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Abstract:

Understanding how the US responded to and perceived the rise of China is of central importance to future debate, and key to peace and prosperity in the twenty-first century. It remains astonishing that the world's only superpower just two decades earlier now appears in so much trouble. Given China's rise over the past two decades, structural realism expected the US to focus on East Asia, confronting China in particular, and to avoid strategic distractions. Though structural realism expected the US to continue its focus on China, things turned out very differently. Over the past 25 years, American grand strategy to China was inconsistent and did not increase but stagnated its military focus on East Asia and China. Building on the work of Taliaferro (2006) and Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell (2016), this paper presents a neoclassical realist model that adds two unit-level variables to the independent structural variable for better explaining American grand strategy to China since 1991. As neoclassical realism is an extension of neorealism, the independent variable remains at the level of the structure of the international system and the distribution of material capabilities. The dependent variable is the variation in grand strategy: continuing the existing strategy (forward deployment of US military capabilities in EA), increasing or decreasing balancing behaviour, or buck-passing with regional allies. Between systemic incentives and grand strategy, two intervening variables are posited. The perceptual variable illuminates the level of clarity that US foreign policy executives have about the strategic environment. The state power variable clarifies to what extent foreign policy executives can use the resources available to them for their preferred grand strategy. This paper thus takes issue with both the theoretical and empirical layer of the study of America's grand strategic response to the rise of China. The United States was at best a hesitant balancer with regard to China due to perceptions of major threats in the Middle East and domestic economic turbulence in the United States. Domestic economic turmoil in the US in the 2000s pressured the White House to seek more economic integration in East Asia. This resulted in an agenda of American-led East Asian economic integration at the discrimination or even exclusion of China in both the economic and security realm.

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