

A Comparison of Foreign Policies between China and the U.S. Based on Political Culture Theories

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Abstract. Political culture is the psychological dimension of the political system and an important variable affecting a country's foreign policy. The differences in political culture between China and the U.S. affect the two countries' foreign policies and interactive relations. However, the contradictions in political culture will ultimately be subject to the practical interests of the two countries. Comparing the differences between the political cultures of the two countries and their influence on foreign policies is of particular value to understanding the bilateral relations between China and the U.S. and formulating comprehensive measures toward the United States.

1. Introduction

China and the United States are today's most complex and critical bilateral relationships. In recent years, the relationship between China and the United States has tended to be tense, and the interaction between the two countries' foreign policies has been divergent. Academics are more likely to analyze the phenomenon from the perspectives of geopolitics and economic interests but less likely to explore it in the context of political culture. Given the vital influence of political culture on a country's foreign policy, this paper will explore the political and cultural reasons for the conflicts between China and the U.S. foreign policy by applying the theory of political culture through the lens of comparative politics.

2. Definition of significant concepts and elaboration of related theories

Political life is not only composed of "tangible factors" such as political system, economic interests, and international environment, but also shaped by "intangible factors" such as ideology and political values. The political culture analysis of China-U.S. foreign policy and interaction is born to meet this requirement.

2.1. Political Culture Theory

The concept of political culture put forward by Gabriel A. Almond has been a classic concept widely adopted by academics. According to him, political culture refers to the psychological dimension of a political system, which "includes the attitudes, beliefs, values, and skills that prevail among a country's inhabitants at the time."^[1] In this paper, we will follow Almond's definition of

political culture, which is defined as the psychological orientation of a country's citizens towards political objects, including political awareness, political emotion, political attitude, political motivation, political intention, political belief, political thought, national sentiment, ideology and so on.^[2]

2.2. Foreign Policy

Foreign policy refers to the basic principles, guidelines, and codes of action a country follows in dealing with international issues and foreign relations and conducting foreign activities. It is formulated by the central decision-making body of the government of each country or the highest decision-making body of other actors by the changes in the international situation and strategic layout to strive for a favorable global environment for the sake of a particular interest or the implementation of strategic tasks for a certain period.^[3]

2.3. The Path of Political Culture Influencing Foreign Policy

Political culture is one of the dimensions of a country's identity and an important variable affecting a country's foreign policy making. The paths through which political culture influences a country's foreign policy mainly include the following points:^[4]

First, political culture influences the goals and content of a country's foreign policy. Cultural interests are part of national interests, and cultural security is essential to national security. The relationship between political culture and foreign policy is centered on the connection between values and ideology as the core content of culture and foreign policy. The orientation function of values and ideology as the core of political culture determines the value pursuit of the state's foreign

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policy, and the identity function of political culture provides the cultural foundation for determining relations with other countries in foreign policy.^[5]

Secondly, political culture provides an ideological source for a country's foreign policy and influences its goals and methods. Each country has its own complete and stable political culture, which "gives meaning to the polity, the spirit of its public institutions, the passions and collective reasoning of its citizens, as well as the styles and operating codes of its leaders."^[6]

Political culture profoundly affects the political life of a country, and foreign policy, as an essential part of political life, is naturally affected by it.

Thirdly, political culture influences the mechanism and process of foreign policy-making. The national political system is an essential carrier of national political culture, and a country's political culture influences its crucial political and political systems. The decision-making mechanism of foreign policy is part of a country's overall political system, and different political systems influence and constrain the formulation of a country's foreign policy.

There are two central values in comparing and analyzing a country's foreign policy with the theory of political culture: first, differences in political culture are an essential cause of conflicts and antagonisms between countries, so analyzing foreign policy through political culture can provide a better understanding of the reasons for the differences between two countries. Secondly, unlike political and economic "tangible factors" and "hard power," political culture as an "intangible factor" and a country's "soft power" can help to analyze foreign policy more comprehensively. Political culture, as an "intangible factor" and a country's "soft power," helps to understand a country's foreign policy more comprehensively.

It should be noted that political culture is one of the essential factors in the analysis of foreign policy, but it is not a determining factor. Studying and analyzing foreign policy from the political culture perspective can enrich the study of foreign policy. However, it cannot replace other views; it can only play a role by complementing and drawing on different factors.

3. Political Culture and Foreign Policy of China and the United States

A country's foreign policy always bears the imprint of the country's political culture, and the respective political cultures of China and the U.S. have an essential impact on the formulation, implementation, and interaction of the two countries' foreign policies. Combined with Almond's definition of political culture, the comparison of Chinese and American political culture and foreign policy is analyzed as follows.

3.1. Characteristics of Chinese and American political culture

3.1.1. China's political culture

Contemporary Chinese political culture is based on traditional Chinese political culture, guided by socialism with Chinese characteristics and the abandonment of mainstream Western political culture.

On the one hand, contemporary Chinese political culture is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese political culture. Traditional Chinese political culture was formed and developed during the long-term historical development of the Chinese nation. The small peasant economy of self-sufficiency, the social structure of patriarchy, and the unity of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are the basis for the formation of contemporary Chinese political culture. This has bred a Chinese political culture characterized by a prominent moral and ethical nature, low political participation, and a more centralized responsibility for policy-making.

On the other hand, contemporary Chinese political culture is guided by socialism with Chinese characteristics. The Communist Party of China (CPC) is the ruling party in China. It is recommended by Marxism, always adhering to the combination of the basic principles of Marxism with the actual situation in China and the characteristics of the times.^[7] Marxism guides China's contemporary political culture, and while constructing a political culture system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, it has taken the essence and discarded the dregs of the mainstream Western political culture to promote the development of China's political culture. At the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President Xi Jinping proposed the concept of a "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind," which shows a new development in China's political culture.

3.1.2. Political Culture of the United States

The main elements of American political culture are isolationism, universalism, realism based on Protestant philosophy, and high political participation. American political culture is a comprehensive reflection of the political attitudes, values, national spirit, religious beliefs, and so on possessed by Americans, which influences the foreign policy of the United States.^[8] Strong Protestantism, participatory political culture, and a significant trend of political polarization in recent years characterize the political culture of the United States.

Above all, Protestant Christianity is an essential undercurrent of the American nation, and three Protestant traditions constitute the primary political culture tone of the United States, including isolationism, ecumenism, and realism.^[9] First, "Protestant isolationism" has inspired isolationist tendencies in U.S. foreign policy, which has led to the so-called "American exceptionalism," considering its newly established society to be a "city on top of the hill. This also gave rise to the so-called "American Exceptionalism." Second,

“Protestant ecumenism” has pushed the United States to embark on the path of global expansion, and the sense of development has been deeply rooted in American culture from the beginning. It has become a distinctive feature of the United States’ foreign relations. Third, “Protestant realism” has led the U.S. to form a realistic tone of foreign policy, attempting to pursue the so-called “justice” and “order” in the “fallen world” order in a “fallen world.”

In addition, strong participation and political polarization in recent years are also prominent features of contemporary American political culture. From the signing of the Mayflower Convention to the implementation of township self-governance in the early days of the United States, the outbreak of the War of Independence, the emergence of “Jacksonian democracy” and the rise of the “Progressive Movement,” and most recently, the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement, to the BLM movement. The recent BLM movement is a manifestation of the participatory political culture of the United States.^[10] Political polarization, on the other hand, is one of the most dominant features of the contemporary United States, where the degree of political polarization has been deepening since the 1970s, with increasing disagreements between the general public and the political elites within the political arena, such as political party affiliation and public policy.^[11]

3.1.2. Comparative analysis of political culture between China and the United States

Overall, the political cultures of China and the United States are more different: the political culture of the United States is more traditional while having a high degree of political participation; China’s political culture has a slight predominance of secular culture, but the degree of political participation is lower.

The Inglehart–Welzel World Cultural Map measures a country’s political participation through the ratio of its traditional to secular and survival to self-expression values, as shown in the table below (Table 1). The larger the value in the table, the more influential the country’s traditional or survival values are. It can be seen that compared to Chinese political culture, American political culture is more conventional and simultaneously has a higher degree of political participation.

Table 1. Inglehart–Welzel World Cultural Map 2023

Margin	Traditional/ secular values	Survival/ self-expression values
China	0.5	0.0
The U.S.	0.0	1.5

Source: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>, last accessed December 18, 2023

At the same time, the political cultures of China and the United States also share similarities. For example, realism and inclusiveness are reflected in both Chinese and American political cultures, which, to a certain

extent, can provide a political and cultural basis for Sino-American cooperation.

3.2. Interaction between political culture and Sino-American foreign policy

3.2.1. Sorting out the Interaction between China’s and the United States’ foreign policies in recent years

Under the century of significant changes, the power shift between the East and the West has brought about new contradictions. In recent years, the U.S. strategic orientation toward China has undergone a significant change from “stakeholder” to “strategic competitor” and “fierce competitor.” China has made specific responses while maintaining its strategic stability.

The Biden administration’s China policy is a continuation and development of the Trump-era policy, and the leading tone of the U.S. “strategic competition” with China has not changed. Since the Biden administration came to power, it has defined China as a “major global competitive power” and launched a “comprehensive strategic competition” with China, carrying out an “offensive” in terms of technology, international mechanisms, values, and security. Simultaneously, it seeks cooperation with China on climate change and Afghanistan. The Biden government’s policy toward China has three salient features: first, it attaches importance to domestic governance; second, it attaches importance to allies and partnerships; and third, it pursues “limited cooperation” with China. Domestic governance is the most critical factor in determining a country’s future international status; allies and partnerships support the U.S. to maintain its hegemonic position. China’s participation is indispensable to resolving global and some regional issues. Based on this, the U.S. is focusing on domestic governance. The U.S. has also launched “limited cooperation” with China while at the same time pursuing a series of “China-exclusionary small circles” in the international arena, such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Five-Eye Coalition, in an attempt to curb China’s strength and global influence in all aspects.^[12]

In the face of the U.S. strategic suppression, China has actively responded to the U.S. game by strengthening its strategic strength and initiative. First, it has resolutely fought and counterattacked issues that threaten China’s core interests, such as the fierce exchanges between the Chinese side and the U.S. side in the Alaska Anchorage Dialogue, the introduction of the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Act, and the sanctioning of U.S. personnel involved in issues related to the border and Hong Kong. Second, it actively seeks support from third-party countries, strengthening cooperation with the European Union, ASEAN, and other countries and improving its strategic diplomatic layout. Third, it has initiated guiding and shaping its foreign policy agenda toward the United States, proposing “two lists” and “three bottom lines.” A series of Chinese initiatives have achieved specific results.

3.2.2. Political culture and U.S.-China differences

Political culture is an essential source of international differences and conflicts.^[13] According to the path of political culture influencing a country's foreign policy, the foreign policy of China and the United States can be analyzed as follows:

First, political culture influences the goals and contents of China's and the United States' foreign policies. China adheres to the guidance of socialism with Chinese characteristics, emphasizes the combination of theory and practice, and has firmly followed the road of socialism with Chinese features for many years. The U.S. has the most potent religious beliefs among capitalist countries. Under the influence of Protestantism and liberalism, the U.S. tries to act as a "world leader" and promote and advocate "religious freedom" and "liberal democracy" to safeguard itself globally. Liberal democracy to maintain its hegemonic position. In this sense, China has become one of the most critical countries in the eyes of the U.S. to promote "democracy" abroad, which is undoubtedly not conducive to the development of China-U.S. relations.

Secondly, political culture provides ideas for China's and the United States' foreign policies and influences the goals and methods of the two countries' foreign policies. The U.S. government treats the ideas of human rights and freedom in its own political culture as the universal values of humanity. It takes the promotion of U.S. values and social model as an essential element of U.S. foreign policy. China's foreign policy often cites traditional Chinese political and cultural values such as "Harmony is precious," "Gentlemen are peaceful but different, while small people are the same but not the same," and "What you don't want to be done to you, don't do to others," emphasizing mutual respect and seeking peace in its foreign policy. Its foreign policy emphasizes mutual respect and seeking common ground while reserving differences. To a certain extent, the different political cultures of China and the United States have created contradictions in their foreign policies. For example, China's idea of a "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" emphasizes the "symbiosis of civilizations." In contrast, the "clash of civilizations theory" represented by American scholar Huntington advocates the "conquest of civilizations." The "clash of civilizations theory" described by the American scholar Huntington supports the "conquest of civilizations." The two are fundamentally different.

Thirdly, political culture influences the mechanism and process of foreign policy-making in China and the United States. The political system of separation of powers in the United States has deep political and cultural roots. The political system of separation of influences makes the process of U.S. foreign policy full of checks and balances and bureaucratic political struggles. Due to party disputes and interest group differences, U.S. foreign policy has a certain degree of uncertainty, often "a set of people, a set of policies." In the case of China, "diplomacy is not a trivial matter" is the fundamental viewpoint in the foreign policy-making process. The final decision-making power in foreign

affairs lies with the Party Central Committee, which is in the hands of the Party's top leaders and the state, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Politburo, and its Standing Committee.^[14] The formulation of China's foreign policy reflects the country's overall interests and has strong stability. Therefore, when the U.S. policy towards China fluctuates due to the change of government or political party, the foundation of policy interaction between China and the U.S. that has already been laid tends to suffer a particular impact.

4. Conclusion

Comparing the foreign policies of China and the United States and analyzing the reasons for the differences between the two countries through the perspective of political culture theory can deepen the understanding of the bilateral relationship between China and the United States to a certain extent. Based on the above analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

On the one hand, the influence of political culture on the foreign policies of China and the United States and each other is stable and long-term. Once formed, political culture is sound across generations and universal across classes. No matter anyone or any government, they are influenced by their political culture and reflect this culture in their actions. China and the United States are both cultural powers with well-developed political cultures. Throughout history, the connotations and manifestations of political cultures in China and the United States have been relatively stable. Therefore, the differences in political culture between China and the United States may affect the relationship between them in the long run.

On the other hand, the political cultures of China and the United States certainly impact the formulation and implementation of their foreign policies. Still, the non-compulsory nature of influencing the political culture determines that its influence is only sometimes present. The political culture factor is only one of the problems in the relationship between China and the United States, not a decisive factor in creating conflicts. In China-U.S. relations, economic and political paradigms can explain the harmony of China-U.S. relations. In contrast, conflicts caused by political and cultural differences between China and the United States are seldom mentioned. Nowadays, when the old paradigms have encountered difficulties in explaining the new trends in the foreign policies of China and the United States, political and cultural analyses have attracted renewed attention.

China and the United States will benefit from cooperation but will be hurt if they fight. China and the United States have significant differences in various aspects, and political culture is no exception, so it is natural for the two countries to have differences and conflicts. The important thing is that, for the sake of the overall interests of the two countries, they can promote more benign interactions in competition rather than the opposite.^[15]

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