



International Journal of Public Law and Policy

ISSN online: 2044-7671 - ISSN print: 2044-7663

<https://www.inderscience.com/ijlap>

Costly signals and compliance boundaries in human rights diplomacy: China's UPR engagement

Yuhang Jiang, Wenlong Song

DOI: [10.1504/IJPLAP.2026.10079709](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJPLAP.2026.10079709)

Article History:

Received:	16 March 2026
Last revised:	26 May 2026
Accepted:	26 May 2026
Published online:	07 July 2026

Costly signals and compliance boundaries in human rights diplomacy: China's UPR engagement

Yuhang Jiang* and Wenlong Song

School of Regional and Country Studies,
Beijing International Studies University,
Beijing, China

Email: 2023221443@stu.bisu.edu.cn

Email: songwenlong@bisu.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Public human rights discourse in multilateral institutions is often dismissed as rhetorical positioning, yet it may also function as a strategic signal shaping negotiation behaviour. This article examines how China's human rights discourse operates as a signalling device in the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Drawing on textual analysis of 51 Chinese statements at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and responses to 428 UPR recommendations from 2018–2024, the study identifies a discursive framework structured around three narratives: development and subsistence rights, sovereignty and non-interference, and the shared values of humanity. These narratives structure China's bargaining behaviour in the UPR. Development-oriented recommendations are frequently accepted, generating commitments that function as costly signals, while sovereignty-sensitive recommendations are rejected despite reputational costs. By linking discourse to differentiated signalling costs, the article develops a discursive framework-signalling cost approach explaining how China communicates and defends its human rights positions in multilateral institutions.

Keywords: Human rights diplomacy; Universal Periodic Review; UPR; costly signals; China.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Jiang, Y. and Song, W. (2026) 'Costly signals and compliance boundaries in human rights diplomacy: China's UPR engagement', *Int. J. Public Law and Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 5, pp.1–28.

Biographical notes: Yuhang Jiang is a student at the School of Regional and Country Studies, Beijing International Studies University. Her major is Diplomacy, and her primary research areas include global governance and diplomatic discourse studies.

Wenlong Song is the Head of the Department of International Relations and Associate Professor at Beijing International Studies University (BISU). He received his PhD in International Relations from the China Foreign Affairs University. His main research areas are Eurasian strategy and political narratives.

1 Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) serves not merely as a multilateral forum for diplomatic coordination but as a central arena in which global norms are debated, contested, and crystallised into international consensus (Johnson, 1955). Against this backdrop, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) – originally designed to assess each state’s human rights performance on an equal footing (United Nations General Assembly, 2006) – has evolved in practice into a complex field of diplomatic negotiation, where the authority to interpret human rights norms and shape the global agenda is fiercely contested. Through strategic interactions in formulating and responding to recommendations, states seek both to legitimise their normative positions and to safeguard national interests. China, as a key protagonist on this stage, has systematically articulated its distinctive conception of human rights while engaging deeply with the UPR process (Chang and Gao, 2024). Its participation thus embodies a dual character: it is both a normative enterprise of discursive construction and a pragmatic exercise in diplomatic bargaining.

This engagement must be situated within a broader structural transformation of the international human rights landscape. The postwar human rights regime, anchored in the 1948 Universal Declaration and subsequent covenants, was forged under conditions of Western institutional predominance and Cold War bipolarity, when the normative authority of UN human rights bodies rested on a relatively stable ideological consensus among their principal architects (Hopgood, 2013). By the 2020s, however, this architecture confronts a fundamentally altered environment. The enforcement leverage of multilateral human rights institutions has significantly eroded amid geopolitical fragmentation, the proliferation of competing governance models, and growing scepticism toward universalist claims (Posner, 2014). Rising powers – China foremost among them – no longer operate solely as norm-takers within Western-designed frameworks; they increasingly seek to reshape the institutional terms of engagement. The implications extend well beyond the mobilisation of Global South coalitions. They also involve direct challenges to the procedural authority of Western-led institutions, the systematic introduction of sovereignty-affirming language into UN resolutions, and the cultivation of alternative multilateral frameworks that operate outside the liberal human rights architecture. China’s UPR participation, viewed in this light, forms part of a wider reconfiguration of multilateral order in which great power competition intersects with human rights governance: the signalling strategies examined in this study are not exercised in a normative vacuum, but within an institutional field whose authority structures are themselves contested and in flux. Understanding this structural backdrop is essential for interpreting the specific discursive and bargaining dynamics analysed in subsequent sections.

Existing scholarship, however, largely treats these two dimensions separately. Constructivist studies predominantly focus on China’s discursive strategies and norm contestation within the UNGA (Zhang, 2017), while institutionalist analyses often confine themselves to assessing the procedural rationality or statistical outcomes of the UPR mechanism itself (Mao, 2021). Consequently, a critical theoretical gap remains: how does the abstract public discourse constructed in the UNGA translate into concrete negotiation behaviour within the UPR? Little scholarship has systematically examined the internal linkage between China’s normative conceptualisations and its specific decisions to accept or reject peer recommendations. As China deepens its engagement

with UN mechanisms, understanding this ‘discourse-behaviour’ nexus is essential for interpreting the logic of non-Western powers in global governance.

To bridge this gap, this study conceptualises the UPR as a dynamic process of signalling games. It advances a central inquiry: how does the human rights discourse framework constructed by China in the UNGA function as a pre-negotiation ‘costly signal’ that delineates bargaining boundaries? More critically, how do the differentiated costs incurred by accepting (policy costs) or rejecting (reputational costs) recommendations serve to validate the credibility of these signals? By answering these questions, we aim to reveal how China leverages these dynamics to uphold its core sovereignty ‘red lines’ while mobilising broader support for its developmental agenda.

To systematically unpack this process, this study develops a dynamic analytical framework comprising three sequential stages: discursive construction (negotiation preparation), negotiation deployment (position interaction), and cost validation (decision enactment). Methodologically, we employ a mixed-method approach that integrates computational text analysis with process tracing. Specifically, we systematically compare 51 core speeches delivered by China at the UNGA (2018–2024) with 428 recommendation response records from the fourth cycle of the UPR, allowing us to empirically test the causal logic between discursive signalling and decision costs.

This study makes three key contributions to the interdisciplinary study of human rights. First, it bridges the long-standing divide between discourse analysis and behavioural research by treating discourse as a strategic asset in negotiations. Second, it introduces signalling theory into human rights diplomacy, empirically distinguishing between ‘cheap talk’ and ‘costly signals’ by measuring the tangible policy and reputational costs of state compliance. Third, it carries significant policy implications. By decoding the specific cost structures behind China’s position-taking, this research provides a pragmatic roadmap for international actors navigating the complexities of human rights negotiations, suggesting that framing demands within compatible ‘developmental’ logics yields higher compliance than traditional adversarial approaches.

2 Literature review and analytical framework

2.1 How China’s behaviour in the UPR has been explained

Scholars have proposed multiple explanations for China’s behaviour within international human rights mechanisms. This article categorises the existing literature into three main approaches: normative discourse explanations, institutional reputation explanations, and power-based bargaining explanations. While these perspectives illuminate different aspects of the logic underlying state behaviour in human rights politics, they remain insufficient to fully account for the specific strategic patterns exhibited by China in the UPR.

The first strand of research explains China’s position within international human rights mechanisms from the perspective of normative and discursive differences. Influenced by constructivist international relations theory, human rights are understood not as fixed institutional standards but as a normative system continuously constructed and contested through international interaction (Yuan et al., 2016). In this view, states are not merely recipients of norms but may also act as agents shaping their meaning (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). From this perspective, China’s stance on human rights is

often interpreted as a normative response to Western liberal conceptions of human rights. At the same time, a broader body of scholarship has questioned the tendency to associate human rights exclusively with Western liberal traditions. As Sen (2006) argues, the foundational ideas underlying human rights are not the exclusive achievement of any single civilisation, but draw on cross-cultural traditions of tolerance, public reasoning, and concern for human dignity that can be identified across many societies (Deklerck, 2003). Recognising these plural origins reframes the analytical task undertaken here: rather than treating China's discourse as a deviation from a uniquely Western benchmark, this study examines it as one articulation among several within an inherently contested normative field, seeking to render the internal logic of that discourse legible rather than to adjudicate its ultimate validity. Existing studies analyse China's official human rights discourse from various angles, finding that it emphasises the importance of the right to development, the right to subsistence and state sovereignty (Wang and Zhang, 2024; Sen, 2006), while criticising what are perceived as Western double standards in assessing China's human rights performance (Peerenboom, 2005). Scholars have also examined the historical and theoretical evolution of China's human rights perspective, arguing that a normative framework centred on the right to development has gradually emerged through the interaction between traditional political culture and Marxist theory (Mao and Yin, 2025). Other studies argue that China's concept of 'comprehensive human rights' helps transcend confrontational dynamics and overcome the limitations of Western liberal human rights frameworks (Wu, 2024). This line of research highlights the ideational foundations underlying China's consistent emphasis on particular value orientations in human rights debates. However, it primarily focuses on what China says and why it says it, offering limited explanation of how such discourse is translated into concrete behavioural choices in diplomatic interactions.

The second strand of research focuses on the institutional design of the UPR and the reputational effects it generates. The mechanism is widely regarded as an important innovation within the United Nations human rights monitoring system (Sun, 2015). The dominant view in the literature holds that, through universal review and peer evaluation, the UPR reduces the level of political confrontation characteristic of traditional monitoring mechanisms, while generating reputational constraints through public deliberation and international attention (Carraro, 2019). Empirical studies further suggest that, compared with traditional treaty-based mechanisms, the UPR is more inclusive in encouraging states to accept recommendations or make policy commitments, thereby constituting a new model of global governance (McMahon and Ascherio, 2012). However, the idealised vision of the institutional environment does not obscure the persistent influence of rights politics. Interactions within the UPR are often shaped by patterns of interstate relations. The concept of 'relational shame', proposed by Terman and Voeten (2018), illustrates this dynamic: states are more likely to issue critical recommendations toward countries with which they maintain more distant political relationships. Although these studies highlight how institutional environments shape state behaviour, their analytical focus tends to remain on the overall effects of the mechanism or on patterns of interstate interaction. As a result, they provide limited systematic explanation of how states make strategic choices when responding to specific recommendations.

The third strand of research interprets human rights issues from the perspective of power and negotiation. This approach emphasises that, in practical international politics, human rights are often not purely normative goals detached from interests but may

function as strategic resources that states can deploy in diplomatic negotiations. From this perspective, human rights issues frequently require trade-offs with objectives such as security and political stability (Bell, 2008), and in practice they may assume a largely symbolic role when subordinated to economic interests (McKenzie and Meissner, 2017). Conversely, human rights discourse may in some cases be employed as a diplomatic instrument for expanding state influence (Mitoma, 2013). Negotiation processes may also generate socialisation effects that encourage states to adjust domestic policies or accept certain norms (Comstock, 2022). However, this line of research primarily focuses on structural constraints and pays relatively limited attention to how states communicate their positions through behaviour and public statements in concrete interactions.

In summary, existing research explains state behaviour in human rights mechanisms from the perspectives of normative differences, institutional environments, and power interactions, providing important insights into China's position on human rights issues. However, these explanations remain insufficient to address a key question: why and how states adopt differentiated responses to different types of recommendations within multilateral review mechanisms such as the UPR. In the case of China, recommendations related to development cooperation or social policy are often more readily accepted, whereas those concerning political institutions or sovereignty issues tend to receive more cautious responses. Explanations based solely on normative differences, institutional pressures, or power structures are therefore insufficient to fully account for this specific pattern of behaviour.

This puzzle suggests the need to pay closer attention to strategic information transmission by states in multilateral review interactions. When confronted with international criticism and review pressures, states must not only articulate their policy positions but also signal to other actors the boundaries of policies they consider acceptable. Accordingly, this study introduces signalling theory into the analysis of the UPR to examine how states convey strategic information by accepting or rejecting specific recommendations, thereby shaping diplomatic signals that can be interpreted by other states within multilateral human rights mechanisms.

2.2 The introduction of diplomatic signalling theory

In an international system characterised by incomplete information, states' true intentions are often difficult to observe directly' they therefore rely on specific actions or statements to convey information to external audiences (Cao, 2022). Such signals can perform multiple functions, including information transmission, image construction, identity signalling and strategic communication (Jönsson, 2016). Signalling theory was first proposed by the economist Spence (1973) in his study of information asymmetry, and was later introduced into international relations scholarship to explain how states communicate strategic information through policy choices or public statements. Existing research has applied this theoretical framework widely to fields such as security, trade, and regional diplomacy, illustrating how states use diplomatic activities to encode, transmit, interpret, and respond to signals, thereby shaping patterns of cooperation and competition (Gu et al., 2024) or fostering trust among neighbouring states (Cao, 2024). In negotiation settings, the communication of state intentions particularly relies on signalling mechanisms (Xiong, 2014). This article therefore conceptualises states' human rights statements delivered in multilateral forums such as the UNGA as diplomatic

signals that both articulate fundamental national positions and communicate the policy boundaries states are willing to accept on related issues to the international community.

Scholars employ multiple criteria when classifying diplomatic signals. From the perspective of transmission mode, signals may be conveyed through verbal communication or through non-verbal actions (Rana, 2001). From the perspective of credibility, signals can also be classified as cost-bearing or costless (Yin, 2021). More specifically, the rationalist paradigm places particular emphasis on the latter dimension and reconstructs the classification of signals on the basis of signalling costs, distinguishing between costly signals and cheap signals (Fearon, 1997). Within this framework, the credibility of costly signals derives from the irreversible constraints they impose on actors' interests. Through the investment of sunk costs (such as military mobilisation or alliance formation) and audience or tying-hands costs (such as joining international institutions or accepting self-binding commitments), these signals create a threshold that screens credible commitments. Only actors that genuinely intend to cooperate are willing to bear the potentially severe losses associated with reneging on such commitments (Schelling, 2011). More broadly, costly signals are defined as constraint-generating signals that impose substantial penalties in the event of defection (Kydd, 2000), allowing audiences to distinguish among actors through differentiated costs of non-compliance and thereby enhancing the credibility of commitments. Nevertheless, even low-cost actions may convey meaningful information within particular institutional contexts, since states must maintain consistency and credibility in their positions throughout repeated diplomatic interactions.

This theoretical perspective provides a new lens for understanding states' behavioural choices in review processes. During the review process, states' decisions to accept, partially accept, or reject different types of recommendations may not merely represent responses to institutional pressure; they may also function as diplomatic signals that communicate policy positions to the international community. This perspective therefore enables further analysis of how states' behaviour in review processes is linked to their long-standing human rights discourse, while revealing the mechanisms of strategic information transmission within multilateral human rights institutions.

2.3 *Analytical framework*

This study examines how China's human rights discourse functions as a negotiating signal and how associated costs validate its credibility. It reconceptualises the UPR as a negotiation process, comprising both justificatory dialogue and position commitments, and proposes a three-layer analytical framework.

The first layer is the dimension of discourse construction. Grounded in constructivist international relations theory, this dimension focuses on China's human rights discourse articulated at the UNGA, examining how repeated and authoritative position statements transform core human rights claims – such as the prioritisation of the right to development and the principle of non-interference – from information privately held by the state into public knowledge shared within the international community (Morrow, 1999). This signalling process clarifies China's identity and interest boundaries, setting the agenda for subsequent negotiations and revealing its human rights discourse framework.

The second layer is the dimension of negotiation deployment. Centred on negotiation theory, this dimension incorporates process tracing to systematically analyse negotiation

preparation, in-session strategic engagement, and post-negotiation interactions, examining how China, within the UPR, translates macro-level human rights discourse into concrete negotiating behaviour. This layer focuses on two analytical tasks. First, it examines how China uses frame-alignment strategies to reinterpret other states' recommendations and integrate them into its discourse. Second, it analyses the boundary-maintenance strategies China employs in response to sensitive issues concerning sovereignty and political security. Process tracing makes it possible to capture the causal mechanisms linking static discourse frameworks with dynamic negotiation behaviour, thereby revealing how discourse becomes operationalised within negotiations.

The third layer is the dimension of cost validation. Drawing on signalling game theory as its analytical tool (Franke, 2009), this dimension treats behavioural costs as the key criterion for assessing discourse credibility, addressing the tendency of traditional discourse studies to privilege rhetoric over practice. This dimension evaluates whether China's prior human rights discourse constitutes a credible costly signal by estimating three types of costs: policy adjustment costs when accepting recommendations, reputational costs from rejecting recommendations, and strategic costs of intermediate or qualified positions.

Together, these three dimensions show how public human rights discourse is translated, via strategic negotiation, into concrete state positions and actions.

3 Methodology

3.1 Case selection

This study selects China's participation in the fourth cycle of the UPR (2023–2024) of the UN Human Rights Council as its core empirical case, on the grounds of its threefold analytical value: typicality, process completeness and theoretical tractability.

First, the case exhibits a high degree of typicality. The fourth UPR cycle represents the first comprehensive international human rights review after China had articulated an integrated set of governance and foreign policy narratives – such as whole-process democracy and the concept of a shared future for humankind – following the completion of its large-scale poverty alleviation agenda. This marks a stage at which China's domestic governance practices and external discursive frameworks had entered a comparatively mature phase of international projection. Moreover, the major human rights controversies surrounding Hong Kong and Xinjiang that arose between the third and fourth UPR cycles provide a critical opportunity to observe China's actual negotiating behaviour within the authoritative multilateral setting of the UPR, and to examine how macro-level human rights narratives articulated at the UNGA delineate negotiation boundaries and are translated into concrete diplomatic actions.

Second, the case demonstrates a high degree of process completeness. The period from 2018 to 2024 constitutes a full UPR cycle, systematically encompassing the pre-review, in-review and post-review phases. In the pre-review phase, China articulated its positions through official statements in UN fora, engaging in position signalling and expectation shaping (Chen, 2024a); during the review itself, states engaged in strategic interaction and framing contests over specific issues (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024e); and in the post-review phase, China consolidated its positions through formal responses to recommendations and implementation commitments (Chen, 2024b;

United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024b). This highly institutionalised process closely aligns with the study’s analytical logic of tracing the causal chain from discourse to action, making it possible to trace signals across their full trajectory – from transmission and interaction to validation.

Finally, the case offers strong theoretical tractability. Human rights discourse articulated by Chinese representatives at the UNGA stage can be operationalised as the independent variable, while China’s differentiated responses to various issues during the UPR serve as the observable dependent variable. This clear temporal sequencing helps to minimise interference from major exogenous events, enabling a focused test of whether – and how – human rights discourse frameworks guide and constrain subsequent negotiating behaviour.

3.2 Data sources

The research data are organised into three groups, each corresponding to a different stage of the analytical chain.

Table 1 Classification of research data

<i>Data group</i>	<i>Data type</i>	<i>Source and time span</i>	<i>Function and purpose</i>
Core Dataset I	UNGA statements	China’s official statements at the UNGA Third Committee and General Debate (2018–2024; n = 51) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China and Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations, n.d.)	Used in Section 4 to identify and extract China’s core human rights discourse frameworks
Core Dataset II	UPR documents	China’s fourth-cycle UPR materials, including the National Report, responses to recommendations, and thematic recommendation lists (2018–2024) (United Nations Human Rights Council, n.d.)	Used in Sections 5 and 6 to trace the translation of discourse frameworks into negotiation behaviour and assess associated signal costs
Supplementary data	Quantitative analytical data	Word frequency, sentiment analysis, TF-IDF, LDA topic modelling, and keyword co-occurrence networks based on UNGA statements	Used in Section 4 to provide quantitative support for discourse framework identification

Source: Compiled by the author

3.3 Analytical methods

In light of the data sources and core research questions outlined above, this study employs three complementary research methods.

Text analysis is primarily applied to Core Dataset I, focusing on China’s speeches delivered at the UNGA, with the aim of identifying recurring narrative structures that organise social reality, define problems, and propose solutions, thereby constituting persistent discursive frameworks. Text preprocessing follows a standardised procedure. The raw texts are first cleaned by removing greetings, irrelevant symbols generated

during web extraction and formatting markers. The texts are then tokenised using Chinese word segmentation tools, followed by stop-word filtering to eliminate common function words and grammatical particles, thereby retaining lexical units with greater substantive meaning. On this basis, a structured document corpus is constructed for subsequent quantitative analysis. Using the preprocessed corpus, this study employs Python-based computational tools to conduct word frequency analysis, sentiment analysis, TF-IDF-based key term extraction, and latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) topic modelling. These techniques distil the core discursive frameworks repeatedly constructed by China to delineate negotiation boundaries and articulate value positions in the field of human rights.

Process tracing is primarily applied to Core Dataset II. This method identifies and tests the intervening steps between hypothesised causes and observed outcomes, thereby establishing and validating causal mechanisms (Liang, 2025). Specifically, this study systematically examines the full set of official documents produced during China's fourth UPR cycle – including the national report, review transcripts, and related meeting records – to identify observable evidence that the discourse frameworks constructed at the UNGA stage were actively deployed during UPR negotiations for agenda setting, boundary defence and consensus shaping. In evidence selection, priority is given to direct invocations of these discourse frameworks by the Chinese delegation during interactive dialogues, which are treated as the strongest evidence of the causal mechanism at work. These are then cross-checked against the acceptance or rejection of specific recommendations and the final outcome documents. The analysis also considers alternative explanations – such as domestic institutional constraints and international political pressures – as potential competing accounts, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the proposed causal mechanism. For example, in examining China's responses to questions concerning civil rights in Hong Kong, the study traces how Chinese representatives invoked the framework of inviolable national sovereignty to delineate the boundaries of legitimate discussion, illustrating how discourse frameworks shift from static textual formulations to dynamic instruments of negotiation.

Comparative case analysis is applied to the final outcome documents in Core Dataset II. The 428 UPR recommendations addressed to China are classified according to their substantive content (e.g., development rights, sovereignty-related issues, and civil and political rights) and China's recorded position on each (acceptance or rejection). Systematic comparison of position choices across recommendation categories identifies patterned features in China's response behaviour, providing the empirical basis for the subsequent cost-based analysis of whether different discourse frameworks function as cheap or costly signals.

3.4 Coding rules

The coding of the 428 UPR recommendations is structured around two analytical dimensions. The first concerns discourse frameworks: based on the substantive content of each recommendation, recommendations are assigned to the three discourse frameworks pre-articulated in China's UNGA statements, identifying the type of rights involved and their degree of association with state sovereignty. The second concerns China's position: based on the Chinese government's final official responses, each recommendation is coded as accepted, rejected or ambiguously addressed. Comparing acceptance rates

across discourse frameworks generates empirical evidence for assessing the costs associated with China's discourse choices and the corresponding signalling logic.

It is important to clarify how these three discourse frameworks were derived, since the categories were not imposed *a priori*. The framework typology emerged abductively from the computational analysis of the 51 UNGA speeches reported in Section 4.1. The keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 2) and LDA topic modelling independently surfaced three recurrent lexical clusters – a development-performance cluster, a sovereignty-boundary cluster, and an inclusive-cooperation cluster – which together accounted for the dominant structure of the corpus. These empirically generated clusters were then interpreted and labelled with reference to the established literature on China's human rights discourse (Section 2.1), which similarly foregrounds the rights to development and subsistence, state sovereignty and non-interference, and an inclusive vocabulary of shared human values. The convergence between the inductive (data-driven) and deductive (literature-informed) routes provides reciprocal validation for the category scheme: the frameworks are grounded in the observable lexical structure of China's own statements rather than in the analyst's prior expectations, while remaining theoretically legible against existing scholarship.

To ensure objectivity and consistency, this study adopts a hybrid coding procedure combining keyword-based preliminary screening with in-depth manual reading. A structured coding protocol is implemented, with explicit rules for handling ambiguous cases. Upon completion of the initial coding, a second-round review is conducted and all cases with residual uncertainty are re-examined to minimise classification errors. To make the classification basis transparent and auditable, the full coding scheme – category definitions, keyword cues and decision rules – is documented in Table 2, with worked examples provided in Appendix.

It should be noted that the coding was performed by a single researcher; consequently, no inter-coder reliability statistic (such as Cohen's kappa) is reported. To mitigate this limitation, three safeguards were adopted: an explicit written codebook fixing operational definitions in advance; a tie-breaking protocol (the dominant-framework and sensitivity-hierarchy rules described below) for multi-issue recommendations; and an intra-coder consistency check, in which the full set of recommendations was independently re-coded after a temporal interval, with divergent cases reconciled against the codebook. While these procedures cannot substitute for genuine inter-coder verification, full disclosure of the coding scheme and examples allows readers to assess and replicate the classification decisions directly. The incorporation of independent coders represents a worthwhile refinement for future research.

For recommendations spanning multiple issue areas, this study applies a dominant framework principle together with a sensitivity hierarchy. Each recommendation is classified according to its primary normative claim. Where no clear dominant frame can be identified, classification follows the hierarchy: sovereignty and national security (Category B) > civil and political rights (Category C) > development and economic, social and cultural rights (Category A), reflecting the differential likelihood of generating negotiation costs. Concrete applications are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 2 Core coding scheme: definition and classification of discourse frameworks

<i>Code category</i>	<i>Category definition</i>	<i>Core keywords/focal issues</i>	<i>Boundary cases (representative recommendations)</i>
A Development rights and economic, social and cultural rights	Focuses on positive state obligations regarding public welfare and living standards.	Poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, social security, SDGs, vulnerable groups (women/children/disabled).	22.220: Continue to reduce development gaps between urban and rural areas and among regions, including disparities in equal access to employment and education. (Bolivia) 22.254: Continue to intensify efforts to effectively implement the 'Healthy China Initiative', including improving access to affordable healthcare services. (Fiji)
B Sovereignty and national security	Relates to core state interests, territorial integrity, and highly sensitive regions (HK, Xinjiang, Tibet).	National security laws, counter-terrorism, anti-separatism, forced labour, arbitrary detention in sensitive areas.	22.129: Continue to firmly oppose the politicisation and instrumentalisation of human rights, and oppose interference in China's internal affairs under the pretext of issues related to Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet. (Venezuela) 22.118: Repeal vague national security, counter-espionage, counter-terrorism, and sedition laws, including the National Security Law in Hong Kong. (USA)
C Civil and political rights	Addresses individual freedoms and judicial integrity, excluding specific national security or regional contexts.	Freedom of expression/assembly/religion, death penalty, judicial fairness, rights of lawyers and human rights defenders.	22.82: Reduce the number of crimes punishable by the death penalty and encourage public debate on the abolition of capital punishment. (Chile) 22.163: Take measures to prevent harassment, intimidation, and attacks against members of civil society, journalists, human rights defenders and lawyers. (Greece)

Source: Author's compilation

Table 3 Illustrative examples of coding ambiguous recommendations

No.	Condensed recommendation	Overlapping categories	Primary category	Classification logic (decision rule)
22.131	Repeal HK National Security Law withdraw charges against human rights defenders. (Canada)	B + C	B	Sensitivity hierarchy: repeal of national security legislation constitutes a core security issue, prioritising Cat. B over Cat. C.
22.164	Lift restrictions on freedom of expression/press, including limitations on media content related to sexual orientation, gender identity (SOGI) and expression, or sex characteristics. (Iceland)	C + A	C	Dominant framework: although addressing SOGI rights (Cat. A), the primary claim concerns freedom of expression, a prototypical civil and political right.
22.205	Abolish coercive labour-transfer programmes and boarding school systems. (Germany)	B + A	B	Dominant framework: ‘coercive practices’ in minority contexts shift the focus from labour (Cat. A) to high-sensitivity sovereignty and security issues.

Source: Author’s compilation

Taken together, the coding results provide a robust empirical foundation for the subsequent analysis.

4 Findings

Multilateral diplomacy is a contest for discursive authority (Liang, 2009). Analysing 51 Chinese statements (2018–2024) and fourth-cycle UPR outcomes, this study identifies a coherent discursive system – rather than ad hoc pronouncements – that forms the normative basis for China’s negotiations. This section first disaggregates China’s human rights frameworks, examines their UPR operationalisation, and finally assesses their credibility through position-taking outcomes and signalling costs.

4.1 China’s human rights discourse at the UNGA and framework construction (2018–2024)

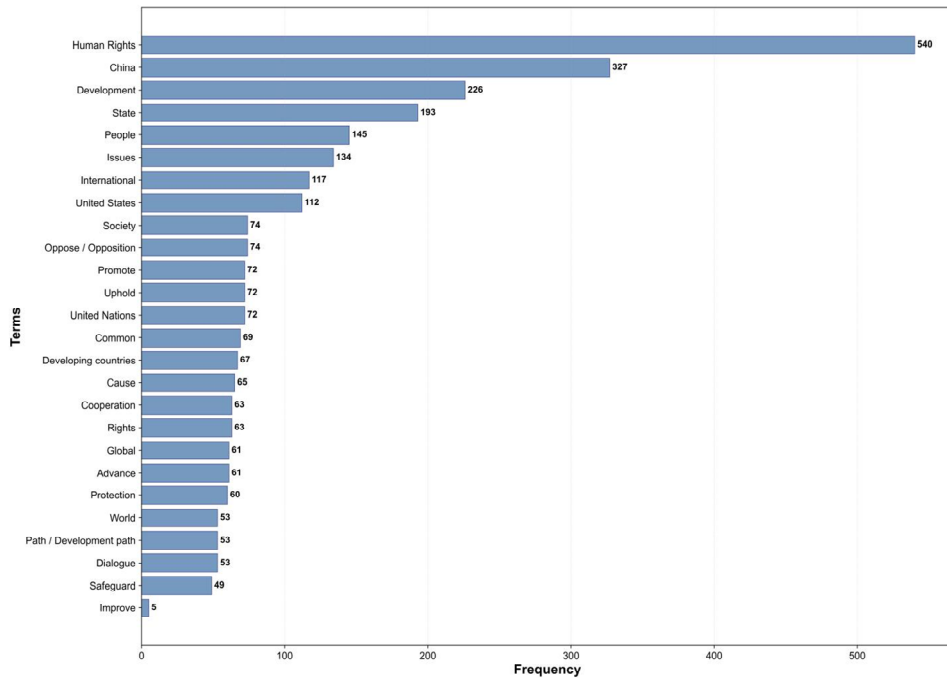
To identify structural features of the discourse, this study first conducts TF-IDF weight analysis (Table 4) and word-frequency statistics (Figure 1) on the speech texts. The results indicate that ‘human rights’, ‘state’, ‘people’, ‘development’, and ‘international’ constitute a core lexical cluster. Notably, the terms ‘development’ and ‘people’ exhibit particularly high weights, comparable to that of ‘human rights’ itself. This pattern suggests that China’s human rights narrative does not frame human rights as an isolated issue of individual entitlements, but rather systematically embeds them within the broader context of national development and collective well-being.

Table 4 Word frequency and TF-IDF weight analysis of UNGA speech texts

<i>Term</i>	<i>Total occurrences</i>	<i>Sentence units</i>	<i>Term frequency</i>	<i>TF-IDF weight</i>
Development	226	118	0.01794078	0.007876016
People	147	72	0.011669445	0.007599433
Human rights	548	226	0.043502421	0.006896086
State	194	126	0.015400492	0.00632566
United States	113	69	0.00897039	0.006005225
Issues	136	95	0.010796221	0.005746575
International	119	93	0.009446694	0.005114628
Oppose	75	54	0.005953799	0.004609342
Common/shared	70	49	0.005556879	0.004532067
Global	61	38	0.004842423	0.004471896
Rights	63	43	0.005001191	0.004356513

Source: Author's compilation

Figure 1 Frequency distribution of high-frequency terms in UNGA speeches (see online version for colours)



To examine discursive connections, this study constructs a keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 2).

The network reveals three functional clusters. The first is the development-performance cluster. Centred on the terms ‘human rights’, ‘development’, ‘people’, and ‘path’, this cluster is strongly connected with words such as ‘undertaking’,

‘global’ and ‘comprehensive’. Together, they form a foundational narrative space through which China positively articulates its governance philosophy and historical achievements (Chen, 2024a). Functionally, this cluster serves to establish the normative foundations of China’s human rights conception.

Figure 2 Keyword co-occurrence network of UNGA speeches (see online version for colours)

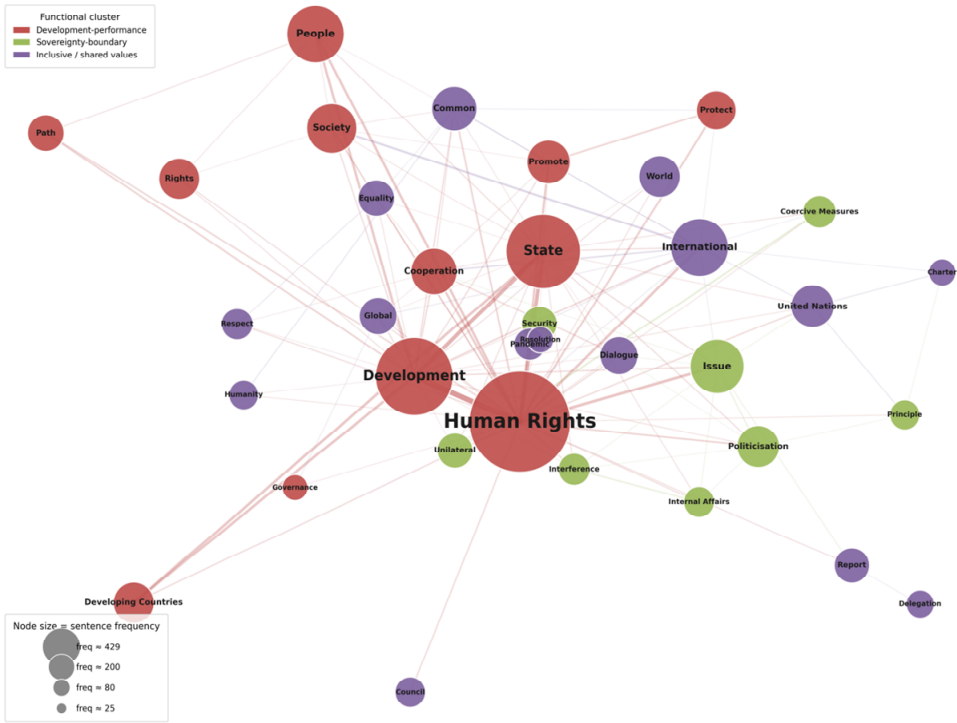
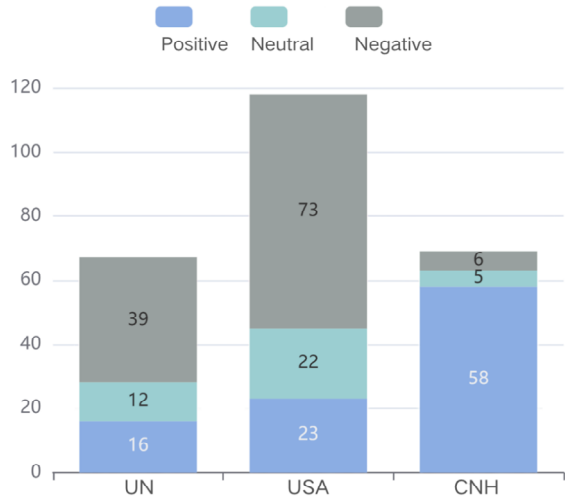


Figure 3 Sentiment analysis of UNGA speech texts (see online version for colours)



The second is the sovereignty-boundary cluster, which anchors human rights discourse in defensive terms such as ‘internal affairs’ and ‘politicisation’. Sentiment analysis (Figure 3) reveals a marked emotional intensity in this cluster, exemplified by Ambassador Dai’s (2023) sharp rebuke of the USA for ‘instrumentalising’ human rights to ‘suppress developing countries’. Rather than treating external scrutiny as neutral evaluation, such interventions are framed as politically motivated threats, thereby constructing non-interference not merely as a legal principle but as a moral imperative for stability.

The third is the cooperative-inclusive cluster. This cluster centres on concepts such as ‘dialogue’, ‘international’, ‘equality’, and ‘common’, emphasising multilateral institutions and constructive engagement. References to initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and global governance frameworks reflect China’s normative orientation toward rule-based equality and mutually beneficial cooperation in the human rights domain.

Synthesising these quantitative findings with qualitative interpretation, this study identifies three nested frameworks that translate China’s practices into a coherent normative narrative.

Framework I constitutes a progressive narrative that anchors human rights in the primacy of subsistence and development (United Nations, 1986). Rather than treating rights as abstract ideals, this framework operationalises them through material governance and ‘quantifiable achievements’. As Foreign Minister Wang (2024) articulated, China adopts a ‘people-centred’ approach that elevates the rights to subsistence and development to a ‘more prominent and urgent’ status. Crucially, the discourse translates normative progress into assessable performance: milestones such as the ‘historic eradication of absolute poverty’ are invoked to construct a causal chain linking party leadership and economic growth to the claim that China’s human rights situation is at its ‘best level in history’. By transforming human rights into a matter of ‘performance-based legitimacy’, this narrative establishes a defensive normative baseline – suggesting that human rights are not merely about legal procedures, but about the public’s tangible ‘sense of gain, happiness and security’.

Framework II advances a sovereignty-centred narrative that delineates the strict boundaries of external scrutiny. By framing sovereignty as the ‘prerequisite’ for human rights protection, this discourse rejects externally imposed standards as illegitimate interventions. As Ambassador Dai (2022) firmly articulated, China refuses to accept ‘casual lecturing’ and opposes the ‘politicisation and double standards’ that distort human rights into tools for interference. It is important to note, however, that ‘sovereignty’ and ‘national security’ do not operate here as a single, undifferentiated category. As the analysis of rejected recommendations below demonstrates, this frame is internally structured into several distinguishable sub-domains – territorial integrity and sensitive regions, national-security legislation and political-system protection, and judicial sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic legal order – each activated in response to a specific class of recommendation rather than applied as a blanket objection (Dai, 2022). Crucially, the narrative transforms legal principles into a defensive posture: it asserts that the right to ‘independently choose’ a development path must be respected, warning that ‘mechanically copying foreign models’ is both ineffective and ‘harmful’ (Qin, 2023). Furthermore, this framework actively undermines the moral authority of critics by denying them the role of ‘arbiters’ of global norms (Zhang, 2023). By invoking

‘non-selectivity’ and procedural justice (Chen, 2024c), China establishes a normative shield that justifies the rejection of country-specific resolutions as neither legitimate nor effective.

Framework III promotes an inclusive narrative centred on dialogue, cooperation, and the ‘shared values of humanity’. By defining human rights as a ‘common cause of all humanity’ (Wang, 2022) rather than the ‘exclusive property of a few’ (Zhang, 2021), this framework positions China as a constructive contributor to global governance. Within this logic, security is framed as the safeguard, development as the driver, and cooperation as the ‘primary mechanism’ for rights advancement (Dai, 2024). Crucially, this discourse seeks to consolidate a broader consensus by rejecting ‘bloc-based’ approaches and ‘clash of civilisations’ narratives (Zhang, 2023, 2019). By articulating peace, development, and justice as the ‘greatest common denominator’ of global values, China utilises this inclusive framing to mobilise support from the Global South. This strategic coupling of discourse and multilateralism serves to neutralise adversarial scrutiny by embedding human rights within a broader vision of a ‘community with a shared future for humankind’.

Practically, this framework justifies China’s acceptance of development-oriented UPR recommendations and enhances its appeal to the Global South (Murphy, 2022). By providing international public goods through the BRI and GDI, China translates the ‘rights through development’ principle into tangible cooperative gains (Pu, 2023). Consequently, this discourse is embedded in concrete policy, generating positive incentives within global human rights governance rather than relying solely on normative persuasion or coercion.

Collectively, these three frameworks exhibit clear functional differentiation and mutual reinforcement: the progressive narrative provides performance-based legitimacy; the sovereignty narrative establishes defensive boundaries against external pressure; and the inclusive narrative cultivates international recognition. This integrated ‘offensive-defensive’ structure enables the coexistence of contestation and cooperation, achieving a strategic unity of value advocacy, boundary maintenance and international image construction.

4.2 The application of discourse frameworks in the UPR process

To assess the practical utility of the identified frameworks beyond declaratory statements, this section examines their translation into concrete negotiation strategies. Drawing on the documentation of China’s fourth-cycle UPR, this study employs process tracing to analyse how these discourse frameworks were operationalised during negotiation preparation, interactive contestation and follow-up engagement. By mapping China’s stance across 428 recommendations, it traces how public discourse becomes embedded in negotiation practice, providing an empirical foundation for assessing signalling costs and credibility.

The National Report (A/HRC/WG.6/45/CHN/1) serves as the primary text for the UPR, translating the normative claims of China’s UNGA discourse into a formal review document. In the section on ‘China’s path, concepts, and achievements’ (Paras. 4–6), the report frames human rights protection as a central governance task. By presenting quantitative successes – such as the eradication of absolute poverty and the expansion of social security – as core evidence, the report activates the development-performance framework. Defining ‘Chinese-style modernisation’ as a process that advances rights

through social fairness, China embeds its discourse within a national development framework, providing theoretical legitimacy for prioritising economic, social, and cultural rights over individual entitlements. Furthermore, the report's emphasis on adapting human rights to national contexts echoes China's UNGA stance against 'one-size-fits-all' models.

Regarding the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions (Paras. 55–70), the report emphasises the 'one country, two systems' principle and frames the National Security Law as a transition from disorder to governance. Within the sovereignty-boundary narrative, these issues are categorised as internal matters. China utilises factual evidence of stability to substantiate the legitimacy of its human rights path, thereby pre-emptively delegitimising external interference. Simultaneously, sections on international cooperation (Paras. 8–10, 49–51) highlight China's participation in global governance and the 'shared values of humanity'. Citing the Belt and Road Initiative and international treaty ratifications, this inclusive-cooperative orientation positions China as a constructive multilateral actor, using a collaborative posture to counterbalance adversarial criticism.

Based on official meeting records (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024a, 2024c), the Chinese delegation systematically invoked the sovereignty and development frameworks during the interactive phase to manage sensitive allegations. In the fourth UPR cycle, China received 428 recommendations spanning legal frameworks, civil and political rights, and vulnerable groups (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Proportion of recommendations by issue area (see online version for colours)



Source: Recommendation matrix (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024d)

Among these, the Chinese Government explicitly rejected 98 recommendations, primarily those concerning national sovereignty, security, and political systems (Table 5). In these responses, the delegation immediately activated the sovereignty-defence framework, re-anchoring universal human rights issues within the domain of territorial integrity and framing external scrutiny as domestic interference. This established an inviolable 'legitimacy red line' regarding the judicial system and UN special mechanisms.

A closer reading of these rejected recommendations indicates that the sovereignty frame, rather than functioning as an undifferentiated catch-all, is internally organised into three recurrent sub-domains, each tied to an identifiable class of recommendation. The first concerns territorial integrity and sensitive regions: recommendations such as Canada's call to repeal the Hong Kong National Security Law (22.131) and proposals to implement the OHCHR assessment on Xinjiang and to cease alleged coercive measures were declined on the grounds that they bore upon matters of national unity. The second

concerns national-security legislation and political-system protection: the USA's recommendation to repeal 'vague national security, counter-espionage, counter-terrorism, and sedition laws' (22.118) was rejected as an attempt to constrain the state's prerogative to define security threats. The third concerns judicial sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic legal order: recommendations on the death penalty (for example, Chile's 22.82), the protection of human rights defenders and lawyers, and visits by UN special mechanisms were rebuffed by asserting the primacy of domestic legal authority. Disaggregating the frame in this manner shows that what appears externally as a broad appeal to 'sovereignty' in fact maps onto a structured hierarchy of bottom-line concerns, in which the firmness of rejection tracks the proximity of an issue to the territorial and regime-security core. This granularity also clarifies why certain recommendations nominally touching on rights are nonetheless treated as sovereignty matters: their categorisation is determined less by the substantive right invoked than by the degree to which compliance would entail external authority over a contested domain.

Table 5 Statistics on China's rejection of recommendations

<i>Core controversial topics</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Key content of recommendations</i>	<i>Rationale for rejection</i>
Human rights issues in Xinjiang/Tibet	~30	Implement OHCHR report; cease alleged coercive measures (e.g., forced labour, boarding schools)	Based on false information; violates national sovereignty, security and unity
Hong Kong National Security Law	~10	Repeal the Hong Kong National Security Law; align legislation with International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; quash cases against activists	National security as a sovereign prerogative; non-interference in judicial proceedings
Death penalty	~10	Suspend or abolish the death penalty; ratify relevant protocols	Retention with strict legal limitations; aligns with national policy
Detention and disappearance	~10	Abolish the practice of 'residential surveillance at a designated location'; release human rights defenders; end enforced disappearances	Law-based governance; residential surveillance is a non-custodial measure under Chinese law; enforced disappearances non-existent
Special mechanisms access	~10	Allow UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts unobstructed access	Must respect sovereignty and domestic law; rejection of politically biased visits
Expression and association	~5	Cease restrictions on media/civil society; end censorship and mass surveillance	Protection of rights via law; cyber-governance per national regulations; claims rest on false premises

Source: Author's compilation

In addressing criticisms of the judicial system, the death penalty, and UN special mechanisms, China emphasises the primacy of domestic legal order to construct a 'closed-loop defence' of its sovereignty. Simultaneously, the delegation operationalises an achievement-offsetting strategy within the development-performance framework. By prioritising the rights to subsistence and development, China leverages systemic

successes in poverty alleviation and social security to reshape evaluation standards. Regarding sensitive regions such as Xinjiang, China dismisses allegations as factually groundless, asserting that historic developmental progress provides an overall legitimacy that transcends isolated criticisms. This narrative creates a ‘moral-layered coverage’ effect, enabling China to maintain the initiative by framing development as the foundational guarantor of human rights. Ultimately, the combination of sovereignty delineation, achievement offsetting, and cooperative inclusion forms a coherent mechanism that safeguards core interests while shaping favourable international opinion.

This tactical flexibility is further reflected in a pattern of strategic differentiation based on the source of recommendations and their issue type. The data indicate that China exhibits high acceptance toward development-oriented recommendations – such as those concerning sustainable development and South-South cooperation – which primarily originate from Global South countries. This proactive engagement reflects a discursive resonance between China’s development-rights narrative and the priorities of the developing world. In contrast, China resolutely rejects sovereignty-sensitive critiques from Western states concerning civic space or specific regions, reflecting a rigid application of its bottom-line logic. China’s UPR engagement is thus defined by a dual-track approach: utilising its inclusive narrative to cultivate leadership and consensus among the Global South while deploying a sovereignty shield to neutralise adversarial scrutiny from the West. This strategic posture simultaneously advances China’s normative influence and constrains the space for sovereignty-related disputes.

4.3 Position selection outcomes and signalling costs

Previous analysis demonstrates that China does not passively respond to recommendations in the UPR process; rather, it implements differentiated negotiation strategies across issues based on the three discourse frameworks of development progress, sovereignty defence and inclusive cooperation. On this basis, China’s position selection regarding the 428 recommendations (Table 6) is not incidental, but the behavioural outcome of embedding its discourse frameworks into negotiation practice. Different positions correspond to varying types and intensities of signalling costs, and the degree of cost incurred serves as a critical indicator for assessing the credibility of the discourse.

The combined proportion of ‘accepted’ and ‘rejected’ positions exceeds 90%, indicating a marked polarisation. These two extreme positions carry substantial costs – domestic policy or institutional adjustment costs in the case of acceptance, and reputational and political pressure costs in the case of rejection – and thereby function as credible costly signals to the international community. Intermediate positions, ‘partially accepted’ and ‘noted’, involve comparatively low signalling costs and are strategically ambiguous in character. By retaining interpretive leeway on issues such as treaty implementation, special mechanism visits, and institutional development, China maintains negotiating flexibility without incurring high-cost commitments. This low-cost, ambiguous zone is consistent with the discursive frameworks identified above, allowing China to adjust its positions across different issues without undermining the overall consistency of its human rights narrative.

Table 6 Typological patterns of China's position selection on UPR recommendations

<i>China's position</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Proportion</i>	<i>Interpretation of attitude</i>	<i>Signalling attribute</i>
Accepted	290	67.76%	Primarily development rights, poverty alleviation, social protection, environmental cooperation, and selected institutional reforms	Costly signal (policy cost)
Partially accepted	8	1.87%	Conditional treaty commitments, special procedures access, climate and regulatory measures	Strategically ambiguous/ low-cost
Noted	32	7.48%	Ratification timing, national human rights institutions, human-rights-based approaches	Strategically ambiguous/ low-cost
Rejected	98	22.89%	Sovereignty-sensitive issues, including national security legislation, Xinjiang/ Tibet, death penalty, detention practices	Costly signal (reputational cost)
Total	428	100%		

Source: Author's compilation

5 Discussion

Building on the empirical analysis, this section employs signalling theory to examine the cost-calculation logic behind China's position choices. The study argues that China's UPR positions represent the cost-bearing manifestation of its UNGA frameworks within the negotiation arena. By analysing the cost modes associated with different positions, the analysis determines whether this public discourse constitutes low-cost rhetoric or credible, binding commitments.

5.1 Cost payment of costly signals

China's UPR behaviour exhibits a predictable stability: broad acceptance of development issues, systematic rejection of sovereignty challenges, and strategic ambiguity on intermediate topics. This consistency transcends mere rhetoric; it is realised through differentiated cost payments. This finding challenges classical diplomatic signalling theory, which often equates 'costly signals' solely with additional concessions (Fearon, 1997). In the highly institutionalised UPR context, however, the cost of a signal manifests not just in concessions, but in the binding nature of acceptance and the reputational price of rejection.

Specifically, China's broad acceptance of development-related recommendations places high-investment domestic strategies – poverty alleviation, social security – under international review, turning domestic policy into commitments open to verification. Poor implementation would then cost China on two fronts at once, domestic legitimacy and international standing, which makes acceptance comparable in weight to a conventional policy concession. The cost is real but not automatic: acceptance in the UPR does not guarantee domestic follow-through, since the mechanism carries little enforcement power and states can word their acceptances loosely. Rejection operates differently. China's

refusal of sovereignty-sensitive recommendations is paid for immediately, in diplomatic censure and reputational criticism (Schoner, 2024). That willingness to absorb the price is itself the signal: it marks the position as non-negotiable. What the price actually amounts to, however, is something China manages rather than simply endures. Years of cultivating Global South support inside UN human rights bodies have reduced the reputational sting of Western criticism, so the rejection posture remains viable at a far lower cost than a standard signalling model would predict (Piccone, 2018). Credibility here rests not only on what a state does, but on the audience, it has assembled to judge what it does, which is why reputational cost is neither fixed nor evenly felt across states.

5.2 Public knowledge and asymmetric advantage

Repeating this framework over time does more than build credibility for any single position; it transforms China's stances into shared public knowledge and gives China an asymmetric advantage in the exchange itself. Because interests in these settings take shape through repeated interaction (Wendt, 1999), an established discursive framework becomes a tool for setting the agenda. Once China marks out its non-negotiable boundaries in advance through the National Report (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024f), reviewing states must weigh the cost of pressing a confrontational line before the session even opens. The same move quietly narrows the review: each cycle that rewards pre-emptive framing leaves less room for genuine peer scrutiny and consolidates the agenda-setting advantage of whoever already holds it.

The framework's consistency also hands China a reusable script: rejections run through the language of sovereignty, acceptances through the language of development. Against the socialisation literature, this resembles strategic adaptation – borrowing a norm's vocabulary without necessarily taking on its substance – and it leaves genuinely open how much commitment sits behind the surface consistency (Risse et al., 2013). The script doubles as a focal point for aligned states: those that share China's development-cooperation outlook tend to cast their own recommendations in compatible terms, which consolidates agenda-setting power among like-minded actors and deepens the bloc dynamics already at work in the review.

5.3 The strategic value of calculated ambiguity

Beyond costly commitments and rejections, the foregoing analysis reveals an equally important intermediate form in normative multilateral negotiations: strategic ambiguity. Unlike the traditional binary in signalling theory that distinguishes only between costly and cheap signals, institutionalised negotiation practices demonstrate that states deliberately maintain partial incompleteness in their positions, striking a balance between the credibility of their commitments and risk management.

In the context of the UPR, 'partially accepted' and 'noted' positions typically correspond to non-core issues that retain a degree of political sensitivity. These are issues that sit outside China's core interests yet stop short of the red lines it defends absolutely, and that often remain genuinely contested internationally, requiring no immediate, explicit, or irreversible commitment. Hedging on them lets China hold down the policy costs and binding risks that an explicit commitment would carry, while preserving room to adjust later, and avoids the friction a flat rejection would generate. China can remain

constructively engaged on secondary issues, keeping channels open without incurring high policy or reputational costs, and reserving its diplomatic capital for more consequential contests. Ambiguity, then, is not the opposite of costly signalling but a means of managing commitment in norm-intensive negotiation. It has a clear limit: recommendations China merely ‘notes’ are followed through far less often than those it formally accepts, so the flexibility it buys comes at the price of weaker substantive compliance.

In sum, the coherence between China’s UNGA discourse and UPR practice demonstrates that its human rights positioning constitutes a strategic costly signal requiring sustained investment. Through differentiated cost payments – binding policy commitments, reputational endurance and calculated ambiguity – China constructs layered credibility, managing the expectations of multiple audiences and advancing national interests within rule-intensive multilateral mechanisms.

6 Conclusions

Focusing on China’s practice in United Nations human rights affairs, this article draws on empirical materials from the fourth review cycle (2023–2024) to advance and substantiate a ‘discourse-as-signal’ explanatory framework. The study argues that within highly institutionalised, transparent, and traceable multilateral platforms, state discourse does not constitute a costless form of expression; rather, it is embedded in calculable structures of policy and reputational costs. In this sense, discourse can function as a form of strategic collateral, shaping the boundaries and expectations of future negotiations through mechanisms of pre-commitment.

At the theoretical level, this article introduces a contextual recalibration of signalling theory. Traditional signalling theory has primarily concentrated on high-politics domains such as military deterrence and security commitments, where costs are material and observable. The contribution here lies in demonstrating that equivalent binding logic operates in non-security arenas: in norm-intensive multilateral settings, the constraining force of discourse does not arise from military sunk costs, but from the reputational and policy obligations generated once public positions are institutionally recorded and become common knowledge. This analytical pathway bridges the rationalist focus on cost calculation and the constructivist emphasis on normative meaning, offering an integrated logic for understanding how non-Western major powers navigate compliance within multilateral institutions.

At the policy level, this study provides a practical tool for anticipating compliance boundaries in multilateral norm negotiations. Rather than cataloguing which types of recommendations China accepts or rejects – a pattern already established in the empirical sections – the actionable insight lies in the underlying logic: identifying a state’s existing policy cost trajectory allows external actors to assess, in advance, where normative pressure is likely to yield compliance and where it will trigger entrenchment. Structurally aligning recommendations with a target state’s prior commitments, rather than amplifying confrontational rhetoric, offers a more tractable pathway for reducing polarisation in multilateral human rights governance. At the institutional level, these findings also speak to ongoing debates about the adaptation of UN human rights mechanisms. The challenges facing these bodies are multi-causal – reflecting resource constraints, procedural design, uneven participation, and the broader fragmentation of the

international order – and cannot be reduced to the conduct of any single state. Insofar as the coexistence of plural normative narratives is a structural feature rather than an anomaly, the resilience of these mechanisms may depend less on enforcing a single interpretive standard than on developing procedures capable of translating between divergent normative vocabularies while preserving a shared commitment to the underlying ends of human dignity.

At the same time, this study undertakes a necessary self-reflection on its own analytical logic. First, assessments of signal credibility depend on externally observable consistency. Given the ‘black box’ nature of domestic decision-making processes, this study cannot fully exclude the possibility that international commitments may align opportunistically with pre-existing domestic policy trajectories. Nevertheless, even in cases of strategic accommodation, once such positions are internationalised and inscribed into institutional records, the public expectations they generate may constitute constraints on future policy reversals. Second, reputational costs are not fixed; they are shaped by the configuration of international audiences. As countries of the Global South assume greater participation and agenda-setting influence within the UPR, standards for evaluating reputational standing are becoming increasingly differentiated. In the absence of consensus among diverse audiences regarding what constitutes reputational damage, the costs associated with rejecting particular recommendations may become relativised. This phenomenon of cost repricing may weaken traditional mechanisms of external pressure while simultaneously driving structural transformations in the architecture of human rights discourse. Accordingly, the framework advanced here does not presuppose normative superiority; rather, it highlights how cost structures are redistributed and reproduced within an increasingly multipolar international environment. Third, this study’s empirical strategy is deliberately centred on Chinese evidence – official statements, policy documents and UPR records – in order to reconstruct the internal logic of China’s negotiation behaviour from an internal analytical perspective. This design choice reflects the article’s core aim: to provide the scholarly community with a systematic account of how a major non-Western power conceptualises and operationalises its human rights positions within multilateral institutions, thereby filling a gap in a literature that has predominantly interpreted such behaviour through external evaluative frameworks. The trade-off, however, is that the analysis foregrounds China’s own discursive rationale at the expense of alternative perspectives – including those of reviewing states, civil society actors and affected populations – whose interpretations of the same institutional interactions may differ substantially. Future research could adopt multi-actor or comparative designs to situate China’s signalling strategies within the broader ecology of competing narratives that constitute the UPR as a deliberative space. Finally, although this study disaggregates the sovereignty and national-security frame into identifiable sub-domains, these categories remain broad by nature, and the boundary determining which rights-related issues are absorbed into them is itself partly a product of strategic framing; finer-grained, issue-specific analysis – for instance, of how a single contested region is articulated across successive review cycles – would further sharpen understanding of how such elastic categories are constructed and deployed.

Finally, from a broader scholarly perspective, the significance of this study extends beyond the Chinese case. The value of the ‘discourse-as-signal’ framework lies in its capacity to illuminate how institutionalised multilateral platforms bind speech to cost structures and accumulate reputational capital through periodic review mechanisms.

Future research may extend this logic to domains such as climate change commitments, global trade disputes, or cross-border data governance, examining how variations in institutional density and technical monitoring constraints condition the efficiency with which discourse is transformed into strategic collateral. Moreover, the cyclical nature of the UPR merits closer examination. Does the sustained release of consistent signals generate a cumulative effect analogous to a 'credit rating', thereby reducing communication costs for major powers in multilateral negotiations? Should the institutional environment evolve toward greater legal enforceability or heightened bloc-based polarisation, how might signalling strategies and cost-calculation logics adapt? These questions collectively constitute a substantive agenda for future research.

In sum, this article does not portray China's UPR practice as a model of success; rather, it situates it at the intersection of rational cost calculation and institutional constraint. The findings suggest that within institutionalised multilateral diplomatic arenas, speech is not a lightweight rhetorical resource but a political instrument capable of strategic deployment and instrumentalisation. When discourse becomes deeply intertwined with policy and reputational costs, it emerges as a critical variable in shaping international expectations, delineating negotiation boundaries, and preserving strategic space. Understanding this mechanism not only enables a more precise assessment of China's diplomatic conduct in the human rights domain, but also offers a transferable theoretical pathway for analysing the normative interactions of other major powers within multilateral institutions.

Appendices/Supplementary materials are available on request by emailing the corresponding author.

Declarations

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability: The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. All primary source materials, including UNGA speeches and UPR recommendation records, are publicly accessible through the United Nations Digital Library and the OHCHR website.

Ethics approval and informed consent: This study involves the analysis of publicly available diplomatic documents and official state records. As it does not involve human participants, biological material, or identifiable private information, ethical approval and informed consent were not required. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee.

References

- Bell, C. (2008) 'Negotiating human rights', in Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T. and Miall, H. (Eds.): *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Peace Processes and Post-war Reconstruction*, pp.210–229, Palgrave Macmillan, London [online] https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230584556_16.
- Cao, D. (2022) 'Cheap signals and credible intention transmission in diplomatic communication', *World Political Studies*, No. 15, pp.35–62.

- Cao, D. (2024) 'An asymmetric perspective on China's good-neighbour signaling to Southeast Asian countries', *Around Southeast Asia*, No. 4, pp.11–24.
- Carraro, V. (2019) 'Promoting compliance with human rights: the performance of the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review and treaty bodies', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4, pp.1079–1093 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz078>.
- Chang, J. and Gao, J. (2024) 'China's advocacy and interpretation of the common values of humanity in the field of international human rights', *Human Rights Law Science*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp.1–43.
- Chen, X. (2024a) *Following China's Human Rights Development Path and Making Greater Contributions to Global Human Rights: Introductory Statement at China's Fourth Cycle Universal Periodic Review*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [online] <https://www.mfa.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Chen, X. (2024b) *Concluding Statement at China's Fourth Cycle Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [online] <https://www.mfa.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Chen, X. (2024c) *Statement at the Adoption of the Report of China's Fourth Cycle Universal Periodic Review*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [online] <https://www.mfa.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Comstock, A.L. (2022) 'Negotiated rights: UN treaty negotiation, socialization, and human rights', *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp.463–484 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2021.2014794>.
- Dai, B. (2022) *The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Should Investigate and Hold the United States Accountable for Human Rights Violations*, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva [online] <https://un.china-mission.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Dai, B. (2023) *US Attempts to Interfere in and Suppress Developing Countries Through Human Rights Issues Are Doomed to Fail*, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva [online] <https://un.china-mission.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Dai, B. (2024) *Statement at the Interactive Dialogue with the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the Third Committee of the 79th UN General Assembly*, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations [online] <https://un.china-mission.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Deklerck, S. (2003) 'Human rights in China: tradition, politics and change', *Studia Diplomatica*, Vol. 56, No. 6, pp.53–108.
- Fearon, J.D. (1997) 'Signaling foreign policy interests: tying hands versus sinking costs', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp.68–90 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002797041001004>.
- Finnemore, M. and Sikkink, K. (1998) 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4, pp.887–917.
- Franke, M. (2009) *Signal to Act: Game Theory in Pragmatics*, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.
- Gu, S. et al. (2024) 'International political signaling in the formation of the US-Soviet track and field meets and its significance', *Journal of Physical Education*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp.14–20.
- Hopgood, S. (2013) *The Endtimes of Human Rights*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca [online] <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801451768.001.0001>.
- Johnson, D.H.N. (1955) 'The effect of resolutions of the General Assembly of the United Nations', *British Yearbook of International Law*, Vol. 32, pp.97–122.
- Jönsson, C. (2016) 'Diplomacy, communication and signaling', in Constantinou, C., Kerr, P. and Sharp, P. (Eds.): *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, pp.79–91, SAGE, London [online] <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957930.n6>.

- Kydd, A. (2000) 'Trust, reassurance, and cooperation', *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 2, p.333 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551190>.
- Liang, K. (2009) 'On international discourse power and China's new approaches to expanding international discourse power', *Contemporary World and Socialism*, No. 3, p.110.
- Liang, Q. (2025) 'Application and reflection on causal mechanisms and process tracing: a review of process tracing: from metaphor to analytic tool', *Social Research Methods Review*, Vol. 7, pp.311–324.
- Mao, J. (2021) 'From country review to universal periodic review: towards a more impartial international human rights mechanism', *Human Rights*, No. 3, pp.73–91.
- Mao, J. and Yin, C. (2025) 'The modern transformation and paradigm transcendence of China's human rights development path', *Journal of Beijing Administration Institute*, No. 6, pp.34–44.
- McKenzie, L. and Meissner, K.L. (2017) 'Human rights conditionality in European Union trade negotiations: the case of the EU-Singapore FTA', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 4, pp.832–849 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12522>.
- McMahon, E. and Ascherio, M. (2012) 'A step ahead in promoting human rights? The Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council', *Global Governance*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp.231–248 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01802006>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China and Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations (n.d.) *Official Websites*.
- Mitoma, G. (2013) *Human Rights and the Negotiation of American Power*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia [online] <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812208412>.
- Morrow, J.D. (1999) 'Strategic setting of choices: signaling, commitment, and negotiation in international politics', in Lake, D.A. and Powell, R. (Eds.): *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, pp.86–91, Princeton University Press, Princeton [online] <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691213095-004>.
- Murphy, D.C. (2022) *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order*, Stanford University Press, Stanford [online] <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503630604>.
- Peerenboom, R. (2005) 'Assessing human rights in China: why the double standard', *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1, p.71 [online] <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol38/iss1/3/>.
- Piccone, T. (2018) *China's Long Game on Human Rights at the United Nations*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.
- Posner, E.A. (2014) *The Twilight of Human Rights Law*, Oxford University Press, Oxford [online] <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199313440.001.0001>.
- Pu, X. (2023) 'Achievements and contemporary implications of ten years of Belt and Road construction', *International Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp.37–51.
- Qin, G. (2023) *Video Remarks at the High-level Segment of the 52nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [online] <https://www.mfa.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Rana, K.S. (2001) 'Language, signaling and diplomacy', in Kurbalija, J. and Slavik, H. (Eds.): *Language and Diplomacy*, pp.108–109, DiploFoundation, Malta.
- Risse, T., Ropp, S.C. and Sikkink, K. (Eds.) (2013) *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [online] <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139237161>.
- Schelling, T. (2011) *Arms and Influence*, Mao, R. (Trans.), p.31, Shanghai People's Publishing House, Shanghai.
- Schoner, R.J. (2024) 'Naming and shaming in UN treaty bodies: individual petitions' effect on human rights', *The Review of International Organizations*, pp.1–40 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-024-09564-1>.
- Sen, A. (2006) *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, W.W. Norton, New York.

- Spence, M. (1973) 'Job market signaling', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 87, No. 3, pp.355–374 [online] <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>.
- Sun, M. (2015) 'China and the United Nations human rights protection system: a case study of the universal periodic review mechanism', *Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp.49–64.
- Terman, R. and Voeten, E. (2018) 'The relational politics of shame: evidence from the universal periodic review', *The Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp.1–23 [online] <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-016-9264-x>.
- United Nations (1986) *Declaration on the Right to Development* [online] <https://documents.un.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations General Assembly (2006) *Official Records of the 72nd Plenary Meeting of the 60th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, A/60/PV.72 [online] <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations Human Rights Council (2024a) *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: China* [online] <https://docs.un.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations Human Rights Council (2024b) *Outcome of the Universal Periodic Review* [online] <https://docs.un.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations Human Rights Council (2024c) *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Addendum – Views on Conclusions and Recommendations, Voluntary Commitments and Replies Presented by the State Under Review* [online] <https://docs.un.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations Human Rights Council (2024d) *Universal Periodic Review Recommendation Matrix* [online] <https://www.ohchr.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations Human Rights Council (2024e) *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review* [online] <https://docs.un.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations Human Rights Council (2024f) *National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: China* [online] <https://docs.un.org> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- United Nations Human Rights Council (n.d.) *Universal Periodic Review Documentation* [online] <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/cn-index> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Wang, X. and Zhang, Q. (2024) 'On the construction of the theoretical system of contemporary China's concept of human rights', *Human Rights*, No. 5, pp.1–20.
- Wang, Y. (2022) *Attending the High-level Segment of the 49th Session of the UN Human Rights Council*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [online] <https://www.mfa.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Wang, Y. (2024) 'Building consensus and strengthening cooperation to jointly promote the sound development of global human rights', Statement at the *High-Level Segment of the 55th Session of the UN Human Rights Council*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China [online] <https://www.mfa.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Wendt, A. (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Wu, W. (2024) 'Human rights and development: China's contribution based on the concept of "greater human rights"', *Human Rights*, No. 4, pp.27–48.
- Xiong, W. (2014) *Diplomatic Negotiation*, p.22, Peking University Press, Beijing.
- Yin, J. (2021) 'The political psychology of signaling and communication', *Chinese Social Sciences Today*, p.8.
- Yuan, Z., Li, Z. and Zhufu, X. (2016) 'China and the reshaping of international human rights norms', *Social Sciences in China*, No. 7, pp.189–203.
- Zhang, H. (2017) 'The sociocultural linguistic "indexical principle" and national image construction: a case study of Xi Jinping's speech at the UN General Assembly', *Foreign Language Research*, No. 3, pp.17–21.

- Zhang, J. (2019) *China's Position on Promoting and Protecting Human Rights*, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations [online] <https://un.china-mission.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Zhang, J. (2021) *Remarks at the Press Briefing on Human Rights Issues at the Third Committee of the 76th UN General Assembly*, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations [online] <https://un.china-mission.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).
- Zhang, J. (2023) *Statement at the General Debate on Human Rights Issues at the Third Committee of the 78th UN General Assembly*, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations [online] <https://un.china-mission.gov.cn> (accessed 16 March 2026).