioned states, opposes the West on **human rights** issues. However, it should also be noted that even the selection of topics, time periods and outliers within the Global South (like Brazil under Bolsonaro) cannot produce a UN session in which countries of the Global South are closer to the West than to China.

The tool also offers the option of checking the coincidences for a selected state for correlations with socio-economic indicators. However, these are from the year 2023 and do not update according to the selected time. While the absolute numbers of the metrics have changed during the observation period, the relations among countries have largely remained the same apart from a few ascendant oil monarchies and tiger states. Since it is the relations between the states that determine the correlation, it can nevertheless be noted that China under Deng had the highest negative correlation between coincidence and the Human Development Index (and factors it consists of) and under Xi had a higher negative correlation with the Freedom House Index. This finding is in line with existing research but requires further academic scrutiny. [24]

6   Critique of the Tool

The presented viewer offers a rich source of information in the debate on international politics in that it adds measurable and falsifiable voting data to a body of research otherwise dominated by politically motivated attributions. Geographical patterns, outliers and changes over time or topics are well recognizable on the world map. Although the results often leave the user without a final explanation, the tool offers fruitful possibilities, especially for exploration, the creation of an overview and the generation of research questions. However, more insight at a content level would be important for a better performance. For example, the two presented as caveats could be overcome and a more precise retrieval of resolutions based on keywords or short descriptions could be achieved. Further improvements would be the addition of historical socio-economic indicators for the correlation table and a percentage breakdown of the topics of the selected resolutions.

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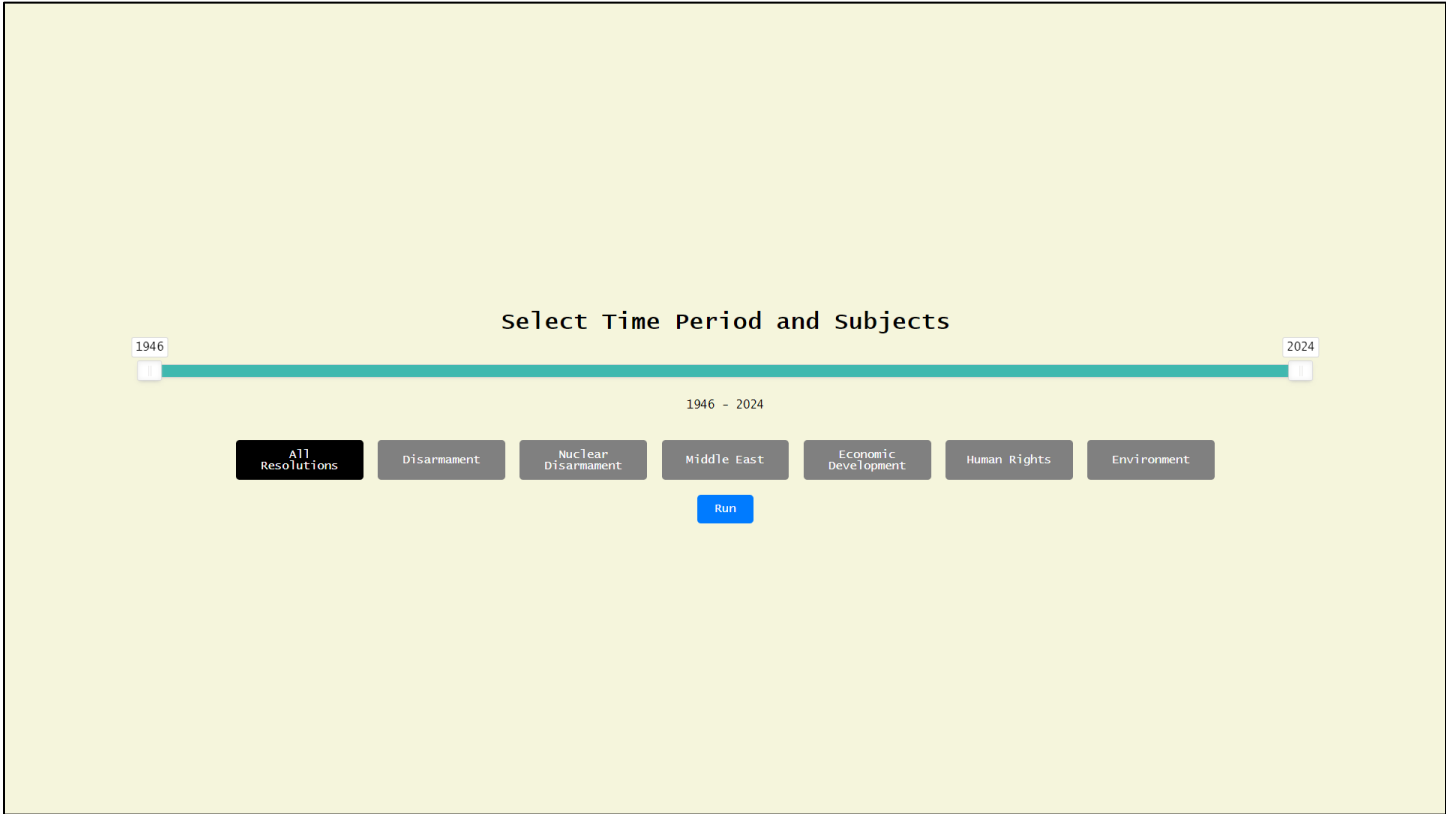
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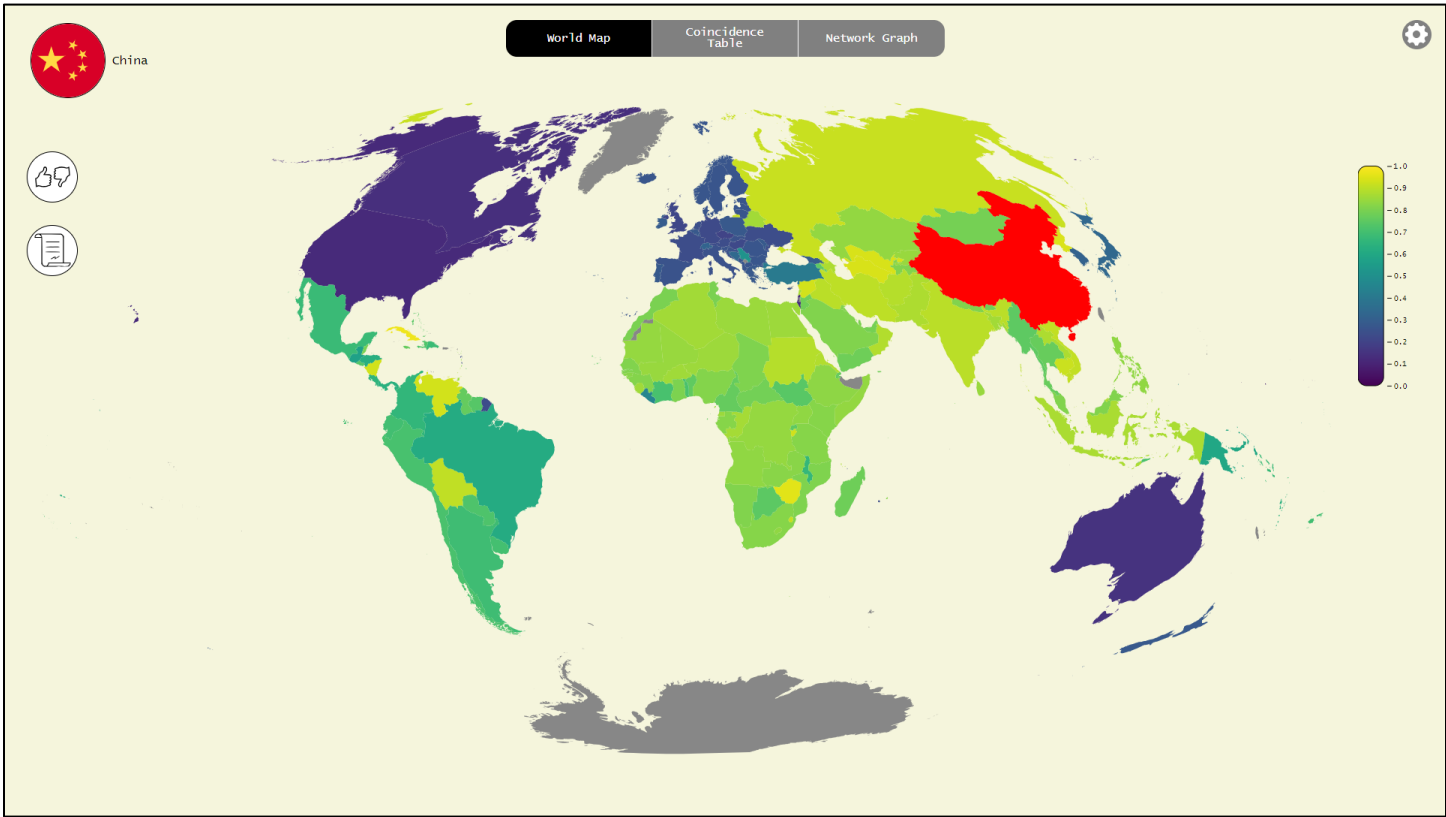
Click here for the GitHub Repository to find the code, the cleaned UNGA dataset, the socio-economic indicators and the images and flags used.
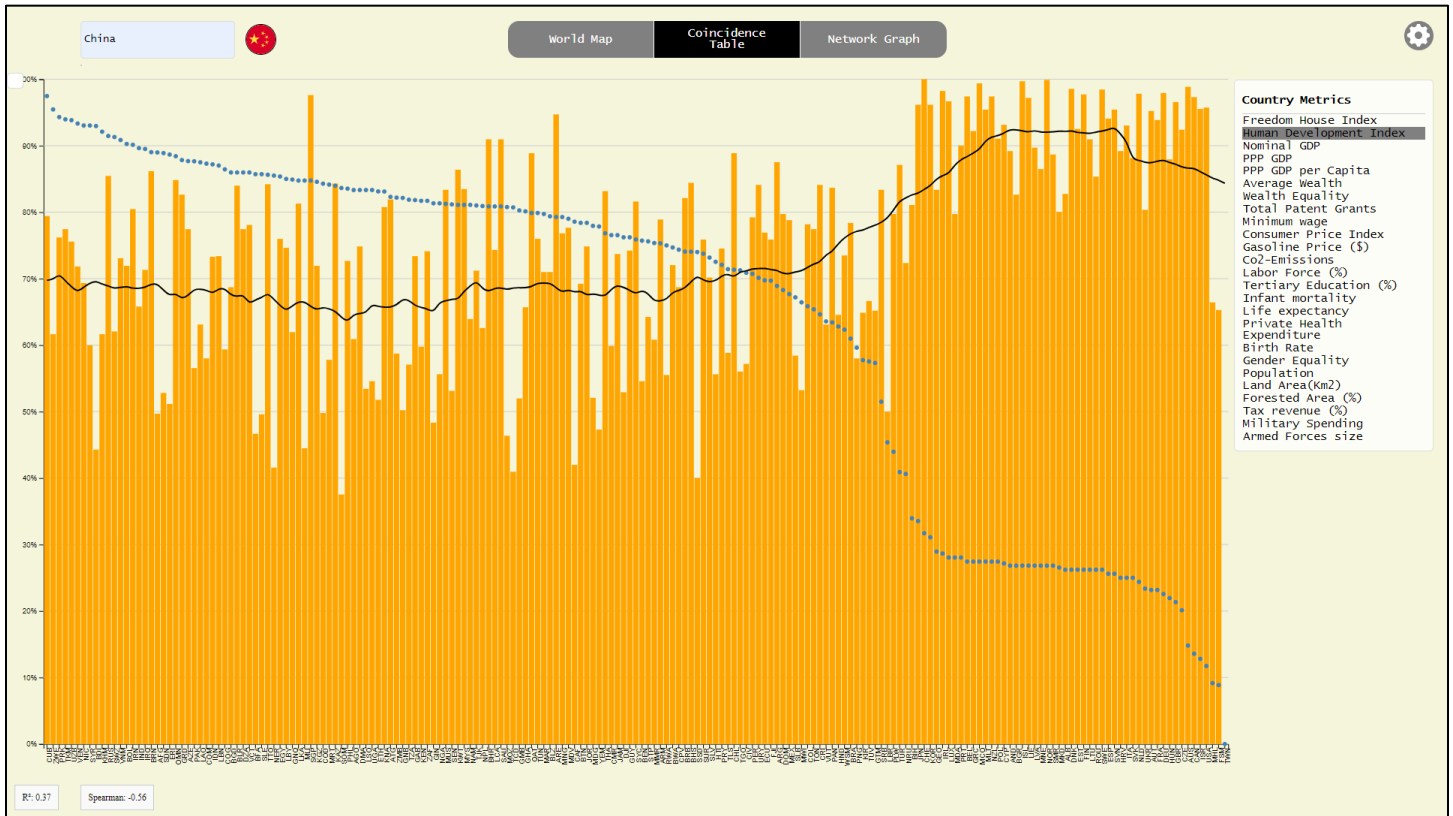
8 Appendix

– Landing Page

– World Map

Appendix 3 – Coincidence Table

Appendix 4 –Network Graph