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Identity in the Development Discourse: The New Era of Sino-US Identity Politics

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Key Points:

- Identity is propagated through planned political discourses backed by concrete policy initiatives attempting at reinforcing political agendas.
- The China-led Southern epistemology is emerging as a new order where the Chinese economic development model stands in contrast to the one dominated by the West, despite operating side by side in the same liberal international order.
- The western global economic development discourse is being overturned with new identity narratives sponsored by China. The patronising power of development discourse inaugurated by these two global powers has created two antagonistic yet seemingly similar ways of redefining the world by creating a “regime of truth”. A truth that is supposedly associated with the eradication of “poverty” by problematising it.
- The Chinese economic model convinces the developing world that the time is ripe to look beyond the discourse of “aid” presented by the West, which seems to be a smokescreen of “altruistic charity” that exploits the developing world and funnels the subsidies to US corporations.
- The moral outlook created by China as a provider and an equal partner, questions the contemporary scenario of development cooperation between a developed and a developing trade partner.
- Power relationship cannot be overlooked while talking about Chinese development cooperation as no aid, assistance, and collaboration comes with no strings attached.

Identity is one of the most prevalent phenomena of the present epoch encapsulating the gist of what transpires on the global political space.¹ The need for recognition and unique identification has long crept into various political and economic domains to project power. Power politics has not spared the realm of international development either. Since the modernisation process took its roots in the West, the development largely operated in a Eurocentric, parochial, and ethnocentric manner, as it claimed to wipe out the years of civilisational knowledge and

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018): 10.

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institutions of the global South. Such identities of development forestalled by the West in the early post-World War II scenario instilled a degree of inferiority, a longing to escape underdevelopment, a sense of being a perpetual loser; to be endlessly reformed, reshaped, and revamped.² In recent times, China has explicitly challenged this Western development discourse by constructing a China-led Southern epistemology of development. Though the different development approaches of the incompatible partners claim to be emancipatory, their underlying essence suggests a different way of exercising power.

² Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 1995): 70–80.

Conceptualising Identity in International Development

In the contemporary world, all strive for progress and development, but this desire has remained mostly unfulfilled owing to the politics that lies underneath the international development agenda. Unlike the Westphalian nation-state model, China is rising as a civilisational state.³ Its acceptance of the Western political and economic model will be disadvantageous to Chinese distinctiveness, suggests Zhang, which is why China is portraying a different development identity to that of the West.⁴ The international scepticism on China's rapid global outreach has escalated since it has emerged as the seventh-largest sovereign donor.⁵ The variance in Chinese and Western approaches to international development has become a new source of friction between the two powers. In the existing divergent scenario, the developing and the underdeveloped states will find themselves in a situation reminiscent of the Cold War where the Soviet-American power struggle for influence in the "Third World" forced them in picking sides.⁶

Nothing exists in an independent reality. Similarly, no state exists in an independent political condition. It means that even if both China and the United States (US) lie under the same Liberal International Order (LIO), the "Third World" is still left to pick sides as no aid, cooperation, and partnership comes with no strings attached. Power relations are still very much a part of a state's political reality overshadowing the case of a common denominator. The patronising power of development discourse inaugurated by both the global powers has created two antagonistic yet similar ways of redefining the world by creating a new "regime of truth". A truth that either of them aims at eradicating "poverty" by problematising it. These regimes are obvious in a manner that the governments of the underdeveloped world see themselves as mimicking one of the two models of development. Here identity imitation comes as a backdrop of development and development alternatives as a consequence of the Sino-US great game. This brings the classical dilemma of hegemonic decline into the foreground. In this respect, the question is how

³ He Li, "The Chinese Model of Development and Its Implications," *World Journal of Social Science Research* 2, no. 2 (2015): 128–38.

⁴ Dustin R. Turin, "The Beijing Consensus: China's Alternative Development Model," *Inquiries Journal* 2, no. 01 (2010), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/134/the-beijing-consensus-chinas-alternative-development-model>.

⁵ Zhang Chao and Tang Yuxuan, "What Does a New White Paper Tell Us About China's International Aid?" *The Diplomat*, last modified January 13, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/what-does-a-new-white-paper-tell-us-about-chinas-international-aid/>.

⁶ Matt Ferchen, "How China Is Reshaping International Development," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (blog), last modified January 20, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/08/how-china-is-reshaping-international-development-pub-80703>.

the essence of the contemporary international order is being transformed and how the Sino-US power tussle will transform the world.

Development Blocs: A New Domain of Power Politics

International order, according to John Ikenberry, is a set of arrangements among states which govern the basic principles, rules, and institutions.⁷ The US-led neoliberalism has long been able to stabilise the international order, but Chinese rapid international development has created a threat perception about its emerging transcontinental role. In such a scenario, the US is under enormous structural stress over whether China is aiming to replace the US preponderance in the international order.

China is a prime beneficiary of the "Era of New Normal".⁸ When the Asian Tigers and the Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) progressed, there remained a minimal focus on the non-Western mode of development. However, China's growth has raised many eyebrows. Such incredulity can be attributed to a shift in power-equation. There is a relative imbalance in the capabilities of the US and its potential competitor China. While many great powers are cutting their aid budgets, China is expanding them. It has appropriated around \$41.8 billion between 2013-18, with 47% of it as a grant, 48% as concessional loans, and around 4% as an interest-free loan. Such an outreach might be marginal compared to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or even the Organization of Economically Developed Countries (OECD). However, the image it is forestalling is unavoidable.⁹

According to Barry Posen, the preponderant role of the US was based on its ability to "control the commons", i.e., attaining superiority of sea, air, and space.¹⁰ Such superiority of the US is under threat by the China-led geoeconomic warfare that is utilising the same international institutions to further its agenda of authoritarian capitalism and regionalism in the eastern hemisphere through its mega projects, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China is on the rise as a transcontinental power stretching its influence in the maritime and the continental realm through spatial fixes

⁷ G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (March 2009): 71–87.

⁸ Syed Hasan Javed, *Rise of China and the Asian Century* (Islamabad: National University of Sciences and Technology, 2016): 16.

⁹ Adva Saldinger, "New White Paper Outlines China's Development Past and Future," *Devex* (blog), January 13, 2021, <https://www.devex.com/news/new-white-paper-outlines-china-s-development-past-and-future-98898>.

¹⁰ Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *Quarterly Journal: International Security* 28, no. 1. (Summer 2003): 5-46.

and surplus recycling mechanisms.¹¹ At the same time, the relative power of the US appears to be in decline. It is mainly because the US was caught up in seemingly unsurmountable challenges inherited from the Trump administration. Under former President Donald Trump, the US enacted protectionist policies, increased non-tariff barriers, and tightened border controls. With all these measures, the US constantly tried to cushion the effects of the trade war by sustaining its leadership role. With the US jettisoning its commitment to stand by its allies and withdrawing from global treaties, the Chinese economic model has provided a blueprint for a more connected, globalised world.

Unlike the Western economic model, where wars and conflicts have remained a part of and have thrived on forming alliances and blocs, the Chinese economic model has helped avert a further escalation in the region by establishing connectivity through various principal motivations of foreign and economic policies. For instance, China's economic partnerships are long-term and fashioned, keeping in mind China's domestic needs. Here, China's overriding concern is related to its success in fulfilling its energy demands which are expected to witness a threefold increase by 2030.¹² Where the situation for the West is ripe with peril in the Middle East, Russia, and beyond, the Chinese economic model has set up an extensive network of connectivity, enabling it to pump gas and oil from Central Asia and Russia to China. The Chinese economic model has hammered out commercial agreements with oil companies in Russia and the Middle East, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran, to ensure large-scale shipments. This is in contrast to the Western economic model that is at daggers drawn with many regional states.¹³ There is no denying that the Chinese economic model is showing absolute momentum and can eclipse the Western economic model in the coming decade.

Constructing a Southern Epistemology

The rise of any great power is not merely a consequence of special responsibilities but also that of great capabilities which have something to inspire the world

¹¹ Victor Pinchuk Foundation, "Niall Ferguson's and Fareed Zakaria's Summary Debate: The Liberal International Order Is Over?," YouTube, September 14, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtC-eT9YWZg&ab_channel=VictorPinchukFoundation.

¹² Zhidong Li, Kokichi Ito and Ryoichi Komiyama, "Energy Demand and Supply Outlook in China for 2030 and A Northeast Asian Energy Community - The automobile strategy and nuclear power strategy of China," *Institute of Energy Economics* (2018): 1-31.

¹³ Robin Mills, "China's Big Play for Middle East Oil," *Bloomberg*, last modified May 10, 2017; Elena Mazneva, Stephen Bierman and Javier Blas, "China Deepens Oil Ties with Russia in \$9 Billion Rosneft Deal," *Bloomberg*, last modified September 8, 2017; Anthony Dipaola and Aibing Guo, "China's CNPC pays \$1.18 billion for concessions in Abu Dhabi," *World Oil*, last modified March 21, 2018.

with, through a doctrinal revelation, or a civilisational mission, or even a social example. The concept of the "End of History" pioneered by Francis Fukuyama to support the Western rise in political, economic, and social spheres appears hollow and lackadaisical. In its hegemonic quest to dominate world politics, the West has compromised the democratic norms and principles it had once affirmed its allegiance to. As it comes against the backdrop of the unprecedented rise of China, the Chinese economic model flashes the hitherto neglected states a supportive sign. The idea of development in the international community has been instrumentalised not only for geopolitical purposes but also in a framework of expert hegemony. Thus, the poor of the world are turned into laboratory specimens, endlessly classified, and manipulated by a supremely arrogant and power-hungry professional community.¹⁴ This mode of ontological and epistemological explanation of the world with the West as its chief propagator is likely under the threat of being competed against, if not defeated, by a China-led Southern epistemology.

In the LIO, China is carving its way not to play by the rules of the West but to tweak them in its favour instead. There is a wider notion that the LIO has, and will, accommodate China, but China's distinct form of capitalism is to be understood first. According to Niall Ferguson, the LIO is rather a scam that has benefitted the least liberal of the great powers and elites.¹⁵ As mentioned in the earlier parts of the paper, the Chinese economic model convinces the developing world that the time is ripe to look beyond the discourse of "aid" presented by the West, which seems to be a smokescreen of "altruistic charity" that exploits the developing world and funnels the subsidies to US corporations.

This, however, does not mean that China will act as a structural imperialist, rather as a regional stabilising agent to strengthen its foothold in the region increasing its leverage in the international political scene. Such initiatives can be seen in the backdrop of deteriorating views of the global community on China. The regions with ample Chinese investment and trade are more favourable than the states of Asia Pacific. As the world shifts from geopolitics to geoeconomics, the question remains, whose development image will suffice, China or the US?

¹⁴ Escobar, *Encountering Development*.

¹⁵ Victor Pinchuk Foundation, "Niall Ferguson's and Fareed Zakaria's Summary Debate," YouTube, 20:21.

Altering Discourse and Embedding Boundaries

Discourse refers to a specific language that is used to create identities, define structures, and explain behaviour. It is how they become institutionalised.¹⁶ Exploring the role of “otherness” in nation-building processes and foreign policy practices, Campbell argues that discourses of danger are essential to both securing states’ identity and legitimacy.¹⁷ While speaking at a webinar, Stella Hong remarked that there was a lexical transformation in the development discourse of China. It can be inferred that it is the one creating defined boundaries within the system of capitalism by instilling threat in the US perception. The discourse of Chinese development cooperation has got a nuanced philosophical emphasis to gain more legitimacy by creating a sense of uniqueness.¹⁸ There is a wider emphasis that while the West is demonstrative of its power and direct in its approach, China, on the other hand, is more cautious and indirect. In this respect, there is a rising need to differentiate the cultural paradigms of the West and China. A better understanding of them may aid in avoiding misreading, over-reading, and under-reading the Chinese discourse and policy initiatives.¹⁹

West	China
Identity as Self Perception	
North	South
Developed	Developing
Donor	Provider
Propagation of Self Image	
Assistance	Cooperation
Aid	Endogenous Growth
Interest	Public Good
Imitation	Innovation

Table 1. The boundaries being indirectly instilled by Chinese development cooperation discourse

The tools of discourse come under the soft power umbrella, and China is considered the richest state in soft power based on its social example.²⁰ Thus, the way China is employing these alternate discourses to embed

¹⁶ Colette Chabbot, *Constructing Education for Development: International Organizations and Education for All*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2009): 34.

¹⁷ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Revised edition (University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 353.

¹⁸ CSCR, “Chinese Development Cooperation and the New Era of Aid and Assistance,” YouTube, 30:20, March 15, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-g0a7hBnXt0&ab_channel=CSCR.

¹⁹ Javed, *Rise of China and the Asian Century*, 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

boundaries based on a different development outlook, cooperation strategy, and regional connectivity (Table 1) is a staunch move towards China aiming to play a leading role in global governance.

Identity is propagated through discourses reinforced by concrete policy initiatives. Table 1 indicates just a few of those lexical changes highlighting deeper meanings in China’s development and identity discourse as it puts itself in a contest with the West. In China’s third white paper, the country portrays itself not merely as a developing state, decoupling itself from the imperialist bloc of the West but also considers itself the protagonist of South-South Cooperation (SSC). The self-imaging of China as a provider, a very normative moral stance, delineates itself from the donor outlook of the West. Similarly, the way China is utilising the development cooperation model to uplift the states of the South based on independent and endogenous growth by providing public goods and strengthening positive spillovers puts it in a contrasting position to the West.

Nonetheless, the Western development agenda has not entirely been as exploitative as being passively portrayed. Yet of all the insistence that China is a developing state, the world is not buying the argument.²¹ Many consider it a strategy to deploy China’s wealth and power.

When China talks about SSC, it downplays the role of power relations. The asymmetric partnerships mostly have strings attached to them. Thus, it becomes questionable to criticise North-South Cooperation (NSC) for the same strings that SSC works on.

Conclusion

This paper intended to explore whether the development identity of China is any different from that of the US or if the Chinese development cooperation is merely a new tool of power politics employed as an alternative to the Western model of international development. Though there appears a lexical transformation and discourse creation on the part of China, as of yet, it does not provide any revolutionary transformation in the way development is being unfolded widely. However, this development identity of China may have significant impacts in the future where the developing and underdeveloped states can succumb to proxy-ism of a new kind. As no aid, assistance, and cooperation come with no strings attached. Thus, power relationships cannot be overlooked while talking about Chinese development cooperation.

In the era where the world is moving towards geoeconomics, China is playing its cards right by subtly

²¹ Ferchen, “How China Is Reshaping International Development.”

bringing itself as a “relief” to the dismal economic case of the South, whether an illusion or more. This China-led Southern epistemology highlights a new trend where China categorically differentiates itself from the West even after being a part of the LIO. Such discourses of identity are reflected in both China’s policy initiatives and development ventures. In the years to come, China might increase its stakes in the global development cooperation through its outreach, and that is what the politics of the new world is exactly going to be about.