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Bachelor's Degree Dissertation

Title: *China's Global Environmental Engagement: Transforming Identity through Governance*

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Abstract: China wants to be more active in global governance to have a greater international influence. With the crisis of multilateralism, President Xi Jinping is finding opportunities to expand a more assertive foreign policy by being more engaged in multilateral organizations. The present work aims to analyze how China's changing identity towards a major power with responsibilities has led to an increasing role in the United Nations Climate Change Framework. Additionally, it will investigate how this proactive stance serves as a vehicle for China's goal of having a greater say in global governance as part of the national rejuvenation. The analysis will use a constructivist approach and focus on two case-studies: the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. In doing so, the present study raises the argument that the change in China's identity, from a non-revisionist state to a major power with responsibilities, and thus in its interests, has meant a different foreign policy action towards deeper global environmental governance.

Keywords: Chinese Foreign Policy, Global Environmental Governance, identity, major power with responsibilities, national rejuvenation, Kyoto Protocol, Paris Agreement.

Resumen: China quiere ser más activa en la gobernanza mundial para tener una mayor influencia internacional. Con la crisis del multilateralismo, el presidente Xi Jinping está encontrando oportunidades para ampliar una política exterior más asertiva mediante una mayor participación en las organizaciones multilaterales. El presente trabajo pretende analizar cómo el cambio de identidad de China hacia una gran potencia con responsabilidades le ha llevado a desempeñar un papel cada vez mayor en el Marco de las Naciones Unidas sobre el Cambio Climático. Además, se investigará cómo esta postura proactiva sirve de vehículo para el objetivo de China de tener una mayor participación en la gobernanza mundial como parte del rejuvenecimiento nacional. El análisis utilizará un enfoque constructivista y se centrará en dos estudios de caso: el Protocolo de Kioto y el Acuerdo de París. Con ello, este estudio defiende el argumento de que el cambio de identidad de China, que ha pasado de ser un Estado no revisionista a una gran potencia con responsabilidades y, por tanto, en sus intereses, ha conllevado

una acción de política exterior diferente hacia una gobernanza medioambiental mundial más profunda.

Palabras Claves: Política Exterior China, Gobernanza Global Medioambiental, identidad, gran potencia con responsabilidades, rejuvenecimiento nacional, Protocolo de Kioto, Acuerdo de París.

Resum: La Xina vol ser més activa en la governança global per tenir una major influència internacional. Amb la crisi del multilateralisme, el president Xi Jinping està trobant oportunitats per expandir una política exterior més assertiva al involucrar-se més en organitzacions multilaterals. El present treball té com a objectiu analitzar com el canvi d'identitat de la Xina cap a una gran potència amb responsabilitats l'ha portat a un paper creixent en el Marc de la Convenció Marc de les Nacions Unides sobre el Canvi Climàtic. A més, aquest document investigarà com aquesta postura proactiva serveix com de vehicle per a l'objectiu de la Xina de tenir una major veu en la governança global com a part del rejuveniment nacional. L'anàlisi utilitzarà un enfocament constructivista i se centrarà en dos estudis de cas: el Protocol de Kyoto i l'Acord de París. Amb això, aquest estudi defensa l'argument que el canvi d'identitat de la Xina, que ha passat de ser un Estat no revisionista a una gran potència amb responsabilitats i, per tant, en els seus interessos, ha comportat una acció de política exterior diferent cap a una governança ambiental mundial més profunda.

Paraules Clau: Política Exterior Xinesa, Governança Global Mediambiental, identitat, gran potència amb responsabilitats, rejuvenament nacional, Protocol de Kyoto, Acord de París.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CBDR-RC: Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities

CBRD: Common But Differentiated Responsibilities

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CD: Clean Development

CO2: Carbon dioxide

ET: Emissions Trading

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GHG: Greenhouse Gas

INDC: Intended National Determined Contributions

IR: International Relations

ITMOs: Internationally Transferred Mitigation Outcomes

JI: Joint Implementation

KLP: Keeping a Low Profile

NDC: Nationally Determined Contributions

PRC: People's Republic of China

QELRC: Quantified Emissions Limitation and Reduction Commitment

RGP: Responsible Great Power

SFA: Striving For Achievement

UN: United Nations

US: United States of America

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I. Introduction

Since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, China's foreign policy has undergone a significant change from keeping a low profile to assertiveness (Peña A. , 2018). China wants to have a more active role in multilateralism to have a greater voice in the international arena. One of the areas in which it is trying to achieve this goal is through global environmental governance. Climate change is an issue at the top of the international agenda and its impacts are visible on a world scale, "costing people, communities and countries dearly today and even more tomorrow." (United Nations, 2024) Consequently, climate action through global governance is crucial to solve, mitigate, and adapt to this global challenge. China's rapid economic growth has made it the country with the highest greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and "also among the nine countries responsible for 90% of global coal production." (CCPI, 2023). Thus, this exposure to environmental issues has entailed a shift in China's climate diplomacy which, at the same time, serves the primordial purpose of becoming a major power with responsibilities.

This shift has also happened due to the United States (US) unilateral turn during the Trump administration. The withdrawal of this superpower has left room for China to assume the leadership and become a key player in climate multilateralism, and to change its behavior towards multilateralism overall, becoming a 'responsible stakeholder' as it recognizes 'that the international system sustains their peaceful prosperity, so they work to sustain that system' (Zoellick, 2005, as cited in L. Kastner & M. Pearson, 2020, p. 164). Paradoxically, China has been contesting the US-led hegemonic system since 2008 by engaging in it on a deeper level, and this has been exacerbated under Xi's mandate. Since Xi Jinping is in power, China positions itself as a '*yinlingzhe*' (a leading state) which in Xi's words means to "proactively undertake more international responsibilities' (Xi 2013), continue to support multilateralism and international multilateral institutions (Xi 2015b, 2016b)" (Jilong, 2022, p. 362).

A major power with responsibilities refers to a state with great influence and capabilities in the international arena, expected to contribute to international cooperation to address global challenges. The Chinese understanding of what is a 'great power with responsibilities' (大国担当) "is associated with actions taken to fulfill

China's potential role in global governance (…) from "talking the talk" to "walking the walk" when it comes to international leadership." (Thomas, 2020)

Against this backdrop, this dissertation aims to shed light on the relevance of environmental politics to China's national interest. And more specifically, to comprehend the evolution of China's identity as an international actor and its stance towards climate governance within the context of the so-called 'China Dream'. The Chinese Dream encapsulates Xi Jinping's foreign policy rhetoric about the desire for national rejuvenation in which the country regains its 'wealth and power' status in the international system. Accordingly, the dissertation endeavors to answer the following research question: *How China's evolving identity as an international actor determines its growing role in the global governance of climate change?* To answer this, the dissertation will evaluate and compare China's role under the United Nations (UN) framework through two-case studies, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement. On one hand, The Protocol institutionalized the norm in the fight against climate change while on the other hand, the Paris Agreement is the most recent reform of the norm in this domain.

The research draws on Constructivism theoretical framework. This International Relations (IR) theory asserts that identity factors have a great weight in decision-making and in shaping an actor's sense of self in the international system and what role should play in it since identity is constructed through social interactions between different actors in the international system. The Chinese Dream is the backbone of China's identity and to achieve the recognition of being a major power with responsibilities, it is changing its foreign policy methods assuming leadership in global climate governance. As China's climate representative Xie Zhenhua said, "addressing climate change is what China needs to fulfil its due international obligation as a responsible power" (Jilong, 2022, p. 368, as cited in Xie Zhenhua, 2015). To draw a comprehensive evolution of China's stance in the climate negotiatios and within its identity this study will use a qualitative approach through the case-study research methods.

The dissertation is structured into six parts. Firstly, a literature review that covers the previous scholarly work relevant to this project. Secondly, a theoretical

framework that acts as a roadmap for the proposed line of work. Thirdly, a methodology to conduct the investigation. Fourthly, the analysis is divided into two parts: 1) China's evolving identity and 2) the case-studies of the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. The case-studies will look specifically at China's identity and position during both climate negotiations. Finally, a conclusion will present the key findings of the research paper. The underlying argument of the investigation is that the change in China's identity, and thus in its interests, has meant a different foreign policy action towards deeper global environmental governance.

II. Literature review

Some scholars claim that what has impacted China's climate practices are both domestic and international factors such as economic growth, environmental problems, and international reputation (Kopra, 2019, pp. 128-137). Meanwhile, others such as Jilong (2022) attribute the implication on multilateral climate practices to "China's changing construction of its international identity" (p. 358) from a victim country to a responsible great power (RGP), taking a constructivist approach. In contrast, Scott L. Kastner and Margaret M. Pearson (2020) explain that the motivation to invest in climate cooperation is not because it wants to be 'responsible' but because "it fears that Chinese interests will be undercut if it allows other powers to deal with the issue" (p. 165). Hence, they assert that the engagement depends on the strategic context. Concerning this affirmation, Yixian Sun (2016) affirms that China's proactiveness in climate negotiations is related to the Communist Party of China (CPC) government plans for 'self-esteem'. The current context is the 'China Dream' in which achieving national rejuvenation is the key to the regime's success. But instead of rejecting the identity factor, he argues how environmental governance is a political instrument for building an RGP international identity, which is the ingredient to fulfill the aspirations of acceptance and recognition of China's great power status. Besides, current literature suggests that the narrative of an RGP chinese identity not only comes from the national context but also "that international society is willing to accommodate China's aspirations for recognition as such, on the condition that China behaves "responsibly" in the world" (Ye, 2023, p. 527).

Moreover, many academics have explored the implications of global climate governance being the ‘world stage’ of which China has gradually moved to the ‘center’ since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 (Jilong, 2022, p. 367). Some argue that it is a problem while others argue that it is the solution. Those who say it is a problem is because they see it as a sign of shift in global power dynamics, as China is seen as an indispensable participant in global climate change governance, as much as the European Union and the US (Yuxin, Fanbo, Yiran, & Yongdong, 2021, p. 443). On the other hand, those who see it as a solution is because is the largest GHG emitter, and as a regional power as China is it will pressure other developing countries to follow its example in addressing climate change (Jilong, 2022, p. 371).

Given the overview of existing scholarly work, multiple suggestions have helped to identify critical aspects of the significance of climate multilateralism in the context of the ‘China Dream’. However, research on specific climate treaties and China’s stance on them is vital to put together to fully understand China’s intentions and even make predictions in future climate negotiations.

III. Theoretical Framework

The basics of constructivism are that both facts and ideas are important. So, it stands out from other schools of thought as it studies immaterial factors and sees the world as a set of social factors, including norms, ideas, shared meanings, etc. (Barbé, 2020)

Consequently, it argues that reality is socially constructed. This is summarized in Robert Cox's idea that “values and ideas are the reflection of concrete social relations which are transformed if those relations change" so that “all knowledge must reflect a certain context, time and space” (W. Cox, 1984). From this concept arises the idea that the social world is an intersubjective realm: “it makes sense to people who have made it and live in it, and who understand it precisely because they have made it and feel at home in it.” (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, p. 167). In the international arena, this implies that changes in a state's domestic and international behavior are influenced by norms and discourses through the processes of socialization. Thereby, actors have a social character, as their social interaction processes constitute their perceptions and

preferences at the time of policy making. The socialization process entails that the ideational component such as discourses, ideas and norms are the source of International Relations, which means that international institutions and regimes play a key role in the construction of identities, interests, and international norms.

State identity is the central component of social constructivist theory. Alexander Wendt defines state identity as the broad representation of the state, for one-self and to other states, based on collective beliefs, ideas, and responsibilities. Thus, since identities are not given by nature but are socially constructed, by what Hopf says “a simultaneous account of norms, culture and institutions” (Alexandrov, 2003, p. 45), they are subject to change. When the collective ideas and beliefs that actors hold change, the state’s identity changes. As identities “provide a frame of reference from which political leaders can initiate, maintain, and structure their relationships with other states” (Cronin 1999, p. 18, as cited in Berenskoetter, 2017), their behavior and interests in the international community also change accordingly. This is because once identity is determined, the identity defines the interest, as “an actor cannot know what he wants until he knows who he is" (Mengshu, 2019, as cited in Wildavsky, 1994).”

Therefore, China’s foreign policy is driven by its identity. This research project will analyze how identity conditions China’s position in climate negotiations by studying the evolution of China’s engagement in environmental governance, comparing the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. International institutions are spaces of power redistribution, as constructivists claim, hence China is using climate multilateralism to reinforce its identity and fulfill its interests. Consequently, this study will introduce the ‘Chinese Dream’, the central piece of its identity, as it is seen as a call to regain its status before foreign imperialism and colonialism and be recognized as a major power with responsibilities on an equal basis with the US.

IV. Methodology

This dissertation will use a qualitative methodology. The documentary analysis will predominantly hinge upon the examination of written primary sources which consist of government official statements, including white papers and speeches, and international treaties. The secondary sources include academic and journal articles and books.

The focal point of this research project is to acknowledge China's change of stance in international society and its internal transformations, taking the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement, the first and last legally binding international climate treaties, as case-studies. By comparing China's involvement in these different stages of climate negotiations it will be possible to address the research question: *How China's evolving identity as an international actor determines its growing role in the global governance of climate change?* The present study raises the argument that the change in China's identity, and thus in its interests, has meant a different foreign policy action towards deeper global environmental governance.

This dissertation follows a multiple case-study research technique assessing a diverse range of literature, encompassing both Western and non-Western perspectives. Additionally, the research entails the examination and analysis of qualitative data derived from primary sources. The basis is UN climate-related international agreements, both the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015), as well as official Chinese statements and documents like a Press release for high level forum of Celebration of the Coming into Force of the Kyoto Protocol in Beijing (2005), President Xi's speech at opening ceremony of Paris climate summit (2015), the 'Enhanced Actions on Climate Change: China's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' (2015) and 'U.S.-China Joint Announcement on Climate Change' (2014). Therefore, this research will only use a qualitative inquiry. In order to start from an empirical basis and establish temporal and spatial limits, a two-case study has been chosen. In light of this, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement have been selected as case-studies as the most useful to draw a comparison under which the hypothesis is set to be validated and cover contextual conditions over a period of thirty years, being the first and last international climate accords, respectively.

V. Analysis

This section divides the thesis analysis into two parts. On one hand, China's identity as an international actor will be examined, exploring its foreign policy turnaround, and how becoming a leader in climate negotiations contributes to the objective of national rejuvenation. On the other hand, the two selected case-studies will

be adressed through the constructivist theoretical framework as factors to predict the argument.

i) China's evolving identity: from non-revisionist to a major power with responsibilities

In the 1980s, under Deng Xiaoping's rule, China identified itself as a non-revisionist, non-disruptive and non-hegemonic actor (Gerald, 2014). The country had recently started developing international relationships due to "the "reform and opening - up" policy (Gaige kaifang 改革开放) introduced in the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping" (Peña A. , 2018, p. 1). The way it was doing it was through the 'keeping the low profile' (KLP) foreign policy strategy, implemented by Deng in the early 1990s. The KLP strategy was to "observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership" (Peña A. , 2018, p. 4) Therefore, it was keeping a low profile in the multipolar order, securing a non-confrontational position, and hiding its capabilities waiting for *their* time to shine. However, there was an assertive turn in 2013 with Xi Jinping. *China has woken up*. China wants to be involved in global governance and to be part of, and not an observer, of institutions, as now it identifies itself as a major power with responsibilities. The drivers in China's international identity change are the quest to restore great power status, consolidate domestic legitimacy, and foster a conducive environment for China's rise (Yi, 2021, p. 300; Boon, H.T., 2022, p. 825).

This change in China's identity also implies a transformation in China's foreign policy. As constructivists argue, identities matter in inter-state relations and when a state transforms its identity, its conduct in international society likewise shifts accordingly. The discourses to resurge China's glory after the loss of great power status during the 'Century of Humiliation' in which the country was ruled by foreign forces have been ongoing since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The objectives of national rejuvenation, as Xi calls it, have remained the same but the means to achieve them are changing under Xi's term (Peña A. , 2019, p. 84). The foreign policy is readjusted from 'keeping a low profile' doctrine to a 'striving for achievement' (SFA) strategy. Contrary to the KLP doctrine that seeks the accumulation of wealth, the SFA strategy contributes to the implementation of national rejuvenation as is based on moral and political values (Yan, 2014, p. 183). As a result, the Asian country has

opened up to the global world, extending country relations, and claiming for (shared) leadership.

Along with the SFA doctrine, China aims to accomplish national rejuvenation and claim leadership by integrating the strategic narrative of a 'community of common destiny for mankind' at the systemic level. This narrative is based on the idea that "The number-one reality in today's world is that all countries rise and fall together, and that the sure path to meeting the challenges is mutual assistance and win-win cooperation" laid out China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi (China Daily, 2024), as, quoting Xi Jinping, "(…) one is inseparable from the other, and their interest is highly inter-mingled and inter-dependent" (Yi, 2021, p. 306). This new interpretation of international relations implied an amendment in the Chinese foreign policy, from nation-oriented to the whole humankind. It recognizes the significance of global governance for building a shared future characterized by a "harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity", as former Chinese Comunist Party (CCP) General Secretary Hu Jintao stated (China.org.cn, 2012). Thereby, this 'new' community becomes a Chinese political mechanism to expand its network of foreign relationships and overall have a more active role in world affairs as the role of China in it is "to make practical efforts and set an example, as well as unswervingly pursue a road to a great nation which is different from that of traditional" spoke China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi (Yi, 2021, p. 306).

The community of common destiny, also known as the community with a shared future for mankind, integrates five dimensions, including the environment. In the 70th UN General Assembly held in 2015, Xi Jinping said, "All members of the international community should work together to build a sound global eco-environment" and "should firmly pursue green, low-carbon, circular, and sustainable development" (China.org.cn, 2015a). Consequently, since the adoption of this political slogan, China has been involved as a participant and contributor in the international climate institutions. According to Zhang and Orbie, China's intentions to defend the climate regime is because it serves as a platform to chase 'institutional discourse power', in which an actor can apply its discourse to persuade others, construct norms, and structure the international governance system (Yi, 2021, p. 308). It is a platform in which China can

claim leadership and fulfill the purpose of completing the Chinese Dream of great national renewal.

ii) Case-studies

a) The Kyoto Protocol

In 1997, when the Kyoto Protocol was held, China identified itself as a non-revisionist, non-disruptive, and non-hegemonic actor as it sought to maintain stability and avoid confrontation while focusing on domestic development and economic growth. XXX. The country decided to be part of the Kyoto Protocol because its rapid economic growth was causing severe environmental problems. Chinese citizens were discontent with the high levels of pollution and waste that were detrimenting their health status. Hence, to keep industrializing the country while maintaining legitimacy, the PRC started participating in international climate politics. (Bjørkum, 2005, pp. 8-9) But despite economic prosperity, China still identified itself as a developing country justifying it still had high poverty levels, low infrastructure development, and a low record of GHG emissions, throughout history (Bjørkum, 2005, p. 2).

The way China identified itself as a non-revisionist actor and as a developing country shaped its position during the Kyoto negotiations. China's priority was to not be bound to imposed obligations as it didn't want a coercive force imposing its conduct and dictating its future. One thing was joining multilateralism, another one was losing power. China was part of the developing countries' block - Group of 77 and China (G77/China) –. In fact, as the most populous and largest developing country, China exerted its influence in shaping the position of the block during the negotiation process. The key principle that G77/China defended was the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (CBDR) which affirms that "all states should be held accountable for international environmental problems, but that the degree of their responsibilities differs. Given their historical contribution to environmental degradation and greater financial and technical capacity to address these problems, developed countries bear a greater responsibility in addressing climate change." (Chaoyi, 2022, p. 190). Considering the CBDR principle, China upheld the division between developed countries and developing countries. G77/China block proposed that only developed countries had to take responsibility and had to have legally binding quantitative limits

on GHG emissions while developing countries didn't have to oblige to such binding obligations. The reasoning behind this proposal was that developing countries were victims of global climate change, and imposing binding emission reduction targets on developing countries could hinder their economic growth and impede efforts to improve living standards as well as "developing countries have limiting capacity to reduce emissions and lack the necessary technological solutions to do so". (Bjørkum, 2005, p. 34) Thus, the block led by China also proposed that developed countries should assist financially and technologically developing countries with climate mitigation and adaptation.

Moreover, during the negotiation process of the Kyoto Protocol, China was skeptical of the Three Flexible Mechanisms: Clean Development (CD), Joint Implementation (JI), Emissions Trading (ET). Although these will bring foreign investment into the developing world and would help the South to develop sustainably, China opposed it because these market-based mechanisms "would have permitted developed countries to shirk their responsibility to cut GHG emissions at home while 'disregarding the living environment of people in other countries' (Harris & Yu 2009, p. 59)- (Bjørkum, 2005). It also opposed the idea of communicating information to the Conference of the Parties (COP) on emissions inventory and implementation measures for sovereignty concerns.

Ultimately, the Kyoto Protocol yield some victories for both G77/China and developed countries. The Kyoto Protocol included the division between North and South that G77/China advocated. Article 10 calls for All Parties to achieve sustainable development "taking into account their common but differentiated responsibilities and their specific national and regional development priorities, objectives and circumstances". Thus, the Protocol follows an annex-based structure in which Annex I countries (developed countries) are bound to 'Quantified Emissions Limitation and Reduction Commitment' (QELRC), contrary to non-Annex I countries (developing countries). Accordingly, as Annex I countries originated the largest share of historical emissions, Article 2.3 requires these countries to take the lead in combating climate change and its adverse impacts, including "effects on international trade, and social, environmental and economic impacts on other Parties, especially developing country Parties". In line with this, Article 11 describes that "the developed country Parties and other developed Parties included in Annex II to the Convention shall: Provide new and

additional financial (…) including for the transfer of technology, needed by the developing country Parties to meet the agreed full incremental costs of advancing the implementation of existing commitments".

However, China could not materialize all of its proposals. The three flexible market-based mechanisms were established in the document in Articles 6, 12 and 17 to "encourage the private sector and developing countries to contribute to emission reduction efforts" (United Nations Climate Change, 2024a). Furthermore, the monitoring and review framework that China had reservations with, was also incorporated. However, only Annex-I parties where adhered to submitting GHG inventories to demonstrate compliance with their commitments under the Protocol. Developing countries were excluded from it as they were not bound to QELRC.

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol became the first international climate treaty, in other words, the first institutionalization of climate change's emerging norm. On the day that it entered into force on February 16th, 2005, China's Deputy Director of the NDRC, Deputy Director of the National Coordination Committee on Climate Change, Mr. Liu Jiang said: "Today is a truly historic day, a day worthy of being celebrated by the whole international community, especially those parties who have been working in the area of climate change for a long time." (National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), People´s Republic of China, 2005) China is among those parties that have been at the forefront of the fight against climate change as it "has been participating actively in the negotiations from the time they were initiated in the late 1980s until today, ratifying both the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1994, and the Kyoto Protocol in 2002" (Bjørkum, 2005, p. 2). Nevertheless, from the onset of the Protocol negotiations China was considered a 'hard-liner' due to its inflexible position in rejecting binding GHG reduction targets due to its belief that the developed countries hold a historical responsibility for climate change, its focus on national sovereignty priorities, and advocacy for developing countries' right to develop (Bjørkum, 2005, p. 27 as cited in Hatch, 2003, p. 50). Benjamin Gilman, Chairman of the US House of Representatives' Committee on IR, portrayed China's stance at Kyoto as a "policy of the 'Three Nos': no obligations on China, no voluntary commitments by China, and no future negotiations to bind China." (Zhang, 2013, p. 1). "Indeed one of the most important arguments for the United States' withdrawal from the Kyoto process in 2001

was the lack of ‘meaningful participation’ from China and other major developing countries” (Bjørkum, 2005, p. 12).

This criticism against China’s role during the Kyoto Protocol negotiation process could have damaged its reputation. However, in practice, the milestone of the first climate-binding treaty “not only helped China to gain diplomatic ground, but also offered economic lucre under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and pushed the country to improve its environmental governance domestically.” (Gerald, 2014, p. 150). Furthermore, even under the category of developing country, China managed to influence the direction of the Protocol in several areas, according to its interests and the rest of the developing countries.

b) The Paris Agreement

Almost three decades after the Kyoto Conference was held, the Paris Agreement negotiations took place. Throughout these years a shift in China’s identity and perception of climate change happened. China no longer identified itself as a non-revisionist actor but as a major power with responsibilities. China has the vision of being recognized as a “great modern socialist country in all respect” (The State Council. The People's Republic of China, 2021). China’s strategy to reclaim its historical status as a significant global power without portraying itself as a threat is to present a global image of China as a responsible stakeholder (Deng 2008; Gries 2004; Johnston 1998, as cited in Kopra, 2019, p. 56). Furthermore, in 2008 China experienced an economic rise. “From 2008 to 2010, China’s real gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaged 9.7%” (M. Morrison, 2019, p. 5), one of the highest growing paces worldwide. By 2010 China became the second-largest economy in the world when it surpassed Japan, with a GDP of 1,34 billion dollars (Díaz Figuls, 2010). However, this success did not come at a free cost as it led to an increase in pollution levels to the point of becoming the world’s largest emitter of GHG in 2006 as a result of two decades of industrialization. So now China had to set an example and take responsibility for its abundant emissions by taking a proactive stance in climate talks.

Xi also desires the resurgence of China’s glory to the point of being considered on equal footing with the US but has changed the means to achieve it. He believes that the policy approach of caution and restraint of displays of power on the international

stage based on Deng Xiaoping's dictum to "hide one's capabilities and bide one's time" (韬光养晦) is not the way. Xi says "it is time for us to take centre stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind" (Clover, 2017) as he acknowledges the significance of international cooperation and institutions for the pursuit of national rejuvenation. Hence, instead of following an isolated foreign policy approach, during his presidency, China has extended its international commitments. It has changed the country's foreign policy strategies from 'keeping the low profile' to 'striving for achievement', a "self-directed and forward-looking policy that leads China to play a more active and influential role at the world stage" (Peña A. , 2018, p. 2). Thereby, Xi has aligned the concept of 'major power with responsibilities' with 'the great rejuvenation of China'.

Furthermore, China has never stopped identifying itself as a developing country. However, it doesn't have the typical features that characterize a developing state. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi "pointed out the "paradoxical phenomenon" of being the second world largest economy in aggregate terms but not in per capita income, which still places China as a developing country" (Peña A. , 2018, p. 7).

This new state identity of RGP and a developing country shaped China's stance during the 2015 Paris Agreement. In November 2014, China and the US signed a bilateral agreement that set the path for the UN Climate Conference in Paris in 2015. The joint announcement was based on unilateral emission reduction targets, where China announced to peak C02 emissions around 2030 and to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in energy consumption to around 20% by 2030. The two sides also declared to cooperate closely together to adopt a successful legal climate protocol in Paris, reaffirming "the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC), in light of different national circumstances." (The White House, 2014) This pre-agreement symbolized a landmark for China. China was no longer a second-category player but an essential player in achieving an effective climate deal. Likewise, by recognizing that it is the largest emitter in the world and committing to curb emissions, China not only assumes its responsibility, but the US superpower also recognizes its responsibility and China's key role in addressing climate change.

During the Paris negotiations, contrary to Kyoto, China did not focus on the historical responsibilities of developed countries as it became the largest carbon dioxide (CO2) emitter. Xi said at the opening ceremony of the Paris Conference, “We should create a future of win-win cooperation, with each country making contribution to the best of its ability” (China Daily, 2015). Nonetheless, due to the developing-country identity, China still defended the principle of CBDR and continued to be part of the G77/China block, calling, in Xi’s words, “to respect differences among countries, especially developing countries, in domestic policies, capacity building and economic structure”, whereby obtaining “financial and technical support for capacity building is essential for developing countries to address climate change” (China Daily, 2015). As President Xi asked all Parties to contribute to climate change, China voluntarily pledged to peak its emissions. However, China still refused binding emission reduction targets. For this reason, China defended the application of ‘Intended National Determined Contributions’ (INDCs), non-binding unilateral quantitative and qualitative objectives “which eased the concerns of China and other developing countries regarding their limited capacity, as well as unsolicited international interference.” (Chaoyi, 2022, p. 204). In June of 2015, in a national document called ‘Enhanced Actions on Climate Change: China's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions’ China presented its INDCs: peak CO2 emissions by 2030, reduce carbon emissions per unit of GDP by 60% to 65% from 2005 levels, raise the proportion of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to about 20%, and augment forest stock volume by roughly 4.5 billion cubic meters compared to 2005 levels. (China.org.cn, 2015b, p. 1)

Another Chinese proposal was that the agreement shall “improve the transparency of enhanced actions of all Parties (…) in a way that is non-intrusive, non-punitive and respecting national sovereignty.” (China.org.cn, 2015b, p. 5). Opposite to Kyoto, China backed a report and review system. As now China wanted all Parties to contribute through INDCs, periodic assessments were imperative. Moreover, China became supportive of internationally transferred mitigation outcomes (ITMOs), petitioning an international mechanism on capacity building to improve mitigation and adaptation in developing countries. Additionally, a novelty was China’s announcement to establish a Fund for South-South Cooperation on climate change to “promote mutual learning, mutual support, and mutual benefits as well as win-win cooperation with other

developing countries". (China.org.cn, 2015b, p. 5) This reaffirmed China's identity as a developing state, while simultaneously solidifying its leadership and influence within the developing world.

Overall, the Paris Agreement accepted most of China's propositions. It adheres to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances" that China defended. However, it eliminated the division between Annex I and Annex II countries that the Kyoto Protocol established in 1997. But still recognized in Article 4.4. that developed countries should take the lead. Hence, it was stipulated in Articles 9,10, and 11 that developed countries have to support developing countries in their mitigation and adoption obligations through financial, technological, and capacity-building resources, as Chinese negotiators requested.

Moreover, the Paris Agreement did not adopt legally binding target emissions but 'nationally determined contributions' (NDC) instead. NDC required each country to choose its targets and timetables unilaterally and communicate them every five years. Therefore, these voluntary but binding NDCs were not included in the Agreement. That was a major win for China because the Agreement required all parties to participate in the fight against climate change, as China had hoped. Also, this mechanism facilitated countries to comply with the provisions of the Paris Agreement following national circumstances and preferences. Accordingly, China's position on transparency was included in Article 13.3, which states that the transparency framework shall "be implemented in a facilitative, non-intrusive, non-punitive manner, respectful of national sovereignty, and avoid placing undue burden on Parties". Regarding voluntary cooperation, Article 6 recognizes it, including ITMOs, and establishes a mechanism "to contribute to the mitigation of GHG emissions and support sustainable development" (United Nations Climate Change, 2024b).

The 2015 Paris Agreement is the pre-eminent international climate treaty. It not only restructures the climate change norm by introducing the concept of NDCs for setting targets and timetables but also establishes a climate change norm cascade as it brings all countries together into a common cause. China became one of the early adopters of the Paris Agreement, ratifying it in September 2016. This decision was

highlighted during a joint press conference with the US, hoping to motivate other countries to follow suit. Finally, it entered into force on 4 November 2016, reaching a total of 195 out of 198 Parties in 2024.

Following the Paris conference, "China's foreign ministry spokesperson Hong Lei (2015) congratulated 'China's sense of responsibility as a major country in tackling climate change'" (Kopra, 2019, p. 110). This opinion was shared by multiple governments and academics. As *The Los Angeles Times* commented "one thing was clear at the global climate change talks in Paris: China, once a dead weight, [had] emerged as a key player in the battle to help avert the worst effects of global warming." (Xiaosheng, 2018, p. 237) And Selwin Hart, director of the Secretary-General's Climate Change Support Team said that "The ambition level of the Paris Agreement would not have been possible were not for China." (Xinhua, 2016) Nonetheless, some voices expressed concerns that China's efforts were not ambitious enough and Christoff (2016) and Dimitrov (2016) claim that China's negotiating conduct in Paris hampered and obstructed ambitious international efforts.

The Paris Agreement supports the three pillars of China's foreign policy. First, the objective to achieve acceptance of RGP and recognition on par with the US is gained with the joint pre-agreement. Second, it supports the desire to "cast itself as the champion of developing countries" (W. Maull, 2018, p. 267) by promoting the South-South Cooperation Fund and CBDR-RC principle. Third, it endorses the goal of protecting national sovereignty and development interests because it follows a flexible multilateralism in which "no supranational body will have the authority to sanction China if it does not reach its INDCs" and gives China "the freedom to adjust them in line with its greatest priority, economic development." (W. Maull, 2018, p. 267)

	Kyoto Protocol (1992)	**Paris Agreement** (2015)
LEGALLY BINDING	Yes. Total and contractual multilateralism.	Partially. Facilitative multilateralism.

OVERALL OBJECTIVE	Targets and timetables	Progressively being more ambitious- each country-to achieve 1.5 degrees more than the pre-industrial period. Both North-South countries. But still common and differentiated, so funds for developing.
PROCESS-RELATED COMMITMENTS	Review the process	Reviews every 5 years of the correct development and implementation of the NDCs bottom-up system where every country chooses their targets and timetables unilaterally.
EMISSIONS TARGETS	5% of 1990 for 2008-2012. But each Annex I party has a specific target.	No. We have NDCs.

Table 1. Case-studies Climate Change International Agreements

Source: own elaboration based on the United Nations Kyoto and Paris treaties.

	Kyoto Protocol (1997)	**Paris Agreement** (2015)
IDENTITY	Developing country identity / Non-revisionist, non-disruptive, and non-hegemonic actor.	Major power with responsibilities.
CHANGE	From 'keeping the low profile' to 'striving for achievement' foreign policy strategy.	
POSITION	'Common but differentiated responsibilities': Only developed countries take responsibility and reduce their emissions. Refusal of binding GHG reduction targets, including voluntary	Not any more historical responsibility nor differentiation: All countries have to contribute to reducing pollution and greening economy, taking into account CBDR-RC principle. Voluntarily pledged to peak its

	commitments. Skeptical to the Three Flexible Mechanisms: Clean Development (CD), Joint Implementation (JI), Emissions Trading (ET). Reservations on international scrutiny of its emissions data and reporting practices. Developed countries have to assist financially and technologically developing countries with climate mitigation and adaptation.	emissions by 2030 and increase the share of non-fossil fuels in its primary energy consumption to around 20% by 2030, as part of NDC. Supportive of internationally transferred mitigation outcomes (ITMOs) and cooperative approaches. Agreed to participate in transparency mechanisms – periodic assessment and review of climate targets. Developed countries have to assist financially and technologically developing countries with climate mitigation and adaptation. Promotion of South-South Cooperation Fund

Table 2. China's Evolving Diplomacy in Climate Negotiations

Source: own elaboration based on Bjørkum (2005), Kopra (2019), and official Chinese documents.

VI. Conclusions

This dissertation aimed to determine how China's changing identity as an international actor shapes its growing role in the global governance of climate change. This study used a qualitative approach and followed a documentary analysis investigation technique to answer the research puzzle To do so, the Kyoto and Paris climate negotiations have been presented as case-studies under the IR theory of Constructivism.

Undoubtedly, "No country can be immune to the risks" (Xie, 2021, p. 109) of climate change and China is no exception. In the past, Chinese policy-making on climate change was described as a 'hard-liner' because it refused both binding and

voluntary emission reduction targets at Kyoto as it upholded environmental responsibility exclusively to developed countries due to their historic contributions. Whereas in Paris, China presented its nationally determined contributions, acknowledging that "climate change is a shared mission for mankind" (China Daily, 2015). These differentiated stances are driven by China's evolving state identity. In 1997, China identified itself as a non-revisionist, non-disruptive, and non-hegemonic actor as well as a developing country. The priorities were national stability and development, thus it kept a cautious profile during the Kyoto negotiations focusing solely on the G77 + China block. On the contrary, in 2015 China already identified itself as a RGP but still as a developing country. The shift is rooted in China's rising emissions due to its growing population, as well as the economic growth and high dependence on coal to keep up with it. This clashes with the historic responsibility narrative maintained in Kyoto. Now the main priorities are to restore China's great status, on an equal basis with the US, and claim leadership in the international arena. Hence, during the Paris Conference, Chinese representatives decided to take a more proactive and pluralistic approach as "responding to climate change is what China needs to do to achieve sustainable development at home as well as to fulfil its due international obligation as a responsible major country", declared China's special envoy Zhang Gaoli at the 2014 UN Climate Summit (Kopra, 2019, p. 108).

Accordingly, as constructivists claim, state behavior is conditioned by the state's identity. So China's changing identity entails that its foreign policy strategies change too. In three decades, a 'new era' has been established from adjusting the 'keeping the low profile' doctrine to the 'striving for achievement' doctrine. Throughout the decades the country's position, role, and intentions have varied, from being just another player to being at the forefront of the negotiations due to its change in identity to become and be recognized as a great responsible power equal to the US at the international sphere.

It is important to highlight that China's evolving identity determines its stance at climate talks from a 'norm taker' to a 'rule shaper'. But also by engaging in the collective-action problem of climate change has been an instrument to advance China's aspirations of becoming a major power with responsibilities aligned with the pursuit of national rejuvenation objectives.

Through the analysis and review of primary and secondary sources, the argument has been validated that China's shift in identity to a great power with responsibilities has entailed a different foreign policy strategy toward becoming a leader in global climate action. In a gap period of thirty years, China has become a significant participant and contributor in the fight against the climate crisis to the point of being recognized as an essential actor. At the same time, this has strengthened China’s position in the international arena, which simultaneously implies a further step toward the ultimate goal of national rejuvenation.

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