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Rediscovering the Transition in China's National Interest: A Neoclassical Realist Approach

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Abstract

Recently, China's core national interest proposal has drawn significant attention from scholars, triggering a wide range of discussions on this interesting phenomenon. However, the existing literature remains largely limited to single-case studies and has neglected several crucial questions: What is the major difference between China's national interest and core national interest? What factors may cause a transition from a national interest to a core interest? How can we understand this long-term transition? Based on these questions, this article constructs a neoclassical-based analytical framework to trace that transition, arguing that the major difference between these two concepts is the scope of their application. Meanwhile, the transition in China's national interest can be categorised as "defensive national interest," "constructive national interest," and "adversary core interest" from the beginning of the 1980s to 2017 – with the scope expanded accordingly from the domestic and regional levels to the inter-regional one.

Keywords

China's national interest, transition process, Chinese foreign policy, neoclassical realism

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Introduction

National interest, a basic concept in international politics, is widely regarded as the basis of a state's foreign policy (Art, 2004: 45). As a steadily rising power, China's behavioural patterns draw significant attention from scholars – and its national interest has, accordingly, become an important starting point for explaining China's foreign policy. Generally, China's national interests – which mainly include defending sovereignty and territorial integrity, maintaining internal stability and political rules, sustaining economic growth, and securing China's status as a great power – have remained fairly consistent over the past few decades. However, these fixed areas of national interest have assumed some differences in China's various stages of rising, largely relying on the strategic calculation of their perceived significance, external threat perceptions, and China's own relative capabilities. Some interesting signs can be observed in the critical junctures of China's foreign policy.

For example, beginning in the 1980s, then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping reiterated in several important speeches that economic growth and modernisation were the central tasks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government, emphasising that all other internal and external affairs should serve the primary interest of economic development. Under Deng's instruction, China's foreign policy managed to turn inward – making both diplomacy and national defence serve domestic economic growth. In the 1990s, while confronting economic sanctions and the “China threat theory,” Deng proposed the basic principle of China's foreign strategy: “Keep a low profile, and do something” (韬光养晦, 有所作为, *taoguang yanghui, yousuo zuowei*). This helped China to overcome the political difficulties brought on by the Tiananmen Square incident. The China threat theory also made the government realise that simply accumulating material capabilities would trigger wide-ranging anxiety and that the inherent ideological conflict between China and democratic countries might escalate such tension. To make other countries accept the CCP-led rise of China, the Chinese government strived to engage in the US-dominated liberal order by actively participating in various international institutions and organisations, signalling that China would act as a rule follower rather than a rule breaker.

Recently, the principle of keeping a low profile has been modified to “strive for achievement” (奋发有为, *fenfa youwei*). This is a new term that President Xi Jinping has used to deal with diplomatic relations, which raise debate over what exactly China wants to achieve (Legro, 2007). At this stage, China's objective is more than material capability accumulation and sharing its increasing dividends. What China currently wants, in fact, is to be a widely recognised and respected great power with extensive prestige and influence. To safeguard its great power status, China has started to exhibit assertive behaviour by defining its control over an increasing number of territories that are in its national interest – not only those of traditional significance such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan but also some disputed territories such as the South China Sea and East China Sea, too.

Based on the above observations, it is easy to note that some changes have occurred in China's national interest since the 1980s. However, although China's national interest has become an increasingly efficient instrument in strategic interactions with other major

powers, the existing literature remains largely limited to single-case studies rather than engaging in the systematic and long-term tracking of trends. This is primarily because existing studies have rarely focused on the following crucial questions: What is the major difference between China's national interest and core national interest? What factors may cause a transition from a national interest to a core interest? How can we understand this long-term transition?

To answer these key questions, this article – which is based on recent developments in neoclassical realism – treats the power structure in place as an independent variable, with two intervening variables – China's strategic orientation and responses by neighbouring states – used to construct an analytical framework to trace the transition from a national interest to a core national interest. While a core interest is inherited from a national interest, sharing the same fixed contents, the major difference between these two concepts is the scope of their application. Meanwhile, this article further contends that the changing scope of China's national interest is determined not only by its rising power status but also by China's strategic choices as well as by the responses from neighbouring countries at different stages of development. Relying on the covariation caused by the three variables, the transition in China's national interest can be categorised as *defensive national interest*, *constructive national interest*, and *adversary core interest* from the 1980s to 2017 – with the scope expanded accordingly from the domestic and regional levels to the inter-regional one.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows: a brief but critical review is given in the next section, to highlight the inadequacies of the existing literature. The third section, based on the modified neoclassical realism approach, constructs an analytical framework to track the long-term transition in China's national interest. The new analytical framework is applied so as to trace this transition in China's national interest and to illustrate the logic of how such a transition operates, in the fourth section. The research findings will then be summarised in the concluding section.

The Existing Literature on China's National Interest

Interestingly, Western scholars do appear to have focused their attention on China's national interest. This is partly because recent references to the country's core national interest have grown dramatically. According to Figure 1, from 2008 to 2016, the number of references rapidly increased – reaching its highest point at 309. Data collected by Xinhua News indicate a more pronounced trend. In line with Figure 2, the maximum frequency during this period was 938, while the average number was approximately 600. Additionally, the Chinese government seemingly shows a strong preference for applying the pursuit of its core national interest to the diplomatic realm (55.5 per cent) – which is seen as far more important than other realms, such as the economy (15.7 per cent) and the military (23 per cent) (Zeng, 2017). In this regard, these figures imply that the concept of core national interest has become a major instrument for interactions with other countries.

This observation is confirmed by growing interest among Western scholars in China's core national interest. Three schools of thought, emanating from different analytical levels, seek to account for China's core national interest. These are China's rise

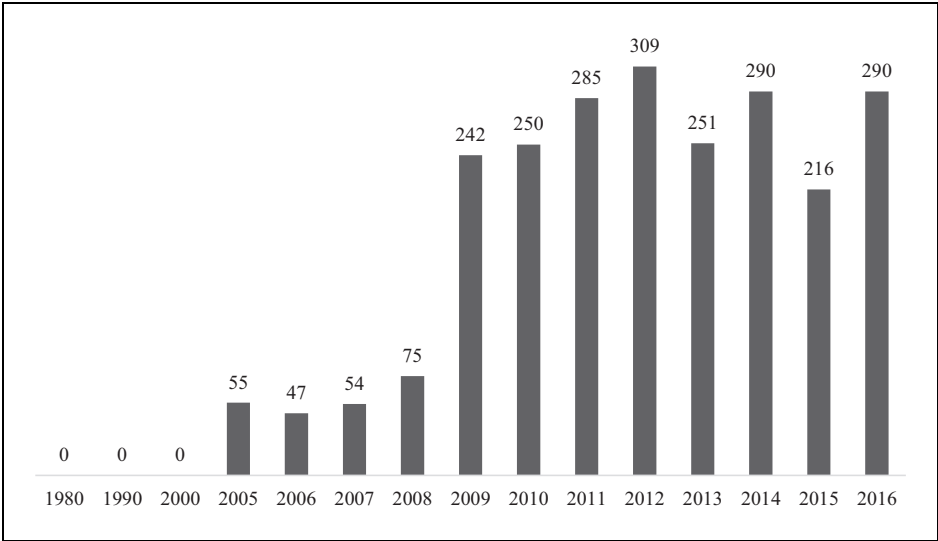


Figure 1. Number of references to core national interest, as collected by People's Daily. *Source:* People's Daily Database (2016).

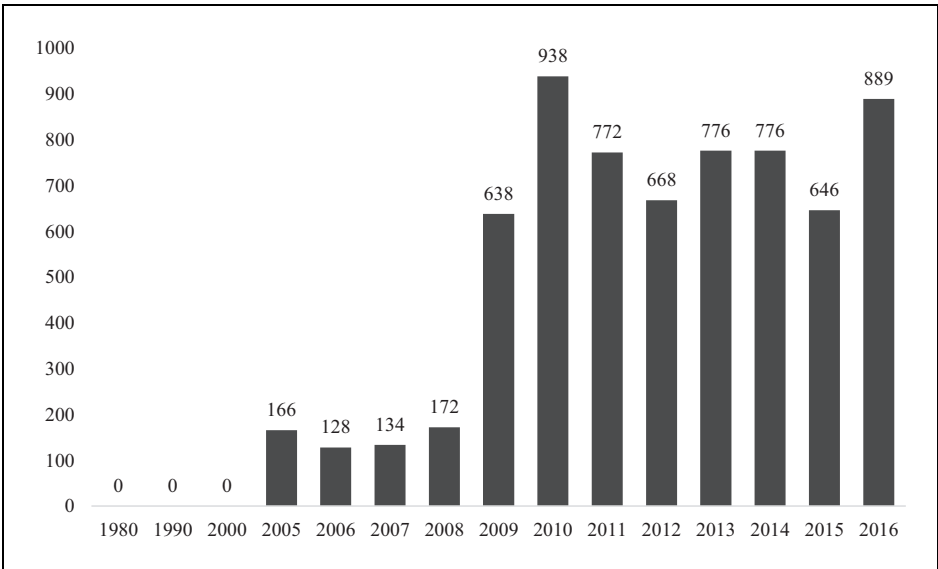


Figure 2. Number of references to core national interest, as collected by Xinhua News. *Source:* Xinhua News Database (2016).

challenging the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, domestic pressure from increasing Chinese nationalism, and the transition in Chinese leadership.

First, some scholars posit that the proposal of the core interest is a by-product of China's rising power – as the rise of China has changed the existing power structure in the Asia-Pacific region. China's challenge to the balance of power has enabled the country to break free from the constraints produced by the system's structure, thus providing space for its strategic choices to shape a more favourable external environment in this region. As He and Feng (2012: 635) summarise, when a state has growing power, its interests will enlarge. They further elaborate this argument using two dimensions: horizontally, China promotes its national interest to focus on protecting its overseas and security interests, for example, by facilitating a large-scale evacuation from Libya and sending navy ships and air force planes to disputed territories. Vertically, the Chinese government consistently insists on sovereignty and territorial integrity issues.

Similarly, Swaine (2011) asserts that the current core interest reflects Beijing's growing determination and confidence to safeguard its bottom lines and national security within a global power struggle with the US. This realist perspective is also supported by territorial dispute cases between China and its neighbouring countries. Scholars argue that the range of interest overlaps between China and its neighbouring countries continues to expand because of its growing power – leading to an increasing number of maritime disputes. The Chinese government, in turn, must propose what the core interest is, as such a concept may help achieve diplomatic goals when dealing with territorial disputes and other sensitive issues (Christensen, 2011; Yoshihara and Holmes, 2011).

Relative capability is undoubtedly the most important factor in international politics, one which enables China to change the distribution of existing power configurations to create more space for its expanding national interest. However, the realist logic neglects the fact that growing power will not only lead to change in its distribution but also may invite balancing behaviours from other countries, too. This means that if we solely attribute China's expanding national interest to its increasing power, the analysis is likely to be divorced from the country's own important strategic calculations – because avoiding the anti-China alliance is always a top priority of its foreign policy. In this vein, China's expanding national interest should be limited by its strategic interactions with other countries rather than be a simple result of growing power. Indeed, some studies also illustrate that the Chinese government has applied a mixed approach – using both reassurance and coercion strategies in dealing with maritime disputes, rather than simply making an “either/or” choice (Zhou, 2016).

The second school of thought emphasises the role of Chinese nationalism and specifically the pressure it generates on the Chinese government to take a more assertive stance in its foreign policy so as to appease the nationalist sentiment of domestic audiences. Therefore, the national core interest underlying Chinese foreign policy is widely regarded by nationalists as being assertive externally. This correlation is explained by William Callahan (2004), who contends that the humiliation and salvation of the nineteenth century produced a strong sense of national insecurity that became the main driving force of rising Chinese nationalism. This viewpoint has been further developed by various other scholars, with the general academic consensus being that

Chinese nationalism – especially the radical and irrational variety boosted by patriotic education in the 1990s – has become the major domestic driving force shaping China’s foreign behaviour – including regarding the promotion of the concept of China’s national core interest (Hughes, 2006; Weiss, 2014; Zhao, 2013b).

However, this explanation suffers from two obvious problems. First, it neglects the fact that the Chinese government indeed has the power to control and appease radical and irrational nationalist sentiment when it reaches an agreement to restore bilateral relations. The rapid appeasement and recovery regarding China–South Korea relations after the latter’s deployment of a US missile system is one such case. Second, this explanation overestimates nationalism as an independent force in influencing Chinese foreign policy. According to empirical studies by scholars, there is no robust evidence for the rise of Chinese nationalism – which means that such sentiment may not have any correlation with the transition in national interest occurring (Johnston, 2017). Identifying problems in the nationalist argument is not to deny its importance in shaping Chinese foreign behaviour, and such sentiment is indeed regarded as a supplement to the CCP’s legitimacy. However, it is not the major source hereof – since economic growth, at least before completing the construction of a moderately prosperous society (小康社会, *xiaokang shehui*), still plays a leading role in determining the CCP’s political trajectories. Additionally, given the government’s ability to control national sentiment, it is better to argue that nationalism is useful to strengthen domestic cohesion and consensus, enabling the government to smoothly implement its chosen foreign policy.

The third scholarly explanation relates the change in national interest to the transition in Chinese leadership. Underlying this explanation are two key perceived dimensions: strongman politics and the necessity of maintaining regime stability and legitimacy. On the one hand, there is the view that China’s national interest transition is largely due to the power transition in Chinese leadership, as President Xi is widely regarded as a stronger, more assertive leader than Hu Jintao – leading to increasingly aggressive and expansive foreign behaviour (Economy, 2014). Some scholars have performed operational coding of the Chinese leadership, finding that an uncompromising stance is preferred when facing a constrained external environment (He and Feng, 2013; Liao, 2016). On the other hand, scholars – based on observations of Chinese domestic reality – argue that the proposal of the national core interest reflects the imperative need of Chinese leaders for stability and legitimacy. The slowdown in China’s economic growth has the potential to produce great pressure on the political legitimacy of the CCP (Nathan, 2017; Zhao, 2013a).

These two interpretations are also problematic, however. First, while strongman politics is useful for clarifying a leader’s personality, preferences, and style, which are important in studies of foreign policy, it is overly reductionist for researchers to consider the rotation of leadership as the decisive factor in external behaviour. Foreign policy is a product of bilateral and multilateral interactions involving the state and the international system, not merely of personal preferences (Waltz, 1959: Chapters 6 and 7). Second, although the new definition of China’s national core interest includes internal stability and the CCP’s political rules, the direct causal relations between the transition in national interest and the regime’s stability are still unclear.

I argue that the existing literature does not provide an adequate description and explanation of China's changing national interest, because most research avoids a long-term study of how it has transformed. Alastair Iain Johnston (2013) comprehensively articulates this problem by stating that recent studies of China's foreign behaviour focus excessively on single-case studies, which may lead to analytical deviation and fail to provide a full picture of the country's foreign policy. Given this research gap, this article attempts to construct an analytical framework in which the transition process in China's national interest can be traced and explicated.

Neoclassical Realism and the Analytical Framework

In the strict sense, neoclassical realism is not a *sui generis* theory but instead a theoretical extension of realist traditions – including classical and structural realism. More particularly, neoclassical realism is widely considered a response to both the shortcomings of structural realism and the critiques of realism in general. Therefore, this article must first identify the logic of structural realism before an analytical framework based on neoclassical realism can be constructed.

Structural Realist Assumptions About Foreign Policy and Their Problems

For Kenneth N. Waltz (1979) and other structural realists, a differential growth rate – which over time changes the relative distribution of capabilities between states – is the driving force in international politics. Based on this theoretical core, structural realism can answer two very general questions: first, which power distributions are more stable? Most structural realists agree that a bipolar distribution is the most stable, followed by a balanced multipolar distribution and unbalanced multipolar distribution (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). Other scholars may also agree with the stability of the unipolar system, as derived from Robert Gilpin (1987) and further developed by William C. Wohlforth (1999).

The second question, meanwhile, is closely related to foreign policy: from among a range of survival strategies, which ones are states likely to choose – including balancing/bandwagoning, reward/punishment or other options? In Waltz's view, structural realism is a theory to explain reoccurring international outcomes – such as the balance of power – rather than a diplomatic one that aims to analyse a state's specific foreign policy. Although Waltz rigidly distinguishes between the theorisation of international politics and diplomatic theory, many structural realist scholars have in fact contributed to the broadening of the scope of structural realism – including Stephen M. Walt's "balance of threat" and John J. Mearsheimer's "offensive realism" – to provide a more accurate explanation and prediction of a state's foreign behaviour. To some extent, structural realism is also called a "systemic approach" to understanding states' foreign policy, as they are compelled to select the most appropriate one in response to systemic circumstances (Ripsman et al., 2016: 19). Thus, we can also infer a driven systemic approach model as follows:

Systemic Stimuli→Policy Selection

However, the systemic approach is not without problems. The overemphasis on systemic stimuli has trapped structural realism into naturalism, ahistoricism, and determinism, which weakens its explanatory power vis-à-vis dynamic and changing political phenomena – such as the transition in the international system, the US's loss in the War on Terror, and the underbalance of China's rise in the twenty-first century (Kratochwil, 1993; Schweller, 2004). More importantly, a rising power, based on rational calculations, should not challenge the existing hegemonic power before it accumulates enough power resources. In this regard, China's foreign policy should be to keep a low profile because the relative power gap between it and the US is still huge regardless of the Asian country's rapid rise.

However, the changing patterns in China's foreign behaviour may demonstrate the fact that it is not only driven by the growth of relative power but also influenced by other factors, too. The problem with a systemic approach is mainly derived from structural logic, which is too simplistic for elaborating how complicated strategic interactions shape a state's foreign policy. Therefore, the shortcoming of structural realism illustrates the fact that a states' foreign policy should not only be determined by systemic variables but also the other variables that emerge in the process of strategic decision-making. Based on this understanding, we cannot wholly explain the transition in China's national interest by merely following the logic of a systemic approach.

The Neoclassical Realist-Based Analytical Framework

A state's foreign policy behaviour is usually shaped by interactions between international and domestic factors, rather than merely being determined by international structures. Nevertheless, a few existing studies have combined different levels of analysis and developed cross-level theories to elaborate states' foreign policies and external behaviours. This is partly because scholars are deeply influenced by Waltz's systemic approach, which views analyses at the domestic and individual levels as reductionist. In dialogue with Waltz, Colin Elman (1996) contends that structural realism neglects the behavioural patterns of state actors, rendering it unable to predict a given state's foreign activities. The resurgence of attention to the state in international political studies indicates that scholars are increasingly aware of the limitations of structural realism in accounting for foreign policy, particularly when it undergoes a long-term transition. Therefore, a powerful theory of foreign policy should emphasise the significance of the international system and incorporate different variables at the international and domestic levels (Hobson, 2002).

The growing demand for cross-level foreign policy analysis has motivated scholars to revise existing International Relations theory, and the rise of neoclassical realism is a product of this trend. Neoclassical realism contends that foreign policy is affected by both independent and intervening variables. The international power structure is viewed as the independent variable, shaping a state's foreign policy, while domestic variables are seen as intervening ones that may accelerate or slow down transitions in foreign policy (Rose, 1998). By treating domestic factors as intervening variables,

neoclassical realism breaks from structural realism's embarrassment about change, rendering the theory operational in empirical studies and useful as a basis for the prediction of a state's foreign behaviour. In addition, a focus on domestic factors facilitates the development of an explanatory framework that can be used to examine a specific state's foreign policy (Liu, 2016).

However, neoclassical realist theory has inherent limitations to it. First, based on the aforementioned discussion, we find that it has utilised various domestic variables – ranging from political institutions and strategic culture to leaders' perceptions (Ripsman et al., 2016: 9–16). This renders the theory relatively diffuse rather than internally cohesive, similar to structural realism. In fact, some leading neoclassical realists – who frankly criticise the fact that there is no single neoclassical realist foreign policy theory but only a diversity of neoclassical realist theories – have recognised this problem (Lobell et al., 2009: 10). Second, while most neoclassical realists aim to bridge the gap between the international and the domestic levels, they seemingly neglect interactions between states – especially with allies or rivals. In political reality, a state's foreign policy choices and behaviour are not only determined by international structures and by own domestic political elements but are also largely shaped by the interplay with other states.

Fortunately, Liu Feng, a professor in the Department of International Relations at Nankai University, fills this missing link. Liu (2016) argues that the strategic interactions occurring within interstate relations will largely impact on states' foreign policy decisions. Using the regional system (systemic stimuli) as the independent variable, Liu further indicates that the output of a state's foreign policy is also largely influenced by the rising power's strategic orientations (both internal and external) and its neighbours' responses – which are defined as two intervening variables in his analytical framework. These two intervening variables are particularly important for China's rise because that country's approach is to choose between strategic interactions with other great powers and with its neighbouring countries.

Two major factors lead to such a strategic choice: first, the rise of China occurs within a unipolar system dominated by the US, which means that China will inevitably face containment from the most powerful country in the world. Also, other major powers in the Asia-Pacific region such as India and Japan may co-operate with the US on the strategic containment of China. Second, as a both sea and land rising power, China has to deal with many neighbouring countries – including some adjacent major powers and other middle/small powers. Therefore, maintaining relations with great powers and surrounding countries simultaneously becomes equally important in China's foreign policy. Relatedly, Liu suggests that a state actor may design its foreign policy based on the calculations about its adversary's own strategy or make a strategic adjustment after its adversary makes a move. Liu's argument is consistent with some scholars' viewpoint that strategic interactions between states should be introduced as a level of analysis (Lake and Powell, 1999: 4). More importantly, such a revision to neoclassical realism not only fulfils the existing deficiency regarding the interstate level but also reduces the inconsistent variables produced at the domestic one, too.

As a diplomatic instrument, China's national interest is also a result of strategic interactions. In this vein, tracing the transition in China's national interest cannot merely focus on international structures and domestic characteristics; it is also necessary to seriously consider interstate relations. Following Liu's theoretical revision of neo-classical realism, this article constructs an analytical framework that can be used to trace the transition in China's national interest. As shown in Figure 3, this analytical framework posits that the transition in China's national interest is mainly determined by the power structure, China's strategic choices, and by the responses from neighbouring countries. These lead to three types of national interest: defensive, offensive, and adversary. The relations between the independent and the intervening variables are summarised in Figure 4, and the analytical framework can be expressed by the following equation: *Power Structure + China's Strategic Choice + Responses from Surrounding Countries = The Transition in China's National Interest*.

Before the empirical examination of this analytical framework, more specific definitions of its key concepts and causal mechanisms should be elaborated. In accordance with neoclassical realism, the power structure in different periods is viewed as the independent variable. More specifically, the power structure is primarily defined by the distribution of capability between the great powers – which can be roughly divided into multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar. The different types of systemic factors represent the structural constraints and opportunities facing China when it accumulates power resources. Neoclassical realism uses various measurements or indicators of a state's material capabilities, including gross domestic product (GDP), level of annual military expenditure, size of population and territory, and so forth. Given that a state's relative power is mainly determined by material resources, this article employs GDP growth rate and military expenditure to illustrate China's changing position within the international power structure.

China's strategic choice is the first intervening variable in promoting the transition in its national interest. However, this transition is also mainly decided by the systemic stimuli from the power structure, which can be categorised as a co-operation model, reassurance model, and hedging model. First, related to the literature on international politics, "co-operation" is a strategy in which states voluntarily adjust their policies to manage their differences and reach a more mutually beneficial outcome (Grieco, 1990: 22). Fravel (2008: 17) develops a more practical concept of co-operation, defined as a state's trade concessions in the face of thorny issues – being made so as to improve ties with adversaries within and beyond the region and because of wanting something in return, usually assistance to counter a more immediate threat faced. In other words, co-operation to some extent implies a compromise strategy to earn support and assistance from other states when one state is confronted by an external threat.

Second, in studies of international conflict, "reassurance" is considered a strategy to signal benevolent intentions and avoid conflicts (Stein, 1991). Recently, reassurance has also been defined as a useful strategy to avoid balancing or containment by other middle or small powers (Sun, 2009). Lebow (2007) highlights more specific approaches to achieving reassurance, including reciprocity, irrevocable commitment, self-restraint, norms of competition, and limited security regimes. In short, by adopting a reassurance strategy, the

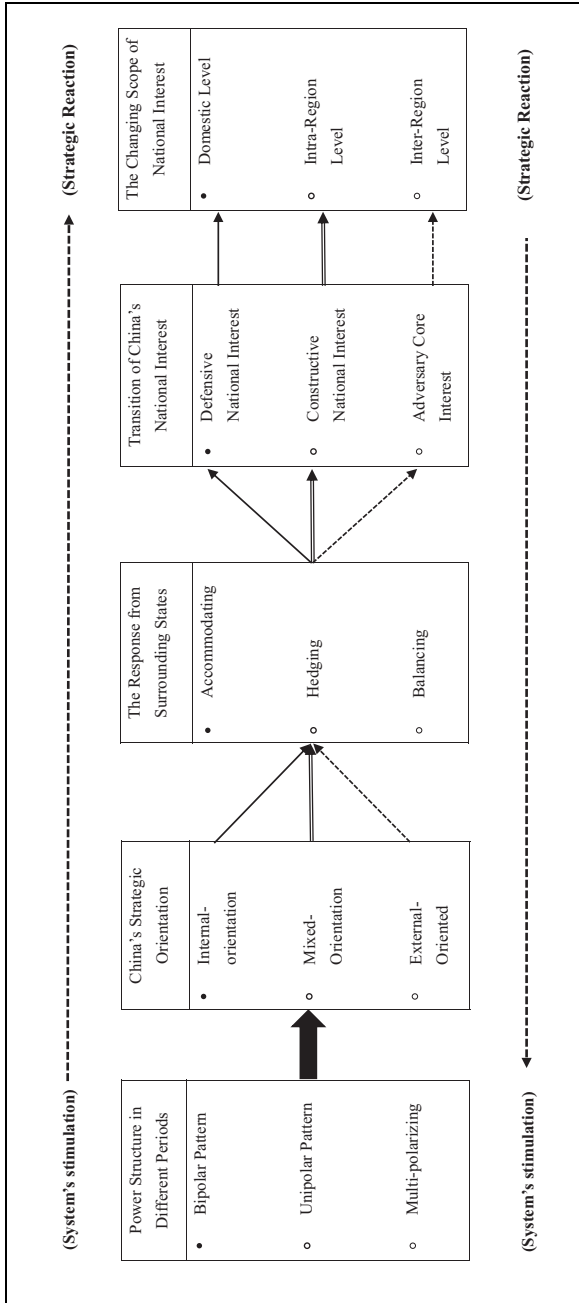


Figure 3. The framework of China's national interest. Source: Author's own compilation.

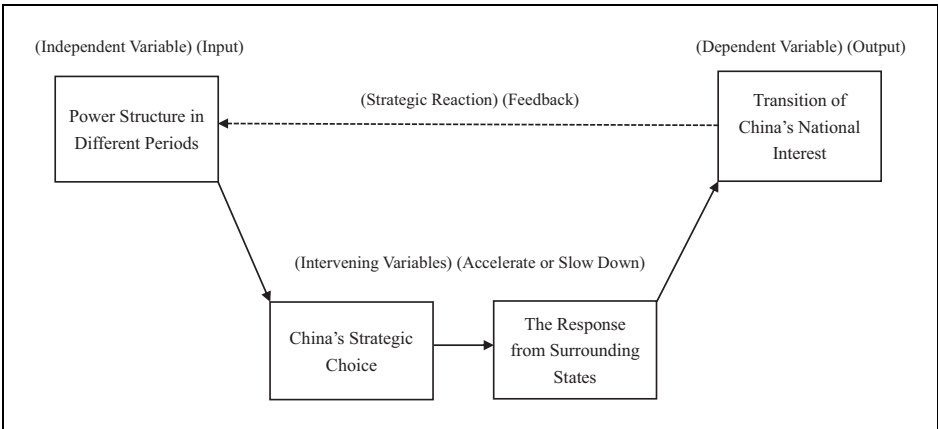


Figure 4. Relations between variables. *Source:* Author’s own compilation.

Chinese government attempts to reshape its image to a benign one so as to alleviate the fear and anxiety caused by the country’s rapid rise.

Third, one of the main attributes of the “hedging” strategy is that it consists of counteracting policies. The hedging strategy encompasses engage/resist, balancing/containment, engagement, co-operation/competition, and so forth (Medeiros, 2005; Nadkarni, 2010: 45). In other words, the hedging model is a mixed strategy that helps a state respond in the moment to increasingly complicated situations in its strategic interactions with great powers and middle/small powers.

Moreover, the rise of a new great power will not be welcomed by all of its neighbouring countries for historical and practical reasons, ones which determine the responses from these states and are the second intervening variable in shaping China’s national interest. Traditionally, the mainstream strategies for middle or small powers are the balancing–bandwagoning dichotomy. However, the increasing complexity of the regional environment due to power struggles between China and external hegemonic powers leads these states to make an either/or choice. In this vein, hedging becomes a middle-of-the-road strategy between balancing and bandwagoning for middle/small powers, which means that such an approach is not only suitable for great powers but also a flexible strategic choice available to middle/small powers, too (Kuik, 2008; Roy, 2005). As such, the responses from China’s neighbouring states have included bandwagoning, hedging, and balancing behaviour. However, related to the historical and political realities on the ground, outright bandwagoning by a rising power is not common in international politics because of the uncertainties and risks that these states have to face. Thus, this article uses “accommodating” to describe the accepting and welcoming attitude towards a rising power. Henceforth, the neighbouring states’ responses are classified as accommodating, hedging, and balancing.

Finally, (1) defensive national interest means that the state’s capability and willingness to defend its domestic demands, such as political stability and economic development, are

growing, yet it seeks only to defend – not expand – those interests. Meanwhile, (2) constructive national interest refers to the state's attempts to achieve a reassuring outcome by expanding its own national interest to connect with that of other states. Further, (3) adversary core interest indicates the state beginning to apply a “two-track approach” in its foreign policy – that is, it has a growing willingness to use an assertive strategy to resist the containment pressure exerted by the existing hegemon, but nonetheless still uses the reassurance strategy towards other major/middle/small powers.

How, then, does a combination of the previous variables influence the transition in China's national interest? Or, how can we merge these three groups of factors into a logical causal mechanism? More specifically, the international power structure is the decisive factor in shaping China's strategic preferences. Both constraints and opportunities included in the power structure exert a significant impact on China's objectives or at least affect the possibility of the country achieving its strategic goals. This will change China's intention of using reassurance or coercion towards other countries. According to China's strategic choices, the systemic stimuli may be either strengthened or undermined among its neighbouring countries, influencing their responses to their neighbour's rise. In turn, China usually has strong incentives to adopt a relatively co-operative approach to an accommodating neighbour but is less willing to do that with balancers on its periphery. Driven by the independent variable and two intervening variables, the scope of China's national interest will change accordingly from the domestic level to the inter-regional one, largely depending on the covariation effect produced by these three variables. Lastly, the transition in China's national interest and its expanding scope become strategic reactions to the international power structure. This formulates a replicated analytical framework, which will be useful in future studies.

The Transition in China's National Interest

This section applies the elaborated analytical framework to examine the transition in China's national interest and to demonstrate the causal mechanism discussed above. The study begins with the 1980s, and three phases – 1980s–1990s, 1991–2010, and 2011–2017 – are included in this process. Meanwhile, as discussed previously, the article calculates GDP growth rate and military expenditure to illustrate the changes in relative power between the US, the Soviet Union/Russia, and China.

1980s–1990s: Bipolar and Defensive National Interest

In the initial stages of the Cold War, the US relied on its material power to maintain a strategic advantage over the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, the power gap between the two great powers rapidly narrowed as the USSR caught up in terms of strategic nuclear weapons, and the US became trapped in the Vietnam War. By the 1970s, the US had gradually lost its dominant position within this power competition. The narrowing gap between the US and the USSR was particularly apparent in the realm of military expenditure during the 1980s. According to Figure 6, in 1985, military expenditure was almost equal between the US (USD 258.165 billion) and the USSR

(USD 225.01 billion). It is easy to see that China was a relatively weak power compared with the US and USSR at this stage (see Figures 5 and 6). In terms of GDP, China's grew from USD 0.191 trillion to 0.309 trillion between 1980 and 1985, but the gap in economic strength relative to the US (USD 4.373 trillion) and USSR (USD 0.941 trillion) remained huge. From a military expenditure perspective, although data on China's were not released in the 1980s, the figure in 1990 reached only USD 10 billion – indicating a large gap in military strength compared with the US and USSR.

The systemic stimuli in this period were produced by the changing defensive/offensive strategic posturing between the US and the USSR. Its growing military power drove the USSR to become increasingly aggressive in its foreign behaviour and an increasing threat to China's national security, which was mainly demonstrated in ideological debates and territorial conflicts – leading to the complete breakdown of the Sino–USSR alliance. Under such circumstances, how to effectively withstand the USSR's aggressive expansion became a common interest of China and the US and led to a strategic rapprochement in Sino–US relations.

Essentially, allying with the US to counterbalance the USSR was an opportunity for China to achieve autonomy within a bipolar international system, enabling the Chinese government to transform its foreign policy to prepare for the forthcoming US–China–USSR strategic triangular relationship (Dittmer, 1981). In response to the change in the international power structure, Deng proposed that China pursue an independent foreign policy of non-alliance – emphasising that the Asian country would play neither the “US Card” nor the “Soviet Card” (Deng, 2008: 56–57). Deng's proposal was indicative of a shift in the Chinese government's rapprochement strategy towards a balance of power, so as to manage the US–China–USSR strategic triad.

The formation of this strategic triangle within the international power structure was a powerful systemic stimulus to China's foreign policy. Other than allowing the Chinese government to break away from the dilemma of isolated diplomacy created by the anti-two hegemony strategy of the Maoist era and receiving the US's financial, technological, and military support, a more important stimulus was that from adopting a balance of power strategy. Hereby, China could maintain its strategic flexibility in dealing with the two hegemony powers and avoid being passively “installed” in the strategic triangle – enabling the government to maintain a relatively neutral but ultimately pro-US position, which provided a broader space for China's strategic choices.

By maintaining strategic flexibility between the US and the USSR, the Chinese government relieved itself of “revolutionary diplomacy” (Armstrong, 1977: 1–12), allowing the country to shift its strategy from a conflict to a co-operation model. Three major changes proved such a shift took place. First, the primary task shifted from “class struggle as the guiding principle” to “economic construction as central.” This indicates that China's policy orientation was increasingly based on rational calculations rather than ideological considerations. Second, following the transition in policy orientation, the importance of ideology in foreign policy weakened significantly, turning from “revolutionary diplomacy” to “developmental diplomacy.” Third, the Chinese leadership no longer assessed the world as one of war, but one in which peace and development were the two major themes of the contemporary era.

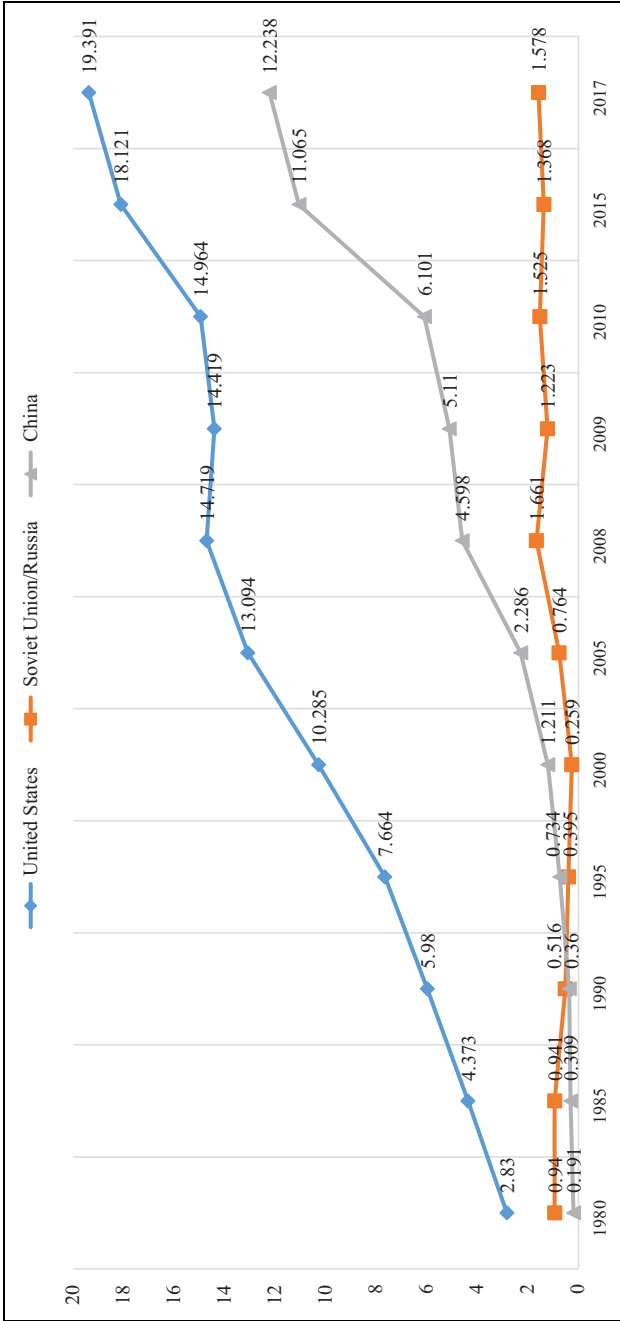


Figure 5. Comparison of GDP between the US, the USSR/Russia, and China (trillion USD). GDP = gross domestic product; USSR = Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Source: The World Bank. Available online at: <https://data.worldbank.org.cn/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2017&locations=CN-US-RU&start=1980>.

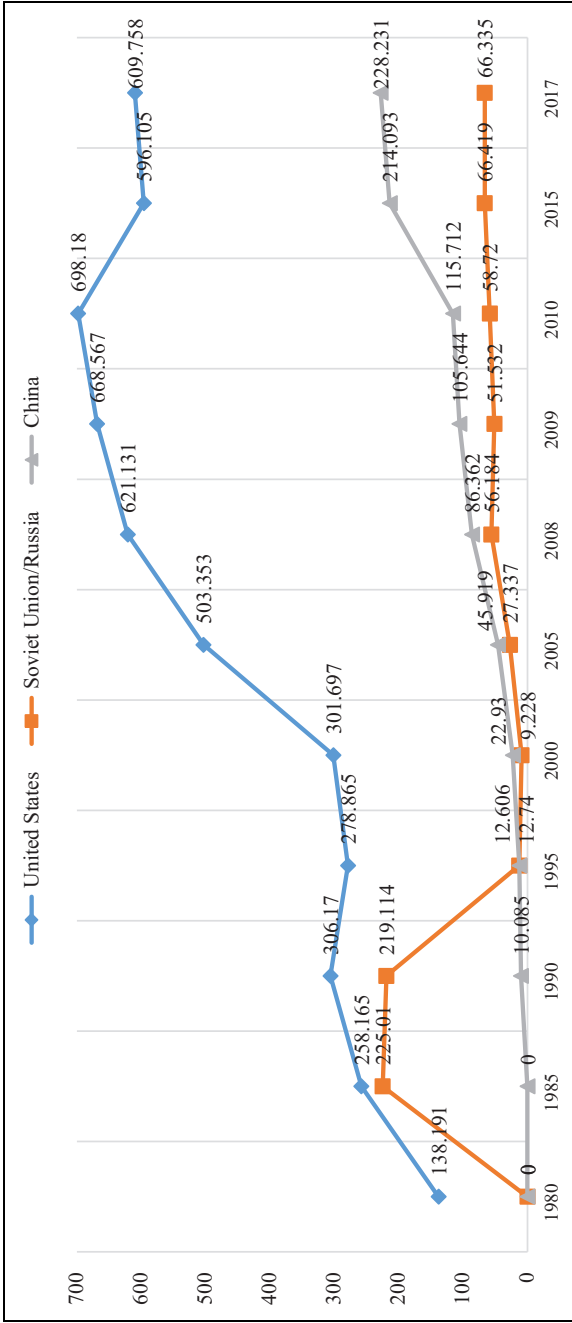


Figure 6. Comparison of military expenditure between the US, the USSR/Russia, and China (billion USD). USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Source: The World Bank. Available online at: <https://data.worldbank.org.cn/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?end=2017&locations=CN-US-RU&start=1980>.

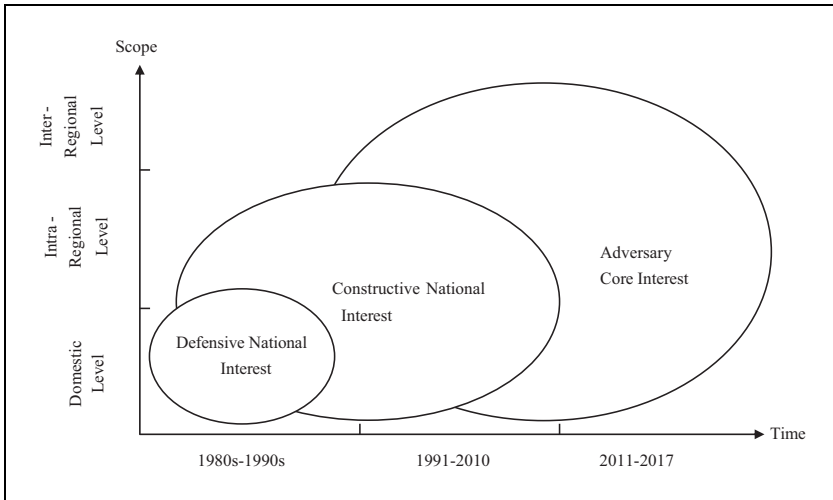


Figure 7. Changes in scope over different time periods. *Source:* Author's own compilation.

The changes shown above reflect China's willingness to compromise on its defence of ideology and to engage with other countries in a more co-operative way. This view can be illustrated from both domestic and international perspectives. Domestically, after safeguarding national security, Deng established economic construction as the central policy at the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1982 – thereby prioritising economic interests over other goals. Deng then reiterated in several important speeches that economic construction and modernisation were the most crucial pre-conditions for China in dealing with international and domestic affairs (Deng, 2008: 163–178, 204).

Internationally, such prioritisation enabled China to strengthen economic co-operation with the US, Japan, and other Western countries, which it did mainly because the market resources, advanced technology, managerial experience, and foreign investment provided by the international economic order were essential to the country's development and modernisation (Sutter, 2012: 74). To develop a closer network with developed countries, China changed its role from that of a self-sufficient socialist country to a participant in international institutions. For example, China joined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) and thereafter participated in a United Nations negotiating conference – endorsing a series of documents and agreements on disarmament and arms control.

Given the normalisation of Sino-US relations and China's co-operative strategy, the stance of surrounding countries also shifted to accommodation. These responses were mainly seen in the following important geopolitical relations: Sino-Soviet, Sino-Japanese, and Sino-Mongolian. To contain the Asian country's rising autonomy within the strategic triangle, then president Ronald W. Reagan pursued a "dual-track" policy towards China

and Taiwan – putting the brakes on the process of strategic rapprochement between China and the US. The deceleration of Sino–US rapprochement opened up space for Sino–Soviet relations. In 1982, the Chinese government engaged in funeral diplomacy to set up a high-level visit, breaking a political impasse that had existed since the 1960s. In response to this ice-breaking effort, Mikhail Gorbachev delivered a speech in Vladivostok expressing Soviet willingness to improve relations with China and agreeing to remove the “Three Obstacles.” Gorbachev then visited Beijing in 1989, where the Soviet and Chinese leadership issued a joint declaration officially recognising the rapprochement between the two socialist countries.

Driven by the improvement in Sino–Soviet relations, the Mongolian government also revealed a willingness to pursue accommodation with China. For example, the two governments reached an agreement on joint inspections of the Sino–Mongolian border, defining it as a friendly and peaceful border in 1984. Sino–Mongolian relations deepened in 1986 with the signing of a trade agreement, which led to substantial improvement in bilateral relations. Sino–Japanese relations also made great progress. Politically, the Chinese and Japanese governments established the four principles of Sino–Japanese relations and formed the Sino–Japanese Friendship Committee for the twenty-first century as an advisory agency of the two governments (Howe, 1996). Economically, the Japanese government and national bank agreed to provide three Japanese yen loans and two resource loans to China. At the same time, the Sino–Japanese trade volume reached USD 189 billion – with Japan surpassing the US to become China’s second-largest trading partner. In this regard, the accommodating responses from the surrounding countries definitely exerted a positive effect on China’s strategic choices, which was helpful for the government in shaping a relatively favourable external environment so as to serve its domestic development.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it is observable that under the covariation of these three variables, China’s national interest at this stage of development had a strong internal orientation, mainly focusing on domestic needs and serving economic growth. Such attributes of China’s national interest are consistent with the definition of “defensive national interest.” More precisely, the logic of the formulation of defensive national interest is as follows: the vacuum created by the relaxation of the power struggle between the US and the USSR enabled China to increase its strategic autonomy, pushing the international power structure towards one of strategic triangular relations. This systemic stimulus not only helped the Chinese government to alleviate the great security threat from the USSR but also made China abandon ideologically driven revolutionary diplomacy, with it turning instead to a more rational and interest-based co-operative approach in dealing with other countries. Relying on the national interest, the Chinese government adjusted its foreign policy from a conflictual to a developmental orientation. China’s co-operative strategic choice reinforced the systemic stimulus signalled by the change in the power structure and caused wide-ranging effects on its peripheries. The accommodative responses of the surrounding countries, as the second intervening variable, were helpful for the Chinese government to shape a favourable external environment –

which, as noted, strengthened China's internal orientation. In this regard, the Chinese government required all other internal and external affairs to serve domestic development so as to formulate the defensive national interest – limiting the scope of China's national interest at the domestic level.

1991–2010: The Unipolar System and Constructive National Interest

From 1991 to 2010, the systemic stimulus was mainly derived from two perspectives: first, the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War was the most significant change in the international power structure of the early 1990s, resulting in a US-led unipolar system. Second, as a secondary great power, China earned its opportunity to accumulate power resources, raising its position within the international system so as to fill the power vacuum left by the USSR. Between 1990 and 2010, China's GDP increased from USD 0.36 to 6.101 trillion, surpassing Japan to become the world's second-largest economy in 2010 (see Figure 5 above). This economic development helped China convert resources into military capability. China's military expenditure increased nearly elevenfold in 20 years, reaching USD 115.712 billion in 2010 (see Figure 6 above).

Following this logic, the Chinese government should have had increasing space for choosing its preferred foreign policy. However, China's rising power position first encountered the US's hegemonic maintenance strategy, which has been a solid, continuous approach from the end of the Cold War to the present. As Brzezinski (1997: 48–56) suggested, the US – as a new type of global hegemonic power – should adopt an appropriate geopolitical strategy, indicating that the government in Washington needs to prevent and contain the potential challenger from rising within the Eurasia chessboard. China, the key geostrategic player, was particularly highlighted by Brzezinski, indicating the US's special attention paid to it. Therefore, China's rise and the US's hegemonic position would become the new structural confrontation in the post-Cold War era – leading the Asian country to inevitably be contained by its North American counterpart. Other than the structural pressure from the existing hegemonic power, China – with its rapidly growing relative material capabilities – also triggered wide-ranging anxiety in other countries, particularly on its peripheries. The Chinese government thus had to pay more attention to relieving the fears of its neighbours about its rise to global power.

While confronting the dual constraints imposed by the hegemonic power and surrounding countries, China realised that simply displaying its willingness to co-operate was not enough to comfort others. The co-operation model was primarily serving its domestic needs, rather than signalling China's real intentions to other state actors. To reduce suspicion and fear on the part of the US and peripheral countries, the Chinese government shifted its strategic choice from co-operation to the reassurance model by establishing keep a low profile as a basic principle of foreign policy. This manifested in two main ways: (1) towards hegemonic powers, China illustrated its strong desire to be

engaged or involved in the US-led liberal international order; (2) towards surrounding countries, China chose to offer more comprehensive reassurance.

In interacting with the US, the Chinese government chose to be consistent with that country's China policy, broadly defined as its engagement strategy – which aimed at peacefully evolving the socialist country into a capitalist one by deepening China's involvement in international institutions. More precisely, in addition to joining the IMF and WB China also successfully earned membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. China's participation in the WTO was widely considered an important signal that the government wanted to pursue a more open market economy approach. Moreover, China's integration in international institutions dramatically increased – going from being involved in 30 to 50 between 1986 and the year 2000 (Johnston, 2008: 33–34). In 2006, China's participation rate in international institutions had reach 60 per cent, ranking it twelfth among all countries worldwide. This increasing trend led Washington to re-evaluate the efficacy of its engagement strategy. In addition, the reassurance model further strengthened China's concession of avoiding direct conflict with the hegemonic power. For example, the Chinese government demonstrated its great strategic patience and self-restriction during the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 EP-3 incident (He, 2009).

The Chinese government has prioritised its relations with neighbouring countries and adopted an increasingly comprehensive reassurance strategy towards them since 2001. For example, in that year then Chinese premier Zhu Rongji proposed that China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should establish a “free trade area” within 10 years – which was warmly welcomed by the latter. In 2002, China and ASEAN reached an endorsement of the “Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Co-operation” and officially activated the process towards the “China-ASEAN Free Trade Zone.” Stimulated by these agreements, the value of trade between China and ASEAN reached USD 78.2 billion in 2003 – realising some 42.9 per cent growth, which made ASEAN China's fifth-largest trade partner. In 2009, the bilateral value of Sino-ASEAN trade had grown to USD 213 billion – up from USD 7.95 billion in 1991. Similarly, China also actively participated in the creation of the China-Japan-South Korea and ASEAN (10+3) framework, broadening the scope of co-operation from economic issues in the initial stage to political, social, and security issues (Wong, 2007). By adopting the reassurance model to reach a relative balance between the hegemonic power and neighbouring middle and small powers, China's strategy at this stage of its development significantly alleviated concerns among Southeast Asian countries about the “China threat.”

Although China would take a reassurance model-based approach to the existing hegemonic power and its peripheries so as to convince them of the country's peaceful rise, the surrounding countries – based on interest-maximisation calculations – still chose to employ hedging as their major strategy. This response was mainly demonstrated by the three great powers: Russia, Japan, and India. As discussed above, Sino-Russian relations were a typical illustration of how great powers co-operate with one another. More specifically, the Chinese government immediately recognised the new Russian government – creating a “non-confrontation, no alliance, no targeting of a

third country” partnership – and they also handled sensitive border disputes through political agreements.

Sino–Japanese relations, meanwhile, were a typical illustration of the hedging strategy. Although the Japanese government adopted a co-operative approach as a different way to address China’s international isolation, leading to smoother relations in terms of high-level visits, trade, and loans, the economic gap between Japan and China became increasingly apparent – encouraging Japan to turn towards a hedging strategy. During the mid-1990s, to contain the rapid rise of China, the Japanese government decided to strengthen security and military relations with the US by upgrading the US–Japan alliance. The redefinition of this alliance further complicated China’s own surrounding environment and increased the potential for the entrapment of it, Japan, and the US in a security dilemma in the East Asia region – thereby weakening co-operation between China and Japan in the early 1990s. Similarly, while China and India reached several agreements to peacefully resolve boundary disputes in the 1990s, New Delhi adopted a nuclear strategy to enable it to compete for power within the region. This helped maintain its hegemonic position on the South Asian subcontinent and led to it confronting the rise of China. By advocating the China threat theory, the Indian government legitimised its pursuit of nuclear weapons – which both undermined Sino–Indian relations and posed a security threat to the southern part of China.

Relying on previous discussions, we are able to assert that the covariation effect of these three variables drove China’s national interest from an internal orientation to a mixed orientation. This means that China’s national interest had to achieve a balance between domestic needs and external pressures. This accords with the definition of “constructive national interest.” More specifically, the logic of the formulation of constructive national interest is as follows: the emergence of a unipolar system and China’s rising power position within it were the two major systemic stimuli at this stage. While the collapse of the USSR opened up space for China to fill this power vacuum, the latter’s rise was first contained by the US because Washington wanted to prevent any potential challengers emerging so that it could maintain its hegemonic position as long as possible. Besides, China’s rising position also caused widespread anxiety and fear on its peripheries.

In the context of such systemic stimuli, China’s strategic choice transitioned from the co-operation to the reassurance model, seeking to pacify the neighbouring states; the co-operation model merely served the country’s internal affairs and failed to demonstrate China’s real intentions. By proactively engaging in the US-led liberal international order and participating in regional integration, the Chinese government tried to signal its benevolent intentions and to demonstrate that the country in its rise shared common interests with international society – rather than it challenging the existing order. Driven by the former two variables – China’s strategic choice and the response from surrounding states, the neighbouring countries did not form an anti-China alliance – helping China avoid the worst-case scenario. However, these countries – based on rational calculations – adopted a hedging strategy to maximise their own interests, which reinforced China’s mixed strategic orientation. To maintain the image of constructor, China was compelled to turn its defensive national interest into a constructive national interest and expand its scope from

the domestic level to the intra-regional one. Hereby it engaged with its own interests and shared its increasing dividends with others to demonstrate its benevolent intentions.

2011–2017: The Trend Towards Multipolarity and China’s Adversary Core Interest

The systemic stimulus in this third stage of development was the relative power transition between the US and China. In 2008–2009, the US suffered a twin loss of relative capability and strategic credibility owing to the global financial crisis, whereas China represented itself as a newly confident and strong great power by showing its responsible attitude in handling the negative impacts witnessed in the post-crisis period. According to Figures 5 and 6, China’s GDP doubled from USD 6.101 to 12.238 trillion between 2010 and 2017, reaching approximately 60 per cent of the US’s own GDP and formally inducing a power transition. China’s military expenditure grew from USD 115.712 to 228.231 billion between 2010 and 2017, reaching one-third of the US amount. This transition enabled China to fill the power vacuum in the Asia-Pacific region left by the US.

However, the relative power transition between the two great powers does not mean that the US has handed its hegemonic position to China. Rather, by reclaiming US global leadership in the report named *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (2012), the Obama administration presented a solid stance for protecting hegemony, resulting in increasing structural conflict between the US and China. The potential conflict caused by the US’s unshakable determination to maintain hegemony and China’s rising capability and expanding international influence has led some scholars to conclude that it is forcing the former to adopt a multifaceted approach to diplomacy so as to address the all-around rise of the latter (Friedberg, 2012).

The “rebalance strategy” proposed by the Obama administration was the first significant strategic reorientation towards the Asia-Pacific region since the end of the Cold War. Its purpose was to regain the hegemonic position in the region by reinforcing military alliances with the US’s partners and initiating a new round of military deployment (Blackwill and Tellis, 2014: 18–22). In line with the important speech “America’s Pacific Century” delivered by Hillary Clinton in 2011, we can summarise that Obama’s rebalance strategy mainly constituted political, security, and economic perspectives (Clinton, 2011). First, from the political perspective, the Obama administration paid more attention to “advanced diplomacy,” aiming at enhancing the US’s regional influence on China’s peripheral countries by sending there high-level officials, experts, and staff from transnational organisations. Hillary Clinton’s visit to Myanmar in 2011 was the most typical case of advanced diplomacy.

Second, from the security perspective, Washington strengthened security relations with traditional and non-traditional partners, attempting to upgrade alliances from bilateral to multilateral ones. For instance, by upgrading the US–Japan alliance that East Asian country was promoted to the second axis – constructing a multilateral strategic partnership with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Third, from the economic perspective, the USA launched the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), regarded as the top free

trade agreement in the twenty-first century – being designed to integrate the economic resources of the Asia-Pacific region into a US-led economic co-operation mechanism. More importantly, the TPP deliberately excluded China – indicating that Washington intended to isolate the rising power from regional economic integration and slow down its rapidly expanding regional influence.

Under this systemic stimulus, China had to maintain a strategy of reassurance towards its periphery. On the one hand, fear and anxiety were positively correlated with China's rising power status; on the other, the Chinese government needed to resolve the acute strategic pressure being generated by the US. This meant that China would be obliged to mix reassurance and balancing, rather than it choosing just one strategy. This mixed strategy is hedging. The balancing conducted by the Chinese government is mainly illustrated in its strategic reaction to the US's containment, which includes two major aspects: quasi-alliances and institution balancing. In terms of the first, Sino-Russian relations were growing closer under increasing pressure from the US's rebalancing strategy. More specifically, Sino-Russian relations were first upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2011; then, Xi and Russian president Vladimir Putin agreed to define relations between the two great powers as a new stage in their comprehensive strategic partnership, in 2014. Thereafter, confronting simultaneous strategic pressure exerted by the US's allies in the Asia-Pacific region and by the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, these two great powers endorsed a declaration on global strategic stability that was widely seen as a quasi-alliance between China and Russia (Liu and Liu, 2017).

Institution balancing mainly concerns the competition between the US-led TPP and the China-led "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership" (RCEP) (Ye, 2015). Balancing is focused on the exclusiveness of the two institutions. First, the leaders of the TPP and RCEP are mutually exclusive. Second, the members of the two international institutions are also exclusive of each other. Specifically, five states in the TPP are non-RCEP members; similarly, nine states in the RCEP are non-TPP members (Li, 2016: 188). Such exclusiveness between the two international institutions reflects the balancing and competition in contemporary Sino-US relations, leading scholars to worry that the RCEP and TPP might split the Asia-Pacific economic system.

Additionally, strategic reassurance is the other approach adopted by the Chinese government in demonstrating its benevolent intentions. This is mainly seen in three major initiatives: constructing a new type of great power relationship within and beyond the Asia-Pacific region, promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and reshaping relations with neighbours. Other than emphasising the new type of relationship with the US, the Chinese government pays equal attention to the other major powers within its region – including Russia, Japan, and India. The three levels of relations concluded, ranked from low to high, are "non-conflict and non-confrontation," "mutual respect," and "win-win cooperation" (Zeng and Breslin, 2016). More specifically, Sino-Russian relations have attained the highest level, win-win co-operation, while Sino-Japanese relations have merely maintained the status of non-conflict and non-confrontation. Sino-Indian relations fall in-between those with Russia and Japan.

The BRI is China's most direct way of showing its willingness to provide reassurance. In the north, based on the two countries' all-weather strategic partnership, China and Russia have expanded the functions of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to help firmly establish the regional economic co-operation mechanism, paving the way for a Sino-Russian-Mongolian economic corridor. In the west, the founding of the China-Pakistan economic corridor has become the main impetus for BRI's westward movement. In the southeast, President Xi has proposed a new good neighbour diplomacy policy whereby China pursues amity, sincerity, mutual benefits, and inclusiveness – with a commitment to advancing peace, stability, and development in the Asia-Pacific region (Wu, 2016). For instance, both President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang visited the countries to China's southeast in 2013, signalling a clear message that it would continue to use its diplomatic, economic, and security resources to provide reassurance to those countries who do not openly balance against its rise. In addition, to relieve the tension caused by the maritime disputes between China and these countries, the government intentionally facilitated a new formula called the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea" as a fundamental principle for dealing with these territorial disputes.

Although the Chinese government has maintained its strategic flexibility in dealing with the US's rebalancing strategy, the balancing responses of neighbouring states may largely undermine China's efforts at reassurance. China's utilisation of the balancing policy is mainly because most major state actors in the Asia-Pacific region are bandwagoning or have informal security relations (e.g. Vietnam) with the US. They also thought that the rise of China imposed a great security pressure on them, which explains why these countries actively and positively responded to Obama's rebalancing strategy (Cha, 2016: 24–28; Ross, 2006).

More specifically, in the Yellow Sea (Northeast Asia), the foreign policy flip-flopping of South Korea vividly illustrates its bandwagoning with the US. While Sino-South Korean relations entered a honeymoon period during Park Geun-hye's administration, South Korea immediately altered its foreign policy orientation – accepting the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system provided by the US – when the new round of the Korean nuclear crisis broke out. From the Chinese point of view, South Korea's acceptance of THAAD weakened its own strategic deterrence and was also a way of strengthening Washington's overall efforts to counterbalance or contain China (Swaine, 2017). In the East China Sea, intentional balancing can be seen in Japanese foreign behaviour. For example, the pursuit of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2012 first led Sino-Japanese relations into a downward spiral, reaching a historic freezing point. Thereafter, the US and Japan upgraded their security alliance by way of publishing a new version of the "US-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines" in 2015, expanding the scope of the US-Japan alliance from Japan's main island to the global context so as to restrict China's growing regional influence.

In the South China Sea, Vietnam's strategic response to the rise of China in recent years has been "bidirectional balance." On the one hand, the Vietnamese government maintains close and friendly party relations with the CCP, which is useful for preserving its political legitimacy at the domestic level and for deepening economic relations with China at the state one. On the other, due to geopolitical proximity, the rapid resurgence

of China has imposed great security pressure on Vietnam – leading that government to seek security support from the US. By connecting militarily with the hegemonic power, Vietnam has been able to adopt a more assertive posture in its maritime disputes with China and to maintain the existing political landscape in the South China Sea (Liu and Sun, 2015).

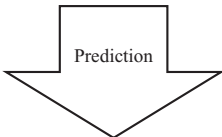
Relying on the above discussion, we find that under the covariation of the three variables, China's national interest has demonstrated strong external orientation. This has required the Chinese government to resist containment from the hegemonic power and to avoid the formation of an anti-China alliance. This attribute of China's national interest is consistent with the definition of "adversary core interest." More specifically, the logic of the formulation of adversary core interest is as follows: although the relative power transition first happened during the 2008–2009 financial crisis, which helped China to increase its regional influence, the US began to strengthen its containment strategy vis-à-vis China. Under this systemic stimulus, the Chinese government has accordingly shifted its strategy from a reassurance to a hedging model, attempting to alleviate a paradoxical situation with a more flexible mix of reassurance and balancing. At the level of balancing, China has used the Sino–Russian quasi-alliance as a strategic basis and manipulated the institutions of the international political economy (TPP versus RCEP) as a means of pushing back against the US's rebalancing strategy. At the level of reassurance, by constructing a new type of relationship with other major powers, implementing the BRI's initiative, and reshaping its good neighbour diplomacy, the Chinese government has sought to reduce its periphery's incentive to balance against the country.

However, alliances and increasing uncertainties drove China's neighbouring countries to follow the US's lead – with them joining the rebalancing strategy and with several territorial conflicts with China being triggered. These balancing behaviours not only weakened the efficacy of China's reassurance efforts but also compelled the Chinese government to adopt assertive actions to protect its territorial integrity. The systemic stimuli and the strategic interactions between China and its neighbouring countries resulted in an increasing adversary core interest in China's national interest and led to it transforming into the national core interest. Given the increasing US–China power competition within the international system, the scope of adversary core interest may be no more than intra-regional – but will still expand to the inter-regional level.

Conclusion

Although this article has viewed the international power structure as still the most important explanatory variable, the structural realist presumption – which largely ignores the impact of the strategic reactions of great powers to the international power structure – is too rigid. This rigidity leads structural realism to identify only a one-way pattern in its analyses of foreign policy. In this regard, structural realism may not provide a convincing explanation of the transition in China's national interest. Relying on theoretical revisions to neoclassical realism, this article defines the international power structure as the independent variable and adds two intervening variables – China's strategic choices and the responses of neighbouring states – at the interstate level to construct an analytical

Table 1. The prediction of the established analytical framework.

	International power structure	China's strategic choice	Response from neighbouring states	The transition of China's national interest	The changing scope of China's national interest
Bipolar system	US–China–USSR strategic triangle	Developmental diplomacy	Accommodation	Defensive national interest	Domestic level
Unipolar system	International isolation and the early stage of China's rise	Strategic reassurance	Hedging	Constructive national interest	Intra-regional level
The trend of multipolar system	China's all-around rise and America's rebalancing strategy	Mixture of co-operation and balancing	Alliance or balance	Adversary core interest	Inter-regional level
					
Multipolar system or return to bipolar system	Continuing strategic pressure from US and allies	Abandoning the traditional non-allied strategy	Balance or bandwagoning	Alliance common interest	Intra-alliance level

Note: USSR = Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Source: Author's own compilation.

framework that is used to examine that transition in China's national interest. More importantly, the impact of the power structure on a state's foreign policy per this analytical framework is not merely one-way, but is rather bidirectional and reactive. In other words, the transition in China's national interest is a strategic reaction to changes in the international power structure. In this vein, this neoclassical realism-based analytical framework can be replicated in future studies.

The transition in China's national interest has undergone three stages since the beginning of the 1980s: defensive national interest, constructive national interest, and adversary core interest. Influenced by the differing systemic stimuli, China's strategic choices, the responses of neighbouring states, as well as the scope of China's national interest have all accordingly expanded from the domestic to the intra-regional and inter-regional levels (see Figure 7).

It is worth mentioning that adversary core interest does not mean that China actively seeks to counter the existing hegemon; rather, it is a passive redefinition of the national

interest, an adaptation to changes in the international power structure. In other words, while China might not have confrontational intentions, the narrowing gap between the dominant states' capabilities leads the US to seek to contain China's rise – forcing that government to fix different types of national interest as a strategic response. In particular, “adversarial” does not imply offensiveness or aggressiveness in foreign behaviour. In contrast, such an adversarial stance is a passive reaction to US containment.

If we use this analytical framework to predict the future development of China's national interest, several observations follow: growing containment pressure from the US may lead the Chinese government to abandon the non-alliance principle, such that states in the Asia-Pacific region will align with either China or the US (see Table 1). Accordingly, adversary core interest may be transformed into alliances based on common interests. Taking Sino–Russian relations as an example, the tenor of them largely depends on the strategic pressure that the US exerts. In other words, if the extent of it goes beyond China's limit, then the latter may discard with the conventional foreign policy of non-alliance and upgrade the Sino–Russian quasi-alliance to a formal one. This strategic transition may drive neighbouring states to choose between China–Russia and the US.

Overall, given China's and Russia's powerful impact on international politics, the US might not ultimately impose too much pressure on China – thereby keeping Sino–Russian relations in a state of quasi-alliance. More importantly, to save on strategic costs, Washington might seek to contain China by acting as an offshore balancer and by passing the buck on its strategic obligations to its allies in the Asia-Pacific region. This strategy is highly possible, particularly since Donald Trump came to power in 2017. Therefore, China's adversary core interest may last for a while yet before the Trump administration increases strategic pressure on it and Russia.

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