



The Impact of Identity Perception Factors on U.S. National Strategy

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Abstract. The national identity perception, consisting of self-perception and significant other perception, is an important starting point for state behavior and influences its judgment and choice of its own national interests. The U.S. national identity perception is a national strategic orientation based on the interaction of its two-way assessment of the self and the significant other, which is used to explain the logic of state behavior and elaborate the national image. The shift of U.S. policy toward China from "strategic engagement" to "strategic competition" is analyzed at the level of identity perception motivation, which reflects the transformation of U.S. role and status in the interaction between China and the United States. Faced with the objective reality of the relative decline of the country's comprehensive power, the Biden administration tried to build a cognitive opposition in the process of interaction with the important other, China, in order to achieve its purpose of diverting domestic conflicts, consolidating the alliance system and seeking a broader competitive advantage over China at the cognitive level.

Keywords: Identity perception; the Self; the Other; Strategic competition; Strategic anxiety

1 Introduction

Faced with the relative decline of U.S. power since the Biden administration came to power, the Biden administration, out of concern for maintaining the country's international role and influence, gave priority to hegemonic protection in strategic decision-making, i.e., maintaining the U.S. status as a world superpower was the primary purpose of U.S. strategic adjustment. In this way, the Biden administration defined the U.S.-China relationship as a "strategic competition" to achieve the purpose of shifting political differences internally and close alliances externally.^[1]This approach of the Biden administration is not uncommon in U.S. history, as the U.S. strategic culture has repeatedly sought or defined "significant others" to solve the major problems facing the United States at the time. The current U.S. strategy toward China is based on the evolution of its long-standing historical strategic tradition, and its attitude and policy toward China reflect an adjustment in the U.S. orientation toward itself. By focusing on the factors of identity perception that play an important role in the formulation of U.S.

national foreign strategy, the U.S. strategic culture and strategic tradition are taken as the lineage of U.S. identity perception. In the context of the interaction between the two sides since the U.S. promoted the shift of Sino-U.S. relations to "strategic competition," we analyze the underlying motivation of the U.S. strategic choice toward China, which to a certain extent reflects the imbalance in the strategic construction of U.S. competition with China.

1.1 Core concepts of identity perception

Identity perception consists of both the state's self-perception and the assessment of the "significant other", and the feedback formed in the interaction between the self and the other modifies the state's perception of its own identity in the previous period. The state's identity perception is influenced by its participation in international interactions from the status and role of the international situation or changes in the environment, structuring the logic of the state's strategic behavior.

Cognition is the active reflection of the subjective world to the objective world and is a unique function of human society. Cognition is a dynamic process, made by the subject on the basis of his own experience, cultural background, knowledge structure, sources of information acquisition and a series of other factors. Perception is an important research variable in the development of national foreign strategies. In his analysis of the mechanisms influencing the generation of cognition, Jervis proposes that the generation of cognition is influenced by the evoked stereotypes of cognitive conformity theory and the knowledge gained from major events in the history of international relations, and that this knowledge in turn influences the interpretation of the information received by the actors. Cognitive factors are important among many factors that determine a country's foreign policy. The perceptions of state actors about their own international environment and their perceptions of the other have better explanatory power in explaining a country's foreign strategy or policy making.

The state's identity perceptions are broadly divided into three categories, including attribute identity, role identity, and collective identity. Attribute identity classifies the state genus category, including the perceptions and attitudes of regime type, state system, degree of development, and geo-environment. The role identity from the perspective of material power refers to the comprehensive judgment of the state based on its own power and international influence, which is gradually formed in the long-term international social interaction. Its perception is generally "great power", "superpower" and so on. Collective identity is more often reflected in the process of actors' participation in international interactions, and refers to the dual consideration of attribute and role identities, and the division of their perceptions into "self" and "other" in a certain community based on factors such as interests. In interstate relations, the active or passive perception of a state's identity is not only an affirmation or denial of the role it plays, but also affects the effect of the power it exerts. Especially for great powers, the authority and prestige of the state are the symbols of its status and identity as a great power. Thus, a great power will seek recognition in the international community, especially the recognition of its status and identity by important others. If it does not

receive the recognition of important others in the process of seeking, it will have an impact on its own national perception.

1.2 Elements influencing the cognitive construction of identity

Self-perception is a comprehensive assessment of the state's own strength, development trend and main goals based on its past history, national identity, strategic culture and traditions in combination with the present. The self-perception of the state is an assessment of the state's role in the national society, which is the self-measurement of the state and the goal it is trying to achieve. Constructivism argues that the core variables that reside in international politics such as power and interests are essentially cognitive issues.^[2] As cognitive psychology continues to be applied to the analysis of political decision making, the idea that concepts such as state power and interests present differentiated influences as the basis for influencing state behavior is becoming more widely accepted. Alexander Winter first introduced the identity factor in the study of international politics and defined it as the attribute of an intentional actor, capable of generating motives and behavioral characteristics, which refers to who or what kind of content the actor is, indicating social categories or states of being. National self-perception refers to the views, opinions and judgments on international affairs formed by national policy makers and decision makers after receiving, storing and analyzing specific information about the target environment based on their own original knowledge reserves and perceptions. Recognition and identification from the other play an important role in the process of national identity formation. Other perceptions are the attitudes of other international actors in a state's international interactions regarding its identity status and the policy behavior that results from that attitude. A state's perception of the other is influenced by the strategic culture from which it derives. Strategic cultural assessment provides a way to examine a state's policy choices while preventing its own ethnocentric biases.^[3] Anthropologist Rob Johnston defines it as "the tendency to project one's own perceptions and norms onto others. The perceptions of the Other developed by states originate in the assessment of the Other, in which international actors that are perceived to have a significant impact on the state are classified as significant others, and the image of the significant other is constructed through political narratives and other means based on the state's national context and practical needs. As Colin Gray states, "Policies and strategies will be influenced by the group's interpretation of each other's histories and by cultural preferences inherited from the geopolitical, geostrategic context."^[4]

1.3 The significance of identity perception for explaining state behavior

The perception of state identity based on the material perceptions it possesses, combined with the interaction of participation in international practices, has relative stability over time. The relative stability of national identity perceptions provides a clearer reference path for observing or predicting state actors, in order to reflect and explain the logic and basis of state foreign policy formulation.^[5] Because national identity cognition is formed in the country's historical and cultural and strategic traditions and com-

bined with the realistic consideration and two-way assessment of the country's participation in international behavior, it is possible to interpret the country's foreign behavior and foreign strategy through the lens of identity cognition, which can more systematically and comprehensively include factors such as objective strength and subjective will, and has more profound explanatory power in the analysis of international events and a country's policies.^[6]The significance of national identity cognitive construction is not only to clarify the question of "who am I", but more importantly, to create a contrasting or even antagonistic structure between the two sides through the depiction and elaboration of self-cognition and important others. camp, thereby achieving the goal of weakening, overtaking, and even suppressing the significant other. In his book Perception and Illusion in International Politics, Robert Jervis proposes three hypotheses for the mechanisms that shape the illusion of national identity perception: the first is cognitive fit, in which actors ignore or misinterpret information that explains the current objective situation when the reality of the situation does not match what state actors earlier made and perceived. The second is the evoked stereotype, in which state actors are influenced by the topics they focus on as a priority when processing information fed back from the outside world.^[7]The third is the influence of past history, in which the actor subconsciously compares information with historical experience after receiving it, in which a false association between current and historical events may occur, thus predisposing the actor to misperceptions.

2 Self-perception and the Significant Other in the Construction of American National Identity Perception

The U.S. perception of its identity stems from its long-standing material and conceptual power, combined with its ability to exert influence on the international community, which constitutes a collection of conceptual elements for dealing with international affairs and inter-state relations abroad. Conversely, the material power, conceptual rationality, and ability to exert influence on the U.S. will also play a role in the U.S. perception of its own identity. The shift in U.S. policy toward China is a major movement in the adjustment of U.S. foreign strategy over time, and the long-established U.S. identity perceptions provide an important reference for the internal motivation of its policy shift.

2.1 Self-perception of American national identity

With its unique geographic location and social composition, the United States embodied both a different aspect of the formation of national identity from that of traditional nation-states in its early years.^[8] In contrast to traditional nation-states based on blood or geography, the initial motivation for the formation of immigrant society in the United States included both common internal interests and common external pressures. The internal common interests of the early American nation included the protection of private property and the security and fairness necessary to achieve a response to common pressures, both from the suzerain state and from native threats. After inde-

pendence in the juridical sense, the initial common interests evolved in a relatively stable social environment, but were influenced by the social structure, economic model, and distribution of interests, which shifted from the macro-construction of the initial founding motives to the resolution and implementation of specific issues. The divergence of internal common interests affects the development and long-term stability of the country and is one of the unavoidable problems in the formation of the American nation.^[9] Therefore, the U.S., out of the need to solve the problems of common interests, has been able to circumvent these problems by portraying and elaborating the common pressures on the outside world to achieve the transformation of the problems. By presenting and even exerting common pressures on domestic society, it effectively gathers social consensus in the short term and provides support for the country's foreign strategy.

2.2 Important Others in the Construction of American National Identity

As the American historian Julius Pratt points out, "The idea that there is a providence that governs and guides American expansion is so ingrained within our national consciousness that there are literally very few times when it does not exist." Since the late 18th century, Americans have seen Europe as the antithesis of the United States and the cultural "other" when defining their own cultural identity, and have believed in "American exceptionalism"; when thinking about the geopolitical identity of the United States, they have seen Europe as a threat, and have pursued a continentalism that distances them from European strife and excludes European influence.^[10] In its national understanding, the United States defines its role as the "City on a Hill" and its "Manifest Destiny" branding itself as "God's Chosen People. In the strategic culture of the United States, "dualism" is more evident. At the beginning of the United States, the isolationism represented by the Washington Farewell Address separated the United States as the "New World" from the chaotic and decadent "Old Europe". With the growth of American power and the need for its expansion, the Monroe Doctrine was born, proposing that "America is America for the Americans" and pitting America against Europe in order to achieve its goal of controlling America against European influence. The United States was convinced that their democracy was not born in the dreams of theorists, that it was not brought to Virginia from the Susan Constant or to Plymouth from the Mayflower, that it came from the American forest, and that it gained new strength every time it touched new frontiers.

2.3 The Process and Significance of National Identity Construction in the United States

The U.S. national identity is internally based on its own strengths, political perceptions, and circumstances in the course of its historical development; externally it draws on the influence of the "significant other" in the international community on itself. The U.S. national identity perception is ambivalent, oscillating between isolationism and internationalism, and evolving into both the Monroe Doctrine and liberal hegemony when it is on the rise. Thus, in the self-perception of the United States, there is often a tendency

to position the country itself on the side of other countries, especially the "significant other". The position of national power does have certain relative attributes, but too much emphasis on the "other" in its positioning often makes its strategic positioning blurred, and even puts the cart before the horse in the strategic decision-making process. The idea of "otherness" is inherent in the creed of nationalism. For most nation-states, there have been and are likely to be different "significant others" based on their own perceptions. A nation's identity is defined or redefined through the influence of the Significant Other. Designing the image of the "other" is an important part of U.S. national strategic planning. As a nation of immigrants, the United States does not share the same ethnic unity, common historical memory, and close blood ties as most nation-states.^[11] Therefore, in the formation of its national community, the U.S. relies more on the imagination of the "other" to promote internal cohesion by arguing the difference or even the opposition between the self and the "other". The U.S. perception of the Other tends to define the antithesis of the state.^[12] America's comparison and transformation of the "other" fosters patriotism and allows for a bold interpretation of American national identity.

3 Conclusion

The U.S. foreign strategy has a tradition of playing international games through the definition of the self and the other, and the direction of U.S.-China relations during the Biden years was influenced by both the U.S. role for itself and China as the "significant other". China is developing rapidly and playing an increasingly important role in the international community, increasingly becoming a "significant other" in U.S. foreign strategic interactions since the end of the Cold War. Identity perception is a product of two-way acquisition of self-perception and significant other perception, but in recent years the United States has increasingly tended to look for differences and even antagonism among significant others, ignoring its own practical needs and long-term interests, resulting in an imbalance in the construction of national identity perception. The Biden administration has not only failed to properly address this issue, but has instead used it as a gimmick to deflect U.S. concerns about itself. In terms of identity, it defined China's development as the rise of a non-Western power in order to strengthen the cohesion of the Western "democratic" camp. The Biden administration's internal portrayal of the significant other is intended to enhance national cohesion in the face of U.S. political polarization and social fragmentation. By articulating the influence of the significant other among allies, the goal is to build strategic pressure on China by continuously promoting cognitive unity with allies. At the systemic level, the Biden administration aims to make its own national perceptions of the significant other acceptable to a wider range of international actors, and to conduct moral kidnappings through "values diplomacy" in the form of Western-style standards of "democracy and freedom". The process of constructing the U.S. national identity is somewhat dichotomous, and the constant reinforcement of the opposing side for political purposes only obscures the real national interest and gives rise to irrational decisions. Under the dynamic world change, the need to strengthen speculation about the important others

while ignoring the fundamental need for self-perception will further intensify the strategic anxiety on the other side.

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