Understanding China's Defensive-Moderate Approach to International Relations

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ABSTRACT

This article reinterprets Chinese foreign policy through the lens of strategic culture by advancing the concept of a defensive-moderate approach, defined as a deliberate blend of assertive defense and restrained diplomacy. While conventional analyses often rely on frameworks such as defensive realism or economic interdependence, this article emphasizes the formative role of Confucian values, including harmony, hierarchical order, and moral governance, in shaping China's external behavior. Drawing on original research from a doctoral dissertation examining China's interactions with the United States and India, this article explains how these values are internalized by elites, institutionalized in policy discourse, and manifested in practices such as preference for multilateralism, non-intervention, and calibrated responses to conflict. Through empirical illustrations from the Belt and Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and border management strategies, this article argues that China's foreign policy is not merely reactive or materially driven but reflects a culturally informed strategic posture. This perspective challenges rationalist models of state behavior and offers a more nuanced understanding of China's role in global affairs by highlighting the importance of socially constructed norms in foreign policy decision-making.

Keywords: *Strategic Culture, China, Confucianism, Foreign Policy, Defensive-Moderate*

Artikel ini menafsirkan ulang kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok melalui lensa budaya strategis dengan mengajukan konsep pendekatan defensif-moderat, yang didefinisikan sebagai perpaduan yang cermat antara pertahanan asertif dan diplomasi tertahan. Sementara analisis konvensional sering mengandalkan kerangka seperti realisme defensif atau ketergantungan ekonomi, artikel ini menekankan peran nilai-nilai Konfusianisme seperti harmoni, tatanan hierarkis, dan pemerintahan bermoral dalam membentuk perilaku eksternal Tiongkok. Berdasarkan riset orisinal dari disertasi doktoral yang mengkaji hubungan Tiongkok dengan Amerika Serikat dan India, artikel ini menjelaskan bagaimana nilai-nilai tersebut diinternalisasi oleh para elite, dilembagakan dalam wacana kebijakan, dan diwujudkan dalam praktik seperti preferensi terhadap multilateralisme, non-intervensi, serta respons yang terukur terhadap konflik. Melalui contoh empiris dari Belt and Road Initiative, Organisasi Kerja Sama Shanghai, dan strategi pengelolaan perbatasan, artikel ini berargumen bahwa kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok tidak semata-mata bersifat reaktif atau didorong oleh kepentingan material, melainkan mencerminkan postur strategis yang didasarkan pada budaya. Perspektif ini menantang model-model rasionalis tentang perilaku negara dan menawarkan pemahaman yang lebih bernuansa mengenai peran Tiongkok dalam politik global dengan menyoroti pentingnya norma-norma sosial yang dikonstruksi dalam pengambilan keputusan kebijakan luar negeri.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Strategic Culture, Tiongkok, Konfusianisme, Kebijakan Luar Negeri, Defensif-Moderat*

Understanding China's ascent on the global stage necessitates moving beyond simplistic labels of aggressor or status quo power. This article offers an alternative approach by focusing on strategic culture to explain China's behavior toward two of its most critical counterparts: the United States (U.S.) and India. Rather than emphasizing solely power dynamics or economic imperatives, it introduces the concept of "defensive-moderate action"—a foreign policy strategy that balances assertiveness with restraint (Johnston 1995; Shiping 2010, 213). In the South China Sea, for example, China asserts territorial claims through island building and naval patrols, yet avoids direct confrontation with the U.S., often operating within the "gray zone". Similarly, while China has engaged in border skirmishes with India, it continues to promote diplomacy and regional cooperation through BRICS and the SCO (Singh 2020; Acharya 2021, 801). This posture reflects a broader strategic calculus—rooted in protecting sovereignty while upholding stability—that is not fully explained by traditional International Relations theories.

Defensive realism posits that states seek security over dominance and will acquire power only as a survival mechanism (Glaser and Medeiros 2007, 293; Snyder and Lieber 2008, 174-185; Lande 2018, 172-192). Although applicable to China's focus on territorial integrity, this theory fails to capture its expansive diplomatic and economic pursuits. Economic interdependence theory suggests that trade reduces the likelihood of conflict (Mansfield and Pollins 2003, 11), yet China's actions in the South China Sea amid deep U.S. trade ties highlight the limitations of this perspective. These frameworks often offer static interpretations that neglect the ideational and cultural foundations shaping state behavior, especially in China's case.

Strategic culture offers a more holistic framework by integrating material and ideational variables such as historical memory, leadership values, and cultural norms (Uz Zaman 2009, 71-72; Lantis 2009, 40-41; Lock 2010, 689; Bergstrand and Engelbrekt 2016; Feng and He 2019, 1-20). In China's case, strategic culture—rooted in Confucian traditions—emphasizes harmony, hierarchy, and non-confrontation, informing its preference for stability and gradualism in foreign policy (Feng 2007, 25; Shiping 2010). These

cultural factors explain China's aversion to direct conflict and its tendency toward calculated responses that blend assertiveness with diplomatic caution. Strategic culture also accommodates agency and adaptive behavior, enabling a dynamic reading of foreign policy amid shifting geopolitical landscapes (Callahan 2015, 80).

This research employs a qualitative design, utilizing a case study approach to examine the influence of strategic culture on China's foreign policy behavior. The case study method facilitates in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within their real-world context, offering rich and nuanced insights into the motivations and decision-making processes that shape Chinese foreign policy (Blatter and Haverland 2012, 177; Schwandt and Gates 2018, 346). The choice of the U.S. and India as case studies is strategic, reflecting their roles as major powers with dynamic and multifaceted relationships with China, thereby providing varied geopolitical contexts for analyzing the manifestation of China's strategic culture. Data collection combines primary and secondary sources. Primary data includes official government documents, policy statements, speeches by Chinese leaders, and expert interviews, while secondary sources encompass academic literature, think tank reports, and media analysis. Confucianism-related materials were gathered from online repositories at Universitas Airlangga, the National Library of Indonesia, and the Library of Congress during the research phase. The data is analyzed using both content analysis to identify recurring themes and narratives in policy documents and interpretive analysis, which seeks to uncover the deeper meanings and significance of these themes within the broader matrix of Chinese history, culture, and politics (Tracy 2020, 61–62). This dual-method approach acknowledges that facts are never entirely objective, but are interpreted through cultural and strategic lenses.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, it defines strategic culture and lays out a framework for analyzing how shared beliefs shape policy decisions. Second, it situates China's strategic behavior historically, emphasizing the influence of Confucianism on its global posture. Third, through case studies of China's relations with the U.S. and India, the article illustrates how defensive-

moderate behavior operates in practice. Finally, it concludes by highlighting the explanatory power of strategic culture in accounting for China's complex foreign policy, calling for further research that bridges materialist theories with ideational analysis to better grasp China's evolving role in world affairs.

Strategic Culture and Chinese Foreign Policy Behavior

Strategic culture theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the ideational factors that shape a state's foreign policy behavior (Lantis 2009, 40–41; Uz Zaman 2009, 71–72; Lock 2010, 689). It posits that a state's strategic choices are influenced by a shared set of beliefs, values, and historical experiences that constitute its strategic culture (Johnson 2006, 7; Feng 2007; Johnson 2018). These beliefs and values shape how a state perceives the international environment, assesses threats and opportunities, and determines preferences for various courses of action. Key concepts in strategic culture theory include core beliefs, strategic preferences, and historical analogies. Core beliefs consist of fundamental assumptions about the international system, the role of force, and foreign policy objectives. In China's case, these beliefs are embedded in its long historical trajectory and reflect its self-identity as a rising cultural, economic, and military power; one that seeks to reshape the global order in line with its perception of itself as a leading civilization capable of setting hierarchical international norms (Connolly and Gottwald 2013, 269; Ford 2010; Liu 2014, 556; Miller 2016, 211). Strategic preferences refer to favored methods for pursuing foreign policy goals, such as diplomacy, economic instruments, or military force. Meanwhile, historical analogies like the trauma of the "Century of Humiliation" continue to inform China's strategic mindset, particularly its heightened sensitivity to sovereignty and territorial integrity issues (Scott 2008).

Several scholars have significantly contributed to the development of strategic culture theory, illuminating its multiple dimensions and practical applications. Alastair Iain Johnston, in his seminal study of Chinese strategic culture, contends that it is marked by a preference for defensive strategies, a reluctance to use force,

and an emphasis on deception and surprise (Johnston 1995, 32). Colin Gray underscores the importance of historical context and enduring cultural values in shaping a state's strategic behavior (Gray 1999, 49), while Peter Katzenstein focuses on the role of norms and identity in influencing state actions (Katzenstein et al. 1996, 33). Despite its theoretical utility, strategic culture theory has faced criticism for being overly deterministic and for underestimating the role of rational choice and material factors traditionally emphasized in strategic studies. Yet, its proponents argue that strategic culture offers a necessary complement to rationalist approaches by foregrounding ideational elements in state behavior. Furthermore, it can be argued that even the identification of what constitutes "rational" decisions or "material" interests is socially constructed—mediated through the cultural and normative frameworks that strategic culture reveals (Feng 2007; Glenn 2009, 523; Bloomfield 2012; Turcsányi 2014, 60).

This research applies strategic culture theory to analyze the influence of Confucianism on China's foreign policy behavior. As a philosophical and ethical system that has profoundly shaped Chinese society for centuries, Confucianism offers a foundational lens through which China's strategic culture can be interpreted. Several core Confucian tenets are particularly relevant to foreign policy. First is harmony (和, *he*), which emphasizes the importance of maintaining social order and avoiding conflict—principles that influence China's preference for diplomatic engagement and peaceful dispute resolution (Kynge 2023; Zhao 2023). Second is hierarchy (礼, *li*), reflecting Confucian recognition of structured social order and respect for authority, which shapes China's view of international relations as a system that should reflect mutual respect and differentiated roles among states (Zhao 2012, 55; Zhao 2019). Third is benevolence (仁, *ren*), which promotes moral leadership and compassion, aligning with China's efforts to support developing countries and advocate for a more just global order (Feng 2007; Ikenberry 2011, 61). These Confucian values are deeply embedded in China's strategic outlook and resonate with the historical notion of *Tianxia*—"all under heaven"—which envisions China not merely as a rising power, but as one bearing global responsibility within a harmonious world order.

The application of strategic culture theory to Chinese foreign policy allows for a nuanced understanding of China's motivations and behavior in the international arena. It helps to explain why China often adopts a defensive-moderate approach, seeking to protect its core interests while avoiding unnecessary conflict and promoting stability and cooperation. By examining the influence of Confucianism on China's strategic culture, this research sheds light on the ideational factors that shape its foreign policy decisions and provides valuable insights into its role as a rising global power (Feng and He 2019, 1). While strategic culture provides valuable insights into China's foreign policy, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Strategic culture is not a monolithic entity, and there may be variations and contestations within a state's strategic culture (Bloomfield 2012, 137). Furthermore, strategic culture is not static and can evolve in response to changing domestic and international circumstances. Moreover, material factors, such as military capabilities and economic interests, also play a significant role in shaping foreign policy decisions (Bloomfield and Nossal 2007, 286; Lantis and Charlton 2011, 291).

While strategic culture provides valuable insights into China's foreign policy behavior, it is not the sole determinant. China's strategic choices emerge from a complex interplay of ideational and material factors, including domestic political dynamics, strategic calculations, and the structural constraints of the international system (Bloomfield and Nossal 2007, 286; Lantis and Charlton 2011, 291). Therefore, strategic culture should be integrated with rationalist and materialist frameworks to develop a more holistic understanding of China's foreign policy conduct. By adopting a multifaceted approach, this research aims to bridge the divide between ideational and material explanations, yielding a more nuanced interpretation of China's strategic behavior. This integrative perspective not only brings attention to the often-overlooked influence of strategic culture but also offers a balanced assessment of China's interactions with major global powers. In particular, the role of Confucian strategic culture in shaping China's engagement with India warrants deeper scrutiny, as the historical, ideological, and geopolitical dimensions of the bilateral relationship illuminate the intricacies of China's evolving strategic outlook. The subsequent section explores this dynamic further,

focusing on how Confucian principles inform China's approach to India in what can be described as the "Dance of the Dragon and Elephant."

The Dance of Dragon and Elephant:
Confucian Strategic Culture in China-India Relations

To fully appreciate the contemporary dynamics of China-India relations, it is crucial to understand the historical context in which these interactions have unfolded. While the relationship is punctuated by periods of conflict, there have also been long stretches of peaceful exchange and cultural interaction. Historical interactions between China and India have shaped their strategic cultures and contemporary relations. The Ancient Silk Road facilitated trade, cultural exchange, and intellectual transmission, fostering mutual respect and diplomatic foundations, with Confucian values emphasizing harmony and mutual benefit (Khyade 2019, 145). Buddhism, originating in India, profoundly influenced Chinese philosophy, morality, literature, art, and architecture, reinforcing shared cultural heritage, while Confucianism's emphasis on compassion and inner peace aided its acceptance in China (Guang 2013, 305). During the colonial era, both nations faced Western imperial pressures, shaping their foreign policy perspectives and fostering solidarity, as Confucian values of national sovereignty and resistance to external interference resonated with Indian leaders striving for independence.

The 1962 Sino-Indian War serves as a stark reminder of the potential for conflict in China-India relations (Chellaney 2012, 108), primarily stemming from territorial disputes over the McMahon Line and Aksai Chin, shaped by early 20th-century British and Russian expansions in Central Asia. China, viewing these territories as integral to its sovereignty, refused to compromise. The war also reflected ideological divergence, with Mao Zedong's China adhering to communist revolutionary principles, while Nehru's India pursued a non-aligned foreign policy (Westcott 2019, 155). Although the war contradicted Confucian ideals of harmony and peaceful resolution, Confucianism also emphasizes the defense of sovereignty and vital interests, possibly framing China's military

action as a necessary step to safeguard territorial claims. In the aftermath, both countries began a gradual normalization process aimed at rebuilding trust and restoring diplomatic relations, driven by a blend of strategic and economic considerations. (Arif 2015, 110). A series of confidence building measures—including border meetings, military exchanges, and diplomatic dialogues— were adopted, with Confucian values emphasizing trust and communication playing a subtle yet meaningful role. Concurrently, both nations undertook economic liberalization programs, opening up to foreign investment and trade, which significantly expanded bilateral economic ties and fostered mutual benefit. This trajectory of economic interdependence illustrates Confucian pragmatism in practice, highlighting adaptability and the pursuit of practical solutions amid political tensions, as China sought to advance trade relations with India despite unresolved disputes.

Despite the progress made in normalizing relations and fostering economic interdependence, China and India continue to face several challenges that test the limits of Confucian influence on their relationship. First, the unresolved border dispute remains a major source of tension. Periodic skirmishes and military standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) underscore the fragility of the relationship and the potential for escalation (Bharti 2024). Second, China and India are engaged in a strategic competition for influence in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean and its efforts to build strategic partnerships with countries in South Asia have raised concerns in India (Pant 2014, 187; Brewster 2016, 10; Singh 2019, 199). Third, despite these challenges, both China and India have demonstrated a degree of restraint in managing their differences. China, while assertive in defending its territorial claims, has avoided large-scale military confrontations with India. India, while concerned about China's growing influence, has sought to maintain dialogue and cooperation on a range of issues. This restraint may be attributed, in part, to Confucian values that emphasize the importance of avoiding conflict and pursuing peaceful solutions.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a major point of contention in China-India relations (Yuan 2019). While China portrays the BRI as a benevolent project aimed at promoting

economic development and connectivity, India views it with suspicion, citing concerns about sovereignty, debt sustainability, and strategic implications. First, The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the BRI that passes through disputed territory in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, has been a major source of friction (Kurita 2021, 56) India views CPEC as a violation of its sovereignty and a challenge to its strategic interests. Beyond territorial disputes, India has also expressed concerns about the potential for BRI projects to lead to debt traps, where recipient countries become heavily indebted to China and are forced to cede strategic assets (Sachdeva 2018, 285).

Furthermore, China, in its rhetoric, emphasizes the mutually beneficial and non-coercive nature of the BRI, stressing the intention of building a "community of common destiny" with its neighbors. Analyzing the BRI may reveal the limits of Confucian values in shaping China's foreign policy, as strategic and economic considerations often outweigh concerns about harmony and benevolence. This section should acknowledge the competing interpretations of the BRI's impacts and intentions (Zhang 2018). In addition, China leverages the BRI and other initiatives to exercise soft power and signal good intentions by building infrastructure. As one example, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation serves China's strategic interests while being implemented under the rubric of a "shared future".

Moving forward, the future of China-India relations depends on their ability to manage differences and foster cooperation. Confucianism can play a constructive role by emphasizing dialogue, communication, and peaceful dispute resolution. The principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference should guide their bilateral and regional interactions. Additionally, both nations must prioritize mutual benefit and win-win collaboration in areas of shared interest. Trust remains essential for stability, which can be strengthened through transparency, predictability, and adherence to international norms and standards.

Between Cooperation and Competition: Confucian Strategic Culture in China-United States Relations

The relationship between China and the United States (U.S.) has oscillated between cooperation and conflict, shaped by historical episodes that continue to influence contemporary dynamics and strategic approaches. At the turn of the 20th century, the United States promoted the "Open Door" policy to ensure equal access to Chinese markets, which, though framed as supporting free trade, was perceived by some in China as a means of undermining sovereignty and perpetuating foreign domination (Zhu et al. 2024, 1). During the Chinese Civil War, U.S. support for Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government against Mao Zedong's Communist forces fostered lasting animosity after the Communists took power in 1949, a divide that widened further during the Korean War (1950–1953), when China's intervention on behalf of North Korea reinforced U.S. perceptions of China as an aggressive, expansionist power. Despite this Cold War hostility, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the beginning of rapprochement, driven by shared strategic concerns—particularly over the Soviet Union's rising influence. President Nixon's 1972 visit to China marked a diplomatic breakthrough, facilitating normalization of relations and closer bilateral ties. This shift reflected a form of Confucian pragmatism, valuing adaptability and practical solutions amid complex challenges, as China embraced engagement with U.S. despite enduring ideological differences.

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1979, China and U.S. have developed a complex relationship marked by deep economic interdependence and growing strategic competition. Trade and investment have expanded exponentially, creating both opportunities and challenges for both nations. However, tensions have emerged over issues such as China's alleged intellectual property theft, which the United States claims has cost American businesses billions of dollars (Santacreu and Peake 2019, 1). The U.S. has also accused China of currency manipulation to gain an unfair trade advantage (Moosa and Ma 2013, 12). Additionally, China's growing military power and assertive foreign policy have led the United States to strengthen its alliances in the region to counter China's influence (Liff 2017, 137).

The South China Sea has emerged as a major flashpoint in the relationship between China and the U.S. (Scobell 2018). China's expansive territorial claims, its construction of artificial islands, and its growing military presence in the region have raised concerns in the United States and among its allies. In response, the U.S. has consistently asserted its right to conduct freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), challenging China's territorial claims, which China has condemned as provocative and destabilizing (Odom 2019, 171). The U.S. has called on China to respect international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in resolving the dispute (Beckman 2013, 142). Whereas China advocates for bilateral negotiations with the directly involved parties. Despite these tensions, China attempts to promote its interests while signaling a commitment to multilateralism, claiming it seeks to "build a maritime community with a shared future," while the U.S. maintains its emphasis on "freedom of navigation" (Zhu et al. 2024, 1). Notably, China has thus far avoided direct military confrontation, a form of restraint that may partly reflect Confucian values emphasizing conflict avoidance and the pursuit of peaceful solutions.

Human rights and democracy remain a major source of disagreement between China and the U.S. (Zhou 2005, 105). The U.S. has consistently criticized China's human rights record, citing concerns about freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the treatment of ethnic minorities. The United States has expressed particular concern about the human rights situation in Tibet and Xinjiang, where China has been accused of suppressing Tibetan culture and religion and of engaging in widespread human rights abuses against the Uighur population (Szadziewski 2019, 211). The U.S. has also criticized China's crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, arguing that it violates the Sino-British Joint Declaration and undermines the city's autonomy (Davis 2021, 57). The Chinese government tends to view human rights through a different lens, prioritizing economic development and social stability over individual freedoms (Biddulph 2021, 147). This difference in perspective reflects the influence of Confucian values, which emphasize social harmony and the collective good.

The relationship between China and the United States has undergone significant changes in recent years, with both the Trump and Biden administrations adopting evolving strategies to address China's growing global influence. The Trump administration took a confrontational stance, imposing tariffs on Chinese goods, restricting Chinese investment, and challenging China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, while also criticizing China's human rights record and trade practices (Kubo 2019, 58). Although the Biden administration has continued a competitive approach, it has also sought avenues for selective cooperation. These developments build upon a complex relationship that has evolved since the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1979. One characterized by deep economic interdependence and increasing strategic rivalry. Trade and investment between the two countries have expanded exponentially, generating both opportunities and tensions. However, disputes persist over issues such as China's alleged intellectual property theft, which the United States claims has cost its businesses billions of dollars and accusations of currency manipulation intended to provide unfair trade advantages (Moosa and Ma 2013, 12; Santacreu and Peake 2019, 1). Moreover, China's growing military strength and assertive foreign policy have prompted the U.S. to reinforce its regional alliances as part of a broader strategy to counterbalance Beijing's influence (Liff 2017, 137).

Reaffirming the Importance and Relevance of Strategic Culture: A Defensive-Moderate Lens

The preceding analysis of China's relationships with India and the United States consistently underscores the enduring relevance of strategic culture as a vital lens for understanding Beijing's foreign policy behavior. However, according to Miller (2017), this research moves beyond simply reiterating the influence of historical values and beliefs, offering instead the analytical power of a novel framework: the "defensive-moderate" approach. Developed in response to the limitations of existing theories, this concept provides a more nuanced understanding of China's international actions. Traditional explanations such as defensive realism sufficiently account for China's security concerns and its desire

to protect core national interests (Shiping 2015, 141). However, they often fall short in explaining China's proactive engagement in global governance, its intricate economic partnerships, and its seemingly contradictory behaviors that blend assertiveness with restraint. Similarly, economic interdependence theory highlights the mutual benefits of trade and investment but fails to fully capture the persistence of political tensions and strategic rivalries, as evidenced in the South China Sea or along the Sino-Indian border (Davis and Meunier 2011, 628). These established frameworks, though insightful, tend to privilege material capabilities and rationalist logic, overlooking the crucial influence of ideational factors embedded in China's strategic culture.

The "defensive-moderate" framework, as developed and applied in the dissertation (Yakti 2025), directly addresses these shortcomings. It recognizes that China's foreign policy is not simply a product of its growing economic and military power but also a reflection of its deep-seated cultural values and strategic preferences. This approach acknowledges China's need to defend its sovereignty and security in a world dominated by powerful actors. However, it also highlights China's commitment to maintaining stability and avoiding unnecessary conflict, a preference rooted in Confucian ideals of harmony and social order (Bell 2009, 26). The "defensive-moderate" strategy is manifested in China's willingness to engage in dialogue, pursue peaceful resolutions, and offer economic incentives, even when faced with challenging situations or perceived threats.

The case studies of China-India and China-U.S. relations provide compelling evidence for the explanatory power of the "defensive-moderate" concept. In its relationship with India, China has consistently sought to manage border disputes through negotiation, promote economic cooperation through initiatives like the BRICS, and avoid military escalation, even in the face of occasional skirmishes (Paul ad Underwood 2019, 348). This approach reflects a desire to protect its territorial integrity while maintaining a stable and cooperative relationship with its neighbor. Similarly, in its interactions with the U.S., China has sought to balance its growing economic and military strength with a commitment to peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit

(Wang 2010, 554). Despite ongoing trade disputes, human rights concerns, and strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific, China has consistently emphasized the importance of dialogue and collaboration, seeking to avoid a new Cold War and promote a more multipolar world order. China's approach to international relations tends to emphasize areas of cooperation, such as climate change, while downplaying the importance of areas of competition, such as geopolitical leverage in the South China Sea (Rosyidin 2019, 214).

By applying the "defensive-moderate" lens, this research offers a more nuanced and insightful understanding of Chinese foreign policy than traditional approaches. It highlights the complex interplay between material capabilities, strategic calculations, and cultural values in shaping China's actions on the world stage. It also provides a valuable tool for anticipating China's future behavior and for developing effective strategies for managing relations with this rising global power (Feng and He 2019, 1). As such, the concept of "defensive-moderate action" offers an important corrective in the field of international relations. This nuanced theory provides a unique framework that can also be applied to other growing superpowers (Danner 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has advanced the understanding of Chinese foreign policy by demonstrating the explanatory power of strategic culture. Particularly Confucian strategic culture, through the lens of "defensive-moderate action." By exploring the historical and philosophical roots of Confucianism, it has shown how this cultural foundation shapes China's foreign policy preferences and behaviors, especially in its interactions with the United States and India. The case studies reveal how China combines assertiveness with restraint, reflecting a deliberate effort to defend national interests while avoiding escalation. This culturally informed framework goes beyond traditional IR theories focused solely on material power or rational choice, offering a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of China's actions on the global stage. It highlights how Confucian values such as harmony, hierarchy,

and stability continue to influence strategic decision-making in contemporary Chinese diplomacy.

This research also acknowledges several limitations and avenues for future study. Strategic culture is not monolithic or static—it may vary across regions, generations, and evolve with domestic and global changes. Therefore, ongoing analysis is needed to capture these dynamics. Moreover, while the study emphasizes ideational influences, it recognizes that material factors like military strength and economic interests are also integral to foreign policy outcomes. Future research should integrate these dimensions to offer a more holistic understanding. The article also calls for comparative studies on strategic culture in other rising powers and urges analysis of how China's defensive-moderate posture is perceived globally. Expanding this framework to examine China's relations beyond the U.S. and India will further enrich our grasp of its global behavior in a multipolar world.

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