



Evolution of China's National Interest: A historical perspective.

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Introduction:

The concept of national interest holds paramount importance in international relations, serving as a guiding principle for a state's engagements on the global stage. As articulated by Nuechterlein (1976), it encapsulates "the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to other sovereign states comprising the external environment." National interest encompasses a spectrum of dimensions, including defence, economic prosperity, maintenance of global order, and adherence to ideological values. These facets collectively underpin a state's foreign policies and strategies, reflecting its aspirations and ambitions on the international stage. Furthermore, national interests are intricately interconnected, often necessitating trade-offs and compromises among them.

Within the field of international relations, national interest emerges as a central theme, embodying the rights and benefits pursued by a nation-state, encompassing both material and spiritual needs. It can be delineated into political, security, economic, and cultural dimensions, each reflecting a nation's values, priorities, and pathways toward realizing its objectives. The determination of national interest is deeply influenced by subjective factors such as cultural traditions, ideological beliefs, and societal values, as well as objective considerations such as domestic circumstances and global trends. Ultimately, national interest serves as a guiding force in the decision-making processes and the formulation of national strategies, shaping a country's engagements and interactions in the global arena.

Each country has its own different interest. Socialist China governed by CCP has their own conception of their national interest. "Throughout the 90-year history of the CCP, their perception of national interests and realization methods have gone from vague and obscure to clear and distinct, from simple to complex. In this process, how to correctly handle the relationship between national interests and ideology has always been an important aspect

of the CCP's view of the national interest (Liu Zongyi, 2014).” Evolution and development of national interest had gone through various historical stages.

Before the establishment of PRC

Following the establishment of the CCP, the party aligned itself with the Communist International during its Second Congress, highlighting objectives of national independence, dignity, and territorial integrity. Engaging in initiatives like the Northern Expedition against warlords and confronting the Kuomintang, the CCP linked its aspirations to those of the international communist movement. As Japanese aggression escalated in the 1930s, the CCP, guided by the Communist International, advocated for a flexible foreign policy aimed at forming a broad anti-Japanese united front.

Amid the Anti-Japanese War, the CCP began formulating its independent national interests, prioritizing the independence and survival of China. Mao emphasized self-reliance and seeking foreign aid to win the war, indicating a shift toward an independent strategy. Despite Soviet instructions, the CCP chose not to deploy its forces against Japan, signalling its pursuit of an independent path.

Following the dissolution of the Communist International, the CCP pursued a revolutionary path tailored to its own conditions. It cooperated with progressive elements within China and engaged in pragmatic diplomacy, aligning with any party supportive of the Chinese revolution. As the focus shifted after the Anti-Japanese War, defeating the KMT and achieving national independence became paramount for the CCP, which sought to maintain its distinct strategy free from external influence. With the onset of the Cold War, CCP leadership recognized the limited ability of external forces to impact China's domestic affairs. Mao charted an independent strategy towards the US, sidelining Soviet considerations. While seeking recognition and assistance from the Soviet Union, deteriorating relations with the US led to the establishment of principles like 'leaning to one side' and 'non-recognition' during the 2nd plenary session of the 7th Central Committee of the CCP. The CCP prioritized independence, self-reliance, and strategic exploitation of contradictions to pursue its national interests for over a decade, establishing these principles as fundamental to China's national interest.

National interest after establishment of PRC: 1949-79

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) transitioned from a revolutionary movement to the ruling party. This transformation, influenced by the prevailing international environment, Mao Zedong's leadership, and the evolving understanding of national interest within

the CCP, significantly shaped China's foreign policy. The relationship between ideology and national interest within the CCP was intricate and multifaceted. Ideology, integral to the CCP's identity, served as both a driving force and a potential source of conflict in its pursuit of national interest. While ideology was considered a vital component of national interest, its alignment with pragmatic goals sometimes led to contradictions.

During this period, safeguarding China's security and promoting economic development emerged as top priorities for the CCP. In the formulation of foreign policy, considerations of security, economic interests, and diplomatic objectives were paramount. The CCP's "leaning to one side" foreign policy, characterized by alignment with socialist countries, was influenced by ideological affinities as well as strategic considerations.

However, ideological differences eventually strained China's relationship with the Soviet Union, leading to the rupture of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1960s. The CCP's vision of consolidating the socialist camp clashed with Soviet policies, highlighting the complex interplay between ideology and national interest. The Cultural Revolution further emphasized ideological fervour, with the CCP advocating class struggle and exporting revolution to advance its national interest. Despite hostility towards both the United States and the Soviet Union, the CCP's extreme ideological stance risked alienating potential allies and tarnishing China's image on the world stage.

The Zhenbao Island incident underscored the primacy of national security in CCP decision-making. Strategic cooperation with the US against the Soviet Union marked a significant shift in China's diplomacy, with national interest taking precedence over ideological considerations. While ideological differences persisted, China's engagement with the West reflected a pragmatic approach to advancing its national interest. Under Mao's leadership, ideological considerations heavily influenced the CCP's perception of external threats. Excessive emphasis on ideology sometimes exacerbated tensions and compromised China's national interests. Nonetheless, the CCP remained steadfast in defending China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, positioning itself as an independent global actor amidst Cold War rivalries. The relationship between ideology and national interest within the CCP was complex, evolving over time in response to domestic and international dynamics. While ideology remained a significant factor, pragmatic considerations increasingly shaped China's foreign policy decisions, highlighting the CCP's pursuit of national interest in a changing world order.

National interest after launch of Reform and Opening-Up

The passing of Mao Zedong in 1976 marked a significant juncture in the trajectory of revolutionary China. Under his leadership, China experienced remarkable accomplishments, yet also grappled with the repercussions of

ideological extremities such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which engendered considerable economic and social hardships.

Upon Mao's demise, China still confronted economic backwardness and widespread poverty, prompting a pivotal reassessment by the new leadership regarding the nation's developmental trajectory. Central to this discourse was the deliberation between adhering to the revolutionary path of socialism and communism and charting a new course for economic progress. This deliberation precipitated the initiation of the "reform" and "opening-up" policies, heralding the introduction of capitalist elements into Chinese society and the evolution of the nation's conception of national interest.

Key tenets of China's national interest encompassed sovereignty, security, and a steadfast commitment to patriotism and internationalism. While these core principles remained constant, distinctions arose in the prioritization of national interests, the fundamental objectives of foreign policy, and the role of ideology in diplomatic endeavours. Notably, the elevation of economic interests to a prominent position alongside traditional security concerns underscored a pragmatic shift in China's foreign policy orientation. The post-Mao era, epitomized by Deng Xiaoping's leadership, witnessed a departure from ideological rigidity towards a more pragmatic approach to international relations. Deng championed the themes of "peace" and "development," emphasizing the pursuit of national interests grounded in pragmatic considerations rather than ideological imperatives. Deng's pronouncement that China would no longer predicate its state-to-state relations on ideology or social systems signalled a significant departure from past diplomatic practices.

Furthermore, Deng advocated for conflict resolution through peaceful means, cooperation, and mutual understanding, advocating for a new international order based on the principles of Peaceful Coexistence. This pragmatic approach to diplomacy laid the groundwork for China's peaceful development strategy and its role as a responsible global actor. Subsequent generations of CCP leadership, exemplified by Jiang Zemin, built upon Deng's vision, adapting China's national interest framework to evolving international dynamics. Jiang's emphasis on the "eight-point" agenda for cross-strait relations and the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" underscored a commitment to safeguarding national integrity and sovereignty while pursuing democratization of the international system.

Against the backdrop of China's ascendance on the global stage, Hu Jintao's leadership identified the imperative of seeking peace, development, and cooperation in navigating complex international challenges. The CCP's delineation of core national interests, encompassing the state system, territorial integrity, and economic sustainability, reflected a comprehensive approach to safeguarding China's domestic and international interests. This comprehensive security concept, coupled with efforts to strengthen China's capacity to protect overseas

interests and promote multilateral cooperation, underscored a strategic shift towards a more proactive and inclusive approach to diplomacy. Moreover, the emphasis on harmonizing China's national interests with the broader interests of humanity underscored the CCP's commitment to fostering a more equitable and just global order. China's evolving conception of national interest, characterized by a departure from ideological rigidity towards pragmatic diplomacy, reflects a nuanced and adaptive approach to safeguarding its domestic and international interests amidst shifting global dynamics. This approach, marked by a commitment to peace, development, and cooperation, underscores China's emergence as a responsible global stakeholder in the 21st century.

Conclusion

China's journey of defining and pursuing its national interest has been marked by dynamic shifts, ranging from revolutionary fervor to pragmatic engagement. Over time, the CCP has adapted its foreign policy priorities to align with changing domestic realities and global dynamics. While ideology continues to influence China's worldview, pragmatic considerations of economic development and political stability have assumed greater significance in shaping its foreign policy choices. Moving forward, China's national interest will likely remain a key determinant of its interactions with the international community, navigating between traditional principles and contemporary imperatives.

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