

The Construction of Climate Leadership in the Rise of Great Powers: An Empirical Study of China

Zhuyue Zhou^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of English and International Studies, China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, 102206, China*

a. zhouzhuyue@mail.cfau.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In this day and age, rethinking and rediscovering climate leadership within the international system is focal to global climate governance and the construction of leadership in the rise of great powers. This paper takes China - the biggest developing country and the second largest economy in the world - as an example to evaluate its leadership on the theoretical basis of Moral Realism. By analyzing China's climate policy, the author concludes that China is simultaneously establishing economic and political state leadership as a hybrid and humane authority international leadership. However, in-depth interaction mechanism between the two types of leadership needs further empirical exploration.

Keywords: Climate Leadership, Power Shift, China

1. Introduction

Undergoing profound changes unseen in a century, the world power landscape is evolving accordingly. The 21st century witnesses the decentralization of power and the rise of emerging states; this power shift is embodied in a joint competition of comprehensive national power (CNP) and strategic preferences between great powers. CNP consists of hard power and soft power - the former is crucial to combat the realistic threat of wars and potential strategic overdraft (material pressure), while the latter is the key to improving the state's power recognition and legitimacy within the international system and shaping its domestic political values (conceptual pressure) [1-3]. Many scholars from home and abroad have studied material pressure; however, scholars lack equal attention to conceptual pressure, esp. in China, one of the most prominent rising powers in the world [4-6]. Deemed the biggest strategic competitor by the US, China has been leveling up with the US in many fields ranging from military, politics, and diplomacy to the economy, environment, information, etc. Aside from the conventional security field, China is pursuing a more significant say in global governance, noticeably in climate change, which exhibits the change in China's attitude from so-called diplomatic obstructionism after Copenhagen failure (2009) to an active participant in Paris Conference (2016) [7-9]. Being the most significant energy user and greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter in the world, China is destined to be a key force in the international climate regime [10]. However, why does China strive for more great leadership as well as a better national image in climate governance, and how does China achieve it through climate policies? The answer to these questions will be the focus of this paper.

Based on the above research background, the author raised related research questions. First, what are China’s motives for enhancing leadership in climate governance? Second, how does China achieve more excellent leadership through various climate policies? The study of these two questions will contribute to the following aspects. Domestically, this paper aims to complement the theoretical research on the conceptual pressure of rising powers esp. the building of leadership, and also serve the practical climate policymaking and effective country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics [11]. Internationally, this paper strives to make the world better understand the motivation behind China’s policy changes and the implementation path to reduce misunderstandings and conflicts.

2. Literature Review

So far, scholars have not formulated a clear definition of leadership. Keohane argues that the dominant state in the world regulates other states by developing a system of rules that meet its interest preferences to establish itself as an effective leader [12]. Kindleberger believes leadership refers to the ability to exert pressure on others to follow you using coercion or inducement [13]. Joseph Nye sees leadership as the power to mobilize others to achieve goals [14]. Finally, Ikenberry asserts leadership as an “institutional bargain” in which other states comply with the dominant state’s rules for basic security and expect the latter to constrain its behavior [15].

As carbon gaming intensifies, the landscape of climate governance is fragmented integration [16]. National actors tend to be free riders since they do not need to pay the cost but rather enjoy the benefits [17]. As a result, any national actor tends to be incentivized to procrastinate and count on other actors to solve the problem [18]. Meanwhile, significant powers are looking forward to climate leadership. Due to their different national interests, it is difficult to coordinate and converge the paths and form a natural synergy and authoritative force that can help promote governance [19].

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs Yan Xuetong’s Moral Realism as the theoretical framework for the following reasons. First, Yan organically integrates the philosophical and political essences of ancient Chinese culture to enrich his theory, and this paper’s focus is the construction of China’s leadership. Thus the theory is of high applicability [20]. Second, compared with Ikenberry’s international political leadership layered analysis, Yan’s categorization of leadership is not limited to the international level but extends to the domestic level, which could offer a more comprehensive view of rising power’s leadership [21]. Third, Ikenberry’s analysis is rooted in the ideology of the US liberal hegemony. This paper hammers at drawing a blueprint for rising China, so the ideological difference also influences the theoretical choice.

According to Moral Realism, international and domestic systems are essentially different; the former is anarchical, and the latter is hierarchical. Hence, the two types of leadership are legitimized differently and performed [22]. The specific types of the two leaderships are as follows.

Table1: Types of State Leadership

Attitude toward State’s Status Quo	Leadership Responsibility	
	Responsible	Irresponsible
Maintain status quo	Conservative	Inactive
Change status quo	Proactive	Aggressive

Table2: Types of International Leadership

	Strategic Credibility	
Principle of Actions	Trustworthy	Untrustworthy
Consistent	Humane authority	Tyranny
Double Standard	Hegemony	Anemocracy

It is worth noting that Yan mentioned the compatibility of different types of state leadership by raising the example of the Trump administration’s aggressive economic and political leadership as a hybrid, which gives a possibility for writing this paper.

4. Analysis

4.1. China Upholds the Fundamental Values of Realism which Originated from Specific Historical Content, Thus Continuously Pursuing Leadership from Home and Abroad in the Future

China is enhancing state leadership. Owing to the great contrast between Imperial China’s great power at the center of the tributary system and China’s powerless when facing foreign invaders, Chinese people are determined to realize the Chinese Dream, namely the prosperity of the state, the national rejuvenation, and people’s happiness [23]. Steady-state leadership is politically legitimized by law, tradition, or religion and seen as the leading body’s sense of national responsibility and capacity to carry out its duty. Hence, it is focal on the realization of the Chinese Dream.

China is pursuing international leadership. First, national interest is the primary motivation for state behavior based on realism. Yan believes that leadership determines political power, which affects a country’s CNP and strategic interests, ultimately determining the state’s rise or fall. Therefore, political leadership is a critical variable in the formula for national capability. Second, given the anarchical international system, countries pursue their strategic interests for survival and security [24]. So, states have a natural tendency to pursue interstate leadership as the responsibility to maintain interstate order and strategic credibility in the current system.

4.2. China is Establishing Economic and Political State Leadership as A Hybrid

China’s state leadership is neither conservative nor proactive but a combination of the two. Conservative leadership refers to a sort of economic determinism. This leadership views the economy as the foundation of a state’s total capacity and advocates maintaining the international status quo. Proactive leadership refers to political determinism, a state leadership that advocates improving a country’s international status by carrying out appropriate reforms. This type of leadership subscribes to political determinism and believes that political talents are the decisive factor. Since Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening up, China has prioritized economic development as an official goal; neither the environment, in general, nor climate policy, in particular, has a similarly high priority [25]. This mentality indirectly caused the negotiation failure in Copenhagen (2009). However, China’s ambition is never limited to maintaining the international status quo but changing it. From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement, China is transforming from merely focusing on economic gains to gradually seeking political support [26]. The integration of imposing economic impacts, enlarging domestic political support, and its manifestation are twofold.

4.2.1. Political Concerns in Domestic Climate Policy

a. Implementing the New Development Philosophy

Nowadays, China pursues a philosophy that development must be innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared; green development balances economic and environmental development and enhances domestic political support and CPC's political leadership.

b. Taking a people-centered approach

Addressing climate change is related to the fundamental interests of all people. China not only aims to enhance the people's expectation of a sound ecological environment through climate change mitigation and adaptation but also to achieve social justice and increase people's sense of happiness and security. The people-centered approach is a potent cohesion of people's political recognition, increasing national solidarity and the state's political leadership.

4.2.2. Economic Concerns in Domestic Climate Policy

a. Developing green and low-carbon industries

China strives to establish and improve an economic system featuring green, low-carbon, and circular development and to pursue greener economic and social development in all respects. The restructuring and upgrading of the industrial structure make China's economy more resilient and accordable with the New Development Philosophy.

b. Giving Full Play to the Role of the Market

In recent years, China is gradually establishing the world's largest carbon market to manage the relationship between economic development and carbon emissions reduction. In addition, China is blending its national economic interests into this global issue by carrying out pilot programs on carbon emissions trading and launching the national carbon market.

c. Synergizing the Reduction of Pollution and Carbon Emissions

Controlling fossil energy use and carbon emissions is conducive to pushing the green transformation of economic structure and boosting high-quality development. Moreover, the awareness of environmental vulnerability and adaptation would strengthen the leadership of domestic governance and international recognition.

d. Promoting the transformation and upgrading of the energy structure

Energy is one of the pivotal thrusters of economic growth. China is carrying out incremental reforms to its fossil-fuel-based energy structure. Due to the increasing energy consumption and shortage, a better energy structure esp. greener energy, could make possible rapid economic growth, reduced poverty, and raised living standards possible.

4.3. China is Establishing Humane Authority and International Leadership within the International System

A leading state with humane authority leadership ought to maintain high strategic credibility and pursue international order as follows: (1) setting itself as an excellent example to other states through actions by international norms; (2) promoting beneficial international norms through rewarding the states that obey these norms; (3) punishing the states that violate international norms [27]. This paper will evidence the construction of China's international leadership in the following aspects.

4.3.1. China is Setting Itself as an Excellent Example to Other States through Actions by International Norms

The construction of ecological civilization is necessary to achieve mutually beneficial and sustainable development for all humanity. China advocates the building of a community with a shared future for humankind and a community of harmony between humanity and nature. Although China lags behind developed countries in terms of emission reduction target setting and process, China advocates emission reduction policies and paths that are suitable for each country's development stage.

Furthermore, China has announced its dual carbon strategy in 2020, namely, to peak its emissions by 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2060, aiming to make vast advancements to fight the global climate crisis. Overall, China is shaping international norms in its direction and taking up international responsibilities.

4.3.2. China is Promoting Beneficial International Norms by Rewarding the States that Obey these Norms

First, China provides climate aid to developing countries in need. At the 2015 U.S.-China summit, China pledged nearly \$3 billion in economic aid to develop countries to cut GHG emissions and combat climate change. In addition, President Xi Jinping announced at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly (2021) that China would increase its support for developing green and low-carbon energy in other developing countries.

Second, China is enlarging international support by winning the hearts of developing countries. China is a firm supporter and advocator of the ordinary but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) principle to call for climate justice. Also, China is willing to implement direct climate policies through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). This mechanism allows Annex 1 developed countries to invest in emissions reduction projects in non-Annex one developing countries [28].

4.3.3. China Cannot “Punish” the States that Violate International Norms

Due to the particularity of climate change issues and the incompetency of international rules, harsher punishment cannot be implemented under the current international law. A well-designed incentive and punitive mechanism among nations still need further exploration.

4.4. China’s Economic and Political State Leadership and Humane Authority International Leadership Interact

The author believes that China’s economic and political state leadership and humane international leadership are relatively competitive since national interests cannot be equated with international moral pursuit. Back in 1939, E. H. Carr criticized the so-called harmony of interests by utopian liberalism, which still applies nowadays [29]. The discrepancy of developments among states and the pursuit of survival and power lead to different policy choices of states. For instance, China needs to balance the enlargement of international support (esp. the aid to other developing countries and appropriate compromise and concession) and the upholding of domestic core interests. The such tradeoff is inevitable and burdensome.

Nevertheless, the two types of leadership reinforce each other. International political support and universal recognition led by international leadership would undoubtedly accelerate the process of carbon transformation domestically. China’s modeling as an active and responsible major country would win favors from other countries, thus attracting more low-carbon investments of high quality. Inversely, by setting dual carbon goals and carrying out related policies, the accumulation of state leadership would also reinforce international leadership. China’s studious efforts to tackle climate change domestically would be supported by most countries in the international decision-making process, which also advances significant country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the field of climate change.

5. Conclusion

By employing Moral Realism and an empirical study on China’s climate policy, the author developed and verified the assumption that 1) China upholds the fundamental values of realism which originated

from specific historical content, thus continuously pursuing leadership from home and abroad in the future; 2) China is establishing economic, political state leadership as a hybrid and humane authority international leadership simultaneously by designing and implementing targeted climate policies respectively; 3) The construction of the two leaderships interacts with each other. However, shortcomings still exist in this paper. The specific interaction of economic state leadership and political state leadership is not formulated in this paper. Moreover, the empirical study on policies is not deep enough, which could be future orientations of study in the future.

References

- [1] Wang, W., Jia, J., Liu, Y., & Wang, P. (2022) *Profound Changes Unseen in Centuries: An Overview of China*. Springer, Germany.
- [2] Organski, A. (1958) *World politics*. Knopf, New York.
- [3] Nye, J. (1990) *Soft power*. *Foreign policy*, 80: 153-171.
- [4] Waltz, K. (2010) *Theory of international politics*. Waveland Press, Illinois.
- [5] Mearsheimer, J., Alterman, G. (2001) *The tragedy of great power politics*. WW Norton & Company, New York.
- [6] Gilpin, R. (1981) *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- [7] Hilton, L., & Kerr, O. (2017) *The Paris Agreement: China's 'New Normal' role in international climate negotiations*. *Climate Policy*, 17(1): 48-58.
- [8] Heggelund, G. (2007) *China's climate change policy: Domestic and international developments*. *Asian perspective*, 155-191.
- [9] Statista. (2022) *Primary energy consumption worldwide in 2021, by country (in exajoules) [Graph]*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263455/primary-energy-consumption-of-selected-countries/>.
- [10] OECD (2022) *Air and GHG emissions (indicator)*. <https://data.oecd.org/air/air-and-ghg-emissions.htm>.
- [11] Smith, S. (2021) *China's "Major Country Diplomacy": Legitimation and Foreign Policy Change*. *Foreign policy analysis*, 17(2): orab002.
- [12] Keohane, R. (2005) *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton university press, New Jersey.
- [13] Kindleberger, C. (1981) *Dominance and leadership in the international economy: Exploitation, public goods, and free rides*. *International studies quarterly*, 25(2): 242-254.
- [14] Nye, J. (2008) *The powers to lead*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- [15] Ikenberry, G. (1998) *Institutions, strategic restraint, and the persistence of American postwar order*. *International security*, 23(3): 43-78.
- [16] Keohane, R., Victor, D. (2011) *The regime complex for climate change*. *Perspectives on politics*, 9(1): 7-23.
- [17] Olson, M. (1989) *Collective action*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- [18] Keohane, R. (2015) *The global politics of climate change: Challenge for political science*. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 48(1): 19-26.
- [19] Skyrms, B. (2001) *The stag hunt*. In *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*. American Philosophical Association, 75 (2): 31-41.
- [20] Yan, X. (2019) *Leadership and the rise of great powers*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- [21] Ikenberry, G. (1996) *The future of international leadership*. *Political Science Quarterly*, 111(3): 385-402.
- [22] Yan, X. (2019) *Leadership and the rise of great powers*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.
- [23] Zhang, Y., & Buzan, B. (2012) *The tributary system as international society in theory and practice*. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5(1): 3-36.
- [24] Waltz, K. (2010) *Theory of international politics*. Waveland Press, Illinois.
- [25] Heggelund, G., Andresen, S., Buan, I. (2010) *Chinese Climate Policy: domestic priorities, foreign policy, and emerging implementation*. In: Harrison, K., Sundstrom L. M. (Eds.), *Global commons, domestic decisions: The comparative politics of climate change*. The MIT Press, Massachusetts. pp. 229-259.
- [26] Yan, X. (2014) *From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement*. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(2): 153-184.
- [27] Yan, X. (2011) *International leadership and norm evolution*. *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 4(3): 233-264.
- [28] Heggelund, G., Andresen, S., Buan, I. (2010) *Chinese Climate Policy: domestic priorities, foreign policy, and emerging implementation*. In: Harrison, K., Sundstrom L. M. (Eds.), *Global commons, domestic decisions: The comparative politics of climate change*. The MIT Press, Massachusetts. pp. 229-259.
- [29] Carr, E. (2016) *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*. Springer, Germany.