

# Strategic Subcultures and Grand Strategy Formation: A Neoclassical Realist View

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**ABSTRACT:** Scholars have identified strategic culture as an important ideational factor that influences grand strategy decision making. However, they pay less attention to the role of strategic subcultures in the grand strategy formation. This paper departs from structural realism and exams the effects of strategic subcultures in grand strategy formation at the unit level. To investigate the role of strategic subcultures, the author uses the Type II neoclassical realist approach, which focuses on the influence of ideas on foreign policy and grand strategy response to structural imperatives. Thus, strategic subculture is an ideational intervening variable that affects grand strategy behavior. This paper uses China as a case to conduct a preliminary study to support the author's theoretical argument. Many scholars have emphasized the impact of thousands of years of Chinese civilization and highlighted the pervasive influence of Confucianism over its state behavior. Nevertheless, China's grand strategy is frequently affected by its strategic subcultures, such as nationalism and ideology. This paper traces evidence of Chinese grand strategy in the post-9/11 era as a case study.

**KEYWORDS:** strategic subcultures, grand strategy, neoclassical realism

## Introduction

Strategic culture is an important ideational factor in neoclassical realism that affects a country's grand strategy formation. Since neorealists do not consider strategic culture as an important variable; therefore, for neorealists, strategic culture challenges the structural realist assumptions about the sources and patterns of state behavior in the international system. Neorealists perceive states as undifferentiated units that seek power through self-help to maximize their capabilities. Material forces mainly constrain the strategic choices of the states. In contrast, neoclassical realists stress on the unit-level factors, which include ideas and domestic factors. Johnston defines "strategic culture" as "ranked grand strategic preferences derived from central paradigmatic assumptions about the nature of conflict and the enemy and collectively shared by decision-makers" (Johnston 1995). He states that "the strategic culture approach challenges the ahistorical, non-cultural neorealist framework for analyzing strategic choices" (Johnston 1995, 34, 35).

Scholars who examine strategic culture differentiate between organizational cultures and a broader notion of strategic culture (Goldstein & Keohane 1993; Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell 2016, 66). For example, Legro focuses on military culture and studies the effect of military culture on the formation of national security policy (Legro, 1995). Kupchan develops a broader understanding of strategic culture and argues that strategic culture takes root among elites and the general public (Kupchan 1994). Collin Dueck argues that strategic culture shapes strategic choice in several ways (Dueck 2008). First, culture influences how international events, pressures, and conditions are perceived (Berger 1998, 3-5). Second, it provides a set of causal beliefs regarding the efficient pursuit of national interests (Goldstein & Keohane 1993, 13-17). Third, it helps determine the actual definition of those interests by providing prescriptive foreign policy goals (Adler 1997, 330, 337).

While most of the neoclassical realists focus on strategic culture, scholars paid less attention to the effects of strategic subcultures in grand strategy formation. Snyder defines strategic subculture as "a subsection of the broader strategic community with reasonably distinct beliefs and attitudes on strategic issues, with a distinct and historically traceable analytical tradition, with characteristic institutional associations, and with more or less distinct patterns of socialization to the norms of the subculture" (Snyder, 1977, p. 10). Bloomfield argues that

strategic subculture “contains an integrated mix of social/cultural and material/technical concepts. These are then promoted by various domestic groups competing against one another to offer the most accurate interpretation of their state’s international context” (Bloomfield 2012; Lantis 2014).

The logic of a state’s grand strategy concerns “how it can most sensibly serve the nation’s interests (goals) in light of the country’s capabilities (means) and the international constraints it faces” (Goldstein 2005, 19). Within this mélange of competences, perceptions of self and others (the international system as a whole or any combination of one or many of the states within it) have a critical influence upon a state’s strategic culture/security identity (Ollapally & Rajagopalan 2012, 74).

Therefore, this paper has two purposes. First, this paper aims to offer an account of the effects of strategic subcultures in a grand strategy model from a theoretical perspective. This author takes the Type II of the neoclassical realist approach, arguing that strategic subculture is a key factor in the theory of foreign policy and grand strategy in response to structural imperatives. The second purpose of this paper is to provide a preliminary empirical study on the above model. Since every country has a different composition of strategic culture and strategic subcultures, this author uses the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s grand strategy as a preliminary empirical case study.

Regarding the arrangement of this paper, this author first states the research question and methods. Next, this author investigates strategic subculture and grand strategy formation from neoclassical realists’ theoretical perspective—finally, this author investigates China’s grand strategy as a case study.

### Research Question, Method and Data

The research question of this paper is, “*How have strategic sub-cultures moderate a state’s grand strategy formation under international pressure?*” In this model, the independent variable of this paper is international pressure, the dependent variable is grand strategy formation, and the unit-level intervening variables is strategic subculture. This paper argues that strategic subcultures are as important as strategic culture in moderating a state’s grand strategy under international pressure.

Regarding the empirical study, this paper examines China’s grand strategy after 9/11 as a case study. This author conducts qualitative research and uses historical and archival research methods. This author collected seven official reports (all in the Chinese language) from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhongguo Gongchandang Quanquo Daibiao Dahui*). Those documents are official statements made by Chinese presidents (CCP Secretary Generals). Although the author selected the most important documents from the author’s perspective, selection bias may still exist. The summary of the documents is listed below:

**Table 1.** *Official Documents of the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party*<sup>i</sup>

Year	Name of the Meeting	Number of Documents
2002	16 <sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party	2
2007	17 <sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party	1
2012	18 <sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party	2
2017	19 <sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party	2

*Source: Table made by the author*

Next, this author coded the data and analyzed the data using MAXQDA software. In qualitative research, coding is “how you define what the data you are analyzing is about” (Gibbs 2007). MAXQDA is a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods of data and text analysis. Finally, the author translated the results and produced the report.

## **Type II Neoclassical Realist's Grand Strategy Model and Strategic Sub-Culture**

### *Type II Neoclassical Realism*

The purpose of neoclassical realism is to construct an approach to foreign policy and grand strategy that retains the primacy of the international system that structural realists emphasize while relaxing the constraints of external determinism to reflect the limitations of structural realism (Ripsman et al. 2016, 25). According to Ripsman et al. (2016, 26-27), Type I neoclassical realism proceeds from the empirical observation that, while states usually conform to systemic pressures over time, they occasionally respond inconsistently with systemic imperatives. Therefore, Type I neoclassical realism explains the anomalies of neorealism. Type II neoclassical realists posit that neoclassical realism can do more than explain anomalies; it can also explain a broader range of foreign policy choices and grand strategic adjustment (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro 2009, 280-299; Ripsman et al. 2016, 29).

There are several distinct points of Type II neoclassical realism. First, neoclassical realism not only can explain the grand strategy of great powers but also other regional and small powers, developing countries (David 1991). Second, neoclassical realists include both external and internal variables in their models. While shifts in power at the international system dominate, threats can also emanate from the sub-systemic or regional and domestic environments (Lobell 2009). Third, for neoclassical realists, "there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behavior" (Rose 1998). What neorealists tend to ignore is whether state leaders have the freedom to convert the nation's economic and military power into foreign policy actions (Lobell 2009). Finally, leaders almost always face a two-level game in devising and implementing grand strategy (Putnam 1988): on the one hand, they must respond to the external environment, but, on the other, they must extract and mobilize resources from domestic society, work through existing domestic institutions, and maintain the support of key stakeholders (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman 2009).

Empirically, there are numerous scholars' works on leaders' ideas and foreign policy choices. For example, Colin Dueck explains patterns of US grand strategic adjustment since World War I in terms not only of its strategic position but also the cultural values of the country's liberal internationalist elites (Dueck 2008). Nicholas Kitchen contends that neoclassical realism explains how grand strategy is the product of both an empirical assessment of international systemic pressures and competition among strategic ideas within a state's foreign policy executive (Kitchen 2010; Ripsman et al. 2016, 31). He argues that "prevailing ideas influence the type of foreign policy response to structural imperatives" (Kitchen 2010, 132).

This author argues that strategic culture and strategic subculture of a country affects its grand strategy decision making and serve as unit-level intervening variables between international pressures and grand strategy policies. There is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to a state's grand strategy policies. Based on the diagram provided by Ripsman et al. (2016), for an analytical purpose, this author adds variable "strategic subculture." It should be noted that strategic subculture is not the only intervening variable that affects grand strategy making. Other variables, such as leader's images and strategic culture, can also affect the decisionmaking process. Due to the length of this paper, the author only examines the effect of strategic subculture.

### *Figure 1. Types II Neoclassical Realist Model and Strategic Subculture*

## Strategic Subculture in China's Grand Strategy: A Preliminary Case Study

### *From Chinese Strategic Culture to Strategic Subcultures*

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 (Lin 2019, 211). Culture is a major factor influencing Chinese leader images and strategic culture, which in turn affects the grand strategy decision making process. Some argue that Chinese strategic culture has a causal impact on Chinese foreign policy and grand strategy. Some analysts, however, go further than merely claiming an "impact" of culture on foreign policy. They believe that culture can determine foreign policy without fully explaining why (F. Zhang 2009, 210). Scholars often debate on what Chinese strategic culture entails. Chinese strategic culture has been defined as a "system of symbol which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences" (Johnston 1995, 46). Johnston (1998) identifies the existence of two strands of Chinese strategic culture: a "Parabellum" (or Realpolitik) one and a "Confucian-Mencian" one; although two strands existed, only one - the Parabellum strand - was operative and the other was purely for 'idealized discourse.' Johnson (1998) argues that Chinese realism stems from ideational sources rather than structural factors.

Scobell (2005) expanded upon Johnston's basic findings suggesting that while China's elites view the world in realpolitik terms, at the same time, they perceive China's own strategic culture as Confucian or pacifist and defensive-minded. However, while Johnston contends that the Confucian strand is mainly symbolic, Scobell asserts it is much more and interacts in dialectic fashion with the realpolitik strand to produce a "Cult of Defense".<sup>ii</sup> Scobell (2003, 3) suggests that China's strategic culture can be conceptualized as one layer in a multilayered cake. This cake contains various tiers of culture: political, civil-military, organizational, and strategic. A full appreciation for the cake requires one to sample a piece with all the layers contained in one mouthful.

Chinese traditional worldviews, dominant traditional culture, and sub-cultures affect both Chinese leader images and strategic culture. As Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman observed, ideational factors such as ideology and nationalism can play an instrumental role in helping a state's leadership extract, mobilize, and direct social resources and cultivate support among its power base (Schweller 2009). Taliaferro defines nationalism as a political movement wherein individuals begin to identify their interests with a group that is too large to meet together; wherein they identify those interests based on a common "culture," "ethnicity," "civic" or "national identity" that the members of the group share to the exclusion of other groups; and wherein individuals come to believe that the members of the group share a common history and to believe that the group requires its own state if it is to survive (Posen 1993; Taliaferro 2009; Van Evera 1994). Ideology is a concept that can be defined according to Michael H. Hunt as "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggest appropriate ways of dealing with that reality" (Hunt, 2009, p. xi). Foreign policy ideologies are sets of beliefs and values that make international relations intelligible and decision making possible (Hogan & Paterson 2004, 222).

Therefore, this author argues that the Chinese strategic subculture at least includes Chinese nationalism and ideology. Nationalism in China is a complex issue. Chinese nationalism is not just about celebrating the glories of Chinese civilization; it also commemorates China's weakness. This negative image comes out most directly in the discourse of China's Century of National Humiliation (*Bainian Guochi*) (Callahan 2006, 202; Kennedy 2010). Several kinds of Chinese nationalism exist since it is powered both by feelings of historical humiliation as well as historical pride and pride over contemporary Chinese achievements. Both among the Chinese elite and in the general Chinese population, the Chinese "weak-strong" mentality or "dual identity" works as an undercurrent affecting the perception of and the approach to developments in the international system and China's role in it (Ross 1997, 32-34). The Chinese leadership has long used nationalism to ensure domestic social and political stability (Sørensen, 2013, 377).

Regarding ideology, Marxism was first introduced to China in the 1910s, and after the Chinese Communist Party came to power, Marxism-Leninism became the first official ideology. For CCP, ideology has served two functions. The first is that it has been linked to the promotion and achievement of modernity. The second is that it has delivered consensus and cohesiveness in areas where there was fragmentation and disagreement (Brown, 2017, 54). Ideology in China infected and politicized public space, embroiled in increasingly widespread and ambitious social movements. The Great Leap Forward (1957–1958) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), for example, are all the social consequences of ideologies (Brown, 2017, p. 54). During and after the Deng Xiaoping era, the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Zhongguo Tese Shehuizhuyi) became the popular term for political theories and grand strategy policies that are seen by their proponents as representing Marxism-Leninism adapted to Chinese circumstances and specific time periods. The above political ideologies have had direct or indirect effects on Chinese grand strategy.

### Results

As mentioned, this paper used official documents from CCP's National Congress. Although the sample size is small (7 official documents) in a with-case study, this author still made a code system trying to observe the patterns of China's grand strategy after 9/11. First, the author used the MAXQDA software and employed a test on the frequencies of official terms that appear in the official documents. To focus only on the central theme of this study, the author had to block some frequent words that are not relevant to this study. The result is as below:

**Table 2. Frequencies of Terms**

Rank	Term	Frequency	%	Documents	Documents %
1	The Three Represents	31	1.39	7	100.00
2	One Country Two System	21	0.94	7	100.00
3	Deng Xiaoping Theory	9	0.40	3	42.86
4	Peaceful Unification	6	0.27	6	85.71
5	Basic Lines	5	0.22	3	42.86

Next, the author coded the seven documents using the four codes that the author assigned (grand strategy goals, foreign policies, ideology, and nationalism). The purpose of this test is to observe the patterns that connect strategic subculture and grand strategy policies. The result is shown below:

**Table 3. Codes and Counts**

Code	16 <sup>th</sup> Congress	17 <sup>th</sup> Congress	18 <sup>th</sup> Congress	19 <sup>th</sup> Congress	Total Counts
1 Dependent variable (grand strategy)					
1.1 Grand strategy goals	3	5	5	10	23
1.2 Foreign policies	3	5	2	5	11
2 Intervening variables (strategic subculture)					
2.1 Ideology	6	5	9	10	30
2.2 Nationalism	2	3	1	8	14

Source: Table made by the author

### Discussion

The test on the top frequencies of terms gives us a general picture of what is the focus of the documents, which guides Chinese grand strategy policies. Among those frequent terms, three terms are associated with ideology (*Three Represents*, *Deng Xiaoping Theory*, and *Basic Lines*). The other two terms are associated with nationalism (*One Country Two System* and *Peaceful*

*Unification*). The Three Represents (or important thought of Three Represents) is a guiding socio-political theory credited to former president Jiang Zemin, which was ratified by the Communist Party of China at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002. The formal statement of the theory is:

This experience and the historical experiences gained by the Party since its founding can be summarized as follows: Our Party must always represent the requirements for developing China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people. These are the inexorable requirements for maintaining and developing socialism, and the logical conclusion our Party has reached through hard exploration and great praxis.<sup>iii</sup>

The *Deng Xiaoping Theory* is the series of political and economic ideologies formulated by former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. The theory seeks to adapt Marxism–Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought to the existing socio-economic conditions of China (W.-W. Zhang 1996). The *Deng Xiaoping Theory* was entrenched into the Communist Party's Constitution as a guiding ideology in 1997 and was written into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. Finally, the *Basic Lines of the Communist Party of China* at the primary stage of socialism is “to lead the people of all ethnic groups in a concerted, self-reliant and pioneering effort to turn China into a prosperous, strong, democratic and culturally advanced modern socialist country by making economic development our central task while adhering to the Four Cardinal Principles and persevering in the reform and opening up”.<sup>iv</sup>

Regarding nationalism, the policies are connected to territorial integrity. The focal point is the issue of Hong Kong and Taiwan. “One country two systems” refers to a constitutional principle of China describing the governance of Hong Kong, particularly since it became a Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of China in 1997. Peaceful unification is a grand strategy policy that refers to its unification with Taiwan, as Beijing considers the island to be a breakaway province since 1949.

From Table 3, this author observes the number of counts of the codes that the author has assigned. Based on Table 3, each National Congress meeting has different frequencies of the mentioning of the variables. Consequently, this author comes up with two observations. First, in comparison to ideology and nationalism, the CCP focuses more on the reiteration of ideology than nationalism. Ideology and nationalism appear in the documents and serve as the basis for the grand strategy policies. Second, the CCP emphasis more on grand strategy policies which incorporates foreign policies.

The author has found several empirical evidence from the data. For example, in the 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress, the grand strategy policy is the realization of three historical missions, including modernization (*Xiandaihua Jianshe*), the reunification of the motherland (*Zuguo Tongyi*), and maintaining world peace (*Shijie Heping*) to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Regarding foreign policy, it focuses on the participation of international exchanges and cooperation through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to enhanced China's international status (*Guoji Diwei*).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress, the grand strategy policy is around several key themes, including the modernization of military and national defense (*Guofang Jundui Xiandaihua*), peaceful unification (*Heping Tongyi*), and peaceful development (*Heping Fazhan*) at the international stage. Regarding foreign policy, China pursues an independent and peaceful foreign policy (*Dulizizhu Heping Waijiao*) to have extensive exchanges and cooperation with various countries for a good international environment for China to construct of a well-off society (*Xiaokang Shehui*).

The 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress focuses on an “important strategic opportunity period” (*Zhongyao Zhanlue Jiyu Qi*). The grand strategy goals include economic development (*Jingji Fazhan*), construction of a well-off society, scientific development (*Kexue Fazhan*), and ensuring the CCP retains at the core leadership position in the socialism with Chinese characteristics. In foreign policy, China aims to promote human peace and development, the spirit of equality and mutual trust, and win-win cooperation (H) in international relations.

Finally, the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress's central theme is to remain faithful to China's original aspiration and keep the three historical missions (modernization, the reunification of the motherland, and maintaining world peace) firmly in mind. Also, China is striving for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era; work tirelessly to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation (*Zhonghua Minzu Weida Fuxing de Zhongguo Meng*). To accomplish those goals, in the foreign policy arena, China aims to actively promote the "Belt and Road" international cooperation, continue to actively participate in the reform and construction of the global governance system, promote the building of new international relations of mutual respect, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation, and promote the building of a community of human destiny (*Renlei Mingyun Gongtongti*).

## Conclusion

This paper has two purposes. First, the author aims to provide a theoretical perspective on strategic subculture as a unit-level variable in the grand strategy formation. The author has used the Type II neoclassical realist approach as the theoretical starting point. The author argues that strategic subculture of a country is an important factor affecting its grand strategy decisionmaking process, and serve as unit-level intervening variables between international pressures and grand strategy policies.

Second, the author has used China as a preliminary case study to investigate the role of strategic subculture in China's grand strategy. In China, Chinese traditional worldviews, dominant traditional culture, and subcultures affect both Chinese leader images and strategic culture. Ideology and nationalism stand out as strategic subcultures that affect China's grand strategy formation. The author has analyzed data collected from Chinese official documents for analysis. The author has made several findings.

Regarding ideology, the *Three Represents*, *Deng Xiaoping Theory*, and *Basic Lines* are the three most guiding concepts in the discourse of grand strategy policies. As for nationalism, *One Country Two System* and *Peaceful Unification* are the two most important policies which both connect to territorial integrity. If compared with ideology and nationalism, the CCP emphasis more on ideology than nationalism. Another finding is that the CCP emphasis more on grand strategy policies which incorporates foreign policies. The author has presented empirical evidence from the data.

Since this is preliminary research on the role of strategic subculture in grand strategy formation from the neoclassical realists' approach, for future research, it requires more in-depth research by using the analytical framework proposed in this paper. For the case study, future research should have a more comprehensive research program by analyzing more data, both in the case of China and other major powers.

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<sup>i</sup> Source: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64569/65444/4429125.html>

<sup>ii</sup> The Cult of Defense identifies six principles that influence Chinese strategists: (1) the primacy of national unification; (2) heightened threat perceptions; (3) the concept of active defense; (4) Chinese just war theory; (5) chaos phobia; and (6) an emphasis on the welfare of the community over that of the individual (Scobell 2003, 32-38).

<sup>iii</sup> Selected Works of Jiang Zemin, Eng. ed., FLP, Beijing, 2013, Vol. III, p. 519.

<sup>iv</sup> [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top\\_news/2017/09/26/content\\_281475885768142.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2017/09/26/content_281475885768142.htm).