

China's Identity Positioning and Diplomacy among Developing Countries

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Abstract: In the contemporary era characterized by the collective rise of emerging nations with China at the forefront, significant shifts in the power structure of the international system have emerged. An urgent concern is how China should position itself and delineate friend from foe in order to garner international support from a vast array of developing countries. China's intricate national circumstances and the profound transformations in the global environment present formidable obstacles to defining its national and international identity. Historically, China has positioned itself as the "largest developing country." However, given its significantly larger scale compared to other developing countries within the global community, disagreements from developed nations regarding China's classification as a developing country have surfaced, leading to economic frictions between China and other countries. Concurrently, China's efforts to secure international support primarily from developing countries have been impeded by certain nations adopting counter-strategies within the backdrop of Sino-American strategic competition, inadvertently imposing substantial economic costs on China and even posing direct threats to its core interests. Therefore, basing its actions on a sound sense of righteousness and benefits, accurately positioning China within the international system and distinguishing between friends and adversaries is a prerequisite for conducting diplomatic work. This approach can potentially mitigate the costs of China's rise, enhance its strategic credibility, and facilitate the acquisition of broader international support. In future diplomatic endeavors, China should persist in safeguarding and advancing the interests of the vast community of developing countries, adhering to a diplomatic layout grounded in the prioritization of relationships with developing countries. This approach will underscore China's commitment to international justice and facilitate the transformation of its identity into that of a "responsible major power," thereby reshaping its perspectives on the international order in this new era.

Keywords: Diplomacy among developing countries, Identity positioning, Sound sense of righteousness and benefits

1. Introduction

In its foreign relations, China adheres to a diplomatic layout characterized by the principles of "great power as the key, neighboring countries as the priority, developing countries as the foundation, and multilateralism as the stage." Developing countries hold a fundamental position within China's

distinctive diplomacy as a major power. Over more than 70 years since its founding, China has experienced ups and downs in its relations with developing countries. Against the backdrop of a once-in-a-century global transformation, the international system has reached a critical juncture, with developing countries continuing to be an essential partner for China in promoting its diplomacy as a major power. However, during this crucial period, China's diplomacy towards developing countries faces two challenges: first, the issue of China's national positioning, and second, the challenge of distinguishing between friend and foe. Effectively addressing these two issues in the early stages of the international system's transformation could facilitate the advancement of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Therefore, this paper's research question revolves around how basing diplomatic efforts on a sound sense of righteousness and benefits and employing the distinction between friend and foe as a prerequisite can reduce the costs of China's rise. This approach could enhance China's strategic credibility and enable it to secure more international support. China should continue to uphold and promote the interests of the vast community of developing countries in its future diplomatic endeavors, adhering to a diplomatic layout founded on relationships with developing countries and reflecting international justice.

2. China's Developing Country Diplomacy in the New Era

Since the 21st century, there has been a noticeable shift in the global power center toward East Asia. The collective rise of developing major countries, with China at the forefront, has emerged as a significant force challenging the dominance of the system's leading countries. This collective is gradually balancing the forces of East and West, as well as North and South, promoting the formation of a new international relationship. The fate of developing countries determines the era's theme. If three-quarters of the world's population and over 80% of countries remain in a state of accumulated poverty and weakness, the realization of a community of shared future for mankind would be challenging. The overall rise of developing countries implies global resource redistribution and internal readjustments among these nations. China considers developing countries to be the bedrock of its presence on the international political stage, positioning itself as a reliable friend and sincere partner to developing countries.

Currently, despite the overall increase in the strength of developing countries, there exist significant disparities within the camp. Various dissimilarities persist. Firstly, there is a diversity of characteristics within developing countries. Countries such as China, experiencing rapid growth in strength, face issues concerning the quality of development, while some of the least developed countries confront survival issues. Secondly, there are significant divergences among developing major countries concerning their positioning vis-à-vis developed countries. China tends to perceive developing countries as a collective entity, shaping the context of developing countries versus developed countries through South-South cooperation and North-South dialogues. In contrast, India oscillates between developing and developed countries, considering itself a party with a special identity. Countries like Saudi Arabia and South Africa lean toward maintaining close relations with developed countries, emphasizing their identity as developing countries to a lesser extent. Furthermore, China's identification as a "developing country" faces considerable challenges. Given its rapid economic development, other countries, including not only developed countries but also some fellow developing countries, have raised doubts about China's identity as a developing country. Lastly, China's contradictions with some developing countries in global governance issues have deepened. For instance, at the Copenhagen Climate Conference, significant disagreements emerged between China and other developing countries concerning global greenhouse gas reduction targets, the basic framework of climate negotiations, and international climate fund aid. Such discrepancies could impede China's conduct of developing country diplomacy.

3. China's Identity Positioning Issue

Identity positioning comprises national positioning and international positioning, both of which determine a nation's national strategy and foreign policy. [1] National positioning entails a country defining its position, role, and interests in the international system based on its comprehensive national strength, considering the background of the era and striking a balance between national and international perspectives. International positioning generally refers to a country's basic understanding and evaluation of its international position during a specific period, which determines the role it plays in the international community and its impact. [2] Examining a country's national and international positioning aids in describing and explaining its national strategy and foreign policy choices. It also assists in predicting the country's future behavior. Analyzing China's national and international positioning is conducive to safeguarding its national interests and better responding to changes in the external environment. Firstly, China regards itself as a developing country. Its national positioning is determined by its basic national conditions and national strength. President Xi Jinping has emphasized on multiple occasions that China remains in the primary stage of socialism, and its international position as the world's largest developing country remains unchanged. This signifies that the Chinese government consistently views China's national positioning as the largest developing country. In September 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi mentioned during a high-level video conference on poverty reduction and South-South cooperation that China will always be a member of the developing countries and will always stand with the vast community of developing countries. This indicates that China perceives the national positioning of developing countries as crucial.

Secondly, China is a socialist country. It is one of the few socialist countries globally, with a political and economic system and ideology different from the majority of countries. The national positioning of a socialist country implies that China possesses the power of "concentrating its efforts to accomplish great things," which differs from other countries, enabling it to effectively prevent ideological and political penetration from hostile forces abroad. Since the 18th National Congress, Xi Jinping has frequently discussed the "Two Centenary Goals" in diplomatic forums, proclaiming China's commitment to building a "moderately prosperous society in all respects" to the international community. China consistently considers the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics as a historical choice determined through repeated trials by the Chinese people. The socialist system is the fundamental system of the People's Republic of China, which requires constant adherence and improvement.

Thirdly, China is striving for the international positioning of a responsible major power. China is a participant in the international system and a guardian of international order, indicating its status as a "responsible major power." During China's rise, some Western countries have argued that China, given its size, can no longer avoid international responsibilities by identifying as a developing country and have demanded that it assume more international obligations. China's positioning as a responsible major power in the international arena determines the responsibilities and obligations it undertakes within the international system. This implies that China must actively participate in international affairs, assume "common but differentiated responsibilities," actively maintain the existing international order, provide regional and international public goods, adhere to a diplomatic approach that is independent, non-aligned, and non-hegemonic, propose more Chinese solutions, and contribute Chinese wisdom.

Due to the complexity of China's national conditions, its national and international positioning is not limited to the aforementioned three aspects. In other contexts, China assumes additional identity positions. For instance, relative to the incumbent dominant power in the international system, the United States (a status quo power), China is an emerging power. China is a strong power in the East Asian region and a major Asian nation. Economically, China is considered an emerging market

country and is the world's second-largest economy. Historically, China carries the weight of a civilization with a history of five thousand years, possessing a profound sense of historical significance and substantial untapped potential for soft power. These diverse national and international identity positions reflect the complexity of China's identity positioning. Moreover, China's self-identity and others' perceptions of China are not always similar or consistent. When self-identity aligns with external perceptions, the relationship tends to be stable. However, when self-identity diverges from external perceptions, the relationship tends to be unstable, potentially leading to hostility. Additionally, how China handles international affairs with what identity positioning in the face of rapidly changing international environments directly impacts its foreign strategy. Despite already identifying as a developing country, a socialist country, and a responsible major power, resolving which identity to prioritize in different thematic areas or specific periods remains an urgent issue. A country's identity positioning should adhere to its national interests while considering adjustments to accommodate changes in the international environment. However, in each specific thematic area or timeframe, the positioning should remain clear and precise to avoid being misunderstood by other countries, preventing strategic miscalculations that could hinder China's great rejuvenation.

4. Distinguishing Friend from Foe, Upholding the Concept of Righteousness and Benefits

Due to the complexity of China's identity positioning and the potential inconsistency between China's self-positioning and how other countries perceive China's positioning, there exists uncertainty in China's understanding of friends and foes within the international community. In the process of its rise, China's most solid partners are developing countries. However, due to containment from the United States, some developing countries have adopted a strategy of "relying on China economically while relying on the United States for security." It is crucial for China, in the process of its rise, to distinguish between friends and foes as a prerequisite to seeking more partners. This approach can demonstrate China's rising capabilities and determination, reduce the diplomatic costs of dealing with "neither friends nor foes" two-faced countries, and firmly safeguard China's national interests.

According to moral realism, a rising power can only establish strategic credibility and garner support from other countries by adopting a more moral diplomatic strategy than the dominant power, known as the "king's way." [3] Given that the vast majority of countries in the world are developing countries often unable to ensure their own security, if a major power promises not to use force externally, it implies that when other countries are threatened, they will not use force to protect themselves. Such a major power lacks strategic credibility and is seen as lacking in moral principles. Due to the current ambiguity in other developing countries' recognition of China's identity during its rise, establishing standards to differentiate between friends and foes as early as possible will help China support other developing countries in pursuing their legitimate rights and interests. It will also aid China in safeguarding its own national interests. The best standard for distinguishing friends from foes is whether other countries recognize and respect China's core interests. These core interests include national sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, national unity, the political system established by the Chinese constitution, the overall stability of society, and the fundamental guarantee of sustainable economic and social development. [4] For countries that do not recognize China's core interests or seek economic benefits through a hedging strategy, China should regard them as "foes" and must not disregard or indulge them in any way. China should resolutely uphold its core interests while appropriately rewarding other countries friendly to China, setting an example and striving to win more developing countries as "friends."

In 2013, during his visit to Africa, President Xi Jinping first proposed that Chinese diplomacy should uphold the concept of "righteousness and benefits." In November 2014, during the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, Xi Jinping emphasized that China should adhere to the concept of

righteousness and benefits, considering mutual benefits, emphasizing credibility and friendship, upholding justice, and establishing moral principles. The 19th National Congress report explicitly stated that China should uphold the concept of righteousness and benefits, as well as the concept of sincerity, real results, affinity, and good faith, strengthening unity and cooperation with developing countries. The proposition of the concept of righteousness and benefits is an imperative of China's identity positioning in the current era, signifying that China is a great power committed to upholding world peace and international justice, emphasizing its status as a developing country that will always stand with other developing countries, and affirming its role as a responsible member of the international community. Meanwhile, China must not abandon its legitimate rights and must not sacrifice its core interests. This signifies that China will uphold the concept of righteousness and benefits in its foreign relations with developing countries, maintain a sense of bottom line awareness, establish a correct perception of "friend and foe," and resolutely safeguard its national interests.

5. Conclusion

In China's path to rise, identity positioning and distinguishing between friends and foes remain two pressing issues. China is expected to maintain a strong growth momentum for a long period, but it will also remain at an absolute disadvantage compared to the United States. To reduce the disruptive impact of other countries' adoption of hedging strategies on China's security and stability, China should firmly establish the concept of distinguishing between friends and foes on the basis of maintaining a clear self-identity positioning. This would help China seek more partners and create a favorable external environment for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Irrespective of changes in the global landscape, developing countries will always remain an essential part of the world system and a natural ally for China in international affairs. Diplomacy with developing countries forms the foundation of China's foreign policy.[5] As a developing country itself, China should continue to firmly uphold the common interests of developing countries. It should organically integrate the twin themes of peaceful development and win-win cooperation, considering the concept of righteousness and benefits as the long-term guiding ideology and action principle for implementing China's distinctive major-country diplomacy.

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