A Different Approach on Analyzing Countries' Grand Strategies: China and the United States

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the grand strategies of two leaders in a more rigorous manner by using a comprehensive and well-established role theoretic framework. It is argued that role theory offers a theoretical foundation for comprehending the structure of grand strategy through the lens of roles, enabling the measurement of changes in its composition over time. This framework provides a comprehensive response to the persistent problems and challenges highlighted by scholars in the field of grand strategy, as well as the enduring issues present within the existing literature. The absence of role contestation within the inner circle of government lends grand strategies their characteristic longevity. This article contends that this framework can also serve as a robust metric for understanding grand strategies in the most rigorous manner possible. Consequently, roles facilitate the differentiation of long-term policies from short-term policies by deciphering the horizontal role contestation process. This approach thus resolves outstanding theoretical and measurement issues within the field of grand strategy analysis. This study will employ a sample of two countries—China, and the United States—chosen for their distinct regime types and extensive scholarly attention in the field of grand strategy.

Keywords: Security, Foreign Policy Behavior, Role Theory, Elite Discourse, Strategic Culture

Introduction

The study of grand strategy maintains an enduring appeal and relevance in the face of profound geographical transformations. Scholars and strategists alike recognize its necessity, engaging in a prolific production of books, articles, and editorials that scrutinize the foreign and security policies of various administrations. Their aim is to discern overarching patterns indicative of higher strategic thinking and coherency. For policymakers, the grand strategy assumes a pivotal role in shaping a nation's international position, aligning means and ends, and providing a guiding framework for discrete foreign policy decisions. Therefore, every crisis or policy initiative prompts extensive introspection regarding its implications for a nation's capacity to craft and execute a grand strategy.

The literature on grand strategy is characterized by its dynamism and voluminous nature. The predominant focus of debates lies in the examination of specific grand strategies,

including their presence, substance, and utility. However, despite its significance, the proliferation of academic and policy-analytical works on grand strategy has yielded a fragmented field, characterized by conceptual inconsistencies and challenges in navigation. Moreover, fundamental questions that underpin the study of grand strategy remain unresolved. Consensus is lacking on foundational matters such as a shared definition of grand strategy, the appropriate methodologies for its study, the selection of suitable comparative cases, and the fundamental purpose of research (explanatory or prescriptive).

Many studies of grand strategy also rely heavily on qualitative case study analyses (Summers 1982; Layne 1997; Paine 2017). Given the unique circumstances surrounding each case, achieving generalizability and parsimonious research designs has proven arduous. Furthermore, despite the various interpretations of measuring grand strategies and categorizing a state's overarching goals into distinct domains, several significant questions have remained unanswered throughout this process. These inquiries include the mechanisms underlying grand strategy formation and the establishment of a more rigorous categorization framework for different regime types.

Given the significance of understanding the grand strategies of nations, this article aims to address these questions by further advancing the foundational role-theoretic framework proposed in my previous work (Demirduzen and Thies 2022). It extends its application and tests its robustness across different geopolitical contexts. By applying this framework to a new set of case studies, this paper not only reaffirms the utility of role theory in analyzing grand strategies but also expands its methodological and empirical scope by adding a novel metric (normalized similarity). This dual contribution not only deepens the theoretical understanding of grand strategy but also enhances the practical tools available for international relations scholars. Building on the insights from Houghton (2007), who advocates for the integration of social constructivism to provide a robust foundation for revitalizing Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), this study adopts a cognitive psychological perspective on foreign policy. The aim of this article is to underscore the necessity, as emphasized by Houghton (2007), for FPA to engage with pivotal debates within International Relations (IR) theory, underscoring the crucial integration of role theory into grand strategy discussions to enhance theoretical depth and sustain FPA's relevance and impact in the broader IR field.

The potential utility of role theory analysis for understanding grand strategies is threefold: (1) it offers the prospect of elucidating the intensity and significance of grand strategies, (2) it facilitates an understanding of the temporal and spatial dimensions of change in grand strategies, encompassing both transformative and stabilizing forces. (3) it enables the differentiation of grand strategies from short-term policies and the grand strategies of other nations, contributing to their categorization. These possibilities constitute a very significant step in the evolution of research and theory, particularly with regard to identifying the formation process in grand strategies in different regime types and conducting comparative analyses across countries.

Role theory is also particularly more powerful as an analytical and methodological tool when compared to other at-a-distance assessment tools in identifying countries' grand

strategies. First, role theory holds the potential to bridge the gap between the fields of FPA and IR facilitating effective communication and coordination of research efforts differentiating it from other tools of analysis (Thies and Breuning 2012). It also links different levels of analysis by incorporating systemic change the domestic political processes of a state in explaining a state's foreign policy (Thies 2013).

In that sense, although alternative other at-a-distance leadership assessment tools may be equally or more effective in comprehending the implementation of grand strategies, role theory proves particularly potent, especially when identifying specific aspects of these grand strategies. This strength derives not only from its robust linkage with leaders' perceptions of their countries' roles and grand strategies but also from its capability to address some of the significant challenges inherent in grand strategies.

This article employs a sample of two countries between—China, and the United States (US)—chosen for their distinct regime types and extensive scholarly attention in the field of grand strategy to test the robustness of this methodology. This study analyzes leaders' speeches to analyze the ruling group and the opposition within each country between 2013-2018. Five students are recruited to conduct the coding analysis for this research, resulting in the coding of approximately 1,100 speeches.[1] A similarity metric, as a contribution to my previous work (Demirduzen and Thies 2022), is utilized to compare these two groups, aiming to assess the level of contestation present in a more rigorous manner. Inter-coder reliability measures are implemented to ensure consistency and agreement between the coders.

This article is structured into four sections. First section provides a brief overview of grand strategy and the grand strategies of China, and the US. The second section introduces the role theory in foreign policy and briefly introduces the framework (Demirduzen and Thies 2022). The third section outlines the methodology employed in this study and the additional contribution made by this paper. The following chapter provides the obtained results and the primary findings regarding the evolution of the grand strategy of these two leaders.

Grand Strategies of China and the US

Grand Strategy encompasses a wide range of variables and behaviors that unfold over an extended period. Hence, it offers valuable insights not only into a country's ultimate objectives in its foreign policy (aim/end) but also into how it aims to achieve them. Understanding grand strategies, therefore, holds the utmost importance for policymakers due to their benefits in terms of purpose, scope, and time horizon. However, despite their significance, numerous unanswered questions and challenges persist in the field.

Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich (2019a) emphasize that disagreements persist on three critical and interconnected issues within the field. Firstly, there is an ongoing debate over the

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definition of grand strategy and its appropriate application in different contexts. The concept itself is intricate and multifaceted, with ongoing contested discussions within the existing literature regarding its fundamental constituents. Definitions vary, ranging from classical approaches derived from historical research to more liberal perspectives that emphasize the significance of institutional building (Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich 2019b; Balzacq and Krebs 2021). Silove (2018) states that scholars have proposed three distinct definitions, while some studies incorporate a combination of these competing definitions.

For instance, Brands (2014) defines grand strategy as a consistent pattern of behavior with a purpose over time, where leaders might consciously or unconsciously adhere to their strategic plans, acknowledging behavior patterns that display both iterative and unique traits. On the other hand, scholars such as Brooks (2015) and Hart (1991) describe grand strategy as a detailed and deliberate plan crafted by individuals, with Hart emphasizing that grand strategy, coordinated at the highest levels of state governance, necessitates the allocation of resources for warfare and inherently serves a strategic purpose. Another group of scholars perceives grand strategy as an organizing principle consciously held and utilized by individuals to guide their decisions (Silove 2018). They conceptualize grand strategy as a detailed and consistent pattern of behavior over time. Additionally, grand strategy can also refer to a pattern in state behavior (Silove 2018).

Historically, the definition of grand strategy has been primarily shaped by two perspectives: Kennedy's (1991) broad interpretation and Posen's (1996) theoretical approach. While Posen (1996) regarded grand strategy as a theory, Kennedy (1991) argued that grand strategies were concerned with peace as much as with war. According to Kennedy (1991) as well as Murray, Sinnreich and Lacey (2011), the grand strategy involves the alignment of means with ends, where national leaders bring together all military or non-military elements to enhance that nation's long-term best interests.

They further emphasized the strategic alignment between policy and grand strategy. Hence, the relationship between the "policy" and "grand strategy" changed when they argued that policy was meant to serve grand strategy; not the other way around as their predecessors argued (Balzacq and Krebs 2021). Prevailing scholarship as well aptly recognizes that the magnitude of grand strategies does not derive from the sheer number of policies they encompass, but rather from their enduring nature and unified purpose that leverages all available state resources towards a specific objective. Lord (2019) claims that the absence of an overarching strategy renders one a prisoner of events, highlighting the significance of strategic orientation in contrast to tactics or policies.

Furthermore, Layton (2012) cautions against confusing the overlapping yet distinct concepts of grand strategy and strategy. He argues for recognizing grand strategy's broader and future-oriented scope, aimed at shaping the global landscape. This differentiation carries significant implications as the two concepts possess fundamental differences. Early works, such as "Grand Strategy" by Sargeaunt and West (1942) and "Strategy" by Hart (1991), rooted in

Sun Tzu's ideas (500 BC/1963), clearly differentiate the two. Strategy operates at the level of campaigns, encompassing planning, resource allocation, and maneuvering. In contrast, grand strategy transcends the realm of campaigns, encompassing policy and planning at the highest echelons, including diplomacy and national alliances. It is posited that strategic decisions made in public relations to execute an organization's grand strategies must align with predetermined goals and remain within specified parameters. I similarly argue that not all decisions made by an administration necessarily contribute to a broader end, such as a grand strategy (Demirduzen and Thies 2022). To gain a deeper understanding of a state's grand strategy and its evolution, it is imperative to distinguish short-term policies from long-term objectives. A consensus within the leadership is crucial for pursuing a grand strategy, and policies or strategies lacking such consensus cannot be interpreted as contributing to a consensus-based grand strategy. This article adopts the definition provided by Demirduzen and Thies (2022), which characterizes a grand strategy as a long-term, consistent approach that is less contested by state elites, distinct from a regular strategy, and incorporates both military and non-military elements.

The second disagreement in the grand strategy literature that Balzacq, Dombrowski and Reich (2019a) argue is that scholars grapple with determining the most effective use of methods such as single case studies, comparative analysis, or other approaches to advance our understanding of the processes and outcomes of grand strategies. The final disagreement is about the considerations that surround the costs and benefits associated with prioritizing prescription over explanation in the study and application of the grand strategy. Overall, the field of grand strategy is marked by both its importance and the persistent need for further theoretical and methodological advancements. This study primarily aims to address these last two challenges by contributing to the role theoretical framework of Demirduzen and Thies (2022) with its novel methodological metric of normalized similarity.

Silove (2018) also adds whether grand strategy is exclusive to great powers, how it undergoes change, and whether it even exists as a constant or flexible concept. This focus on exclusivity to great powers has led to a concentration of grand strategy studies on two primary great powers: China, and the US. While the historically predominant focus of grand strategy literature resides in studies about the US, the discourse surrounding China's grand strategy has become a subject of intense debate especially in the recent years. This debate is further exacerbated by the purported escalation of assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy behavior. Methodologically and conceptually diverse, these studies diverge not only in approach but also in their interpretations of the essence and origins of China's grand strategy.

Scholars such as Joseph Nye (2010) and Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) have discussed the concept of US dominance in the face of a rising China, employing the framework provided by the grand strategy literature. When we investigate the US' grand strategy, Posen and Ross (1996) and Barry and Ross (1996: 5) identify four competing grand strategies for the US: neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security and primacy. These strategies are anchored in various analytical frameworks, including minimal/defensive realism, traditional balance of power realism, liberalism, and maximal realism/unilateralism, respectively (Brooks

Wohlforth 1999). Additionally, Waltz and Mearsheimer (2016) have explored the notion of offshore balancing as a component of US grand strategy. These studies contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the grand strategies pursued by these countries and provide valuable insights into their foreign policy orientations and approaches to global power dynamics.

The actual composition of these two countries' grand strategies is frequently debated as well. For instance, Braumoeller (2010) indicates that the isolationist grand strategy of US is not really isolationist where it is not possible to see absolutely "isolationist" states in the international system anymore. Another example can be given from China. The debate mainly revolved on the nature and source of China's grand strategy where scholars are divided between the peaceful (status-co power/role taker) (Swaine and Tellis 2000; Di 2007:7; Zhang 2015).and assertive rhetoric/strategies (revisionist power/role-maker) (Yan 2014) of China (Danner 2018: 30). Drawing upon Danner's (2018) seminal work, it is posited that China's grand strategy exhibits a pronounced incoherence, stemming from a discernible conflict between ostensibly peaceful and assertive rhetoric and strategies. There are also debates about the main components of China's grand strategy. While some scholars argue that this grand strategy mostly depends on the expansion of its developing markets (Araya 2019), some argue that it is composed of economic development with a peaceful regional and international environment (Feiteng 2018). Some others indicate that China will open more to the outside world and pursue further integration (Chen 2017) and involve smart power to balance US (Wang 2016).

Yıldız (2023) also explores the complex interplay between China's rise and key domestic issues within Russia and Turkey, predicting potential shifts in their policies such as the prolongation of Putin's Ukraine campaign and significant influences on Turkey's approach to the Kurdish issue. Integrating these insights helps to elucidate the multifaceted nature of grand strategies, where major powers like China engage in behaviors that are both cooperative and competitive, shaping and reshaping the strategic landscape in accordance with their evolving national interests and international pressures. In exploring the intricacies of grand strategies within international relations, the work of Gafarli and Raknifard (2023) provides a compelling examination of Turkey's pursuit of strategic autonomy over the past two decades.

Role Theoretical Framework

Understanding the way states perceive themselves in the international community, and their expectations towards one another can provide valuable insight in predicting states' foreign policy decisions. Role theory is a significant tool that can do that. It is not a single theory but more of a research program that includes various theories and perspectives emphasizing the significance of the concept of role in social life (He and Walker 2015; Brummer and Thies 2015; Altiparmak and Thies 2024; Thiers 2025) and used for decades by social psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists (Holsti 1970; Walker 1987; Grossman 2005; Thies 2010;

Walker and Schafer 2010; Breuning 2011; Harnisch 2011; Chen 2017) to understand the behavior of individuals (Biddle and Thomas 1966; Le 1997; Grossman 2005). Many foreign policy scholars used it to understand and better interpret state behavior and foreign policy (Northrup 1989; Chafetz, Abramson, and Grillot 1996) . It begins with the basic assumption that states behave consistently with specific roles with which they identify just like individuals would (Breuning 2003; Elgstrom and Smith 2006; Thies 2010; Harnisch 2012).

It has descriptive, organizational, and explanatory value (Walker 1987) and has been used to tackle some of the significant problems of international relations such as connecting agents and structures in IR or social interaction among actors in an anarchic international system (Wendt 1999, Thies and Breuning 2012, Michalski and Nilsson 2019). According to Holsti (1970), the role of an actor is affected by "Policy-makers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their state and of the functions if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate systems" (national role conceptions), society's demands (alter's role prescriptions or role expectations), and "the particular context in which the role is being acted out" (Chafetz, Abramson and Grillot 1996).

While role theorists have also assumed a consensus among elites regarding national role conceptions (NRCs), recent scholarship, such as Kaarbo and Cantir's (2012) work, has emphasized the significance of domestic sources of NRCs by bridging the gap between FPA and IR. Kaarbo and Cantir (2012) assert that roles are not homogeneous. They are contested both vertically, between elites and masses, and horizontally, among elites. This approach quickly became part of foreign policy role theory (Thies and Breuning 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016; Jones 2017) and produced plenty of studies (Ozdamar 2016; Breuning 2017; McCourt 2020; Breuning and Pechenina 2020; Friedrichs 2021) but still fewer studies analyzed the connection between role contestation and grand strategies (Walker 2016; Demirduzen and Thies 2022).

By using Cantir and Kaarbo's (2016) concept, in our previous work, we draw similarities between grand strategies and roles and argued that roles can be used to understand the ingredients of grand strategies (Demirduzen and Thies 2022). In contrast to the prevailing literature on grand strategy, we also put forth the argument that grand strategies consist of multiple components or roles, rather than being singular in nature (Demirduzen and Thies 2022). This perspective aligns with the theoretical framework of role theory, which posits the existence of various roles and their influence on decision-making processes. Another advantage of using role theoretical framework is that it is not just applicable to great powers. It could also be applied beyond that to middle powers or regional powers as well. It does not restrict itself to the assumption that only great powers can have grand strategies, nor does it assume that every middle power or regional power has a grand strategy. However, every country has role conceptions. What helps us understand whether they have a grand strategy or not is their long-term role contestation level.

I argue that role contestation as a concept should be valuable in understanding the adoption of grand strategies. I have identified national role conceptions advocated by leaders (establishment/ruling group) and political factions of China (opposition) and compared them to detect the horizontal role contestation between their favored foreign policy roles in their framework. I further posit that elite consensus is a prerequisite for the durability or existence of a grand strategy. Therefore, uncontested or less contested roles as essential components of a grand strategy provide valuable insights into the grand strategies of nations. Contested roles are indicative of short-term policy decisions, which are not independent of the current leader or ruling party (Demirduzen and Thies 2022). These "short-term policies" tend to dissipate when the ruling party leaves office or even within the tenure of that party or leader. To determine the level of contestation, they examine the average role contestation over three consecutive terms. If the average horizontal contestation of a single role is below the average horizontal contestation across all roles for three consecutive terms, they argue that this role is part of a grand strategy. Conversely, if the average horizontal contestation of a single role is above the average horizontal contestation across all roles for three consecutive terms, they argue that it indicates a short-term foreign policy.

This article further develops this role theoretical framework put forth by Demirduzen and Thies (2022). I also concur that the absence of contestation within the inner circle engenders the requisite longevity characteristic of grand strategies. But instead of employing the average horizontal role contestation metric, I use the average normalized similarity metric to assess contestation levels.

Let us define the percentage value of a role "i" for person "p" and year "n":

Normalized similarity measure for two groups (g1 and g2) on this role can be formulated as;

$$sim_{ri}(g_1, g_2, n) = \begin{cases} \left(1 - \dfrac{|r_i(g_1, n) - r_i(g_2, n)|}{r_i(g_1, n) + r_i(g_2, n)}\right), & if\, r_i(g_1, n) + r_i(g_2, n) > 0 \\ 0, & otherwise \end{cases}$$

The result will be 0, if otherwise. Then, the average of the similarity metric over the years (from n1 to n2) can be used as a metric to estimate the existence of a grand strategy.

$$M_{sim_{ri}} = \frac{1}{n_2 - n_1 + 1} \sum_{n=n_1}^{n_2} sim_{r1}(g_1, g_2, n)$$

In this study, a threshold of 50% is used for the normalized average similarity metric to determine the inclusion of a role within a grand strategy or its association with a short-term foreign policy. If the normalized average similarity metric for a single role exceeds 50%, it indicates significant consensus over that role, suggesting its potential involvement in a grand strategy. Conversely, if there is high contestation observed for a role, it may signify its alignment with a short-term foreign policy approach.

The method I use provides the similarity of the ratios for the roles discussed for the opposition and the leader over the years. Indeed, the utilization of the average normalized similarity measure as a method of measurement offers several advantages in identifying the points of change in a grand strategy without being restricted by specific time frames and it serves several important purposes. Firstly, normalization allows for a standardized comparison across different roles and time periods. By normalizing the similarity metric, you can establish a common scale that enables meaningful comparisons of contestation levels between roles, regardless of their inherent differences or variations in data availability. Secondly, the average normalized similarity metric provides a comprehensive overview of the overall contestation level for each role. It considers the variation in contestation levels across different years and leaders, providing a more representative measure of the role's prominence or consistency within the grand strategy. It also allows for a systematic and quantifiable analysis of contestation levels. It provides a clear and measurable indicator of the extent to which a particular role is contested or uncontested, facilitating the identification of patterns and changes in the grand strategy over time.

By employing this method, the analysis can identify shifts and changes in the contestation levels of different roles over time, regardless of the temporal boundaries. This allows for a more flexible approach to capturing the evolution of grand strategies, as it is not constrained by predetermined time intervals or fixed durations. By avoiding the limitation of time-space, this method allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the evolution of grand strategies, capturing both gradual shifts and sudden changes in role contestation and enhances the ability to identify critical junctures and turning points that shape a country's strategic trajectory, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of grand strategy development.

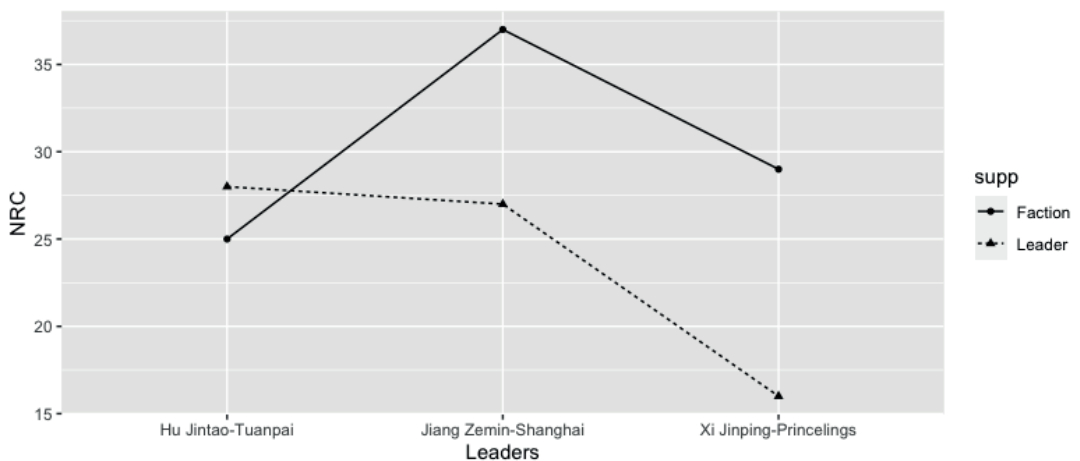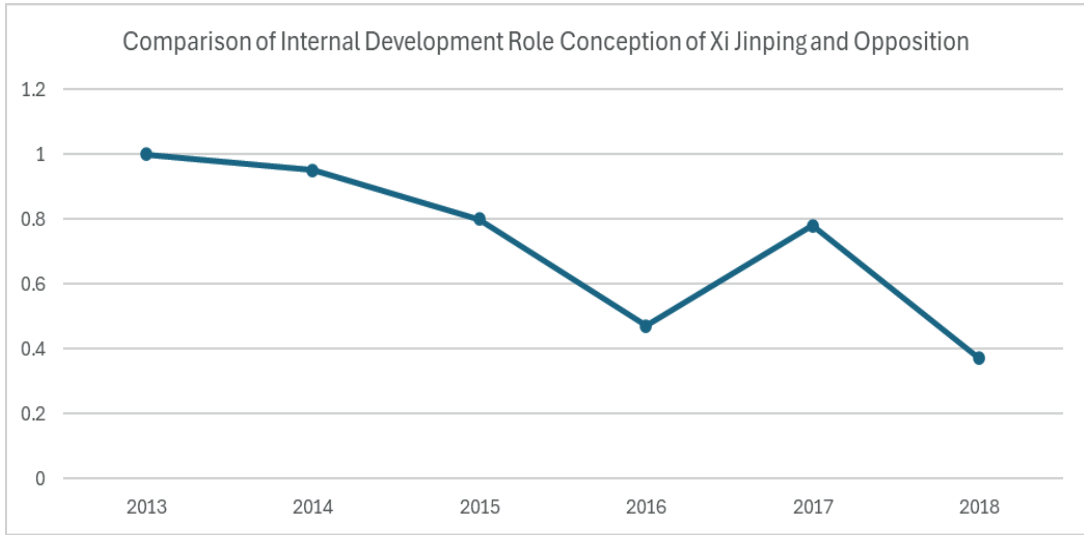**Figure 1.** Data from Demirduzen and Thies (2022)

Figure 2. Data from the current Study

The previous method, depicted in Figure 1 from Demirduzen and Thies (2022), illustrates the role changes of two leaders over time. Conversely, Figure 2 displays data from this paper specifically related to the President of China, Xi Jinping. The primary rationale for this selection is that the normalized similarity metric offers a more granular analysis, leading to more insightful and detailed results. The other method is more practical to use, not time-consuming, and more suitable for broad comparisons or capturing changes in grand strategies over a longer period. The comparison of two methods can be seen in Figure 1.

Data and Method

This paper aims to conduct an analysis of two distinct forms of horizontal role contestation, involving the presence of two distinct groups. Firstly, it will investigate the phenomenon of horizontal role contestation occurring between a leader and the followers within their own faction. Notable examples of this contestation can be observed in the president and the significant members of the ruling party in the US. Secondly, the paper will also examine horizontal role contestation between a leader and the opposition. Illustrative instances of this contestation include the leader and opposing factions in China, the president and the significant members of the opposition party in the US.

The primary focus of this study will be on the latter type of horizontal role contestation, as it is believed to enhance our understanding of a country's overarching grand strategy. However, I believe it is essential to examine the first type of contestation as well to gain a comprehensive understanding of the level of compromise regarding the components of these grand strategies and to facilitate the interpretation of the processes underlying strategic changes.

Latent content analysis, which is a method used in qualitative research to identify underlying meanings or themes that are not explicitly stated in the text, is used for this article to analyze leaders' opposition and factions' speeches. However, it is used with a manifest coding sheet to make categorization and counting visible. This type of analysis is particularly useful in studies where understanding the deeper psychological sociocultural dimensions of communication, such as political speeches, is and allows us to uncover the less obvious, hidden meanings.

Official transcripts of foreign policy speeches are served as the primary source material.[2] Approximately 20 speeches per year are coded for both the establishment and the opposition, each consists of 5 to 10 pages on average. Systematic sampling is utilized for each consecutive year for the leaders through selecting speeches from an ordered sampling frame containing a random starting point and continuing a fixed periodic interval. Purposive sampling frame is utilized for the opposition or factions due to limited data. Three main variables that are assumed to have been attributed to a certain role—words, proverbs, and themes—are coded for each speech. In total, approximately 3,000 speeches are coded for both country cases. The coding sheet comprises three main sections: frequency, space, and intensity. The frequency measures the density and occurrence of attributed roles, represented as the percentage of each role attributed by the establishment or opposition within a speech. Intensity assesses the strength of a role on a scale from 1 to 5. Finally, space creates a mentions-per-paragraph statistic for each article, capturing the prominence of roles (see appendix Figure 1).

The speeches examined are limited to foreign policy speeches and the audience are the international officials, countries and institutions. To prevent source bias, a variety of sources are used in collecting the speeches such as official speeches from official websites, policy briefings, interviews, international conferences, summits and press briefings. For the US case study, I also gathered transcripts from both the White House archives, and Congressional archives.

This study has encountered several other research limitations. One of these limitations pertains to the labor-intensive nature of manually coding the roles, which may leave it susceptible to criticism from scholars. To mitigate this potential issue and enhance the research's validity, I took measures to ensure inter-coder reliability. Hence in addition to personal coding, five other coders were recruited with research funding from the Arizona State University to ensure inter-coder reliability (approx. 83%). The inter-coder reliability is ensured by having multiple coders analyze the same set of speeches and then comparing the consistency of their coding. An average similarity score is calculated to quantify the level of agreement among the coders. Approximately 10 speeches are selected for each politician. Each speech is between 3-7 pages long each consisting of an average of 3,000 words.

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2   To access the data, please see Kilic, Cagla. 2025. A Different Approach on Analyzing Countries' Grand Strategies: China and the United States at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OJGTKE.

The reason why these two countries have been selected as the primary cases is because they have been extensively studied in the field of grand strategy, with a particular emphasis on the US, which has been a subject of frequent analysis (Posen 1996). Professionally translated documents in English are utilized as primary sources since using a unified language (professionally translated) when coding the speeches for both of these countries will enhance coherence in coding and facilitate effective comparisons.

Average normalized similarity metric, as explained in the theory section has been used to gauge the contestation level between the leaders and the opposition. On average, 10-20 roles that are relevant to the analysis have been identified for each country. These roles encompass various aspects of the countries' foreign policy and strategic orientation.

Finally, one concern regarding this framework could be the question of whether a high level of contestation over an extended period can lead to stability. Regarding the calculation of the average contestation level, as the number of data points (years) increases, the changes or deviations in the average contestation rate for future years are expected to decrease. This suggests that the average contestation level becomes a more stable and representative measure of contestation for a given period. Moreover, as the country's overall future vision or average contestation level may naturally evolve over time, this would not impact the current study, as the focus is on assessing the contestation levels relative to the average of their respective time periods. The detailed summary of key political figures examined for the opposition in all two countries are listed in Table 1. The table specifically focusses on their roles within the political opposition or their relevance in political dynamics at various times. For the US, figures like John Boehner, Tom Cotton, and Ted Cruz are listed, indicating their leadership roles or prominence as critics during specific periods. In China, political personalities such as Li Keqiang, Qian YunLu, and Wang Yang are mentioned.

Table 1. Coded Opposition Leaders and Groups for Each Country

China	US
Li Keqiang: Current Premier of the People's Republic of China. Known for his economic policies and efforts to reform and open up China's economy.	John Boehner: As Speaker of the House until October 2015, Boehner led the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and was a prominent critic of Obama's policies on healthcare, immigration, and budgetary matters.
Qian Yunlu: Former governor of Heilongjiang Province and held various other significant positions within the CPC.	Paul Ryan: Succeeded Boehner as Speaker of the House in October 2015. Ryan, a former Vice Presidential candidate, was a vocal opponent of Obama's fiscal policies and played a significant role in Republican efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act.
Liu Qibao: Former head of the CPC Propaganda Department and a member of the Politburo. Known for his role in media and ideological work.	Mitch McConnell: As Senate Minority Leader until 2015 and then Senate Majority Leader, McConnell was a central figure in opposing Obama's legislative agenda, particularly on judicial appointments and healthcare.
Zhang Baoshun: Former Party Secretary of Anhui Province and held other significant roles within the CPC.	Ted Cruz: A Senator from Texas known for his staunch conservative views and opposition to many of Obama's policies. Cruz played a key role in the 2013 government shutdown, which was aimed at defunding the Affordable Care Act.
Ling Jihua: Former director of the General Office of the Communist Party of China. Convicted of corruption and abuse of power.	John McCain: Senator from Arizona and a prominent voice on foreign policy. McCain was highly critical of Obama's handling of the Syrian civil war, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, and the approach to Russian aggression in Ukraine.
Liu Yandong: Former Vice Premier of China. Known for her work in education, health, and science policy.	Lindsey Graham: Senator from South Carolina and a close ally of McCain. Graham was vocal in criticizing Obama's policies in the Middle East, particularly regarding Syria, Libya, and the fight against ISIS.
Wang Yang: Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. Known for his reformist views and economic policies.	Mitch McConnell: As Senate Majority Leader from 2015, McConnell was critical of Obama's overall foreign policy strategy, including the nuclear deal with Iran and relations with Russia.
Li Yuanchao: Former Vice President of China and a member of the Politburo. Known for his work in organizational and personnel management within the CPC.	Marco Rubio: Senator from Florida and member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Rubio frequently criticized Obama's policies towards Cuba, Venezuela, and the broader strategy in the Middle East.
Hu Chunhua: Vice Premier of China and a member of the Politburo. Seen as a potential future leader within the CPC.	Tom Cotton: Senator from Arkansas and a strong critic of Obama's foreign policy, especially the Iran nuclear deal. Cotton gained attention for his open letter to Iranian leaders, signed by 46 other Republican senators, opposing the nuclear negotiations.

Change in Countries Grand Strategies

The table 2 shows the most mentioned two national role conceptions of each leader over the years. Table 3 and table 4 compare the opposition and faction's NRCs to those of the leader. It is significant to note that this article does not aim to trace the process of examining whether the national role conceptions align with state's foreign policy. Instead, the focus is on identifying the NRCs to detect contestation or consensus between these roles.

Table 2. The Most Mentioned 2 NRCs of Each Leader Over the Years

Year	OBAMA	XI JINPING
2013	Arms Control and Disarmament Agent / Defender and Protector of Peace	Tianxia / Asianism
2014	Anti-terror agent / Defender and Protector of Peace	Nation-State Role Conception / Defender of the Faith
2015	Defender and Protector of Peace / Faithful Ally	Nation-State Role Conception / Developer
2016	Defender of Democratic Principles and Human Rights / Collaborator	Developer / Internal Development
2017	Defender of Democratic Principles and Human Rights / Defender and Protector of Peace	Nation-State Role Conception / Tianxia
2018		Nation-State Role Conception / Tianxia

Table 3 shows the level of similarity (normalized similarity) of the national role conceptions between Xi Jinping and the opposition for each year and an average normalized similarity in his term. Roles with a total normalized similarity higher than 0.5 indicate a grand strategy and significant alignment with Xi Jinping's policies. Notably, the role of "Internal Development" demonstrated the highest alignment, with a total normalized similarity of 0.73, indicating a consistent grand strategy and strategic compromise over the period. Similarly, the role of "Tianxia" (Asianism) exhibited substantial alignment, with a total normalized similarity of 0.69 and 0.48, suggesting a cohesive grand strategy in this domain.

Conversely, roles such as "Nation-State" and "Developer" displayed moderate alignment, with total normalized similarities of 0.25 and 0.48 respectively, indicating occasional strategic compromise but not consistently reaching the level of a grand strategy. Roles like "Asianism" (0.05) and Civilization (0.16) showed even lower alignment, reflecting limited strategic compromise and alignment with Xi Jinping's policies.

Table 3. Normalized Similarity Metric for Xi Jinping and Opposition

Xi Jinping-Opposition	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Average Normalized Similarity
Nation-State	0.24	0.19	0.00	0.37	0.72	0.00	0.25
Tianxia[3]	**0.71**	**0.83**	**0.34**	**0.39**	**0.94**	**0.81**	**0.67**
Asianism	0.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05
Civilization	0.20	0.18	0.62	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.16
Internal Development	**1.00**	**0.95**	**0.80**	**0.47**	**0.78**	**0.37**	**0.73**
Developer	0.61	0.19	0.50	0.72	0.66	0.22	0.48

The variability in these metrics underscores the complex and dynamic nature of political strategy within Xi Jinping's opposition. The high alignment in "Internal Development", "Developer" and "Tianxia" roles suggests prioritized strategic focus areas, while the lower alignment in other roles indicates varied levels of compromise and strategic alignment. This analysis, when compared with Obama's faction and opposition, highlights differing strategic priorities and the multifaceted nature of political alignment and compromise across different political contexts.

Table 4 shows the level of similarity between US President Barack Obama and his faction for each year and finally an average normalized similarity for all these years. Within Obama's faction, the "Defender of Democratic Principles and Human Rights" role demonstrated the highest alignment, with an average normalized similarity of 0.76, indicating a consistent grand strategy in this area. "Defender of Peace" and "Arms control and Disarmament agent" roles reflect moderate alignment between Obama and his faction. Roles such as "Anti-Terror Agent" displayed minimal alignment, with an average similarity of 0.0586, reflecting a lack of strategic compromise. It indicates that US' stance against terrorism has been more of a temporary strategy rather than part of a grand strategy.

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3   It is significant to also emphasize that Tianxia and Asianism role conceptions differ from one another. While both *Tianxia* and Asianism challenge Western-centric international orders, they differ fundamentally in orientation and historical grounding. *Tianxia*, rooted in Confucian political thought, envisions a hierarchical and morally ordered world radiating from a Sinocentric core, with China as a civilizational leader guiding subordinate peripheries through virtue and ritual. Asianism, by contrast, emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries as a political ideology advocating for regional solidarity among Asian nations—often in opposition to Western imperialism—and was promoted by various states, including Japan and India. Whereas *Tianxia* implies hierarchical submission to moral authority, Asianism (at least discursively) emphasizes horizontal equality and anti-colonial cooperation.

Table 4. Normalized Similarity Metric for Obama and his Faction

Obama-Faction	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Average Normalized Similarity
Arms Control and Disarmament agent	0.90	0.00	0.33	0.00	0.95	0.44
Active Independent	0.79	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.16
Liberation Supporter	0.87	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.17
Internal Development	0.55	0.69	0.00	0.74	0.00	0.40
Developer	0.41	0.69	0.00	0.87	0.00	0.40
Collaborator	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.49	0.00	0.17
Defender and Protecter of Peace	0.44	0.93	0.00	0.00	0.85	0.44
Faithful Ally	0.00	0.70	0.00	0.51	0.00	0.24
Defender of Democratic Principles and Human Rights	**0.99**	**0.46**	**0.91**	**0.78**	**0.66**	**0.76**
Anti-terror agent	0.00	0.00	0.29	0.00	0.00	0.06

Table 5 shows the normalized similarity metrics for Obama and the opposition. Comparatively, the analysis of Obama's opposition reveals that the "Defender and Protector of Peace" role exhibited the highest alignment, with an average normalized similarity of 0.5675, suggesting a grand strategy and compromise. Other roles within the opposition, such as "Arms Control and Disarmament Agent" (0.4554), "Defender of Democratic Principles and Human Rights" and "Faithful Ally" (0.4518), showed moderate alignment, indicating some strategic compromise but not consistently a grand strategy.

Table 5. Normalized Similarity Metric for Obama and Opposition

Obama-Opposition	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Average Normalized Similarity
Great Power Role	0.37	0.00	0.32	0.00	0.00	0.14
Arms Control and Disarmament agent	0.00	0.61	0.41	0.39	0.86	0.46
Internal Development	0.00	0.61	0.00	0.84	0.00	0.29
Developer	0.00	0.37	0.28	0.33	0.00	0.19
Defender and Protecter of Peace	**0.00**	**0.93**	**0.12**	**0.99**	**0.80**	**0.57**
Faithful Ally	0.00	0.76	0.68	0.81	0.00	0.45
Defender of Democratic Principles and Human Rights	0.51	0.44	0.36	0.62	0.16	0.42
Anti-terror agent	0.00	0.94	0.20	0.49	0.74	0.47

While both Obama's faction and the opposition displayed strategic compromises in certain areas, the consistent grand strategy was more evident within specific roles, such as "Defender of Democratic Principles and Human Rights" in Obama's faction and "Defender and Protector of Peace" in the opposition.

It becomes evident how the refined role-theoretical approach I employ responds to and extends the conversation initiated by my previous work (Demirduzen and Thies 2022). I argue that both models do well in terms of communicating the grand strategies of countries and both can be used widely. But this application of the average normalized similarity metric, introduces a methodological innovation that provides more granular insights into the role contestation dynamics within and between different regime types. This contribution is vital as it opens new avenues for operationalizing role theory in the study of grand strategies, thereby broadening the framework's applicability and relevance.

While the normalized similarity metric provides a refined tool for analyzing role contestation, it is also necessary to acknowledge the dimensions where Demirduzen and Thies's (2022) metric may offer better insights. For example, their metric might capture broader, more stable trends that our more sensitive metric might overinterpret as fluctuations. Understanding these differences enriches our overall analysis, providing a more comprehensive toolkit for scholars investigating the complex phenomena of grand strategies.

Conclusion

My research reveals that China adopts a comprehensive grand strategy, primarily aimed at bolstering its economic development with a threat perception against its economic interests. This strategy prioritizes the protection of economic interests, assigns China the role of influencing neighboring countries, and embraces a special responsibility to nurture and provide mutual opportunities for regional stability. The results are also consistent with the existing literature, which suggests that the foreign policy priority of the Shanghai Gang within the elitist faction has been economic development (Li 2019). Xi Jinping's most recent massive Belt and Road Initiative also aims to develop China's economic ties and influence regional countries' foreign policies.

Contrary to the current literature (Chaudion, Milner and Tingley 2010), the results suggest that China might also be pursuing a liberal internationalist policy, applying "value-oriented" principles to its engagements with developing and underdeveloped nations. These values, however, are neither explicitly communist nor liberal but appear to be deeply rooted in China's historical legacy, particularly reflected through the *Tianxia* concept. Hence, some of these findings align with scholarly work that integrates China's ancient heritage into its contemporary grand strategy.

My analysis concerning the US, however, identifies a distinct grand strategic tradition. In the United States, my findings highlight a national security strategy focused on promoting democracy internationally, prioritizing regional and global stability and peace through disarmament, arms control or other measures. Although there is some emphasis on bolstering the American economy and its development sectors, these are not as pronounced as other strategic priorities. These observations are also consistent with the existing literature. It is important to note that there are different views regarding the grand strategies of the US in literature.

According to current literature, the common goals of the American grand strategies in general are security, peace, and prestige. Additionally, my data also shows that US pursues a liberal internationalist policy with elements such as non-isolationism and pursues a liberal agenda that promotes free trade, democracy, human rights and cooperative security (Chaudoin, Milner and Tingley 2010: 76; Anton 2017). In alignment with established scholarship, the US appears to be committed to a primacy grand strategy, actively promoting American values globally to potentially deter the emergence of rivals through advocacy for democracy, international law, and free-market economies (Posen and Ross, 1996). Additionally, there is no consensus in the data supporting a more militaristically aggressive role, such as global power or hegemonic leadership, suggesting a strategic focus on diverting resources and political capital towards domestic renewal, primarily through economic stabilization. This approach, termed concurrent retrenchment, and identified in Obama's administration, involves balancing domestic rejuvenation with maintaining international primacy (Jones 2015).

While this study draws heavily on the theoretical framework established by my previous work (Demirduzen and Thies 2022), it transcends its foundational base by offering new empirical evidence and methodological enhancements. These contributions extend this work and provide the academic community with new tools and perspectives to explore the complex dynamics of grand strategy. Normalized similarity metric reveals nuanced shifts in role contestation that are not as apparent with the previous metric, particularly in the context of rapidly evolving international crises or domestic political shifts. These insights are crucial for policymakers and scholars who require a more dynamic and responsive analytical tool in their study of grand strategies.

The normalized similarity metric, while serving as a robust tool, is not proposed as a replacement for the metric used by Demirduzen and Thies (2022). Instead, it is intended to complement and extend the analytical capabilities of the existing metric and offer a more granular analysis for different needs. It captures short-term fluctuations and subtle shifts in strategic orientations that may not be as apparent when using broader, more stable metrics. Applying both metrics can better help clarify why certain regimes exhibit more flexible or rigid strategic behaviors. Normalized similarity metric may be used alongside, rather than in lieu of, Demirduzen and Thies's (2022) metric to deepen our collective understanding of grand strategies. This study also reveals the significance of utilizing role theory in understanding grand strategies. This enhanced analytical approach also better provides the nuances in Chinese and American foreign policies by offering a clearer understanding of the development in grand strategy formulation, and how it might undergo change.

Moreover, grand strategies are influenced by the ideational factors-particularly cultural and normative elements of policymakers-, not solely by material factors at a systemic or state level (Rosecrance and Stein 1993; Balzacq 2019a). Different leaders may not internalize or be constrained by the same beliefs regarding a country's grand strategy or its interactions with other states. Thus, analyzing a country's grand strategy requires an examination of individual-level determinants and the specific components of grand strategy, highlighting the utility of individual level analysis in identifying these elements.

While other at-a-distance leadership assessment tools like operational code analysis offer deep insights into the enactment of grand strategies (Marfleet 2021; Walker 2021), role theory excels in identifying specific aspects of these strategies. However, further research is necessary to fully leverage these tools to understand changes in grand strategies, discern patterns across different regime types, and refine the framework by integrating additional analytical tools. Role theory and other at-a-distance measurement tools promise significant enhancements to our understanding of national grand strategies and broader aspects of international relations.

Additionally, according to Breuning and Thies (2010), role theory has the potential to serve as a conduit between the fields of FPA and IR offering potential for integration and possibly, synthesis. This possibility, as Pfaler and Teschke (2024) argue, can also help us understand international politics and track the concrete ordering of the world. It provides a framework that incorporates both psychological and social dynamics, enabling the analysis of individual leaders' psychological traits and the social dynamics within states and the global political system (Walker, 1987; Thies, 2010; Walker, Malici, and Schafer, 2011; Walker, 2013; Walker, 2016; Walker and Schafer, 2021).This approach also raises the question of whether grand strategies are exclusive to great powers or if smaller states can possess them, broadening the empirical study of grand strategy beyond the traditional focus on major powers.

Finally, if FPA is to gain broader relevance, it must engage with key debates in IR theory (Houghton 2007), making the integration of role theory into the study of Grand Strategy crucial. This approach not only provides a comprehensive understanding of how grand strategies evolve and adapt but also captures subtle shifts that influence a country's foreign policy decisions.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Coding Sheet

Leaders Name:	Size:
Source:	Speech Subject:
Article:	Speech Focus:
Date:	Coder:

Role	Frequency %	Number	Intensity (1-5) 1-Very Weak, 2-Weak, 3-Neutral, 4-Strong, 5-Very Strong	Space