

The Application of Stakeholder Theory in the Orientation of International Society

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Keywords: Stakeholders, Constructivism, U.S.-China relations

Abstract: On October 15, 2020, the Biden administration submitted its first official National Security Strategy report to the White House. The report, overall, continues the tone towards China set during the Trump era. The Biden administration defines China as the "greatest geopolitical challenge" and the "top, priority, and sole global competitor," considering the "increasingly confident" China as the only competitor capable of combining economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to challenge the stable and open international system. The description of China in the report reflects the longstanding mistrust of the United States towards China and its long-term perception of the competitive relationship between the two countries. This article, from the perspective of stakeholder theory and in conjunction with constructivism's "identity positioning," focuses on analyzing the National Security Strategy report released by the Biden administration and examining the changes in the United States' identity positioning towards China in different domains.

1. Introduction

The "America First" approach during the Trump administration can be seen as analogous to the traditional shareholder primacy perspective in corporate management. During the Biden administration, overall, the tone has been continued, and from the language used to describe China in the U.S. National Security Strategy report released in 2022, it appears that the Biden administration's positioning towards China is seemingly more stringent than its predecessor, although not without changes. The United States' identity positioning towards China has been constantly evolving. After China became the world's second-largest economy in 2010, the U.S. description of China went through a phase of "great power cooperation" and "Asia-Pacific rebalance" during the Obama administration to the "great power strategic competition" under both the Trump and Biden administrations. Currently, the U.S. identity positioning towards China is in a relatively ambiguous period. China is simultaneously a trading partner, a strategic competitor, and a potential adversary for the United States. Analyzing the U.S. identity positioning towards China solely based on the traditional Wendt constructivist theory of role positioning is insufficient. Therefore, moving away from the traditional framework of categorizing China as a "friend, competitor, or enemy" in terms of identity positioning, defining the U.S. identity positioning towards China as an "interest stakeholder" aligns better with the current situation.

2. Stakeholder Theory and Identity Positioning

2.1 Definition and development of stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory is a theory in organizational management and business ethics that was initially developed in the field of corporate management. It argues that the behavior of any organization or individual in a social environment is not independent, and the goal of an organization is to identify its stakeholders and achieve collective action by coordinating their interests. The theory can be traced back to the 1950s and gained prominence in the 1980s. The most representative definition of stakeholder theory was given by Professor Freeman of Harvard Business School in his work "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach." He stated that "stakeholders are individuals and groups who can affect or are affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives[1]." The fundamental viewpoint of the stakeholder theory framework is that the healthy survival and long-term development of an organization depend on comprehensive consideration and balanced decision-making by organizational decision-makers regarding the interests of all stakeholders[2].

With the emergence of various challenges such as globalization, digitization, and climate change, stakeholder theory has become increasingly important and mature. Its research scope is no longer limited to corporate management but can also be applied to the analysis of inter-state relations in the field of international relations. When applied to the field of international relations, this theory emphasizes the existence of interconnected stakeholders in the global governance process and the different interest demands and behavioral logics of each stakeholder. It provides us with a perspective to understand the complex relationships among countries in international relations.

2.2 Definition of Constructivist "Identity Positioning

In Nicholas Greenwood Onuf's book "Worlds of Our Making: Rules and rule in social theory and international relations" published in the 1980s, the core idea of "constructing international society" was introduced [3]. Since then, the theoretical framework of constructivism has gradually matured, incorporating rich insights from disciplines such as political science, sociology, history, and economics, becoming an important branch of international political theory. According to the identity positioning theory of constructivism, identity is a dynamic and constructed concept shaped by history, culture, and social practices. In international relations, a state's identity positioning is a dynamic and multidimensional process involving various factors and levels.

Under the condition of an anarchic international society, Alexander Wendt proposed three cultures of international society: Hobbesian culture, Lockean culture, and Kantian culture[4], corresponding to three identity positions: enemy, competitor, and friend. In Hobbesian culture, states perceive each other as enemies and tend to rely on military means to resolve international frictions, striving for power to balance other countries. In Lockean culture, states position themselves as competitors and tend to seek alliances to safeguard their own security. In Kantian culture, states recognize each other's sovereignty and establish cooperative relationships to address conflicts and crises, fostering a more amicable relationship. It is evident that different identity positions correspond to different strategic measures[5]. Therefore, understanding a country's foreign policy can be approached by examining its identity positioning towards relevant countries.

In the study of identity positioning, scholars generally believe that the United States' identity positioning towards China has transitioned from friend to competitor and then to enemy. However, careful analysis of the official documents of the United States regarding China's identity reveals that the United States has never positioned China as its "friend" at any point in time. It has only engaged in seemingly friendly exchanges and cooperation in certain areas, as reflected in the annual National

Security Strategy reports.

3. The Logic of U.S. Identity Positioning Toward China

3.1 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy Report on China

Taking the "National Security Strategy" report submitted by the Biden administration to the White House on October 15, 2022, as an example, China is defined as the "most significant geopolitical challenge" and the "priority, sole global competitor" by the Biden administration. It is considered as a "growing confident" competitor that has the capability to combine economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power and challenge the stable and open international system. While the report extensively describes how China threatens global order, regional peace, and American democracy, it also emphasizes the importance of cooperation with China in addressing global challenges, particularly climate issues, and promoting economic trade. Furthermore, the report dedicates a significant portion to the necessity of deepening and sustaining cooperation with allies in the "Indo-Pacific" region to counter the threat posed by China's rise. Therefore, in the report, the United States' positioning towards China encompasses a seemingly tough "enemy" positioning as well as friendly and competitive positioning. In such a complex situation, it is not comprehensive to determine the attributes of the United States' identity positioning towards China based solely on a single aspect of the report. Summarizing and analyzing the overall description of China in the report, it is appropriate to describe the United States' identity positioning towards China as "stakeholders." Considering different domains, the United States adopts different strategies towards China after weighing the pros and cons.

Table 1: Summary of Descriptions of China in the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy Report

	Frequency
Number of visits to China	56
Chinese-related vocabulary	China, the People's Republic of China(PRC)
Distribution of Chinese-related articles	Foreword, The competition for what comes next (The nature of competition between democratic and authoritarian, Cooperating to address shared challenges in an era of competition, Overview of our strategic approach), Investing in our strength (Implementing a modern industrial and innovation strategy, Transformative cooperation, Modernizing and strengthening our military), Our global priorities (Out-competing China and constraining Russia, Cooperation on shared challenges, Shaping the rules of the road), Our strategy by region (Promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, Deepen our alliance with Europe, Foster democracy and shared prosperity in the Western Hemisphere, Maintain a peaceful Arctic)
China-related fields	Political situation, security and military, economic and trade, regional security, non-traditional security, common challenges, climate issues, intelligence and cyber security, human rights

Source: U.S. Identity Positioning Toward China in the Perspective of Critical Geopolitics - An Example of U.S. National Security Strategy Report's Perception of China since 2010 and the U.S. National Security Strategy Report of October 15, 2020.[6]

As shown in Table 1, we can see that the report extensively describes China as the United States' "top" strategic competitor, and the United States positions and analyzes China in various aspects.

However, based on the aforementioned discussion, the United States positions China as a stakeholder. According to the stakeholder theory, when making strategic decisions to achieve their own goals, countries consider the interests of relevant stakeholders. The degree of interest relevance in different domains is a key factor determining their identity positioning and policies towards China. They seek to maximize interests in various domains to achieve overall interest maximization and maintain their long-term hegemony and status.

Table 2: Stakeholders and Role Positioning in China

Degree of interest	Field	Collocations	Location
High	Common challenges, climate change, non-traditional security	Cooperation, support, attention, solution and effectiveness	A friend
Medium	Economic and trade, regional security, political form, military security, intelligence and network security	Competition, control, containment, theft, challenge, harm, expansion, substitution, surveillance	A competitor
Low	Human Rights and ideology	Erode, threaten, destroy, reject, out-competition	An enemy

Source: U.S. National Security Strategy Report of October 15, 2020

As show in Table 2, it can be observed that the United States positions itself as a competitor or enemy in multiple domains regarding China. It can be said that the overall tone of the United States' positioning towards China is that of a competitor or enemy, and the identity positioning of "friend" is only determined in certain domains based on the high degree of interest relevance.

3.2 U.S. Identity Positioning Toward China and Its Practices during the Biden's Administration

In October 2022, after Joe Biden's presidency reached its halfway point, the United States submitted its National Security Strategy report to the White House. The report highlighted that strategic competition would be the main theme for the next decade, and it proposed a strategic approach of "investing national power, uniting allies, and employing comprehensive deterrence," while adhering to a "dual-track" policy of competition and cooperation with China. The Biden administration emphasized two major challenges faced by the United States in the National Security Strategy report: geopolitical competition among major powers and the common challenges posed by global issues. The strategic policy outlined in the report was "investment alliance deterrence," and the strategic priorities were "competition-cooperation-leadership"[7]. According to the theory of stakeholders, the United States' identity positioning towards China in its interactions can be specifically manifested in the report as follows:

(1) Regarding global common challenges, the level of interest relevance between China and the United States tends to be high. Issues such as climate change, the global economy, energy, food crises, and the inadequacy of the global public health system highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic aftermath are areas where both countries have common interests and a high degree of convergence. Resolving these issues is beneficial to all nations worldwide. Therefore, in order to achieve the goals in this domain, the United States is inclined to cooperate with China in its policies, demonstrating a relatively positive attitude.

(2) In terms of geopolitical competition among major powers, the level of interest relevance between China and the United States is comparatively lower than that in global common challenges.

With China's rise and increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has proposed strategies such as "rebalancing to Asia," "Indo-Pacific strategy," and "Quad strategy" since the Obama administration to regain its influence and control in the Asia-Pacific region in order to maintain its global hegemony. The United States has strengthened its alliances by enhancing bilateral or multilateral cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific region to counterbalance China's rise. It is worth noting that many countries in the Asia-Pacific region have adopted "hedging" strategies in response to the strategic competition between China and the United States, aiming to mitigate the impact of major power rivalry. In this regard, numerous scholars argue that countries in the Asia-Pacific region desire to enjoy the substantial economic benefits brought about by China's rise while relying on the "hub-and-spokes system" network constructed by the United States in the region for ongoing security assurances. From this perspective, the United States defines China as a competitor vying for "hegemony" in the Asia-Pacific region, with this competition primarily manifesting in the economic and security domains, as the United States seeks to secure allies' support by showcasing the economic benefits and security assurances it can offer.

(3) Regarding freedom and authoritarian ideologies, just like during the Cold War period between the Soviet Union and the United States, the vast differences in ideologies represent an insurmountable gap for both countries. Generally, ideologies do not change due to external circumstances. Previously, it was China that felt unilateral ideological pressure from the United States. However, now the United States also perceives challenges to its own ideology from China. After several unsuccessful attempts to change China's ideology, the U.S. government's objective regarding China's ideology has shifted from attempting to change it to combating and weakening it, adopting a hostile stance towards China. In this aspect, the two countries do not have common interests; instead, they face sharp opposition and irreconcilable differences akin to a "zero-sum" game.

4. Reasons for the formation of U.S. identity orientation toward China

(1) Strengthening of China's discourse power and regional influence: Firstly, the expansion of China's discourse power and influence has raised concerns among US decision-makers that China may challenge the United States' global hegemonic position to some extent and pose a threat to American interests domestically. As a result, US political agendas and policymakers emphasize the need to strengthen measures to guard against and suppress China in order to maintain American leadership. Secondly, China is a rising major power and an important partner for the United States in fields such as economy, technology, and science. With the increasing discourse power and regional influence of China, some US businesses and political figures worry about potentially losing control and a leading position in the Chinese market, which could diminish the competitiveness of American companies. Lastly, the expansion of China's regional influence may pose a threat to US strategic and military strategies in the Asia-Pacific region. Some US political agendas and experts in the field believe that China's rise could jeopardize American interests and position in the region. Consequently, the US has implemented a series of military containment and preventive measures to counter China's military and geopolitical influence.

(2) Anxiety over the late stage of US hegemony: With changes in the international landscape, some scholars, considering the characteristics of late-stage hegemony observed in dominant countries and the appearance of such characteristics in the international society, believe that the late stage of US hegemony has already begun, leading to a certain level of anxiety. This anxiety influences the US perception of China: the anxiety over the late stage of US hegemony intensifies vigilance and hostility towards China. Some Americans believe that China's rise signifies the possibility of the United States being replaced, further amplifying vigilance and hostility towards

China. Under such perceptions, the US has engaged in suppressing and containing China to safeguard its hegemony, such as exerting pressure on Chinese companies and imposing sanctions on China. Additionally, there have been political attacks on China, with some US government officials and media figures launching a series of political attacks on China, including issues related to human rights, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and more. In summary, the anxiety over the late stage of US hegemony affects the US attitude and actions towards China, leading to an overall characterization of China as a competitor and enemy.

(3) Differences in values between the two countries: The differences in values between China and the United States mainly manifest in three aspects: political systems, human rights and democracy, and ethics and culture. The United States emphasizes human rights and freedom, pursuing individualism, while China values national and collective interests, emphasizing the family and the collective. These differences have various impacts on the China-US relationship. Firstly, they contribute to divergences and contradictions between the two countries on certain issues such as human rights and democracy, exacerbating the lack of political mutual trust between China and the United States. Differences in political systems and values deepen competition in areas such as trade and technology. Due to these differences, there is a lack of platforms for dialogue and cooperation between China and the United States, making it difficult for both sides to resolve critical issues.

5. China's Response to U.S. Identity Positioning Toward China

In the face of the United States' varying positioning of China in different fields, China needs to approach the complex China-US relationship from multiple aspects in order to strengthen dialogue and cooperation and reduce the risks of confrontation. The key areas include:

(1) Strengthening dialogue: The stability and healthy development of China-US relations require enhanced dialogue and consultation through various channels. Firstly, strengthening dialogue between China and the United States helps promote mutual understanding and trust, thereby reducing potential conflicts and disputes. Secondly, it contributes to resolving differences and issues between the two sides. There are many disagreements and problems between China and the United States, such as human rights, South China Sea disputes, and cybersecurity. Strengthening dialogue facilitates problem-solving and promotes cooperation. Lastly, it plays a role in promoting regional and global peace and stability. Enhancing dialogue between China and the United States can drive regional and global peace and development while avoiding threats to global and regional instability and unpredictability.

(2) Enhancing regional cooperation: Building upon the "Belt and Road Initiative," China should strengthen cooperation and exchanges with neighboring regions to overcome the strategic dilemma of the "Indo-Pacific" strategy. China possesses extensive regional influence in Asia and around the world. It should strengthen cooperation with neighboring countries and regions, expand common interests and cooperation areas, and promote stability and development in regional and global governance, economic development, and humanitarian affairs. Strengthening regional cooperation is beneficial for maintaining regional stability and security, promoting economic development, deepening regional friendships, and enhancing cultural exchanges. By enhancing cooperation in areas such as mutual trust, economy, culture, and environment, China can further deepen friendly relations with regional countries and establish a more equal, stable, and prosperous region. China's "Belt and Road Initiative" has promoted infrastructure construction in neighboring regions, facilitated economic development, strengthened cultural and educational exchanges, and enhanced strategic mutual trust and cooperation among countries in the region.

(3) Upholding multilateralism: Currently, the international situation is complex, and

multilateralism is facing challenges. China should support and uphold multilateralism, adhere to international rules and agreements, promote the fairness and reasonableness of global governance, protect its own interests and position, and contribute to global governance. Upholding multilateralism is conducive to promoting global harmony, stability, and prosperity, creating more opportunities for different countries and regions. It also helps enhance cooperation among nations, thereby safeguarding international order and world peace. Furthermore, it contributes to strengthening international solidarity and action to better address global issues and challenges.

6. Summary

In the face of the complex international environment today, as two influential major powers in the international community, neither the United States nor China can view each other purely as "enemies." There exists competition and confrontation between China and the United States in terms of global discourse and influence, but there is also communication and cooperation when dealing with global issues arising from economic globalization. In the competition for regional hegemony and the construction of regional influence, the United States and China are competing in economic and security aspects to demonstrate their strength to regional countries and gain more support. In such a complex context, the United States' identity towards China should not be limited to being purely a "friend," "competitor," or "enemy." Instead, it should be seen as a "stakeholder," and the positioning and strategies in different domains should be determined based on the analysis and comparison of the degree of interest relevance in each domain. China should recognize this, understand the logic behind the United States' positioning towards China, seize areas of potential cooperation, and strengthen dialogue and communication, as this is crucial for maintaining global and regional peace.

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