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China's Utilization of the Paris Agreement;s 'CBDR-RC' Principle Through the Role of Identity

Research Article

China's Utilization of the Paris Agreement's 'CBDR-RC' Principle Through the Role of Identity

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Abstract

This study examines China's utilization of the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) Principle to justify its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. As the world's largest carbon emitter and a major economic power, China faces mounting international pressure to undertake ambitious climate commitments, especially after its NDCs are evaluated as 'insufficient' in meeting the Paris Agreement 1.5C goal. Through the Constructivist lens of International Regime Theory, this study explores how China uses the role of identity to institutionalize CBDR-RC in the Paris Agreement, where China uses its type identity as a developing nation and role identity as the leader of the Global South to shape climate negotiations; it also forms a collective identity with the Global South countries through alliances to promote the institutionalisation of the CBDR-RC principle. Using the methods of Political Discourse Analysis and Process Tracing, this study highlights China's active role in institutionalizing CBDR-RC in the Paris Agreement to ensure the rights to differentiated climate obligations and preferential treatment for developing nations in the climate regime, which ultimately allows China to justify its NDCs under the CBDR-RC principle through the logic of appropriateness.

Keywords: CBDR-RC Principle; China; Identity; NDCs; Paris Agreement

Introduction

As climate change rises to prominence as a pressing global challenge, China has been a subject of scrutiny due to the non-alignment of its NDC with the I.5C Paris Agreement goals. In 2021, China announced its updated NDC to achieve peak carbon emissions before 2030, carbon neutrality before 2060, and four other climate targets – which Climate Action Tracker (CAT) (2024) rated as "highly insufficient" to fulfill the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global temperature rise to well below 2C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to cap it at 1.5C (UNFCCC, 2015). Since China is a major economic power and the world's largest carbon emitter, there are increased expectations to bear more climate obligation and commit to a more ambitious NDC. However, China has seemingly opted for a more 'phased' approach to its climate commitments, citing its identity as a developing country and entitlement to leniency in climate obligations and concessions such as climate finance (UN, 1992).

This research will analyze China's justification of its NDCs through its utilization of the CBDR-RC principle by highlighting its identity as a developing country. The need for justification comes from its ambitions to

"increase China's soft power" and "give a good Chinese narrative", as iterated by Xi Jinping (2018). Utilizing the norms embedded in the regime, China's defence is based on the CBDR-RC principle which addresses the fair attribution of responsibility and obligation between developed and developing countries, especially in light of the national circumstances of developing nations. Evaluating China's growing prominence in the climate regime and rise as an economic powerhouse, debates continue over its level of responsibility in emissions reduction — it is crucial to understand how China frames its commitments under the CBDR-RC principle given its vital role in shaping the outcome of the Paris Agreement. Thus, this research examines "How does China use the CBDR-RC Principle in the Paris Agreement to justify its NDCs?".

In answering this question, this paper uses the Constructivist lens of International Regime Theory, showing how China establishes its 'type' identity as a developing country, 'role' identity as the representative of the Global South, and 'collective' identity with the Global South in the Paris Agreement, using the bargaining power granted through these identities to advocate for the institutionalization of the CBDR-RC principle as a norm embedded within the Paris Agreement. By utilizing the CBDR-RC principle, China follows the 'logic of appropriateness', promoting the norm not out of self-interest but because it is a norm that it has to follow as a member of the Paris Agreement. Advocating for the principle as a developing country, China invokes its national circumstances and the historical responsibilities of the developed countries, alluding to Article 4 of the UNFCCC regarding the "Commitment of Parties" to show that developing nations are entitled to preferential treatment such as the acknowledgment of overriding priorities of social and economic development which may increase its share of emissions. Through climate negotiations and active participation in developing country blocs such as LMDC, G77, and BASIC group, China can use the CBDR-RC principle to justify its NDC under the argument of its rights as a developing country under the norms and principles of the regime.

This paper will be organized in the following ways: First, it will review the literature on International Regime theory and expand upon the Paris Agreement as a regime and the CBDR-RC Principle as a critical pillar of global climate governance. Following this, it will explain the ambition gaps in China's NDCs and the criticisms that follow. Lastly, it will analyze the role of China's identity in justifying its NDCs through the CBDR-RC Principle.

Literature Review

International Regime Theory

In combating global issues, international regimes play a central role in coordinating state behaviour and making global cooperation possible – especially in the context of urgently resolving climate change. Emphasizing this, the study of international regimes seeks to explore how they affect state behavior and collective outcomes in its particular issue area (Hasenclever et al., 1996). Krasner (1982) defines it as an "implicit or explicit set of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations.", to which Keohane (1988) adds that unlike international organizations, it does not have the autonomous power to enforce compliance or take action in the face of defiance.

This research utilizes the view of International Regime Theory rooted in Constructivism, focusing on Alexander Wendt's role of identity to answer the research question. It argues that identity is the driving force of normative patterns in international regime and politics; it is grounded in the 'Logic of appropriateness' (Tarzi, 2003). Echoing this, Wendt (2003) also argues that state interest, capabilities, and the international system—including international regimes—are shaped by 'culture', understood as a system of shared ideas such as norms, principles, rules, and ideology. Wendt (2003) discusses four types of identity that drive state behaviour and ultimately international regimes:

Table 1. Types of Identity

Identity Type	Definition
Personal	Inherent characteristics and historical narrative defining states
Type	Label applied to states sharing characteristics, such as party affiliation
Role	Define how states occupy a position in social structure and shape their behavior towards those possessing counter-identity, such as leader vs. follower
Collective	When 'Self' and 'Other' merge into a single identity and interest is calculated as a group

Source: Author's Analysis

While the first identity is intrinsic and relatively stable, the other three identities are forms of social identity that are only formed and present through cultural interactions with others. These social identities are shaped and evolve through social interactions and the role of culture. The formation of collective identity is particularly significant in international regimes theory where cooperation and norms are the central focus; Wendt (2003) describes four factors that contribute to the formation of collective identity: (1) Interdependence, where each actor's choices affects others' outcome; (2) Common fate, where survival depends on group outcome; (3) Homogeneity, or 'alikeness'; (4) Restraint, or self-limiting actions

Based on these identities, states construct national interests that evolve based on social interactions and culture within international regimes. Wendt established an equation to illustrate this process: 'Desire + Belief = Action', describing how Identity (shaped by ideas and Belief) and Interest (Desire) constituted by Identity is what drives state action. This equation is driven by the 'Logic of Appropriateness', or what is socially accepted as being the 'right' or 'expected' behavior shaped by norms, identities, and social expectations in the international regime (Wendt, 2003). Guided by this logic, the identity and beliefs of a state include notions of what is considered accepted based on norms and principles; likewise, the desire produced by these beliefs is pursued through means that are socially acceptable or appropriate based on norms, which leads to actions that are guided by norms and expectations within the regime. As such, in the same way that identity, national interest, and state action are shaped by culture, culture is also formed, reinforced, and contested by states through repeated social interactions in negotiations and discourse. In the context of the Paris Agreement, the CBDR-RC is a principle that was formed through years of negotiation and social interactions — likewise, it has also created the norm of differentiation based on development levels which became the basis of most contentions, actions, and discourses within the regime such as during the COP.

The CBDR-RC Principle in the Paris Agreement

A blueprint for climate equity and justice, the CBDR-RC principle provides a guideline for parties to protect the climate following their varying degree of economic, technical, and financial capacity as well as responsibility for current and/or historical emissions (Pauw et al., 2014; Shapovalova, 2021). CBDR-RC acknowledges that all nations have a shared responsibility to act on climate change — the 'common' aspect — however, different nations have different historical contributions to climate change and have different adaptation and mitigation capabilities – the 'differentiated' aspect — thus, climate negotiations and actions need to cater to each

nation's respective social and economic conditions. This principle was first embedded into international law through Principle 7 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which led to the drafting and adoption of the UNFCCC, where CBDR-RC was adopted as a guiding principle as written in the preamble of the UNFCCC (1992).

The CBDR-RC principle has been subject to different interpretations in various climate agreements and a central subject of contention between developed and developing countries. This contention is rooted in the 'North-South' divide in distributing responsibilities, capabilities, and obligations between developed and developing countries; it is the debate on the attribution of who is primarily responsible for advancing climate change, what obligations entail it, and how to address the disparity of capability and development between countries to achieve an effective and appropriate international response. In light of this debate, the CBDR-RC principle was first established to convince countries to agree on a legal framework for global climate policy in the 1990s (Pauw et al., 2014).

The Paris Agreement builds upon the framework of the UNFCCC in conceptualizing its rules and principles. The UNFCCC divided the 198 parties into categories "Annex I" or developed countries and "Non-Annex I" or developing countries. Through this classification, the UNFCCC has implemented CBDR-RC by dividing Parties based on their economic development level and hence divides the obligations based on their capabilities. Highlighting the notion of CBDR-RC, the UNFCCC states in Article 3.1 for all Parties to protect the climate "on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.".

According to the UNFCCC Convention Text (1992), all Parties are obligated to update and publish reports of anthropogenic emissions and cooperate in climate mitigation and adaptation. The developed countries, considering it has contributed the largest share of historical and current global emissions and possess more capabilities to act on climate change, lead the adaptation and mitigation efforts, provide finance and technology, and assist vulnerable nations, such as small island countries and those whose income are highly dependent on carbon-intensive activities. While developing nations are also responsible for adaptation and mitigation, it is given preferential treatment such as climate finance – recognizing their vulnerability and the minimal contribution to anthropogenic climate change, as well as the priority of social and economic development.

Under UNFCCC, the Paris Agreement explicitly stated under Article 2 that it will be implemented "to reflect equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in light of different national circumstances", grounding the entire Agreement based on the CBDR-RC principle (UN, 2015). Thus, the Agreement requires each party to submit and commit to NDCs, outlining actions to reduce their emissions and build climate resilience; this recognizes the differing capabilities of each party and allows the flexibility to take into account their domestic circumstances and capabilities. While every Party is obligated to submit an NDC and pursue measures to achieve it, the achievement of the NDC itself is not legally binding. This, in addition to the Parties being granted freedom to design their own NDC, has been the central criticism of the Paris Agreement as it is deemed to cause non-compliance as there are no consequences for not achieving an NDC or submitting an insufficiently ambitious one. As reported by the UNEP (2022), even if all unconditional NDCs were to be fulfilled, the global temperature would still rise by 2.6C above pre-industrial levels by 2100. This has elicited great social pressure for states to commit to more ambitious NDCs — especially China which currently emits the most carbon emissions in the world. However, under the CBDR-RC, China as a developing country is given preferential treatment of less climate obligation as there are overriding priorities of social and economic development that limit their ability to commit to greater climate obligations.

Although the interpretation of CBDR-RC has evolved from the UNFCCC to the Paris Agreement, the core expectations of differentiated responsibilities of developed and developing countries remain the same. The Paris Agreement and the Kyoto Protocol which adopts the UNFCCC as a foundational principle impose greater climate responsibility on developed countries due to their historical emissions and greater capability to

commit to climate obligations due to higher economic and technological capacities. On the other hand, while developing countries are also expected to reduce emissions, it is acknowledged that there are overriding priorities of social and economic development that limit their ability to commit to greater climate obligations. Not only that, China is also a nation whose economy is highly dependent on a carbon-intensive economy which also grants it preferential treatment under the CBDR-RC. This has positioned China in a unique position as a developing country with the greatest amount of carbon emissions, leading to clashing climate commitments and international expectations.

Methods

This research sought to explore China's use of CBDR-RC in justifying its NDCs using Qualitative research methods. Creswell (2013) defines Qualitative research as addressing how individuals or groups perceive social or human issues through identifying patterns or themes, where the final report incorporates the perspectives of participants and a comprehensive explanation and understanding of the problem. The dependent variable in this research is China's use of the CBDR-RC principle. The independent variable will be the alignment of China's NDCs with the Paris Agreement goals. Data collection in this qualitative research would be done through a Secondary Data Collection of texts such as, but not limited to, journal articles, official government documents, and news articles. This will be presented to show the ambition gap between the 1.5C aligned targets and China's NDCs and China's construction of its identity as a developing country. The data collected will be analyzed using Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) and Process Tracing. Process Tracing analyzes the "trajectories of change and causation", highlighting sequences of independent, dependent, and intervening variables (Collier, 2011). This is used in this research to trace China's historical advocacy of the CBDR-RC principle in international climate negotiations. PDA refers to the use of language in text and statements to produce, challenge, and maintain power (Dunmire, 2012), which is relevant in answering the research question as it examines the narrative constructed through political statements and China's official documents to illustrate China's advocacy of the CBDR-RC in developing country blocs and its strategy in highlighting its identity and circumstances as a developing country to justify its NDCs.

Result and Analysis

China's NDCs: Ambition Gaps and Criticisms

As a party to the Paris Agreement, China must submit NDCs and update them every 5 years. In 2021, China submitted its most recent updated NDCs as follows: (1) Achieve the peaking of CO2 emissions around 2030 and make the best effort to achieve it early; (2) Lower CO2 emissions per unit of GDP by over 65% below the 2005 level; (3) Increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 25%; (4) Increase forest stock volume by 6 billion cubic meters from the 2005 levels; and (5) To have the total installed capacity of wind and solar power to over 1200 GW by 2030 (MEE, 2021). Along with these targets, in the document submitted to the UNFCCC, China has also outlined its philosophy on climate change and the new measures it will take to implement the updated NDC goals. However, numerous research bodies have rated these NDCs as 'Highly Insufficient' (CAT, 2024), a "long way off from being 1.5C compatible" (Climate Analytics, 2024), and "not yet on track" (Myllyvirta et al., 2023). Further illustrating this, the table below shows the ambition gap in China's NDC between its 1.5C compatible pathways as indicated by various research and China's 2021 updated NDCs.

Table 2. Ambition gap in China's NDC

China's 1.5C Compatible Pathway	China's 2021 Updated NDCs	Ambition Gap

55% emissions reduction from 2023 levels by 2030 (exc. LULUCF), 66% down inc. LULUCF and peak immediately. To achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 (CAT, 2024; Myllyvirta, 2022)	Achieve the peaking of CO2 emissions around 2030 and achieve Net Zero before 2060	Delay in peaking emissions, 10 years delay in achieving net zero carbon emissions. LULUCF emissions are not yet included in NDCs
Carbon intensity reduction by 87-93% below the 2005 level based on 2020 GDP (Asia Society Policy Institute & Climate Analytics, 2020)	Carbon intensity reduction by over 65% below the 2005 level by 2030	Approximately 23-28% gap in carbon intensity reduction
Share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to reach 73-84% by 2030 and coal phase-out by 2040 (IEA, 2023; Patel, 2024)	Increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 25%	Approximately a 48-59% gap in the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption, no target for coal phase-out
-	Increase forest stock volume by 6 billion cubic meters from the 2005 level.	-
To have 2900 GW of solar capacity and 1600 GW of wind capacity by 2030 (Welder et al., 2023)	To have the total installed capacity of wind and solar power to over 1200 GW by 2030	3300 GW gap in installed solar and wind power capacity

Source: Author's Analysis

As illustrated by the table, almost all NDCs are not 1.5C Compatible. Further encompassing the 'insufficiency' of China's NDCs, the carbon peak and neutrality goals do not have an absolute cap on the number of emissions, thus even if China reaches its NDCs, its high emission levels are still not aligned with Paris Agreement goals. CAT (2024) further criticizes the lack of an absolute target, where China uses language such as 'around' and 'before' to give more flexibility. According to Climate Analytics (2024), at the current rate, China would achieve its carbon peak at the level of 13.5-14.6 GtCO2e/year, while 1.5C aligned level is at 6.8 GtCO2e/year. Not only that, China's carbon peak and neutrality goal only covers CO2 gases, emitting other gases that contribute to ⅙ of China's total climate footprint (CAT, 2024). Nonetheless, the table shows that even if China achieves all of its targets, it would not be sufficient to achieve the 1.5C goal. Geall (2021) attributes this to China's tendency to "under-promise and over-deliver", which is rooted in its domestic challenges of social instability and economic stagnation.

Constructing Type Identity: China as a Developing Country

As a basis for its argument in advocating for differentiated responsibility between developing and developed countries, China constructs its 'type' identity as a developing country. This is supported by the UN classifying China as a developing country based on China's HDI valuing 'High', however not high enough to be classified as Very High as other developed countries due to poverty and inequality (UNDP, 2022). China has also highlighted its personal identity as a socialist country with 'Chinese characteristics', historical and colonial

struggles, and combined with national circumstances such as poverty and uneven development, reliance on carbon-intensive industries, and energy transition challenges to support its claim and align itself closer with the developing countries.

Socialist Values in China's National Development

China's development is rooted in "Modernization with Chinese Characteristics", influenced by its Socialist ideology and Confucian values and guided by its 'Two Centenary Goals': achieving a moderately prosperous society by 2021 and a modernized socialist country by 2049 (Yang et al., 2022), which can be accomplished through economic and military strength and soft power (Yi, 2020). Still branding its development stage in the 'moderate' level, China must continue to accelerate its socio-economic development in order to achieve its second centenary goal – especially since 17% of its population still living in poverty based on the upper-middle-income country poverty line (World Bank, 2024) and China's 0.4 Gini coefficient characterizing it as a "highly unequal society" (Mazzocco, 2022). Emphasizing its socialist values in solving this issue, Xi repeatedly emphasized its goal of 'common prosperity' and letting the people "share the fruits of development", referring to socio-economic equality and a people-centered development agenda (Xi Jinping, 2023).

The Century of Humiliation and China's Colonial History

The period between 1893 and 1949 has been dubbed China's "Century of Humiliation", marking their downfall as a powerful nation. Invasions by the British, the first and second Opium War which led to Hong Kong becoming a British colony, the first and second Sino-Japanese war, and the Nanking Massacre – these foreign subjugation and internal struggles have led to a loss of territory, control, and international dignity (Farhan, 2018; Kaufman, 2011). The Century of Humiliation serve as a reminder towards the Chinese people of foreign aggression and a push for a greater status globally (Harper, 2019); as Zheng Wang (2014) iterated, "History is a religion to the Chinese", highlighting the importance of historical struggles to the identity and ambitions of China. As Harper (2019) also stated, its colonial history also further aligned China with the developing world's historical struggle, allowing China to argue that despite its economic power, it is still a developing nation due to its historical identity.

China's Carbon-Intensive Industries and Energy Transition Challenges

China's rapid economic development is largely fueled by carbon-intensive industries and fossil-based energy. As the world's second-largest economy with a GDP of US$18.27 million (IMF, 2024), China is dubbed "The World's Factory" due to its dominance in global manufacturing and industrial output. Following this feat is also the title of the world's largest GHG emitter and the second-largest contributor to historical emissions behind the US (Slotta, 2024). Its emissions are primarily driven by electricity and heat production (45%), manufacturing and industry (35%), and transportation (8%), all mostly coal-fueled (Ritchie and Roser, 2022). China is home to 50% of the total coal power plants in the world, highlighting the paramount role it plays in China's economic development (Liu et al., 2023). As outlined in the document China's Achievements, New Goals, and New Measures for NDC (MEE, 2021), it is a nation "Rich in coal, and poor in oil and gas", illustrating that China's abundant coal reserves have led to its natural reliance on coal, thus posing difficulty in transitioning into renewables.

Energy transition challenges are exacerbated by the current unreliability of renewables and simultaneous growing energy demand which poses risk to China's energy security. In 2023, drought led to a nationwide power crisis causing a 14% decrease in hydroelectricity generation despite an 18% increase in hydro capacity in 2023 from 2019 (Kemp, 2024)—As a result, power shortages in 2022 have caused industrial plants in cities like Sichuan to shut down to conserve power for household users, causing billions of yuan in losses (Reuters, 2022). The unreliability of renewables is echoed by Li et al., (2024) concluding that China's obstacles are not

only weather unreliability, but there is also a lack of sites in China that have high availability, low variability, and low extremeness of renewable energy.

China constructs its type identity through its socialist values, historical struggles, and socio-economic challenges that lead to obstacles in energy transition to argue that it is still a member of the developing world. According to Wendt's equation 'Belief + Desire = Action' and the Logic of Appropriateness, China's developing nation identity lead to the interest for socio-economic development, and guided by norms and expectations within the regime used CBDR-RC to advocate for preferential treatment in order to balance economic development and climate commitments.

Constructing Role Identity: China as The Leader of the Global South

China has consistently played an active role in formulating and advocating for the CBDR-RC principle in the international climate regime, especially in the Paris Agreement. It is grounded on fairness and equity, advocating for a differentiation in responsibilities and obligations given the developed nations' historical contribution to climate change and the developing countries' development circumstances (Jiang, 2022). Exploring China's history of advocating for CBDR-RC would give insight into China establishing its 'role' identity as the leader of the Global South to form alliances and collective advocacy, later enabling China to justify its NDC. The table below shows the chronological events of China's advocacy of the CBDR-RC Principle from 1972 to 2015, the ratification of the Paris Agreement.

Table 3. China's Engagements in Institutionalizing the CBDR-RC Principle in the Paris Agreement

Year	Event	Significance	China's Position
1972	UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm	First UN conference focusing on international environmental issues and produced the "Framework for Environmental Action", acknowledging the need for environmental protection	Requested the establishment of a 'Working Group on the Declaration' and initiated amendments to balance development with environmental protection
1991	The Beijing Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development of Developing Countries	Produced the Beijing Declaration, calling for the recognition of the right to development and for developed countries to take the main responsibility for environmental degradation	Organized the meeting and led the shaping of the Beijing Declaration, which defines developing countries' views on the following year's UNCED conference. The initiation of China as a developing leader.
1992	1992 UNCED Conference in Rio De Janeiro	Produced the Rio Declaration and the UNFCCC, which adopted the CBDR-RC principle as an operational provision of the treaty in Article 3.1	China with the G77 actively advocates for the concerns of the developing countries and resists the developed countries' push for an equitable burden-sharing framework

1997	The Kyoto Conference	Produced the Kyoto Protocol	Aligned with the G77 to push for binding targets only for developed countries and resisting binding targets for developing countries
2009	First BASIC Ministerial Meeting in Beijing	The formation of the sub-bloc BASIC Group	Initiated the formation of the sub-bloc in order to advocate for the continuation of differentiation of obligations between developed and developing countries
2009	The COP15 Copenhagen Summit	Produced the non-binding Copenhagen Accord	Major role in the drafting of the accord along with BASIC group and the USA, succeeding in maintaining differentiation and respect for sovereignty
2012	The COP18 in Doha	Consolidated the resolve and timetable to adopt a universal climate agreement by 2015	China with the LMDC Bloc rejected a uniformed mitigation obligation and argued for the 2015 outcome to be guided "on the basis of equity, and in accordance with CBDRs"
2015	The COP21 in Paris	Produced the Paris Agreement	The Paris Agreement adopted the CBDR-RC principle, with text that is based on the 2014 and 2015 US-China Joint Statement, the 2015 EU-China Joint Statement, and the BASIC-US Consensus

Source: Jiang, 2022

As shown in the table, China has largely influenced the content of the CBDR-RC Principle and the Paris Agreement through the Beijing Declaration and Joint Statements with the US, EU, and the BASIC group. It has also actively aligned with and formed new alliances, such as the G77 as a developing country, going against the developed nations in the North-South divide. In 2009, China's initiation of the BASIC Group was in response to the growing divergence in the interests of the developing countries in the G77, where smaller developing countries such as the AOSIS highlighted 'vast differences' with larger developing countries like China and India with considerably greater emissions (Jiang, 2022). Forming alliances with similarly situated countries of Brazil, South Africa, and India through BASIC with their rising economic power and emission allows China to keep advancing its interest to continue the differentiation of climate obligations between developed and developing countries. Likewise, China has once again initiated a new bloc called the LMDC when diverging views are found within the BASIC group in COP16, where each state disagreed on whether all major emitters and economic powerhouse should be subject to binding emission reduction (Hallding et al., 2011).

Highlighting its position as the leader of the Global South, China is a self-declared "largest developing country" and a "natural member" of the Global South who "breathes the same breath" and "shares the same future" with fellow developing nations (Anthony, 2023). According to Yang (2021), China has also communicated through various national narratives about its ambition to be a *'yinlingzhe'*, a pioneer or a leading state that does not highlight a hierarchy structure between a leader and follower. Xi Jinping (2017) further highlights this ambition in the 19th CPC National Congress, stating that China is a "participant, contributor, and torchbearer," in international climate cooperation, further reinforcing China's role identity as the leader of the Global South. This also shows the deeply embedded Confucian values of benevolence, harmony, and leading by example (Xu et al., 2021); positioning itself not as an authoritative leader but a moral leader that seeks to uphold justice, fairness, and harmony which reinforces legitimacy as a leader of the Global South especially in the face of climate inequality. The forming of new alliances with like-minded countries, whenever there are divergences with its previous alliance, shows China's strategy in using its role identity to institutionalize the CBDR-RC principle that aligns with its interests to differentiate the responsibilities of developed and developing nations and honor the rights to the development of the developing countries. Aligning with the constructivist views, this shows that CBDR-RC as a norm is a product of social interaction, where state identity and interest actively shape its meaning and influence its legitimacy in the regime.

Collective Identity Formation with the Global South

Using its role identity as the leader of the Global South, China seeks to form a collective identity among the developing countries to unify their voice in advocating for the CBDR-RC principle as aligned with the definition and interest of China, which is the differentiation of responsibility between developed and developing countries. Wendt (2003) describes collective identity as a sense of being a part of a group, a 'we', in which the welfare of the group is the ultimate goal to overcome collective action problems. China does this through poignantly evoking interdependence, common fate, and homogeneity of developing countries as well as self-restraint in their part in speeches, statements, and official documents, as shown in the table below:

Table 4. China's Collective Identity Formation

Actor	Statement	Collective Identity Factor
Responding to Climate Change: China's Policies and Actions	"Climate change is a challenge for all of humanity. The sustainable development of the Chinese nation and the future of the planet depends on tackling it successfully." (SCIO, 2021)	Common Fate
Wang Wenbin, spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry	"Developed countries have been emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere during the past 200 years of industrialization, and have an unshirkable historical responsibility for global climate change." (Yu & Xu, 2021)	Common Fate
Xi Jinping at the 29th Group Study Session of CPC Central Committee Political Bureau	"China is ready to assume its international responsibilities as far as its current level of development permits." (Xi, 2022)	Self-Restraint
Xi Jinping at the 2023	"China has always shared the fate of	Homogeneity

BRICS Summit in Johannesburg	developing nations…It has been, is now, and will forever be a member of the developing world." (Bandurski, 2023)	
Xi Jinping at the 29th group study session of the Political Bureau of the 19th CPC Central Committee	"Restructuring our country's industry will take time. At present, traditional industries still account for a large proportion of our economy…the tasks of achieving peak carbon dioxide emissions and carbon neutrality remain daunting." (Xi, 2022)	Self-Restraint & Homogeneity
China White Paper on "A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions"	"China tries its best to help developing countries improve their ability to address climate change…It has inked 46 South-South Cooperation documents with 39 developing countries to address climate change" (SCIO, 2023)	Interdependence
China's Achievements, New Goals, and New Measures for NDC	"China will carry out, within its capacity, South-South cooperation on climate change with other developing countries to jointly build capacity against climate change." (MEE, 2021)	Interdependence
China's Achievements, New Goals, and New Measures for NDC	"Developed countries should step up efforts to support developing countries in funding, technology development and transfer, and capacity building…developed countries should confront their historical responsibilities, continue to lead in absolute reduction of emissions." (MEE, 2021)	Common Fate
China's Policies and Actions Addressing Climate Change 2024 Annual Report	"Only by respecting the different starting points, stages of development, and capacities of each country…will the world be able to truly fulfill its climate ambitions." (MEE, 2024)	Homogeneity & Interdependence

Source: Author's Analysis

The statements in the table highlight China's framed narratives to construct a collective identity as a part of the Global South to transform the advocacy of CBDR-RC into a collective demand rather than a self-interested argument. Through the narrative of development constraint, China uses the strategy of 'self-restraint', which Wendt (2003) categorizes as an enabling factor. In China's case, it is limiting itself by employing phased and gradual climate commitments that are linear to its development level and national circumstances, considering its carbon-intensive industries that are still the main driver of the economy. Another form of self-restraint is shown in Table 3.1, where China sought to shape the principle from within through the formation of alliances to align it with its interests of differentiation rather than outrightly defying climate agreements — This shows its circumstances and narratives as a developing country, which enables China to utilize the three other collective identity formation strategies.

Emphasizing the 'homogeneity' of developing nations, China evokes the shared colonial history and national circumstances of developing countries. A forever member of the developing world, China's declaration is more political than economic, embracing the status of a developing nation due to its colonial history, stating that China "understands the lesson of history" (SCIO, 2023), emphasizing the lessons it learned from its 'Century of Humiliation'; China's historical struggle has led to its values on championing equity and multilateralism in the world's endeavor for development and sustainability. It also captured the shared development challenges seen through China's formation of developing country negotiating blocs shown in Table 3.1, where China unifies countries with similar identities such as the BASIC group with similar economic circumstances and the LMDC group with the same interest in the climate regime. This gives a foundation to the 'common fate' of developing nations, where every state is facing an existential threat due to environmental degradation; however, developing countries, including China, are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change, as shown by how it dominated the lower rank of ND-GAIN Country Index which rates countries vulnerability and readiness (ND-Gain Country Index, 2022). This inequality is rooted in a shared historical struggle against the developed countries which are responsible for historical emissions that largely caused the current anthropogenic climate change, which China has used to frame climate equity as a 'North vs. South' issue and highlight the disproportionate impact climate change has posed to the Global South — this became the central argument for the collective demand of the developing countries in the institutionalization of CBDR-RC. Encouraging multilateralism following the CBDR-RC principle, China underlines the 'interdependence' among countries in addressing climate change, especially among the Global South; accentuating this, China its active participation in South-South cooperation and the importance of considering the different capacities of nations to foster effective climate action where every single country can actively participate in.

Ultimately, China has used four strategies of Wendt's collective identity formation to reinforce the idea that developing nations collectively face development constraints that are rooted in historical injustices that justify differentiated climate responsibilities. This creates a sense of South-South solidarity to collectively demand—rather than a self-serving interest—a climate regime rooted in the CBDR-RC Principle that differentiates the responsibility between developed and developing nations and grants the latter preferential treatment due to its development circumstances.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that urban green spaces are more than mere aesthetic additions to city landscapes; they play a critical role in enhancing community well-being. The benefits of these spaces include reduced stress, improved mental health, and increased social interaction. Given these findings, it is crucial for urban planners and policymakers to prioritize the integration of green spaces in city development strategies.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of green space exposure and consider additional variables such as accessibility and maintenance. By continuing to invest in green spaces, cities can foster healthier, happier, and more connected communities.

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