FLEXIBLE POSITIONS AND PRAGMATISM: A STUDY INTO THE PRC'S OFFICIAL DISCOURSE ON ITS ROLE IN THE UN

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ABSTRACT

Over the past fifty years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has significantly changed its position towards the United Nations (UN). This becomes visible from the nation's increasing financial contribution, troop contribution, and changing attitude towards UN norms and principles. Some believe it suggests that the PRC aims to influence and transform the UN, and more broadly the global governance system. However, others argue that it indicates an increased willingness to integrate in the existing international framework. Based on research conducted in 2021, this article aims to examine the PRC's attitude towards the UN by conducting a political discourse analysis on the PRC's position papers to the UN. It argues that the PRC presents itself as a supportive actor and representative of the developing world within the UN, while maintaining its own values and principles. This suggests that the PRC government does not depict itself as either a reformist or a status quo supporter. Rather, the PRC takes a flexible and pragmatic position, stressing different aspects of its identity depending on its political interests.

KEYWORDS:

Chinese foreign policy, United Nations (UN), political discourse analysis, ideology, soft power.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) entered the United Nations (UN) in 1971, its contribution has significantly increased in terms of finances, troops, and support *vis-à-vis* UN norms and principles (Cabestan 2018, 716; China Power, n.d.; De Coning and Osland 2020, 4; Foot 2014, 1092; Kim 1979, 196). This has triggered a debate about the PRC's changing attitude towards the international order. Some believe that the Chinese government seeks to 'bend the arc of global governance' in a way that serves its own political agenda (Lee 2020). They argue that the PRC government's increased engagement is a way to influence and replace the rules-based order with a political system based on principles (Paszak 2020). Others believe that the PRC's increased engagement indicates the Chinese government's approval of the international framework. Supporters of this view interpret the PRC's changing attitude as a growing willingness to abide by the current international norms (Cabestan 2018, 730; De Coning and Osland 2020, 4; Foot 2014, 1092; Wuthnow 2013, 32).

The ambivalence shows the need to create a better understanding of the PRC's role in the UN and global governance, without exaggerating the country's potential influence. Although much research has been done on this topic (Cabestan 2018; Fung 2016; Fung and Lam 2021; Stähle 2008; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2021), few studies have been conducted from a discursive perspective. Taking a linguistic approach can reveal how the Chinese government presents political issues and upholds or undermines underlying power structures. This is important to study, since discourse has political consequences. Claims by the PRC government can determine the direction of international public debate and provoke foreign policy responses. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap in literature by presenting a political discourse analysis on three Chinese policy documents to answer the research question: *How does the PRC government present the PRC's role in the UN framework in its official discourse between 2016 and 2020?*

The research builds on two areas within academic literature. First, it reflects on the use of ideology in Chinese politics to make sense of the PRC's changing position towards UN norms and principles. For the sake of this article, ideology is defined as 'a systematic or comprehensive set of values and beliefs

("ideas") that provides a way of looking at and understanding the world' (Joseph 2014, 149-50). It is an important tool for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to legitimise its rule and present itself as acting in the common interest (Holbig 2013, 64-65). The CCP does so by adapting the party ideology to the country's changing needs (Holbig 2013, 67). Although the core of official CCP ideology remains the same, each Chinese leader has made his own ideological contribution, reflecting domestic demands and international interests of that time. For instance, Deng Xiaoping introduced the idea of 'Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' (Joseph 2014, 178), marked by the transformation to a socialist market economy. Likewise, President Xi developed 'Xi Jinping Thought', which speaks of a 'new era' in which the PRC returns to centre stage (McCahill Jr. 2017). The constant reinvention of the Party ideology illustrates the PRC government's high level of pragmatism and flexibility in determining its guiding principles. The presented study seeks to analyse whether this pattern is visible in UN politics as well.

In addition, the research provides new insights in the use of soft power in Chinese politics. This concept was first coined by Joseph Nye, who defines it as a country's 'ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment' (Nye 2008, 94). The Chinese central government uses soft power to correct what it sees as misperceptions of China in international media and instead promote a preferred Chinese idea of what the nation stands for (Barr 2011, 33; Breslin 2011, 7; Schneider 2019, 205-06). Despite criticism about its vagueness (Breslin 2011), its indistinctiveness from hard power (D'Hooghe 2015), and the difficulty to prove its effectiveness (Schneider 2019), soft power remains a relevant subject of study. As similar to discourse, appeals to soft power evoke political responses, such as concerns about the PRC's (prospective) power. Furthermore, soft power is a leading factor in the behaviour of some political actors, which gives meaning to the concept (Schneider 2019). For instance, the Chinese central government often appeals to Chinese history, culture, and values as sources of soft power to shape the PRC's image (D'Hooghe 2015, 100-01). Therefore, this study analyses how the PRC government uses soft power within the UN.

The remaining of the article outlines the research methodology, followed by an analysis of three PRC position papers to the UN. The findings

from this case study are then placed within broader discussions about the PRC's identity within the UN. Finally, the conclusion sums up the article and makes suggestions for further research. The main argument is that the PRC government presents itself as a cooperative actor and peaceful spokesperson of the developing world, while following its own guiding principles in the UN. The findings suggest that the PRC does not lay claim to one identity like norm-follower or norm-changer, but instead takes a pragmatic approach, adjusting the narrative around itself according to its political interests.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses political discourse analysis to demonstrate how the Chinese government uses language to present itself in a particular way. PDA builds upon the ideas of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), who argued that implicit knowledge, or the 'common sense' of a given time and place, shapes the explicit knowledge that constitutes the human sciences (Feder 2014, 43). Consequently, the knowledge will be 'recognized as true' (Feder 2014, 43) and internalized in culture and customs, institutions, and individuals. This process takes place through discourse, as we can either reinforce or challenge institutionalized knowledge by using certain discourse over others (Schneider 2013b). This makes political discourse analysis a suitable framework for the presented research. It illustrates how the PRC government uses specific discourse to influence how other nations perceive them. In this regard, it provides insight in 'the play of social power within language itself' (Eagleton 1991, 195).

The analysed documents include the PRC's position papers to the UN in 2016, 2018, and 2020. These documents likely present one cohesive narrative around the PRC in the UN, since they were all produced under the 13th Five-Year Plan, therefore following the same policy strategy. Moreover, the documents present the official views of the PRC government on the topic. The focus of analysis is on the Chinese versions of the documents, while the English translations serve as a reference. Table 1 provides an overview of all sources.

Nr.	Document title	Governmental organization	Year issued

1.	第 71 届联合国大会中方立场文件	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFA)	2016
2.	Position Paper of the People's Republic of China At the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly	MFA	2016
3.	第 73 届联合国大会中方立场文件	MFA	2018
4.	Position Paper of the People's Republic of China For the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly	MFA	2018
5.	中国关于联合国成立 75 周年立场文件	MFA	2020
6.	Position Paper of the People's Republic of China On the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations	MFA	2020

Table 1. Overview of selected primary sources

The sources have been coded according to three recurring categories: development, values and principles, and the PRC's achievements/contributions. Then, a political discourse analysis has been conducted based on Fairclough's (2014) three-stages-approach. The next chapter covers the first stage – description – and presents any recurring discursive statements (Schneider 2013a) within the three categories, as well as the use of grammatical features and rhetorical figures. The discussion section covers the remaining stages of interpretation and explanation of how the PRC constructs social reality around its role in the UN.

LANGUAGE AS POWER: DECONSTRUCTING THE PRC'S NARRATIVE

This chapter presents the main findings of the case study. The table at the end of the chapter displays examples of all discursive features.

DISCURSIVE STATEMENTS

The position papers reflect three categories of discursive statements. First, the documents repeatedly show support for the international governance system. The PRC government emphasizes its contributions to the UN and attributes an important role to the organization in solving international issues. Second, when discussing its foreign policy, the Chinese government frequently refers to values and principles like 'mutual learning', 'win-win cooperation' (MFA 2020a), and other terms reflecting the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. Finally, the PRC government repeatedly refers to its relationship with developing countries, stressing that 'China has always been a developing country and will continue to deepen cooperation with other developing countries' (中国始终是发展中国家的一员，将继续 (…) 同广大发展中国家深化合作) (MFA 2018a/b). Altogether, the discursive statements serve to reaffirm China's commitment to the international system, inform the audience about the PRC's value-driven approach to global affairs, and strengthen the PRC's relationship with developing nations.

LINGUISTIC MECHANISMS

The texts include several linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms. In terms of grammatical features, two protagonists or participant types (Fairclough 2014, 100) are frequently recurring. 'China' (*Zhongguo* 中国) or 'the Chinese side' (*zhongfang* 中方) is addressed to clarify the PRC's position on political issues, while 'the international community' (*guoji shehui* 国际社会) is being called upon to tackle global challenges collectively. To reinforce its message, the PRC government uses modal auxiliary verbs

(Fairclough 2014, 105). The verb 'will' (*jiang* 将) is used when making commitments or declaring the PRC's position, whereas the verbs 'must' (*yao* 要) and 'should' (*ying* 应 or *yinggai* 应该) are used to make normative claims (Schneider 2025, 145) or calls for action (Schneider 2013b). The texts make use of two types of terminology to convey the message. First, verbs around the semantic domain of *support*, such as 'to praise' (*zanshang* 赞赏), as well as around *progress* and *action*, such as 'to strengthen' (*jiaqiang* 加强), are used to stress the PRC's positive attitude towards the international UN framework. Second, the terms 'mutuality' (*hu* 互) and 'togetherness' (*gong* 共) are used to enhance feelings of inclusiveness and connectivity. They often appear in the context of cooperation between member states and are combined with values like 'respect' (*zunzhong* 尊重), words that indicate positive results such as 'benefit' (*li* 利), or verbs that indicate action like 'to build' (*goujian* 构建). The final discursive feature includes the use of rhetorical figures. While metaphors and idioms are limited, enumerations, parallelisms, and tri-colons appear frequently in the texts, with the latter two often combined. They likely serve to emphasise the message, as they are particularly used for stronger emphasis on principles, values, mutuality, and togetherness.

Discursive feature	Example	Translation	Source
Discursive statement	我们愿 (…) 共同推动联合国重整行装再出发	China will (…) join the UN on a new journey with renewed commitments (MFA, 2020a)	Source 5, MFA, 2020
	中国 (…) 坚持平等互信、包容互鉴 (…) 的理念	China follows the principles of equality, mutual trust,	Source 5, MFA, 2020

		inclusiveness, mutual learning (MFA, 2020a)	
	中方 (…) 为其他发展中国家 (…) 提供了有力支持	China has provided strong support to other developing countries (MFA, 2018a)	Source 3, MFA, 2018
Use of protagonist	中方在乌克兰问题上始终秉持客观公正立场	'China has always held an objective and impartial position on the Ukrainian issue' (MFA, 2016a)	Source 1, MFA, 2016
	国际社会要强化发展伙伴关系	'The international community should strengthen development partnerships' (MFA, 2018a)	Source 3, MFA, 2018
Use of modalities	中方将认真落实各项承诺和措施	'China will follow through on its pledges and measures' (MFA, 2016a)	Source 1, MFA, 2016
	国际社会要强化发展伙伴关系	'The international community should strengthen development partnerships' (MFA, 2018a)	Source 3, MFA, 2018
	国际社会应建立公平合理、持续稳定的农业贸易秩序	'The international community should establish a fair, equitable, sustained and stable agricultural trade order' (MFA, 2016)	Source 1, MFA, 2016
Terminology	中方欢迎联合国安理会通过第 2429 号决议	'China welcomes the adoption of Resolution 2429 by the Security Council' (FMA, 2018a)	Source 3, FMA, 2018
	中方愿同有关各方加强交流合作	'China will step up exchanges and	Source 1, MFA, 2016

		cooperation with all parties' (FMA, 2016a)	
	各国应本着相互尊重、平等互利的原则)	'countries should follow the principles of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit' (MFA, 2016a)	Source 1, MFA, 2016
	坚持共商共建共享的全球治理观	'We need to advocate consultation [lit.: discuss together], cooperation [lit.: build together] and shared benefits in global governance' (MFA, 2020a)	Source 5, MFA, 2020
Literary figure: metaphor	掀开了世界和平与发展事业的新篇章	'Thus began a new era [lit.: to tear open a new chapter] in mankind's pursuit of peace and development' (MFA, 2020a)	Source 5, MFA, 2020
Literary figure: idiom/proverb	要综合施策，对症下药	'calls for a multi-pronged and well-targeted approach' (lit.: to prescribe the right medicine for an illness) (MFA, 2016a)	Source 1, MFA, 2016
Literary figure: parallelism	75 年来，联合国以和平为己任 (…) 75 年来，联合国以发展为目标 (…) 75 年来，联合国以公平为要义	'Over the past 75 years, with peace as its mission (…) Over the past 75 years, with development as its goal (…) Over the past 75 years, with equity as its founding principle' (MFA, 2020a)	Source 5, MFA, 2020

Literary figure: tri-colon	推动全球绿色、低碳、可持续发展	'promote green, low-carbon and sustainable global development' (MFA, 2018a)	Source 3, MFA, 2018
Literary figure: enumeration	共同构建和平、安全、开放、合作的网络空间	'work together to foster a peaceful, secure, open and cooperative cyberspace' (MFA, 2016a)	Source 1, MFA, 2016

Table 2. Discursive features

UNPACKING THE PRC'S FLUID IDENTITY

The outcome of the case study shows that the Chinese government constructs a multi-faceted identity around itself, emphasizing different aspects of its identity depending on the context. It suggests that the PRC continues to take a flexible and pragmatic approach towards international affairs, rather than fulfilling a single role as either a reformist or a status quo supporter. The next section unpacks the three main components of the PRC's constructed identity.

THE PRC AS A COOPERATIVE PLAYER

The first element of the PRC's self-constructed identity is its willingness to cooperate. The Chinese government appeals to soft power to make this point, by stressing the nation's peaceful guiding principles, such as inclusiveness and mutual respect. A repeated emphasis on the PRC's support for UN bodies, activities, and concepts further enhances the narrative. The emphasis on the PRC's cooperativeness also becomes clear from the use of supportive verbs, for instance when discussing UN peacekeeping operations. Finally, the repeated references to mutuality and togetherness as well as the use of literary figures further contribute to the message. They suggest that the PRC wants to cooperate with other member states, rather than distance itself from the international community.

Portraying the PRC as cooperative and non-threatening serves to present the country as a peaceful nation and responsible player. It refutes the idea of China as a norm-changer who undermines the status quo. This ties back to

Foucault's idea of 'reverse' discourse (as cited in Feder 2014, 48), which describes how institutionalized knowledge can be replaced by internalizing new types of discourse around an issue. By presenting China as a responsible stakeholder and benign actor, the Chinese government seeks to change the dominant discourse around China from 'threatening' into 'cooperative'.

THE PRC AS A PRINCIPLE-DRIVEN NATION

The documents also show a strong emphasis on the principles of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. The PRC government wants to depict China as a nation guided by clear principles, which marks the second element of the PRC's identity. For example, it states that 'China stands for respecting the sovereignty of countries concerned' (中国 (…) 主张尊重当事国主权) (MFA 2018a). The question is how the focus on these principles should be interpreted. The argument can be made that this is another instance of reverse discourse, in which the PRC government tries to replace UN norms by their own principles. However, it is important to understand that these principles have been part of the Chinese government's political discourse since 1949, long before its entry into the UN (Kent 1999). Moreover, the fact that the PRC government upholds and promotes its own principles does not automatically imply that it rejects the system in place. As discussed earlier, the PRC also stresses its support for the UN system. These mixed signs suggest that the PRC neither aims to overthrow the current system, nor does it fully accept the existing norms. Therefore, it may be too simplistic to label the PRC as either a norm-maker or norm-taker.

THE PRC AS A SPOKESPERSON OF THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The third and final aspect of the PRC's constructed identity is that of a spokesperson of the developing world. The PRC repeatedly stresses the need to strengthen the voice of developing countries and speaks of itself being the 'largest developing country' worldwide (中国作为全球最大发展中国家) (MFA 2018a). The PRC government also refers to *other* developing countries rather than developing countries in general to position both China and developing states as equals within the UN. Moreover, the Chinese government

regularly uses verbs indicating support when discussing developing nations. This appeal to the developing world can be placed in a wider context of strengthening relationships between China and developing nations. In its official communication, the Chinese government 'recontextualizes' (Wodak and De Cillia 2007, 339) China's national history and attaches new meanings to it by stressing that both the PRC and developing nations have been victims of Western imperialism (Alden and Alves 2008, 47). They continue to argue that for this reason, the PRC would never impose its own vision on other countries, a promise that resonates with many developing nations. It makes the PRC government a trustworthy partner and gives China a benefit over Western countries, many of which have a negative historical record on the African continent (Alden and Alves 2008, 47; Galchu 2018, 7). By referring to the nation's history, the PRC government deploys its soft power again to strengthen ties with the developing world.

In conclusion, the PRC government constructs a narrative around itself as a responsible stakeholder who supports the international system, while upholding its own unique principles. Meanwhile, the Chinese government aims to underline its benignity by depicting China as a representative of the developing world. Soft power plays a central role in this narrative in two ways. First, the PRC government makes an appeal to soft power by stressing the peaceful principles and values guiding its actions. Second, the Chinese government seeks to deploy soft power by constructing a shared history with the developing world, constructing a collective identity as equals. The PRC frequently shifts the focus between all different elements of its identity. This suggests that the PRC government does not conform to one specific identity such as a reformist or a status quo supporter, but instead takes a pragmatic approach and adjusts the narrative around itself based on its interests.

CONCLUSION

This research has examined the Chinese government's official discourse on the PRC's role in the UN. The outcome of the study shows that the PRC government exercises its soft power to present itself as a cooperative, responsible actor, driven by a set of guiding principles as well as the perceived need to represent

the developing world. The findings demonstrate that the PRC's role in the UN is not unequivocal and that labels such as norm-follower, norm-changer, or developing country all cover only one aspect of the position that the PRC takes. Therefore, the PRC can be best described as pragmatic and flexible, constantly adapting the narrative around itself to the given circumstances.

As this research has been conducted in 2021, later developments in the PRC's official discourse on the UN are beyond the scope of this study. To gain broader understanding of the PRC's role in the UN, research on more recent communication materials is recommended. A suggestion would be to study the central government's official communication on the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), as an alternative for the UN guiding principles.

Nevertheless, scholars should not only pay attention to whether the PRC will reshape the current international norms and principles. As pragmatism has proven to be an effective method for the CCP to legitimise its authority, scholars should try to understand the pragmatism guiding the PRC's international politics. Studying the nature of Chinese politics would help to make a well-informed assessment of the PRC's influence on global governance. This would allow for more effective policy responses towards the PRC's changing role in international institutions.

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