

International Events and Grand Strategy Adjustment after the Cold War: Examining Chinese Grand Strategy Using a Neoclassical Realist Model

Leo S. F. Lin

The University of Southern Mississippi, w951096@usm.edu

ABSTRACT: There is a two-fold purpose of this paper. First, the author attempts to test whether the Type III of the neoclassical realism model developed by Ripsman et al. (2016) has better explanatory power on China's grand strategy adjustment after the Cold War era than other models. Second, the author examines how international events have impacted Chinese grand strategy adjustment in the everchanging systematic dynamics. The author argues that Type III of the neoclassical realism model provides a suitable model to explain a state's grand strategy adjustment, as this model can explain medium to longer-term dependent variables. According to the model, unit-level factors, such as leader images and strategic culture, have impacted the grand strategy decision-making and its foreign policy implementation, which resulted in the grand strategy adjustment over a long period. In terms of the case study, the author succinctly traces and examines how international events have impacted China's grand strategy, such as the dissolution of Soviet Union (1989), 9/11 terrorist attacks (2001), and the Global financial crisis (2008). This paper contributes to the study of Chinese grand strategy.

KEYWORDS: Chinese grand strategy, neoclassical realism, foreign policy

Introduction

The grand strategy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become a crucial issue in International Relations (IR), Security Studies, and Strategic Studies since the rise of China at the end of the Cold War era. However, the real Chinese grand strategy is not easy to identify. The goal and logic of the Chinese grand strategy can be comprehended only when a broader time frame is applied (Goldstein 2005). In IR, realism traditionally focuses on military threats, hard power (the use of military and economic means to influence the behavior of other states) and systemic constraints. However, this tradition has failed to understand the extent to which a state's grand strategy represents "a political-military means-ends chain, a state's theory about how it can best cause security for itself" (Posen 1986). Grand strategy is, therefore, the level at which systemic and unit-level factors converge, where matters of national security are mediated through public diplomacy (Mor 2006, Kitchen 2010). In realism, although defensive realism and offensive realism can explain the impact of systemic incentives on a state's foreign policy, it is hard for both strands to explain the ideational factors and the role of leaders in grand strategy decision making. Thus, by reviving classical realism's insights about the state, neoclassical realism is better able to explain the changes in grand strategy that is not wholly derived from a shift in international structure (Kitchen 2010).

Thus, this research paper is a preliminary analysis with an attempt to examine Chinese grand strategy development by using the neoclassical realists' approach. More specifically, this paper utilizes the Type III of the neoclassical realism model developed by Ripsman et al. (2016) and argue that it has better explanatory power on China's grand strategy adjustment after the Cold War era. To support this argument, the author succinctly selects three international events and examines their impacts on the Chinese grand strategy.

Research Question, Method and Data

The research question of this paper is, "How have international events impacted Chinese grand strategy adjustment since the Cold War?" The independent variables of this paper are international events, the dependent variable is China's grand strategy adjustment, and the intervening variables are domestic factors. The article has selected three notable international events as case studies, namely the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1989), the 9/11 terrorist attacks (2001), and the Global financial crisis

(2008). The international stimuli have impacted the unit-level intervening variables which in turn affect the output of Chinese grand strategy. In terms of research methods, this qualitative research paper uses historical and archival research methods. The data were collected from original texts and Chinese Communist Party official publications.

Defining Grand Strategy

The origin of the concept of grand strategy stems primarily from the history of the Western world. It is based mostly on the experience of the European great-powers and the United States. It is significantly imbued by the Judeo-Christian tradition (Danner 2018). Initially, the concept of grand strategy was used especially referring to wartime. Thus, the strategy usually focuses on military strategy. Clausewitz is often credited with originating the concept by asserting that true military strategy inevitably extends beyond war. Clausewitz provides an argument of “war as the continuation of politics by other means,” already encapsulates much of the same thinking (Clausewitz 1976). Another influential figure is Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke. Moltke is often time viewed as the strategist who operationalized Clausewitz’s theories. According to him, “strategy is a system of expedients. It is more than a discipline; it is the transfer of knowledge to practical life, the continued development of the original leading thought by the constantly changing circumstances. It is the art of acting under the pressure of the most difficult conditions” (Hughes 1995).

The term “grand strategy” was officially introduced by Liddell Hart in 1967 (originally published in 1929), which emphasizes that grand strategy was about more than winning the war but achieving “a state of peace, and of one’s people, [that] is better after the war than before.” The role of grand strategy – higher strategy – is to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of countries, towards the attainment of the political object of the war – the goal defined by the fundamental policy. While the war bounds the horizons of strategy, the grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace (Hart 1967). Later, according to Bernstein et.al (1994), grand strategy expands on the traditional idea of strategy in three ways: First, expanding strategy beyond military means to include diplomatic, financial, economic, informational, etc. means; second, examining internal along with external forces, which takes into account both the numerous instruments of power as well as the internal policies necessary for their implementation; third, including consideration of periods of peacetime in addition to wartimes (Bernstein, Knox, and Murray 1994).

The major modern interpretations of grand strategy to which scholars most frequently refer include those of an assortment of historians, strategists, and political scientists- Paul Kennedy, John Lewis Gaddis, Edward Luttwak, Barry Posen, and Robert Art (Milevski 2016). Art’s offering is the narrowest of all, as he states that grand strategy “concentrates on how the military instrument can best be used to support foreign policy goals” (Art 2009). Posen describes grand strategy as “a political-military, means-end chain, a state’s theory about how it can best “cause” security for itself” (Posen 1986). Gaddis posits that grand strategy “is the calculated relationship of means to large ends” (Gaddis 2002). Luttwak asserts that grand strategy is at “the level of final results. This is also the common form of strategy, because the dynamic workings of the paradoxical logic are constantly present in international politics, even when the war in any form is only a highly theoretical possibility” (Luttwak 2001). Kennedy has suggested that grand strategy is “about the evolution and integration of policies that should operate for decades, or even centuries” (Kennedy 1991).

Silove provides a most comprehensive review of grand strategy, and she offers a typology of grand strategy concepts. According to Silove, if the concepts of grand plans, grand principles, and grand behavior are understood, each concept consists of two constituent elements, ends, and means. The concepts have the characteristics of being “long-term,” “holistic,” and “important,” then definitions for each of the concepts can be derived as the following table (Silove 2018). According to Silove:

- *Grand plans are the detailed product of the deliberate efforts of individuals to translate a state’s interests into specific long-term goals, establish orders of priority between those goals, and consider all spheres of statecraft (military, diplomatic, and economic) in the process of identifying the means by which to achieve them.*

- *Grand principles are overarching ideas that are consciously held by individuals about the long-term goals that the state should prioritize and the military, diplomatic, and/or economic means that ought to be mobilized in pursuit of those goals. They tend to be expressed in single words or short phrases.*
- *Grand behavior is the long-term pattern in a state's distribution and employment of its military, diplomatic, and economic resources toward ends.*

The Type III of the Neoclassical Realist's Model

Neoclassical realists regard the structure of the international system as providing states with information about the costs and benefits of particular courses of action, but how that information is processed and weighed depends on the way states understand the world, their preferences, their ideas and their ethics (Kitchen 2010). Grand strategy emerges through the processes of empirical assessment and ideational competition within the state. Although in most cases the primary requirement is for security from threats. By placing a systemic analysis of the distribution of power at the heart of grand-strategic decision-making, grand strategy involves much more than simply the identification of, and response to, threats. At the heart of the process, strategic ideas provide policymakers with guidance in conditions of uncertainty, reflecting the considerable autonomy and scope for creativity on the part of the state to use ideas to shape grand strategy in response to external pressures (Dueck 2004). Thus, it is argued that the neoclassical realist approach is the more appropriate given that the strongest states have the greatest degree of strategic choice because they possess more power than is required to meet their basic security requirements. Looking inside the strongest states to understand the mechanisms driving their choices of auxiliary goals is necessary to provide a proper understanding of the nature of the international system itself (Kitchen 2010).

In terms of measuring grand strategy adjustment, Dueck has suggested that we measure change by reference to the policy instruments typically associated with strategic decision making. Thus, we should look for shifts in areas such as military deployments and spending; alliance commitments; foreign aid; and willingness to commit to diplomatic initiatives, as well as considering the overall tone of a state's stance towards its adversaries and the international system in general (Dueck 2004). He further identifies two levels of strategic adjustment – first-order changes entail a “massive shift in the extent of strategic commitments”, and second-order changes are “less fundamental.” Dueck rightly points us in the direction of policy instruments as our variable factors, and we might look for rhetorical shifts to indicate whether a shift is “massive” or “less fundamental” (Dueck 2004).

The neoclassical realist position takes that admission further, arguing that variables at the unit-level – in the ideas and perceptions of actors within the state – play a “pivotal” role in the selection of a grand strategy (Rosecrance and Stein 2016). Thus, grand strategic change can result from shifts at either the unit or the systemic level. Since the most important element in international relations remains the balance of power between states, changes in the international distribution of power encourage strategic adjustment (Kitchen 2010). It is shifted in the level of external threats that are the most likely cause of strategic adjustment (Dueck 2004).

This paper will employ the “Type III” neoclassical realism developed by Ripsman et al. (2016), which is a body of theories that explains phenomena ranging from short-term crisis decision-making by individual states up to and including broader patterns of international outcomes and structural change (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). According to them, three types of neoclassical realism can be identified. Type I focuses on explaining anomalous cases, whereas Type II uses neoclassical realist theory as a theoretical approach to the study of foreign policy. Both have their uses, but the authors are aiming for a “Type III”, which is a theory of international politics rather than simply a study of foreign policymaking (Messmer 2016). In this model, grand strategy adjustment is impacted by international stimuli through unit-level factors. In the grand strategy decision-making process at the domestic level, several variables affect the decision-making process, namely leaders' images,

strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. Due to the page limits, this paper focuses primarily on leaders' images and strategic culture.

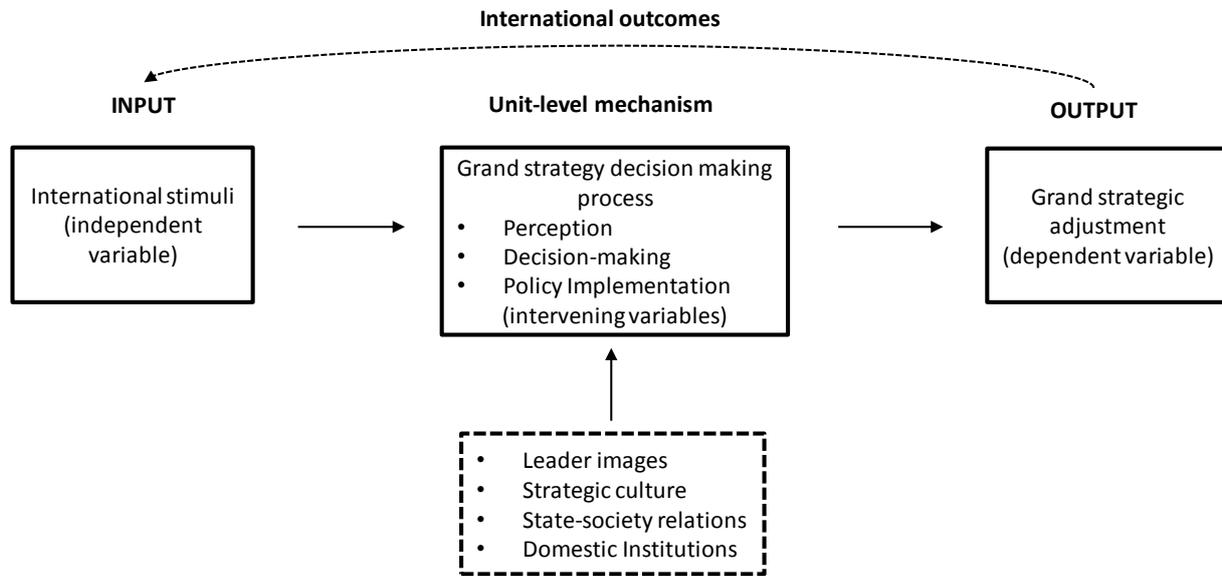


Figure 1: Type III Neoclassical Realist Model

(modified by author, based on Ripsman et al. 2016)

Fitting in the Model: Leaders Images, Strategic Culture, and Chinese Grand Strategy

There are several diverse viewpoints about China's grand strategy represented by various factions. First, some scholars believe that China either has no grand strategy and is still in search of one or is merely acting pragmatically. Second, there is an argument that China does have a grand strategy, but it is a contradictory one. Third, some observers have argued that it is not in China's culture to have one coherent grand strategy but rather to seek a middle way. And fourth, China may be shifting from "Peaceful Development" to another grand strategy (Danner 2018). Buzan once commented: "The question is therefore not whether China does or doesn't have a grand strategy. It does. The key issue is whether the logic of this grand strategy and the contradictions within it are fully understood and whether China has sufficient depth and coherence in its policy-making processes to implement such a strategy" (Buzan 2014). Thus, the debate is "whether China actually has a cohesive grand strategy, and whether incoherence could be a sign of either China being in the process of changing to another grand strategic course or not having a grand strategy at all" (Danner 2018).

One of the most prominent approaches to examine China's grand strategy is the strategic culture approach. Strategic culture can place severe constraints on the ability of elites to undertake strategic adjustment to systemic changes. Specifically, as Kupchan observes, decision-making elites can become trapped by strategic culture, which can prevent them from reorienting grand strategy to meet international imperatives and avoid self-defeating behavior (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Two types of analysis have been common: Conventional thinking was that China's Confucian tradition was a key determining factor in Chinese strategic thinking. Because of Confucianism, in this interpretation, China tends to favor harmony over conflict and defense over offense (Kierman and Fairbank 1974). Other analysts, usually focusing on Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, have stressed a Chinese predisposition for stratagem over combat and psychological and symbolic warfare over head-to-head combat on the battlefield. Johnston identified the existence of two strands of Chinese strategic culture: a "Parabellum" (or Realpolitik) one and a "Confucian-Mencian" one while two strands existed, only

one—the Parabellum strand—was operative and the other was purely for “idealized discourse.” Johnson argues that Chinese realism stems from ideational sources rather than structural factors (Johnston 1998).

Scobell, unlike Johnston, argues that both the Realpolitik and Confucian-Mencian strands are operative. Scobell contends that the two strands interact in a dialectic fashion to produce a distinctive “Chinese Cult of Defense” (Scobell 2003). Scobell suggests that a country’s strategic culture be conceptualized as one layer in a multi-layered cake. This cake contains various tiers of culture: political, civil-military, organizational, and strategic. Scobell further points out that the vast majority of strategic culture adherents have limited its analysis of the impact of strategic culture to explain how one country’s own strategic culture influences its strategic behavior. They have missed the ‘second face of strategic culture’—the strategic cultural image that the political and military elites of a country hold of a particular adversary or potential adversary. Leaders’ perceptions of another country’s capabilities, activities, and intentions are filtered through how these elites conceive of the other country’s strategic culture (Scobell 2003).

With the purpose of examining the Chinese grand strategy using the neoclassical realist model introduced above, this paper defines grand strategy as the operationalization of a state’s foreign policy for medium to the more extended period, focusing on political-military-economy means and end at the unit level. Furthermore, due to the page limits, this paper will only focus on Chinese state leaders’ images and strategic culture, the two most critical intervening variables in this research paper. The author makes two arguments: first, on Chinese state leaders’ images, the author argues that Chinese leaders perceive and use the three international events as “important strategic opportunity (*zhongyao zhanlue jiyu qi*),” which have affected Chinese grand strategy making. Second, the author argues that the traditional Chinese strategic thinking is mainly defensive. The Chinese strategic culture has three elements: the first one is “Preparation for Warfare (*bei zhan*),” the second is “Prudence for Warfare (*shen zhan*).” The third element is “strategic conservatism,” which deems war as a last resort. It is important to note that this type of strategic culture does not mean that China never became offensive or will never become offensive. It only suggests the nature of Chinese strategic culture provides a constraint for its strategic behaviors.

Preliminary Analysis with Empirical Cases: Chinese Grand Strategy after the Cold War

According to Wang Jisi’s account, “a unique feature of Chinese leaders’ understanding of a country’s history is their persistent sensitivity to domestic caused by foreign threats. From ancient times, the ruling the day has often been brought down by a combination of the uprising and external invasion” (Jisi 2011). In modern China under Communist rule, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always played a dominant role in foreign policy decision making by framing the strategic and macro-level guidelines, principles, and policies on the basis of the ideology and political theories of the CCP, including Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong thought, Deng Xiaoping theory, and the discourse of the “Three Represents.” Despite its changing functions and structure from time to time, the Standing Committee of the Politburo and the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, which include the chairman/general secretary of the CCP, are the de facto foreign policy-making institutions. The organizations of the CCP exist widely in departments at all levels in charge of foreign affairs (Hao and Hou 2009). By utilizing the neoclassical realist model laid out above, this paper offers three cases with brief analysis, which shows how international events have affected Chinese grand strategy after the Cold War.

Case 1: The Dissolution of the Soviet Union (1989)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War introduced an American unipolarity in which Washington had a variety of grand strategic options to pursue as the sole great power (Posen and Ross 1997). For China, this is the first strategic opportunity after the policy of “reform and openness” (*gaige kaifang*) announced by its leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978. In fact, in the post-Deng era, Chinese foreign policymaking tends to show more collective characteristics, but the role of individual policymakers remains crucial in some major foreign policy areas, especially in solving

crises (Hao and Hou 2009). For example, in response to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the unipolarity of the U.S., Deng Xiaoping proposed a foreign policy strategy of “*tao guan yang hui*,” which means “to put your brightness in your quiver behind your back and then to nourish your capabilities secretly.” Another strategy is called “*bu dangtou*,” which means “don’t stick your head up” (Pillsbury 2000). After the collapse of Soviet Union, China has become the number one leader in Communist camp; however, Deng took a strategy of not to get out in front and not to draw the attention of the global hegemon of the world- the United States. Instead, China continued to focus on its economic development and military buildup.

With a decisive push provided by Deng Xiaoping and sustained by Jiang Zemin, aggressive economic reforms re-ignited rapid growth catalyzed by large-scale foreign trade and investment (Zhao 1993). The resulting boom had international political effects as Beijing refocused on development as the central themes of its diplomacy. It stepped up the emphasis on improved relations with neighboring states - engaging in constructive dialogue about border disputes, normalizing state-to-state relations, and working to manage “problems left over from history” (Goldstein 2001). In the Fourteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1992, Former General Secretary Jiang Zemin confirmed that social market economy (*shehui zhuyi shichang jingji tizhi*) and socialism with Chinese characteristics (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi lilun*) are the guiding principles to address the domestic and external challenges (Jiang 1992).

Case 2: The 9/11 terrorist attacks (2001)

The Bush administration came into office in 2001, seeing China as a “strategic competitor” and was poised to take a more adversarial approach toward Beijing than its predecessor. When September 11, 2001, occurred, the terrorist attacks shifted the administration’s strategic focus. After the incident, the Bush administration adopted a unilateral foreign policy and deployed a preventive-war doctrine for military adventurism in Middle East, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. With America’s strategic spotlight focused on counterterrorism and Iraq, China perceived another “period of strategic opportunity” in which it could concentrate on developing its “comprehensive national power” (Wang 2006). Most importantly, after the global attention shifted to terrorism, global powers did not pay close attention to Chinese military buildup while war on terror was raging in Middle East. Anatol Lieven commented that China is “the quiet winner in war on terror” (Lieven 2011).

In the Sixteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2002, Jiang Zemin stated that China has “overcame the adverse effects the Asian financial crisis and world economic fluctuations had on China and maintained a relatively rapid economic growth” (Jiang 2002). He confirmed that the paths set up by Deng Xiaoping and the core strategy of developing economic strength are correct. With China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Jiang considered it a significant achievement of the open and reform policy. He further pointed that, “we (China) propose a fair and reasonable international political economy order,” because that the traditional and non-traditional security threats, terrorism and hegemonism have intensified the conflicts across the borders (Jiang 2002). Indeed, China has seized and made the most of the important period of strategic opportunities for China’s development since 2001, which has made Chinese economic and military development steadily growth in the first decade of the 21st century.

Case 3: The Global financial crisis (2008)

In September 2008, the lingering more than year-long sub-prime crisis culminated in the fall of Lehman Brothers, triggering a financial meltdown of the Wall Street, which then quickly turned into a global financial crisis and economic recession that had never been witnessed since the Great Depression (Lardy 2010). In response to the financial crisis, President Hu Jintao, addressing in the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, admitted that “the global financial crisis caused acute difficulties to Chinas development”, however, “by making resolute decisions and taking major countermeasures on the basis of sizing up the overall development in a scientific way, we (the party) made China’s economy the first in the world to make a turnaround, and we have gained important experience in effectively defusing external economic risks and maintaining

steady and robust growth” (Hu 2012). Also, Hu stressed that, to promote China’s overall development, China has to “take the pursuit of development in a scientific way as the underlying guideline and to accelerate the change of the growth model as a major task” (Hu 2012).

Chinese leaders considered the period after 2008 as another important period of strategic opportunities for its development. China still holds economic development as the central goal for enhancing the country’s prosperity and strength and continues to pursue the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2020. As the global financial crisis swept the West, China emerged to be the only big economy that prospered in the shadow of the global recession. Partly driven by the 4 trillion yuan stimulus package, China becomes the first economy of global scale to not only recover from the crisis but also does so in a sustainable manner, and it became the second-largest economy in 2010 (Lardy 2010).

Conclusion

This paper provides preliminary research on using a neoclassical realists model to examine the Chinese grand strategy. The author argues that this is a better-suited model when examining the impact of international events on China’s foreign policy and grand strategy, as shown in history, China’s grand strategy and foreign policy have impacted by external factors. At the unit level, leader’s images and the strategic culture are the most important variables that have affected China’s grand strategy decision making. From the above analysis, the Chinese leaders consider the three international events as strategic opportunities for China to continue to grow. China follows the Economic development path designed by Deng Xiaoping and quietly built up its overall strengths when other major powers got tied up with international incidents. This paper also confirms that the “Type III” neoclassical realist model helps explain China’s grand strategy adjustment after the Cold War.

As for future research, it requires a more in-depth research program by using the analytical framework proposed in this paper, by looking into Chinese history and its grand strategic development over a more extended period. Especially, how China was forced to abandon its traditional Tributary System and integrated into the Westphalian system after the Opium Wars in 1840, and what were the impacts on Chinese grand strategy development, is a recommended historical point for further investigation.

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