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ABSTRACT

How do great powers operationalise security through their institutions? Drawing on Neoclassical Realism (NCR) and Balance of Power (BoP) theories, this research argues that national security institutions constitute the transmission belt through which systemic pressures are translated into grand strategic adjustments. A comparative case study is employed between the United States National Security Council (NSC), with particular focus on Nixon-Kissinger's triangular diplomacy against the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China's Central National Security Commission (CNSC), with particular focus on Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative as a response to the U.S. rebalance to Asia. The analysis draws on declassified U.S. government documents, alongside Chinese policy sources and scholarly literature on NSC and CNSC. It reveals that despite differences, both institutions serve as the principal processors of state balancing behaviour. The study contributes to the scholarship of International Security Studies (ISS) frontier zone with Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) by establishing domestic security institutions as an intervening variable between stimuli and strategy.

KEYWORDS

National Security, Grand Strategy, Neoclassical Realism, National Security Council, Central National Security Commission, State Balancing Behaviour.

PREFACE

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “To understand the man, you must know what was happening in the world when he was twenty”. My early twenties in Damascus coincided with the most vicious period of the Syrian War. Witnessing conflict and geopolitical rivalry heightened my interest in international security and foreign policy. Although my background is in engineering, these experiences ultimately led me to pursue an MA in Security and International Relations. This thesis, therefore, is not only an academic study of national security but also the product of a personal journey, shaped by war, to understand order in international politics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am further grateful to Professor Andrea Catanzaro and Professor Pietro Piana for their support and encouragement throughout this process.

To my family in Damascus, your sacrifice made this journey possible. Every page of this thesis carries something of yours.

To my friends in Genoa who made it feel like a second Damascus, thank you for making a foreign city feel like home.

CONTENTS

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EXPANDED CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APNSA	Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
BoP	Balance of Power
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CFAO	Central Foreign Affairs Office
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMC	Central Military Commission
CNSC	Central National Security Commission
DC	Deputies Committee
DoD	Department of Defense
FALSG	Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
FPE	Foreign Policy Executive
GSA	Grand Strategic Adjustment
IGS	Interdepartmental Groups
ISS	International Security Studies
LSG	Leading Small Group
MAD	Mutual Assured Destruction
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCR	Neoclassical Realism
NPC	National People's Congress
NSA	National Security Advisor

NSC	National Security Council
NSDD	National Security Decision Directives
NSDM	National Security Decision Memoranda
NSLSG	National Security Leading Small Group
NSPD	National Security Presidential Directives
NSS	National Security Strategy
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
OCB	Operations Coordinating Board
P.R.C.	People's Republic of China
PBSC	Politburo Standing Committee
PC	Principals Committee
PD	Presidential Directives
PDD	Presidential Decision Directives
PLA	People's Liberation Army
R.O.C.	Republic of China
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SRG	Senior Review Group
SSF	Strategic Support Force
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
U.S.	United States
U.S.A.	United States of America
U.S.S.R.	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WSAG	Washington Special Actions Group

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National Security in Theory and Practice: From Ambiguous Concept to State Institutions

INTRODUCTION

In July 1971, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger secretly departed from Islamabad aboard a Pakistani plane bound for Beijing. He carried no formal diplomatic mandate or Senate-confirmed authority. What he carried instead was the full institutional weight of a White House-centred National Security System, redesigned to make such a mission possible. The rapprochement with China, one of the clearest examples of grand strategic adjustments, was not a product of systemic pressure alone. It was the product of an institution.

This research is concerned with that institution. It asks: **how do great powers operationalise security through state institutions?** The question carries tension. As complete national security cannot be obtained in an anarchic system, and to hold it as an aspiration is to pursue an impossible objective (Buzan, 2016, p. 260). Relative security is, by necessity, an unsatisfactory condition; the criteria by which a satisfactory level might be defined are themselves ephemeral, and any attempt to move toward complete security will raise the level of threat facing the state (Herz, 1950). If security as an end can never be fully achieved, then the institutional process through which states pursue it becomes essential. The question is not whether great powers attain security, but how they organise the attempt.

The question emerges from a gap at the intersection of two scholarly traditions. Neorealism attributes state behaviour to the anarchic structure of the international system and the relative distribution of capabilities, but treats the state as a unitary actor that responds automatically to structural pressures (Waltz, 1979). Neoclassical Realism (NCR) improves on this by arguing that domestic-level variables mediate between systemic stimuli and strategic outcomes, yet existing scholarship has paid limited attention to national security institutions themselves as the arena of that mediation (Rose, 1998; Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009). This research addresses that gap.

The argument proceeds in two parts. Part 1 constructs the theoretical and conceptual foundations. Chapter 1 reviews literature from the realist tradition, the balance of power theory and the concept of grand strategy, building a neoclassical realist framework in which national security institutions are positioned as the transmission belt between stimuli and strategy. Chapter 2 traces the intellectual genealogy of national security as a concept, from its geopolitical origins and Cold War ambiguity to the expansive definitions of the Copenhagen School and Baldwin's (1997) specifications.

Part 2 applies this framework comparatively. Following the Research Design, Chapter 3 examines the U.S. National Security Council, tracing its development from Truman's reluctant advisory body to the White House-centred apparatus of the Nixon-Kissinger system, and then analyses how that system operationalised triangular diplomacy as a grand strategic adjustment to Soviet parity and the burden of the Vietnam War. Chapter 4 examines the People's Republic of China's Central National Security Commission, tracing the evolution from the fragmented Leading Small Group system to Xi Jinping's top-level design, before analysing the Belt and Road Initiative as China's response to the U.S. rebalance to Asia. The Conclusions compare the two cases together and assess what they reveal about the role of national security institutions.

Buzan and Hansen (2009) described Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) as one of the frontier zones of International Security Studies (ISS), a space where both fields share ground (p. 18). This study operates at that frontier. It contributes to ISS by treating national security institutions as intervening variables that connect systemic pressure to grand strategic adjustment, and to FPA by privileging political leaders and elites as the agents. It establishes domestic security institutions as the mediator that shapes how, when, and through what means state balancing behaviour occurs.

PART 1:
National Security in Theory

CHAPTER 1: Behaviour Under Anarchy: Literature Review

States' behaviour has long been associated with the relative distribution of capabilities. While this relationship has been extensively studied within the realist tradition, existing research has largely treated the state as a unitary actor and has focused on systemic pressures rather than the institutional mechanisms through which security is operationalised (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). While neoclassical realism recognises that systemic pressures are mediated by domestic structures, existing research has paid limited attention to national security institutions themselves as arenas of strategic transmission (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009). This research examines how great powers operationalise security through their national security institutions, and how their configuration is shaped by systemic pressures and directly affects grand strategic adjustments and balancing behaviour.

Accordingly, this chapter reviews the necessary literature to analyse the process of translating security to strategy through these institutions. In particular, it is organised around three scholarly debates: (1) What structural security challenges do great powers confront? (2) How are these structural pressures mediated and transmitted to state institutions? (3) How do states adjust their grand strategy in response to relative changes in the distribution of capabilities? The text continues as follows: the first section introduces the realist tradition, its theories and different competing paradigms. Here, the literature agrees on the structure of the international system and differs on the way its pressures are transmitted domestically. Then, in the second section, the balance of power theory and variations in balancing behaviour are discussed. The last section is concerned with the concept of grand strategy and situates it as the dependent variable for institutional mediation. Throughout this literature review, the theoretical framework is constructed by linking systemic stimuli to grand strategic adjustments by institutional mediation.

1.1. Realism and State Behaviour

Realism, the dominant paradigm of international security studies, is mainly because realists claim that the tradition can explain the constant state of conflict that exists in the world (Donnelly, 2000, p. 1; Walt, 2002, p.197; Dunne & Schmidt, 2014, p. 99).[1] Further, as Wohlforth (2016) explained, theorists in realism seek to use centuries of international relations knowledge and practice to put into words a general theory (or body of theories) that can analyse and predict the political actions of states (p. 38). To understand realist explanations of states' behaviour, we will examine the *conditions* and *assumptions* that all theories acknowledge and then map how each bases its argument on them.

CONDITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The conditions that most realist theories acknowledge have been derived from Thomas Hobbes' book *Leviathan* (Williams, 1996; Wicaksono, Suyastri & Sundari, 2022). One condition pertains to human nature, *egoism,* and the other concerns the world, *anarchy (*Donnelly, 2000, pp. 13-15). Hobbes (1651/2017) presents an image of humans that are driven by one of three: competition, diffidence, or glory. As Waltz (1990) puts it: "*Competition leads to fighting for gain, diffidence to fighting to keep what has been gained, glory to fighting for reputation*" (p. 35). These drivers were summarised by Morgenthau (1946) as "*animus dominandi*" or "*lust for power*"; that is, humans have the natural

[1] *In fact, realism has also been used to explain peace. Absence of conflict or "peace" results from a dominant power providing order locally, or from states uniting against a common threat (Wohlforth, 2016, p. 42). But it is always contingent on these configurations, and conflict will ignite once they are eliminated. Meanwhile, traditional international politics explanations fail to account for the persistent patterns of war and peace in all variations of state characteristics (e.g., ideology, customs and institutions) (Waltz, 1990, p. 34).*

tendency to dominate others. And since all people are equal in ability to inflict damage using violence (either by grouping or weapons) and there is no universal authority to assure security, the natural state of life is "*Warre*" (Hobbes, 1651, Ch. 13) or, in contemporary realist wording, anarchy. But it is important to note that anarchy does not mean constant conflict or disorder. Indeed, as Mearsheimer (2001) explained: "*The realist notion of anarchy has nothing to do with conflict; it is an ordering principle, which says that the system comprises independent states that have no central authority above them*" (p. 30). He calls this the "*911 problem*", meaning that in the international setting, there is no police force to contact in case of emergency (p. 32).

Several works have focused on summarising the assumptions of realism.[2] Wohlforth (2016) stated that, in addition to egoism, there are also *groupism* and *power-centerism* that flow within all realist writings. Groupism holds that humans act primarily as members of groups, whose mere existence, expressed today through states, generates rivalry with other groups. Power-centrism means that the accumulation of power becomes the core of political life (pp. 36-37). Walt (2002) confirms this point and adds that the acquisition and management of power is the main challenge states confront (p. 200). Similarly, Dunne & Schmidt (2014) identify what they call the three Ss—*statism*, *survival* and *self-help*—which they say is common across all stripes of realism. Statism places the sovereign state as the ultimate referent object, and unlike within international settings, for realists, the problem of anarchy has been solved internally with the existence of local governments. And since the use or threat of force is legitimate, survival becomes the highest aim. Consequently, states operate in self-help, meaning they must rely on their own capabilities and can

[2] Not all literature agrees on the similarities of realisms. Tabak (2025) rejected the idea that realism has what he calls "the consensus view". In his opinion, realism did not emerge as a coherent tradition but as a fragmented and contested body of thought (pp. 1-2). The supposed assumptions are not unique to realism, but are shared with other strands of international relations scholarship, including liberal and institutional approaches (pp. 7-8).

entrust none (e.g., international organisations[3]) to guarantee their security (pp. 107-109). Further, Schmidt (2016) attributed these three Ss as the reason for the primacy of national security in foreign policy practice.[4]

For the purposes of this study, realism provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the external security environment confronting states. Its assumptions, the anarchic ordering principle and the primacy of survival define pressures that great powers confront when formulating strategy. The structural condition of the international system remains central to understanding the security challenges confronting great powers. The following subsection, therefore, turns to structural realism (neorealism), forming our baseline from which institutional mediation will be examined.

SECURITY OR POWER MAXIMISERS

Using the two conditions, egoism and anarchy, Donnelly (2000) developed a two-dimensional typology of realist theories. First axis, the weight they assign to either anarchy or egoism. Second axis, the strictness with which they adhere to a purely realist framework (pp. 11-13). *Classical* or *biological* realists, such as those who attribute conflict to human nature (Morgenthau, 1946; Niebuhr, 1932), view war as an expression of the human lust for power or even the policies of aggressive statesmen (Carr, 1939; Wolfers, 1959). In contrast, *structural* realists or *neorealists* prioritise anarchy, arguing that the absence of a world authority makes power competition unavoidable (Mearsheimer, 2001). As for the second dimension, neorealists are more open to change because anarchy, unlike human nature, can be avoided through changes (e.g., shifts in the balance of power) that can temporarily eliminate conflict (Donnelly, 2000).

[3] *Realists, like Mearsheimer (2019), argue that international institutions do not provide security guarantees because their effectiveness ultimately depends on the power and interests of the states that constitute them. When rules conflict with interest, they will ignore them (pp. 8–9).*

[4] *Schmidt (2016) outlines that national security is widely recognised as the core objective guiding state behaviour and is the fundamental challenge that statesmen face. At the same time the concept is highly contested (as discussed in Chapter 2).*

As Walt (2002) puts it: "*If conflict were ultimately due to human nature, then efforts to create a more peaceful world were doomed to fail. But if conflict arose from the circumstances in which states were placed, then in theory one could identify especially dangerous conditions and fashion appropriate policies to mitigate them*" (p. 203).

Indeed, as Wohlforth (2016) explained, classical realists often did not clarify when their ideas explained particular events versus general patterns of international behaviour. This lack of applicable precision created "*endless debates*" (p. 38). Equally important, Elman & Jensen (2014) observed that classical realism is no longer a contemporary international politics approach, but it remains the foundational school of the tradition (p. 3). Therefore, contemporary realism started with Structural Realism, which was theorised by Kenneth Waltz (2010/1979) in his book *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz (1990) explained that neorealism creates structures with similar units (states) that interact with each other; the different ways these units are combined lead to different outcomes of interactions. These structures are defined with three things: (1) an ordering principle, here anarchy (in domestic structures hierarchy), attributes of the units, here similarity, and (3) the distribution of capabilities (or power) across units (p. 29).[5]

In light of the establishment of neorealism, scholars became interested in expanding the application of its anarchic structure to aspects of state behaviour. As Walt (2002) explained, Waltz identified the structure solely based on the spread of capabilities, without considering the physical or military environments (p. 204). Further, he explicitly rejected the use of neorealism as a theory of foreign policy, arguing that foreign policy is shaped by both external and internal factors and therefore does not constitute an autonomous

[5] *In this article, Waltz (1990) defined power as "simply the combined capability of a state" (p. 36), but power in international relations theory, including different realism theories, is a heavily discussed topic that lack consensus (see for example Walt, 2002, p. 222; Schmidt, 2005; Baldwin, 2016 & Mearsheimer, 2001, Ch. 3-4).*

realm (Waltz, 1996). Accordingly, he maintained that structural realism possesses explanatory power only at the level of international politics, accounting for the outcomes of interactions among states rather than the specific foreign policies they adopt (Elman & Jensen, 2014, p. 243). Wohlforth (2016) confirms this divide and notes that from this realisation of the importance of geography and technology in explaining foreign policies, the defensive and offensive stripes were established. The next generation of structural realists was split into two camps, particularly on the issue of states' motivations and how much power they want (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21). Although Waltz himself leaned toward a security-seeking logic (Dunne & Schmidt, 2014, p. 105), later neorealists diverged over whether anarchy presses for security or power maximisation.

Defensive realists and Walt argue that states can make probabilistic judgments about other states' motivations, and that prevailing geography and technology will favour defensive postures. They argue that conquered resources are not easy to maintain and yield diminishing returns (even if they have strategic importance initially) (Glaser, 2003, p. 269; Elman & Jensen, 2014, pp. 134-135). On the other hand, *offensive realists* believe that in the same anarchic conditions, states can never be sure of others' intentions, and what is true today may change at any moment. Consequently, states are always seeking to increase their power, and conquest mostly pays off, meaning its results are cumulative (Mearsheimer, 2001; Snyder, 2002). This debate matters because it offers different expectations about state behaviour, specifically, the use of military and diplomatic instruments to balance their competitors. Balancing behaviour will be further addressed in the second section of this chapter.

Despite their disagreement, defensive and offensive scholars share the neorealist premise: that anarchy-generated systemic pressures will translate rationally into foreign policy. This implies that the state is treated as a "*black box*" (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009, p. 71).

Neoclassical realists depart fundamentally from this assumption. Emerging in the 1990s, neoclassical realism combines both systemic and domestic variables to explain the variations in foreign policies and grand strategies among states (Schweller, 2004, p. 164; Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 19). Rose (1998), who coined the name of the approach, wrote: "*Its [neoclassical realism] adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system*" for that reason, they are realists. But they go further and argue that "*the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level*", and that is why they are neoclassical. They are "*updating and systematizing*" the classical realist thought (p.146).

While this study accepts the neorealist understanding that anarchy and the distribution of capabilities generate systemic stimuli, i.e., its *independent variable* (IV), it departs from purely structural explanations by adopting the neoclassical realist approach that pressures are filtered through domestic-level mechanisms. In particular, the research argues that the national security institutions play an essential role in mediating between systemic pressures and grand strategic adjustments (GSAs).

IMPERFECT TRANSMISSION BELT

As mentioned, neoclassical realists introduce multiple domestic-level factors that mediate between systemic constraints and state behaviour. It follows that an examination of the state is needed, as states with the same capabilities but different characteristics will act differently (Rose, 1998). As Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro (2009) explained, '*Neoclassical realism posits an imperfect "transmission belt" between systemic incentives and constraints, on the one hand, and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies states select, on the other*'. They note that over a long period of time, the actual distribution of capabilities will match international outcomes, but the short-term policies are not always predictable based on the systemic factors alone (p. 4). Within later works, Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell (2016) mention that while international politics and foreign policy will neither be determined solely by system nor domestic-level factors, in extreme circumstances, one might dominate. Consequently, it is better understood as a spectrum, on one end, systemic determinism (no agency), and on the other end, domestic determinism (complete agency) (pp. 4-5). They further explain that neoclassical realism theory addresses these variances by identifying intervening variables at different levels of analysis and then demonstrating how they produce outcomes or dependent variables (p. 7).

Therefore, the theory assumes that decision-makers devise their strategies, alternating between two levels. They have to respond to external environment pressures, while also extracting resources and maintaining support from their society (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009). That is why leaders' perception and misperception are the first of four stages that make the transmission belt process imperfect. First, decision-makers interpret external developments through personal cognitive filters, potentially misjudging threats or relative power distribution. Second, the clarity of systemic signals is often low. The international system does not always generate unambiguous indicators about power shifts. Third, problems of rationality arise because leaders operate under limited human ability and imperfect information; consequently, they may adopt suboptimal strategies. Fourth, even when leaders correctly perceive systemic incentives, they must mobilise state resources to respond. This requires extracting resources from society, a process governed by domestic institutions and elite cohesion (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, pp. 19-25).

Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell (2016) identify three types of neoclassical realism. Type I explains foreign policy deviations from balance of power (e.g., Underbalancing) predictions by incorporating intervening variables. Type II expands the analysis to grand strategy, focusing on broader patterns of state

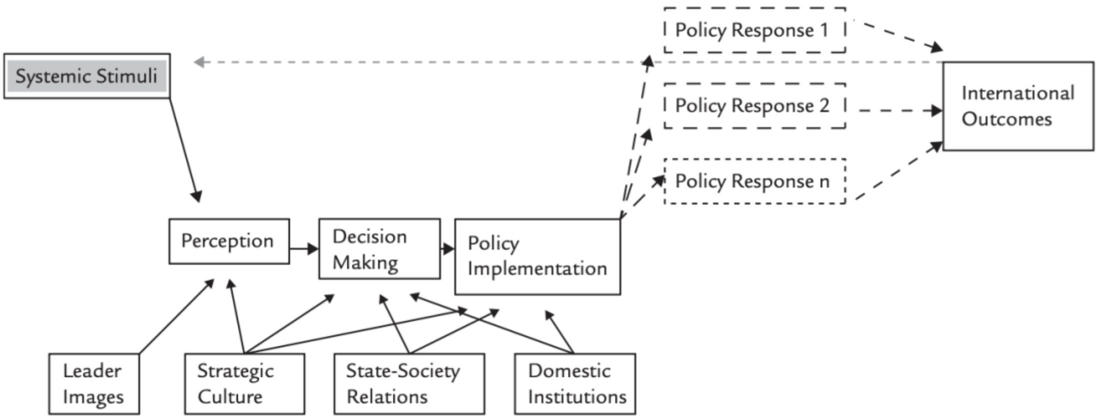

Figure 1.1. Components of Neoclassical Realism

Source: Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell (2016, p. 34)

behaviour and how internal conditions affect grand strategic adjustments (pp. 26-31). Type III is the most ambitious, seeking to explain international systemic change and outcomes by arguing that great powers' grand strategies interact and shape alliance formations, balancing behaviour and international outcomes. In effect, it is a neoclassical realist theory of international politics (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016, p. 80-82; Meibauer et al., 2021, p. 278).

Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell (2016) further organise the neoclassical theory by extracting from the canon four broad groups of intervening variables (see Figure 1.1). Images and perception of leaders, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutional arrangements (p. 59). For the purposes of this study, two of these categories are particularly relevant: leaders' perceptions and domestic institutions. Leader images shape the perception process, acting as cognitive filters through which executives interpret incoming external pressures (pp. 61–65). By contrast, domestic institutional arrangements shape the processes of decision-making and policy implementation by determining who participates in policy formation, which actors serve as veto players and how effectively state resources can be mobilised (pp. 75–78). However, these two variables operate at different temporal levels within the transmission process. Because national security institutions constitute formal domestic structures through which strategic choices are processed and implemented, these policies will operate for years, maybe even decades (Kitchen, 2010, p. 120). At the same time, these institutions do not function autonomously; they are shaped by their leaders, who guide them, specifically in short-term foreign policies (Meibauer, 2020, pp. 32-33). As recent neoclassical realist scholarship argued, international pressures do not translate automatically into state behaviour but are filtered through leaders' beliefs, who channel them through existing institutions when formulating policy (Meibauer, 2025).

In other words, in this research, the prime intervening variable (IVV) is domestic institutional arrangements, but complements it as a secondary one, is leaders' perception. These intervening variables shape how systemic pressures are interpreted and translated into strategic responses. Consequently, their variation helps explain why states respond differently to similar structural conditions, such as their balancing behaviour.

1.2. State (Under)Balancing Behaviour

The balance of power theory has long been a part of the realist tradition. Wolfers (1959), a classical realist, explains that when the balance of power is mentioned in international relations, it generally means the distribution of power among states. However, it can also take multiple meanings; it can either be the ideal power distribution, automatic equilibrium or a goal for policymakers in foreign policy (pp. 2-3). Nonetheless, it was Waltz (2010) who made the theory a crucial part of neorealism, restating it as an automatic phenomenon, which can be used to understand state behaviour (Nexon, 2009, pp. 336-338).

NEOREALIST BALANCE OF POWER

Waltz (2010) explained that anarchy limits cooperation among states in two ways. First, states worry about relative gains; a state remains concerned that others may gain more, thereby potentially threatening its security. Second, states fear dependence. Exchange can create reliance on others for critical goods and services, which creates strategic vulnerability. Therefore, even when leaders recognise that cooperation could benefit both collaborators, structural constraints discourage it (pp. 105-106). But that does not mean that cooperation does not happen. When anarchy is partially dampened by hierarchical elements[6], states reach agreements and create organisations, but only within the boundaries of the system (p. 115). Within the structural environment, the balance of power is an automatic process. As capabilities shift, states respond through "*action and reaction, and reaction to the reaction*," producing a piecemeal adjustment mechanism (p.113). Each state is seeking, at a minimum, survival, and they pursue this goal through two principal means: *internal* and *external* balancing. Internal balancing involves the development of economic, military or technological capabilities within the state itself. External means are the state's diplomatic efforts to either expand its alliances or weaken its peer competitors (p. 118).

MILITARISATION AND DIPLOMACY

With the inclusion of the balance of power theory within realism, scholars became interested in discussing the different mechanisms through which it occurs. Waltz (2010) originally stated two strategies, *balancing* and *bandwagoning*, and which of them will be initiated depends on the characteristics of the system. Balancing will happen when victory is clear and places the other's survival in jeopardy. While bandwagoning will happen when gains are possible for both camps and survival is not on the line (p. 126). Walt (1985), a defensive realist, confirmed this and explained that states choose balancing for two reasons: in addition to survival, joining the weaker side

[6] *Hierarchical elements refer to arrangements within the international system, where power is still not equally divided, but it is delegated. They can facilitate arms control and cooperation, but their effectiveness remains conditional (see Mearsheimer, 2019). A prominent example is the United Nations, where the veto power of the permanent five stands as a power regulator.*

against the strong increases influence, not decreases it. As for bandwagoning, it is either for appeasement, to divert attacks, or to share the spoils (pp. 5-8).

Mearsheimer (2001), the founder of offensive realism, diverged fundamentally. He listed two categories: strategies to shift the balance of power in states' favour and strategies to prevent shifts against them. The former can be achieved through war, blackmail, or other similar means. While for the latter, he rejects appeasement or bandwagoning as sound strategies and frames the choice between *balancing* or *buck-passing* (pp. 138-140). Balancing means that great powers take direct responsibility for the process. As for buck-passing, they look for another state that is also threatened by the aggressor to do the work. To accomplish it, there are four measures: seek good relations with the aggressor, maintain cold relations with the buck-catcher, mobilise additional resources, and facilitate the growth of the buck-catcher power (pp. 158-159).

Scholars also established their own realist balance of power theory. Walt (1985) established the *balance of threat* theory to explain alliances. For him, balancing or bandwagoning are better understood with the level of threat a state may pose, not only power. Consequently, threat is measured by four factors: aggregate power, proximity power, offensive power and offensive intentions (p. 9). Each of these factors can trigger events with either balancing or bandwagoning. For example, when responding to a proximate threat with bandwagoning, the phenomenon of "*sphere of influence*" happens. And when the offensive power permits rapid conquest, threatened states will see no chance of resisting, so they bandwagon. Intentions play a major role, as even small power states may trigger balancing if they are perceived as aggressive (pp. 11-12). Of equal importance, Glaser's (1994) "*contingent realism*," which maintains that Herz (1950) security dilemma phenomenon is not uniform across contexts and that cooperation among states is possible when the offense–defense balance favours defence and when states can reliably distinguish between offensive and defensive military postures (pp. 57–60).

Nevertheless, neorealists agree that balancing behaviour is common in international relations. Walt (1985) explains that balancing is dominant because states will be more secure and preserve more freedom of acting than if they bandwagon, which is what invites the use of force within the international system. After all, it will be rewarded (pp. 13-15). Mearsheimer (2001) mentions that balancing is always happening, even if it is buck-passing, because it is essentially who does the balancing, not if it gets done (p. 269). More recently, Parent & Rosato (2015) did a quantitative analysis of historical great-power behaviour, putting the neorealist balancing understanding to test. They analysed three forms of balancing: internal balancing through armament or imitation of successful military practices and external balancing through diplomacy. Their findings show overwhelming support for internal mobilisation, either by expanding military capabilities (82%) or by emulating the organisational and technological innovations of peer competitors (79%). By contrast, external balancing, they find that although states will enter into alliances, they seldom rely on them, they are rare, risky and unresponsive. In short, Alliances are formed when conflict is inevitable. However, while these results confirm the existence of balancing behaviour, they still show that great powers sometimes fail to balance; these shortcomings require more elaboration using neoclassical realism.

BALANCING ANOMALIES AND VARIANTS

The neoclassical realist understanding of the balance of power agrees with neorealism that balancing is a predicted state behaviour. Either externally forming alliances or internally building arms and imitating others; however, it argues that states' reaction to the relative change of power in the international system is not automatic; it is not a law of nature. Schweller (2004) established the theory of *underbalancing*; his analysis of states' politics reveals many cases of them failing to balance, instead, in his words, "*they bandwagoned, buck-passed, appeased, or adopted ineffective half measures*" (p. 160). He argues that there are domestic political risks to leaders if they adopt a balancing policy. Because war is a heavy undertaking, elites carefully weigh the domestic costs of balancing against alternative options (p. 161)

Accordingly, he divided these options into four. First, appropriate balancing, when the opponent should not be appeased. Second, inappropriate balancing (or overbalancing) is when an aggressor is misperceived, triggering unnecessary actions. Third, nonbalancing, which can be bandwagoning, buck-passing or appeasement. Fourth, underbalancing occurs when a state fails to balance or does so inefficiently against the aggressor, leading to a war that could have been avoided or become more costly (Schweller, 2004, pp. 167-168).

Schweller (2004), neoclassical realist theory further identifies four domestic intervening variables that determine which option the state will opt for. Of the *willingness* to balance, elite consensus and elite cohesion. Of the *ability* to balance, government/regime vulnerability and social cohesion. Elite consensus plays a central role; when they agree on the threat and the political cost of mobilisation, states are more likely to balance (pp. 170-171). Elite cohesion means the degree to which the leadership is divided by internal division. It may be ideological, cultural, or any other type of loyalty (p. 180). As for the regime vulnerability and social cohesion, they are the strengths of the ruling coalition and the strength of ties between individuals, respectively. Greater stability expands feasible policy options for the state (pp. 173-175).

Further, the theory organises these intervening variables into five causal schemes that describe how they interact (Schweller, 2006, p. 62). In doing so, it moves the analysis beyond balancing decisions and situates underbalancing within the framework of grand strategy, which is the next section's main topic.

1.3. State Strategic Behaviour

Grand strategy holds a central role in international security literature but lacks an accepted definition. Scholars' discussions revolve around presenting their own interpretations or countering neorealism using the term. Following the Cold War, its usage increased, further complicating the concept (Silove, 2018, pp. 27-28). Consequently, scholars sought to differentiate their meanings.

COMPETING GRAND STRATEGIES

Silove (2018) identifies three meanings: *grand plans*, *grand principles* and *grand behaviour*. Grand plans are formal documents deliberately written by political leaders to align the long-term objectives with the use of military, diplomatic and economic instruments (pp. 35-36). Grand principles differ from plans in that they are less detailed; they are general frameworks or overarching guides. It mostly advocates towards a direction, such as isolationism or primacy (pp. 39-41). Finally, grand behaviour is assumed to take shape out of a series of governmental decisions about alliance diplomacy and defence spending, meaning it is reactive and slow-emerging (pp. 43-44).

Lissner (2018) contends that typologies, including Silove's, clarify how grand strategy can be observed but not how it should be studied theoretically. Accordingly, she articulates an alternative classification, grand strategy as a *variable*, *process* or *blueprint*. As a variable, it comes from scholarly study of state behaviour, mainly from the realist tradition. It can be either an output (without agency), which is the neorealist understanding or a tool (relative agency) that interacts with structural constraints, creating grand strategic outcomes, which is the neoclassical realist understanding (pp. 57-58). As a process, it is how the government articulate its national security strategy and "*effectively link ends, ways and means might*". It can guide domestic institutions and signal a direction internationally. As a blueprint, it is similar to Silove's principles, which call for a specific foreign policy stand (p. 61-65).

Overall, these meanings share structural similarities. They are defined by ends and means. Also, they share the characteristics of grandness: long-term in scope and holistically concerned with all aspects of statecraft (Silove, 2018, pp. 45-46; Lissner, 2018, p. 56). However, for the purposes of this research, grand strategy is defined primarily as grand behaviour. It is understood as the evolving pattern through which governments align ends and means in response to international pressures (i.e., shifts in relative capabilities). Nevertheless, formal grand plans documents—such as National Security Strategies (NSS)—are treated as evidence of this process. In this way, plans are not grand strategies by themselves, but empirical indicators of adjustments.

GRAND STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENTS

With the emergence of neoclassical realism, unit-level variables were introduced to understand international outcomes, and scholars were able to include grand strategy within the theory. Kitchen (2010) theorised an NCR grand strategy model; he employs grand strategic adjustments and specifies how these changes can be identified. Rather than rigid typologies (e.g., expansionist or status quo), Kitchen argues that strategic change should be observed through shifts in instruments. Therefore, variations in military deployments and expenditure, alliance commitments and diplomatic engagement, and the general tone toward adversaries should be examined. These observable instruments provide empirical signs of adjustment (pp. 136-138). Onea (2021) goes further and suggests that grand strategy should be treated as the structure of realism. Crucially, states grand strategies do not interact with one another; rather, each grand strategy interacts with the structure, shaping and being shaped by the distribution of power. Thus, grand strategy becomes the link between systemic structure and international outcomes (pp. 277-280).

Hermann (1990) offers a useful framework for understanding how and why foreign policy changes over time. He distinguishes four levels of change. The first is *adjustment change*, where governments simply increase or decrease the effort devoted to an existing policy without changing objectives. The second is *programme change*, which involves changing instruments used to pursue the same goals, for example, shifting from military coercion to diplomacy. More substantial are *goal/problem changes*, where policymakers change the objectives themselves. Finally, the most extensive transformation is *international orientation change*, where a state alters its role in world politics and its relationships with other actors (pp. 5–6). Grand strategic adjustments resemble the latter two forms of change, particularly international orientation change, because they involve shifts in the overarching direction through which states pursue security.

He also emphasised that policymakers operate according to a hierarchy of priorities. Decision-makers are driven to address the most fundamental first, typically survival, before moving to lower priorities such as domestic concerns. When there is any indication of unsatisfactory performance at some level, leaders attempt corrective action. In this sense, foreign policy change often happens when existing strategies fail to satisfy high priorities (Hermann, 1990, p. 9). Finally, he identifies four main sources of foreign policy change: leader-driven, bureaucratic advocacy, domestic restructuring and external shocks. *Leader-driven* change occurs when a powerful decision-maker imposes a new strategic vision. *Bureaucratic advocacy* arises when groups within the state apparatus push for redirection of policy. *Domestic restructuring* refers to shifts in the political coalition. *External shocks* originate in dramatic international events that cannot be ignored (Hermann, 1990, pp. 11–13) (see Figure 1.2).

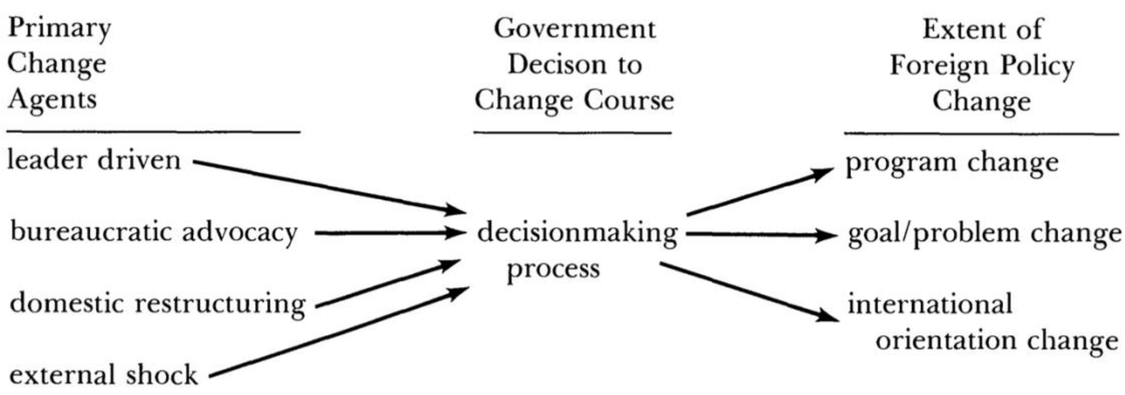

Figure 1.2. Foreign Policy Change Process
Source: Hermann (1990, p. 13)

For the purposes of this research, the most relevant sources are bureaucratic advocacy, emerging within national security institutions, and external shocks, which can trigger reassessments of strategy and initiate balancing behaviour through foreign policy change. Further, in this study, the dependent variable (DV) is grand strategic adjustment (GSA). These shifts will be observed through changes in military posture, alliance formation and diplomatic engagements. In effect, national security institutions will be situated as part of the transmission belt through which such adjustments are interpreted and implemented.

FOREIGN POLICY EXECUTIVE

As explained, grand strategy encompasses a state's long-term behaviour in matching ends with means. Consequently, the decision-making process involves multiple policymakers and governmental bodies, resulting in complexity. For that reason, neoclassical realism suggests identifying the members and composition of the Foreign Policy Executive (FPE). Lobell (2009) introduces them as those who "*occupy critical positions in the administration, and are responsible for long-term grand strategic planning, including the identification of changes in the global or regional balance of power*" (p. 45). Further, they are "*Janus-faced*", meaning they focus both outwards on the systemic and subsystemic balance of power, where states compete and inwards on the domestic balance of power, where societal blocs compete (p. 43).[7] It follows that the FPE can act domestically for international ends and internationally for domestic ones; they decide which components of internal power should be increased to safeguard the balance of power (pp. 56-62). Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell (2016) highlight defining the hierarchy between executives. Starting from the head of government (e.g., the President, the Prime Minister) and then separating those who influence security affairs (e.g.,

[7] *Subsystemic balance of power operates within regional bounded arenas, where local powers compete for dominance or security under dynamics that are semi-autonomous from the global system. Domestic balance of power, by contrast, concerns competition among societal blocs over the distribution of political and economic authority (Lobell, 2009, pp. 49–51).*

Minister of Foreign Affairs, National Security Advisor) from other cabinet members. This process is mostly important in non-democratic regimes (e.g., One-party systems) where the FPE can be only a few individuals (pp. 125-127).

A complementary lens is Allison & Zelikow's (1999) Governmental Politics Model (Model III).[8] The model views foreign policy as the result of a bargaining or "*national security policy game*" among officials rather than as a single decision. In this arena, *Chiefs* are the senior leaders—President, Ministers and National Security Advisors; *Indians* are the officials within departments; and *Staffers* are the aides who develop options and manage procedures. "*Where you stand depends on where you sit*" captures how institutional position shapes perceived interests (ch. 5).

This chapter has reviewed the principal literature concerning realism, balance of power and grand strategy. It established systemic stimuli as the independent variable and grand strategic adjustment as the dependent variable, while establishing national security institutions as the intervening mechanism. This constructed theoretical framework will guide the analysis of how great powers operationalise national security through state institutions.

[8] *Model I (Rational Actor) explain foreign policy as the product of a unitary rational state. While Model II (Organizational Process) explains foreign policy as the output of established routines and standard operating procedures (SOPs) (Allison & Zelikow, 1999).*

CHAPTER 2: Conceptualising Security: Ambiguity and Expansion

Statesmen invoke national security, sometimes to mobilise, sometimes to justify and often without precision. Yet behind this rhetoric lies a long, layered genealogy. This chapter reconstructs this evolution in two sections. The first section begins with the geopolitical foundations of security in Spykman and its academic articulation by Earle, before turning to Wolfers' explanation of its ambiguity within the realist tradition. It then examines Leffler's integration of domestic core values. The second section introduces the expansion movements, mainly by Buzan and Wæver's widening agenda and securitisation framework. The chapter concludes with Baldwin's seven specifications, which provide an applicable analytical concept of national security.

2.1. Foundational Definitions of National Security

We trace the intellectual origins of the contemporary concept of National Security to two movements in the 1930s and 1940s. The *first* movement emerged from the upheavals of the Great Depression (1929-1939), a crisis that shook faith in self-regulating markets. Writings in that time linked economic and social conditions to liberty and security (Neocleous, 2006, p. 367). These ideas were best articulated by economist Harold Laski, who argued that liberty cannot exist where economic insecurity prevails. Laski (1948) wrote in 1930: "*It is when the economy of a society begins to contract that liberty is in danger. Economic contractions always mean fear, and fear always breeds suspicion. It is then that the rulers of a society begin to regard liberty with dislike*" (p. 15). Here, Laski explains how the instability of capitalism undermines society by producing fear. When economic security collapses, civil freedoms quickly follow. Therefore, values and security are dependent on an internal order that guarantees access to material and employment.

The *second* movement was established by Edward Mead Earle, who employed a school of thought in borderless geopolitics to identify security as encompassing both territory and values (Preston, 2014, 494). The argument was built on the idea that in the globalised world, geography is the most permanent factor shaping foreign policy, more so than governments or leaders, because geographic features like mountains and seas are unchanging (Earle, 1943, p. 95). Scholars such as Spykman (1938) argued that geography does not determine policy but conditions its limits. In *Geography and Foreign Policy*, he listed size and location as examples that shape possibilities, particularly by affecting access to oceans and communication routes (pp. 31–33, 40–43). Further, he argued that geography's significance has changed throughout history. Technological advances and military capabilities shifted the strategic importance of space. In this sense, geography has become "*unbounded*" not because physical space disappears, but because distance was compressed and transformed (pp. 47–49). Similarly, Cahnman (1943) argues that Geography provides the structural framework within which political action unfolds, yet its shifts with changing technology and historical context, producing dynamic spatial boundaries (pp. 57–58).

Earle took these ideas and reoriented them to national security. At the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton between 1939 and 1941, he convened academics for a seminar that debated the definition of the term. The group was provided with this initial definition: "*National security is the condition in which external attack, direct or indirect, by armed force or other means, upon the nation's territorial domain, rights, or vital interests is not likely to be made or, if made, to succeed*" (Preston, 2014, p. 495; Preston, 2021, p. 240). The definition supported the idea that isolation was a delusion in an age of interdependence and technological advancements. But they have also moved beyond geography and put forward a vision that framed national security as the preservation not only of where the state stood in space but also of what it stood for in values (Relyea, 1987, p. 12; Neocleous, 2006, p. 375).

These movements laid the groundwork for statemen, who were on the precipice of another major war, to recalibrate national security in a way that their public would understand and endorse. Laski (1948) connected security to social conditions and values. Earle (1943) emphasised that external threats could transcend borders and compromise these values. Although these intellectual concepts of national security stem from debates on social order and geopolitics, it was in the United States that these ideas were consolidated into a doctrine. The American case represents the first systematic usage of national security as a framework. The fear of losing precious freedoms will lead to mobilisation and to face threats, wherever they may lie.

WORLD WAR DOCTRINE

For much of its early history, the United States enjoyed what historians describe as "*Free Security*", the belief that geography provided natural protection. Vast oceans solidified a conviction that safety was assured through isolation rather than power projection. In this situation, foreign policy is a choice, not a necessity. Free security remained intact even during the Great War. When President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war in 1917, he justified it not for sovereignty or security, but as a responsibility to civilisation (Preston, 2014, pp. 486-487). It also explains why America did not join the League of Nations, simply because it did not believe there was any reason to.

All of this changed with the Great Depression. As Neocleous (2006) argues, the crisis redefined insecurity not as an external condition only but also as instability within capitalism itself. President Roosevelt's New Deal, supported by academics like Laski, reframed state responsibility; security had to be maintained through governance and regulation. That is why Roosevelt framed programmes such as Social Security not merely as welfare but as central to sustaining the nation's survival. Socioeconomics became synonymous with national strength, and national security is the economic security of individuals. In this context, FDR said his famous lines in 1933:

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself —nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyses needed efforts to convert retreat into advance"[9]

As Europe descended into war with Nazi Germany, President Roosevelt skillfully used Earle's expanded definition of national security and argued that America's way of life was at risk. He merged the traditional concept of sovereignty with a desire to protect and promote American values globally. In fact, FDR mentioned national security during this time, between 1938 and 1941, more times than all presidents preceding him combined (Preston, 2014, p. 490). He also emphasised that security now depended on the survival of international economic openness. Because the use of air power and modern warfare meant that geographical distances were obsolete (Neocleous, 2006). Roosevelt reasoned that Nazi control of Eurasia would pose a direct threat to economies through markets and resources. The public's acceptance of government intervention in the economy under the New Deal provided a receptive ground for expanding national security and legitimising the intervention, on the side of similar ideological allies in World War II (Thompson, 2005, pp. 673-675).

Roosevelt was the architect of this complex doctrine; that is why his death in 1945 left a void in its articulation. As the Cold War dawned, the national security framework inherited this complexity but lacked the skill to link its elements; thus, the concept became ubiquitous.

AMBIGUOUS CONCEPT

It is a sign of great leadership when a statesman guides his people through fierce challenges in ways they would never have. Roosevelt's redefinition of how Americans conceived national security is an example. Henry Kissinger wrote about this in his seminal book Diplomacy: "*Roosevelt's methods were complex—elevated in their statement of objectives, devious in tactic, explicit in*

[9] *First inaugural address of Franklin D. Roosevelt (Roosevelt, 1933).*

defining the issues, and less than frank in explaining the intricacies of particular events. Many of Roosevelt's actions were on the fringes of constitutionality" (Kissinger, 1994, p. 387).[10]

After the Second World War and the start of the Cold War, American policymakers found it difficult to establish a post-FDR national security doctrine. National security was used to label policies attractively and deceptively, to collect consensus, or even to shield allegations of spying (Sorensen, 1990; Hoffmann, 2005; Martin Hobbs, Lowe, & Holbrook, 2025). In this context, the concept of national security was situated in a broader tension between international relations theories, mainly between the realists and idealists. Liberal thought linked security to international cooperation, collective institutions and the protection of individual rights. In contrast, realist theory treated security as the survival of the state under conditions of anarchy (Wendt, 1992; Doyle, 2016; Schmidt, 2016). Arnold Wolfers's (1952) article on the ambiguity of national security represents the realist tradition understanding. He described the vagueness of the concept and set up a framework that would usher in every future discussion within the field of national security, which some argue is still somewhat ambiguous today (da Cruz, 2021).

Wolfers (1952) started by explaining what is considered a national interest. In effect, it establishes a hierarchy where national concerns outweigh individual or, with the establishment of the United Nations, even universal concerns (p. 481). Similarly, Morgenthau (1949), a classical realist, argued that principles and national interest have contended throughout history. While moral principles guide individual conduct, they cannot guide states in the international arena (p. 208). Therefore, during the Cold War, individual welfare

[10] *In chapter 15, America Re-enters the Arena: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Kissinger (1994) describes how Roosevelt reshaped U.S. foreign policy from isolationism to global leadership. He argues that he mergerd Wilsonian Idealism with great power politics.*

became overshadowed by the concern for state security. Further, with possible nuclear conflicts, the national interest became synonymous with national security. In *The Absolute Weapon*, Brodie (1946) echoes this, explaining that nuclear weapons transformed the nature of military strategy, shifting the objective from winning wars to preventing them. Wolfers (1946) writes in the same volume, discussing the political aspect, noting that international relations evolved to prevent a catastrophic conflict. Nuclear mutual assured destruction (MAD), therefore, transformed national security by making survival the ultimate priority. As both superpowers achieved second-strike capabilities, the value of security rose above all, since even minor conflicts threatened extinction (Debs, 2025).

Security, then, is defined as a state value comparable to wealth and power, to which nations may aspire in varying degrees. Nations aim for more or less security depending on perceived threats. Security may be understood objectively as the *absence of danger* or subjectively as the *absence of fear* (Wolfers, 1952, p. 485). The nation's reaction to threats is largely but not exclusively determined by its history and culture. For example, those recently attacked tend to exaggerate dangers, while nations long at peace underestimate them. Recent writings also emphasised that the value of security is context-dependent; it may be interpreted positively (enabling freedoms) or negatively (absence of threat), and thus its meaning varies (Hoogensne Gjørv, 2012; Nyman, 2016).

The level of how a nation estimates its danger also has a direct impact on its relations with other nations. As Herz (1950) coined the term *security dilemma,* which describes the paradox that when a nation increases military power to protect itself, others may interpret this buildup as aggressive, prompting them to arm. This cycle was adopted by Wolfers. The *attack propensity* concept captures this logic and distinguishes two types of states along a spectrum. At one pole are aggressive states, those willing to attack whenever success is likely. At the opposite pole are non-aggressive states, those that would not initiate war even if they could win. Wolfers (1952) explains: "… *security in respect to the first group can come exclusively as a result of 'positions of strength' sufficient to deter or defeat attack, nothing could do more to undermine security in respect to the second group than to start accumulating power*" (p. 496). Then he moves to the moral dilemma of national security policy, which lies in the implicit value judgments. To prioritise national security is already to make a moral choice, at the expense of other values such as justice and liberty. A state increasing its armament or signing alliances with autocracies does so under the cover of security over morality (pp. 498-501). And so, statesmen are faced with a choice: how much security is enough and which values to sacrifice. Morality and expediency become equally ambiguous elements.

DOMESTIC CORE VALUES

As explained before, the primacy of national security after World War II was ignited by two main changes: firstly, a change in the structure of the international system, to a Cold War between two hegemons and secondly, technological progress in producing weapons. These conditions transferred the control of war from the military to civilian experts.[11] Within this new reality, national security literature was divided into categories based on approach, either emphasising conflict and power maximisation or cooperation and interdependence, and by level of analysis, focusing on specific policies. This expansion to nearly all policy areas, as Bock and Berkowitz (1966) described, turned the usage of the term into a "*ritualistic appeal to some mystical national*

[11] *With the rise of the new multi-disciplinary national security field, the U.S. government increasingly relied on privately funded research organizations such as the RAND Corporation (Air Force), the Operations Research Office (Army), the Operations Evaluation Group (Navy) and the Institute for Defense Analyses (Department of Defense), all supported largely through defense contracts to employ civilian engineers, scientists and academics on policy-relevant problems. There were also personnel exchanges to the other side, as many officials leaving public service joined centres like Brookings Institute and Council on Foreign Relations, where they continued contributing to national security research (Bock & Berkowitz, 1966, p. 123).*

security interest", which amplified the ambiguity (p. 132). Nevertheless, in their work, they reviewed the theoretical content and extracted a definition. They reached that national security is "*the ability of a nation to protect its internal values from external threats*", a definition that echoes the foundational text by Earle's academic group in 1940 (p. 134). They also distinguished between defining values and protecting them. National security policy is not about choosing a nation's values but rather safeguarding those values as they are given by policymakers. And although works in the field were not fully materialised, its framework's strength lies in its ability to comparatively analyse multiple systems and to study both war and peace strategies (Bock & Berkowitz, 1968).

Melvyn Leffler (1990) drew directly from this intellectual lineage to explain the concept for historical analysis. In his 1990 essay, he famously wrote: "*National security policy encompasses the decisions and actions deemed imperative to protect domestic core values from external threats*" (p. 143). His contribution lay in transforming Bock and Berkowitz's definition into a comparative tool. For him, the national security framework's power is derived from its synthetic quality, enabling the interpretation of multiple variables within any period. National Power, he observed, is measured by political stability, social cohesion, plus the military infrastructure in possession (Leffler, 2004, p. 128).

Key for Leffler (1990) is threat perception; assessments of danger depend on various factors such as technological change, leadership ideology, and, most importantly, the structure of the international system. For example, he observed that American policymakers perceived the Soviet Union differently in 1945 and 1947, not because behaviour changed, but because the international environment had shifted (p. 125). Here, he aligns with McCormick's world systems interpretation, which situates security within the broader capitalist economy. McCormick (1990) argued that power relations reflect a hierarchy between core (first world countries; high tech), semiperipheral (second world countries; intermediate functions and capital movement) and peripheral (third world countries; production of agriculture and raw materials) states (p. 126). In this way, economic interdependence shapes perceptions of threat (Wallerstein, 1974).

Danger perception is the product of core values, which are the fusion of material interests, such as access to markets, with fundamental goals like democracy and sovereignty. Identifying these values requires analysing trade-offs made by governmental actors, institutions and civil society organisations. Core values are thus the objectives that emerge after compromises among competing goals; they are the aims a state is willing to defend "*whatever the cost*," the ones "*worth fighting for*" (Leffler, 1990, p. 145). The national security approach, Leffler (2004) concluded, demands a multidisciplinary insight from psychology, international relations theory, decision-making behaviour and organisational design and management (p. 133).

Ultimately, Leffler's formulation linked the protection of core values to the perception of external threats; his framework is capable of integrating domestic politics and the global system. Nevertheless, it remained largely military-centric, reflecting the conditions of the Cold War, which facilitated a realist understanding of national security as power competition under anarchy. As the international order changed and new forms of insecurity—economic, societal, and environmental—challenged classical assumptions, scholars began to question whether security was structurally determined at all. Indeed, as Wendt (1992) famously argued, "*anarchy is what states make of it*" (p. 395), implying that security practices are socially constructed through identities and shared understandings rather than by relative material power (pp. 395–399). The following section, therefore, turns to these constructivist perceptions of threat.

2.2. Expansive Definitions of National Security

By the 1980s, scholars began to challenge the narrow conception of national security as military threats could no longer reflect the insecurities of modern societies. And as the Cold War wound down, this intellectual shift intensified. Economic instability, environmental degradation and demographic pressures became the centre of the literature, arguing for a multidimensional definition of security. The redefining security works laid down the foundation for a widened "*Security Agenda*" within the international security studies field.

REDEFINE SECURITY MOVEMENT

In his influential article, Richard Ullman (1983) criticised the current definition of security as "*excessively narrow and excessively military terms*". He argued that such a definition produced a "*false image of reality*", which was dangerous because it limited state priorities and encouraged a cycle of militarisation in international relations, thereby making the world less secure (pp. 129-130). He uses game theory to argue that the game is not "*zero-sum*", meaning countries and their allies are not safer than other enemy countries. Instead, the cycle makes the game a "*negative-sum*" one, leaving all players less secure (p. 132). With this condition, he argues, security is not a goal but a consequence. Therefore, he proceeds and proposes an alternative definition of threats:

> *"... a threat to national security is an action or sequence of events that (1) threatens drastically and over a relatively brief span of time to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state, or (2) threatens significantly to narrow the range of policy choices available to the government of a state or to private, nongovernmental entities (persons, groups, corporations) within the state."*
> *(Ullman, 1983, p. 133)*

He concludes by describing the political convenience of military threats; he observed that they are easier for leaders to mobilise public opinion around because they involve obvious enemies and quantifiable solutions such as weapons. Military expenditure, he noted, creates an illusion of precision because it produces numbers, yet no way to measure the security gained. Nonmilitary threats lack such clarity and are therefore neglected despite posing greater long-term risks. This dynamic is why the state remains the sole "*market*" authority for purchasing security (Ullman, 1983, pp. 150-152).

Later, authors began to concentrate on specific areas of security concerns, such as re-incorporating economic security as a national security dimension. Sorensen (1990), writing after the end of the Cold War, argued that the threat that justified most of the military budget is gone (i.e., U.S.S.R.), yet policymakers had failed to build a new concept of security grounded in economic vitality, innovation and cooperation. He warned that excessive defence spending was shifting resources from education and investment. Similarly, Romm (1993) explained that the nation's strength depends on its ability to sustain productivity and technological innovation. He highlighted several vulnerabilities: trade deficits, foreign debt and dependence on imported oil. These weaknesses, he argues, undermine policymaking and reduce the country's capacity to act, precisely the kind of narrowing of policy choices that Ullman (1983) had identified in his redefinition of security.

Building on Ullman's definition that insecurity stems from any condition that degrades the quality of life, scholars argued for environmental degradation as a primary national security threat. Brown (1986) stated that "*new sources of danger arise from oil depletion, soil erosion, shrinking forests, and climate alteration*" (p. 25). For Brown, resources such as productive land, water and energy were being exhausted by unsustainable growth. In his view, true security required restoring ecological balance, not expanding arsenals, which accelerates insecurity through environmental neglect. Matthews (1989) further developed this argument, where she called for expanding the concept to include environmental and demographic threats because resource strains were beginning to "*break down the sacred boundaries of national sovereignty*" (p. 162). Environmental issues, she argued, had become transnational as they could trigger migration crises and social unrest. Romm (1993) confirmed this link, arguing that "*environmental degradation and global climate change are national security threats in their own right*" (p. 51).

The National Security discourse that had expanded through the mentioned works was still conceptually fragmented. Each author had highlighted a different dimension of insecurity—economic, environmental, or societal—but the field lacked a theoretical structure. It was within this context that Barry Buzan's (2016/1991) *People, States and Fear* was republished in 1991 as an attempt to conceptualise the widening agenda.

WIDENED SECURITY AGENDA

Buzan (2016) states that a simple-minded concept of security, equated with only military threats, is a barrier to the development of a security theory and can even become part of the problem. Because it assumes that insecurity is primarily from external hostile actors and ignores the high-level interdependence of actors seeking security. It treats security as a one-dimensional and state-centric problem (p. 25). Further, he criticised both intellectual traditions. Realism reduces security to power, narrowing the agenda to deterrence. Idealism, by contrast, reduces security as a consequence of peace, assuming that cooperation can neutralise insecurity. Both, in his view, are incomplete: realism ignores nonmilitary aspects, while idealism underestimates the world's anarchy (p. 33). A new, versatile, multidimensional concept is thus required, one capable of analysing insecurity across levels (individual, state, system) and sectors (military, political, societal, economic, ecological) (p. 40). Ultimately, he agreed with Ullman (1983), Brown (1986), Mathews (1989) and others that the security agenda must widen.

Of equal importance, Wæver (1995) criticised the traditional security concept, which treats security as something that has existed since the dawn of humanity. Instead of arguing for it to widen, he questioned the concept itself. Therefore, he develops the *securitisation* explanation, which means turning a normal political issue (politicisation) into a security issue by saying it is an existential threat. When leaders do this, they claim the right to use exceptional measures to deal with it. In this sense, security is not just something that exists; it is something created through a speech act. *Desecuritisation* is the opposite move. It means taking an issue out of the emergency frame and bringing it back to normal politics, where it can be debated and managed without extraordinary powers. For Wæver and Buzan, this is often how it should be, because calling everything "security" expands fear and state power. In simple terms, we need less security and more ordinary politics (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, p. 29).

Coming back to Buzan (2016), he identified five reasons why the concept of security has remained underdeveloped: (1) Security is perceived by scholars as a complex concept, therefore not attracting analysis. Here, he echoes Wolfers' (1952) article, published forty years before. But he states that it is not more difficult than much-studied concepts, such as justice or peace. (2) Overlap between the security and power, reducing security to a synonym of power. (3) Multiple revolts against the realist school as too war-prone for the nuclear age. (4) Fast technological advancements in military affairs keep researchers focusing on them. (5) Political elites have incentives to preserve the ambiguity of national security, since it allows them to maximise power (pp. 29-32).

Buzan (2016) then defined referent objects as entities that need security and identified three levels: the individual, the state, and the international system. Individuals are the ultimate bearers of insecurity, but they cannot serve as the central referent object because security at this level is fragmented and varies across countries (pp. 49-51). The international system, while important for constraints, also cannot be the main referent object because it lacks agency and cannot act to secure itself. The state, therefore, becomes the primary referent object, as it is the place where individual and system-level pressure are absorbed and transferred to security policy (pp. 65-71). Wæver (1995)

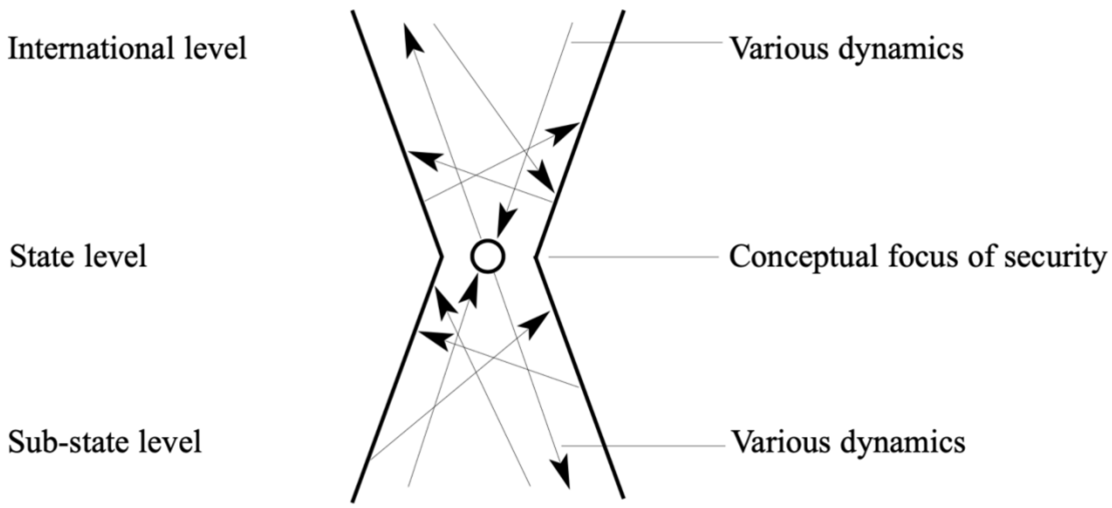

Figure 2.1. Wæver Hourglass Model

Source: Buzan (2016, p. 258)

argued that while this is an improvement, it creates ambiguity. Is security a "*triple-decker*" concept, or is national security simply contextualised by other levels? For that reason, he introduces the hourglass model (see Figure 2.1). Security is conceptually located at the state level, while international and sub-state dynamics flow into it from above and below. Meaning that security is not equally distributed across levels; it is focused on the state, but shaped by processes. In the revised edition of *People, States and Fear*, Buzan (2016) endorsed this hourglass and privileged the state, while agreeing that national security cannot be understood in isolation (pp. 258-259).

Therefore, since the state is the main referent object, the basis of Buzan's (2016) concept is distinguishing strong from weak states by how much the idea of the state resonates with its people and how effective its institutions are. A strong state possesses a cohesive national identity and legitimate institutions capable of maintaining order and managing demands. By contrast, a weak state suffers from contested legitimacy, fragile institutions or internal divisions (pp. 93-99). Further, he distinguishes between weak and strong powers, according to their physical base; this includes the territory, population and natural resources that sustain the state materially. These internal attributes, he names *vulnerabilities*, which are conditions that determine how damaging an external pressure can become. Vulnerabilities arise from deficiencies in the state's idea, institutions or physical base (e.g., divided identity, corrupt institutions, exposed borders) (pp. 104-105). *Threats*, by contrast, are external pressures that may exploit these vulnerabilities. A threat originates outside the referent object, whereas a vulnerability lies within it. For him, insecurity emerges from the interaction between the two (pp. 105-107).

Copenhagen school's scholars identified five types of threats: military, political, economic, societal and ecological. *Military* threats remain the traditional core because the use of force can damage all three components of the state and can overturn centuries of development through destruction. *Political* threats target the organisations of the state, arising from pressures that undermine its government. *Economic* threats concern access to resources, markets and production; while many risks are normal features of market competition, they become security issues when they jeopardise military or national power. *Societal* threats endanger the sustainability of national identity, language, culture, religion and ethnic minorities. Finally, *environmental* threats include resource depletion and climate-related changes that may alter borders and displace populations (Buzan, 2016, pp. 107–119; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 22-23).

The Copenhagen school's contribution transformed the fragmented redefining security debate into a coherent conceptual framework capable of analysing multiple referent objects, vulnerabilities, security actors and threat types within a single model (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). Yet this broadening also raised concerns about whether the concept is becoming overstretched (Walt, 1991, p. 213). It is precisely this problem that the next literature seeks to confront and to clarify what security should simply mean.

ANALYTICAL SECURITY CONCEPT

Baldwin's (1997) genius lies in stripping away the layers that had accumulated around the concept of national security. By the mid-1990s, the security agenda had produced a literature dominated by policy recommendations rather than conceptual rethinking. The redefining security writings, whether urging attention to environmental, economic or societal threats, were, in his words, not conceptual but policy articles using normative (which values and which people to protect) and empirical (magnitude of threats) language. While these contributions expanded the agenda, they concealed the concept of security. And the result was an illusion of disagreements between scholars (p.11).

He challenged Buzan's (2016) levels of individual, state and system. For Baldwin, these were not inseparable dimensions of the concept but a research preference. Levels of analysis help with empirical studies, yet they do not define security. Baldwin further rejected Buzan's claim that the concept of security remained underdeveloped because of five reasons: its complexity, its overlap with power, criticism of realism, technological advancements analysis, and political necessity. The reason, he argued, is the scholarly community's lack of interest in conceptualising it. Compared to concepts such as power or peace, security had been omitted from analysis (Baldwin, 1997, p. 9).

Therefore, he does not propose a new framework, theory or test of hypotheses, but describes the concept itself. Without a clear one, scholars speak past each other, and policymakers fail to distinguish policies (Baldwin, 1997, p. 6). He returned to Arnold Wolfers' (1952) essay, which he regarded as the last serious attempt to specify the meaning of security. He uses Wolfers' definition, "*security is the absence of threat to acquired values*", but to include a wider array of threats, such as earthquakes, as suggested by Ullman (1983), he changes it to "*security is a low probability of damage to acquired values*". In this way, he does not change the probability of threats happening, but only the probability of damage. With this in mind, he states two specifications that define security as an objective, followed by five specifications that describe policies to achieve that objective (Baldwin, 1997, p. 13).

First specification is *"(i) security for whom?"*, here a wide range of answers are acceptable, the individual (some, most, or all individuals), the state (some, most, or all states), the international system (some, most, or all systems) or any other actor, depending on the research question. Second specification is *"(ii) security for which values?"*, here only Wolfer's objective dimension will be taken into consideration. The subjective dimension can be considered by placing "*absence of fear*" as a value; again, this depends on the research at hand (Baldwin, 1997, pp. 13-14). Baldwin criticises Leffler's (1990) designation of "*core values*" no matter the cost, as no rational policymaker would leave costs out of his calculations, in his words, "*costs always matter*" (p. 16).

Now we move to specifications for policies pursuing the objective. Third, *"(iii) how much security?"* Since security is not absolute, it is a matter of degree, and actors inevitably face trade-offs. Fourth, *"(iv) from what threats?"* demands precision about the types, sources and conditions that cause punishment if not met. Fifth, *"(v) by what means?"* are the instruments available—military, economic or diplomatic. Baldwin insists that defining the concept should not presuppose means; instead, analysts must clarify them in each case. Sixth, *"(vi) at what cost?"* as pursuing security competes with other values. Security gains may require sacrifices in liberty or resources. Finally, *"(vii) in what time period?"* highlights the temporal dimension of security. Short-term threats may differ from long-term ones, and conceptual clarity requires specifying national from grand strategies (Baldwin, 1997, pp. 14-17).

This chapter has shown that national security did not emerge as a fixed concept. It evolved through successive definitions and redefinitions, from geopolitics and realist formulations to constructivist expansions. National security thus appears not as a stable definition, but as a contested framework.

PART 2:
National Security in Practice

RESEARCH DESIGN

Theoretical Framework

As constructed in Chapter 1, this research adopts a neoclassical realist theoretical framework. NCR accepts the neorealist idea that the anarchic structure of the international system and the relative distribution of capabilities generate systemic stimuli for states. However, it departs by arguing that these stimuli are not automatically translated into state behaviour. Instead, they are filtered through domestic-level actors.

Accordingly, this research identifies three analytical components. The *independent variable* (IV) is systemic stimuli, understood as shifts in the relative distribution of power. The *intervening variable* (IVV) is the domestic institutional arrangement of the national security executive, complemented secondarily by leaders' perception. The *dependent variable* (DV) is grand strategic adjustment, understood as the evolving pattern through which governments align ends and means in response to international pressures. Following Kitchen (2010), grand strategic adjustments are observed empirically through variations in instruments, such as military posture and expenditure, alliance commitments and diplomatic engagement. This IV-IVV-DV structure constitutes the analytical framework applied across both empirical cases.

Research Method

The research employs a qualitative, theory-guided comparative case study design. Case studies are appropriate as they allow for *process tracing*, which is our primary method of analysis. The comparison is based on a *most-different systems* logic. The United States and the People's Republic of China differ in regime type, institutional history and the degree of transparency available to outside observers. The U.S. NSC operates within a liberal democratic system characterised by separation of powers, congressional oversight and several declassified documents. The P.R.C. Central National Security Commission operates within a Leninist party-state, with authority concentrated in the Chinese Communist Party and limited public records of internal deliberations. Selecting cases that differ across these dimensions serves an analytical purpose: if the NCR transmission belt is observable in both systems despite their structural differences, this strengthens its generalisability. The comparison is not intended to produce an evaluation, but to examine whether the same logic operates across different institutional configurations.

Within each case, the analysis is further structured around two dimensions. The first is *institutional development*: how the national security architecture evolved, and how changes in the international environment shaped that evolution. The second is a *strategic operation*: how the institution functions, and then a study of a specific strategic change episode. For the United States, the focus episode is the Nixon-Kissinger triangular diplomacy of 1969–1972, selected because it represents a clear case in which the NSC apparatus was central to executing a major strategic adjustment. For the People's Republic of China, the focus episode is Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, understood as China's soft balancing in response to the U.S. rebalance to Asia.

Sources Used

The research draws on two categories of sources. Primary sources include declassified U.S. government documents, principally National Security Study Memoranda (NSSMs) and National Security Decision Memoranda (NSDMs) from the Nixon administration, accessed through the Department of State's Foreign Relations of the United States series, alongside the National Security Act of 1947, the Tower Commission Report and publicly available Chinese policy documents including Xi Jinping's 2014 CNSC address and the 2015 National Security Law. Secondary sources include scholarly literature on NSC and CNSC institutional history and American and Chinese foreign and security policy.

CHAPTER 3: Institutionalising Security:
U.S. National Security Council

This chapter examines how the *United States of America* (U.S.A.) operationalises security through the *National Security Council* (NSC), the executive institution responsible for coordinating foreign, defence, intelligence and economic policy. The U.S. National Security System is an overarching one that deals with certain strategic issues, which transcend departments and require central control. For example, a doctrinal change in army training may remain an internal Department of Defense (DoD) matter, whereas the procurement of a new weapon can become a national security concern when it carries broader implications for alliance commitments and strategic competition (see Figure 3.1) (Shoemaker, 1991, pp. 4-6).

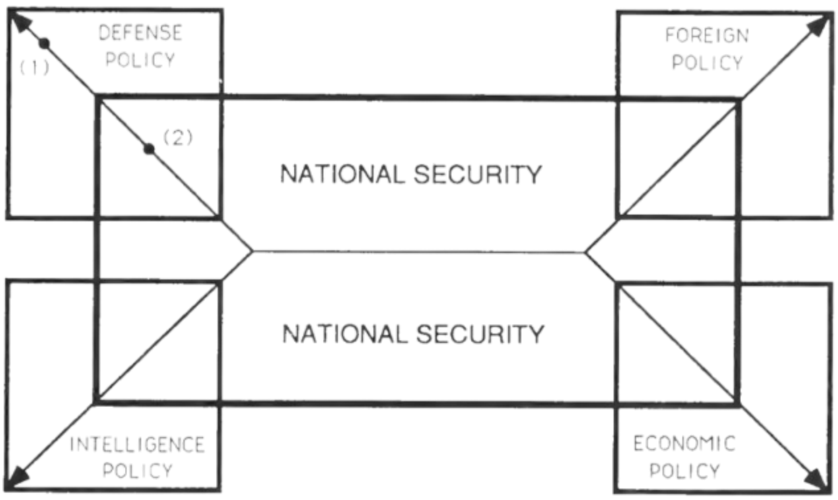

Figure 3.1. American National Security Policy

Source: Shoemaker (1991, p. 5)

Further, foreign policy occupies a privileged place in U.S. presidents' priorities because of the wider constitutional authority in external affairs and the prestige associated with statesmanship in international affairs (Destler, 1977, pp. 143–146). Yet the NSC has produced a paradox: although originally designed to bind presidents more to cabinet advice, it instead reduced their dependence on departments by creating a powerful body nested in the White House (Zegart, 1999, p. 56; Miller, 2013, p. 593). The NSC is currently the principal mechanism of American national security decision-making.

The chapter is organised as follows: the first section examines the structure and institutional development of the U.S. National Security Council from its establishment in 1947 to the contemporary Scowcroft Model. It analyses how different presidential administrations reorganised the NSC in response to changing international pressures. The second section examines the functions and strategic operation of the NSC. It first analyses the role of the National Security Advisor and the NSC Staff in policy coordination and strategic planning before examining how Nixon and Kissinger operationalised triangular diplomacy and the rapprochement with China through the NSSM-NSDM process and White House-centred national security system.

3.1. Structure and Institutional Development

The National Security Council (NSC) in the United States originated in the aftermath of World War II. The complexity of the war demonstrated that the traditional model of formulating foreign and military policy was lacking and that there is a need for an institution to integrate elements of national policy that are overreaching, meaning they transcend individual departments (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 4, 8; Marcella, 2010, p. 47). Furthermore, in the early years of the Cold War, the global responsibilities and commitments of the U.S. expanded; therefore, under any definition of national security, they required the thorough coordination of all available sources of power. Given the risk of mutual nuclear attacks and the narrow margins for error, executives needed a centralised and controlled foreign policy-making process. (Zegart, 1999, p. 56; Auerswald, 2011, p. 33). This change in the relative capabilities of the United

States made the world less orderly and power more diffused between the two superpowers. To preserve its leadership position with both allies and adversaries, institutional mechanisms to support American policymakers in diplomatic, military, intelligence and economic policy were established. These institutions were designed to analyse the international environment, identify priorities and recommend adjustments (Destler, 1980, p. 574; Best, 2010, p. 1).

President Harry S. Truman signed the National Security Act on July 26, 1947.[23] The Act established the Council and set its purpose as: "*The function of the Council shall be to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security*" (National Security Act of 1947). Yet, the initial Truman National Security System was a weak one, mainly because the President's reluctance to allow this body to gain policy-making authority; he continuously stated that it was only an advisory body (Shoemaker, 1991, pp. 8-11). That was the case till the *Korean War* broke out in 1950. Before the conflict, Truman attended only twelve out of fifty-seven NSC meetings; however, during the war, the Council met every week, and Truman attended sixty-four out of seventy-one meetings (Burke, 2009a, pp. 284-286). Policy recommendations were increasingly coordinated through the Council and its staff. From this point, the reliance on the NSC for responding strategically to international situations is already evident, but its formal authority remained limited, and it did not develop any

[23] *Between 1943 and 1947, the War Department supported merging the armed services under a single Department of Defense, while the Navy opposed this reform because it threatened its autonomy. As an alternative, the Navy promoted a coordination mechanism centred on a National Security Council. This proposal was formalised in the Eberstadt Report, which recommended a high-level council to coordinate foreign and military policy while preserving the independence of the services (Eberstadt Report, 1945). President Truman ultimately incorporated the NSC into a compromise that produced the National Security Act, making the council partly a product of the struggle over this unification (Nelson, 1985, pp. 362-363).*

bureaucratic autonomy beyond the horizon of the involved departments (Destler, 1977, p. 152; Nelson, 1985, p. 360, 373; Best, 2010, pp. 7-8).

The National Security System comprises three distinct yet interconnected components. There is the formal National Security Council, which is a statutory body, composed of the President and senior cabinet officials (i.e., Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and other officials who participate at the president's request), intended to advise the president on national security policy. Beneath them, interagency committees review issues and prepare options before decisions reach the president. Finally, the NSC Staff supports both the formal council and the committees and resides in the Executive Office of the President (Best, 2010, p. 1; Miller, 2013, pp. 593-594).

Post-Truman presidents have modified the structure and procedures of this system to reflect their governing preferences and priorities. While the formal council itself has remained largely unchanged, presidents have relied more on the staff and committee system to manage and centralise national security decision-making within the White House (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 21; Zegart, 1999, p. 56). These variations are attributed to the characteristics of the president himself, including leadership and management style, familiarity with foreign policy and reactions to the practices of previous administrations. At the same time, changes in the system have also been driven by the broader international environment. External stimuli or exogenous shocks created pressures for institutional adaptation to manage a crisis or enact strategic adjustments (Auerswald, 2011, pp. 35–36; LaGattuta & Limbocker, 2021).

TOP OF POLICY HILL

President Dwight Eisenhower, a distinguished general and former Supreme Allied Commander during the Second World War, brought to the presidency extensive experience in long-range strategic planning, which in turn shaped his approach to organising the national security decision-making system. His administration set up a multi-stage system. The process starts with the newly established *Planning Board,* which will draft policy proposals and resolve any interdepartmental disagreements (Best, 2010, p. 8). The statutory NSC, chaired by Eisenhower (he attended 90 per cent of the meetings), considered them and made decisions. Finally, the *Operations Coordinating Board* (OCB) will coordinate and monitor the department's implementation (Auerswald, 2011, p. 36). This resembles a policy hill; the two boards were the upslope (policy planning) and downslope (policy coordination), while the statutory NSC sits at the top, making decisions (Miller, 2013, p. 597). Another major change was the establishment of the *Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs* position, to which Robert Cutler was appointed.[24] Although not intended, this post came to lead and supervise the NSC Staff, which, in addition to the council, supports the two boards (Shoemaker, 1991, pp. 12-13).

The Eisenhower Planning Board was a unique feature of the system. Composed of senior representatives from departments and agencies, the board's only responsibility was to develop long-term policy proposals before they reached the Council. In this way, the Planning Board, with a grand strategic approach for planning, encouraged forward-looking consideration of national objectives. This emphasis on planning also helped officials become familiar both with the issues under consideration and with one another's perspectives. Through discussions of policy papers before they reached the president, participants developed an understanding of the problems and possible responses. As a result, when complex national security policies were debated in the council, advisors were prepared to provide informed advice rather than simply endorse the president's preferences (Miller, 2013, pp. 598–599).

[24] *Robert Cutler was tasked by Eisenhower during the presidential transition with reviewing the NSC system and proposing reforms. After completing this study and helping design the new structure, he was appointed Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, presiding over the Planning Board (Nelson, 1983, pp. 308–309).*

The system was tested during several Cold War international events during Eisenhower's presidency. One prominent example was the administration's handling of the French war in Indochina. Throughout 1953–1954, the NSC discussed papers on U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia and possible courses of action should the French position deteriorate. These discussions produced planning documents (e.g., NSC 177 approved as NSC 5405) that defined how the United States might assist France, including financial support, military advice and the development of indigenous forces to maintain internal security. By early 1954, as the French position at Dienbienphu became increasingly precarious, the council had already debated responses, reflecting the Council's ability to address strategic problems through planning (Nelson, 1983, pp. 315–316). However, the highly structured nature of this system also created significant rigidity. The emphasis on interagency consensus often produced compromise solutions rather than innovative options (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 13). Events requiring rapid decisions did not always fit within the formal NSC process. During the Suez Crisis of 1956, for instance, many discussions took place in smaller Oval Office meetings rather than within the council itself, showing how the NSC could be bypassed when events required immediate action (Best, 2010, p. 9; Nelson, 1983, p. 315).

APEX OF NATIONAL SECURITY

After Eisenhower, President John F. Kennedy had an informal management style.[25] He appointed McGeorge Bundy as his special assistant, who quickly moved and dismantled both the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board, making the NSC almost without a structure (Goldstein, 2008). Another major change was that staff members were now appointed by the president, not by their department. This gave the staff the unprecedented

[25] *For instance, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK relied primarily on the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm), a small ad hoc group of senior advisors, rather than the full NSC (Burke, 2009a, p. 291). The ExComm provided a more flexible and intimate forum for deliberation, reflecting Kennedy's preference for informal decision-making (Goldstein, 2008).*

ability to provide policy options directly to the president (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 14; Burke, 2009a, pp. 289-290). However, limiting the usage of NSC had its strategic consequences. The failed invasion of Cuba or the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, and the confusion surrounding U.S. policy during the 1963 coup against President Diem of South Vietnam, highlighted the need for better institutional long-term planning and coordination (Best, 2010, p. 11). For that reason, the administration created the Situation Room, which provided the White House with direct access to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Departments of State and Defense (Destler, 1977, p. 157; Zegart, 1999, p. 86, 104).

That is also why Richard M. Nixon's presidential campaign was centred on restoring the National Security Council to its peak relevance. Nixon served as the Vice President for Eisenhower, which had a clear effect on how he organised his own National Security System. In effect, he favoured long-term strategic planning over the crisis day-to-day management style of his predecessors (JFK & LBJ). He further asked to be given distinct policy options to choose from, rather than policies with total consensus (Best, 2010, pp. 12-13). Therefore, the system reached its functional maturity during the Nixon administration, and the council stood again at the apex of this system. The architect and prime mover of this system was Harvard professor Henry A. Kissinger, whom Nixon appointed to the renamed post of *Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs* (APNSA).[26] The Nixon-Kissinger system was designed on purpose to centralise and control the national security policy from the White House and bypass the bureaucratic institutions when possible (Burke, 2009b, pp. 108-110).

[26] *During Nixon's second term, in September 1973, he appointed Kissinger as Secretary of State while he simultaneously retained his position as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. This made Kissinger the first individual in U.S. history to hold both offices at the same time. By maintaining control of the NSC Staff and process, Kissinger ensured the persistence of the White House–centered decision-making system (Destler, 1977, p. 157).*

In this system, a *National Security Study Memorandum* (NSSM) directed the bureaucracy to study a specific strategic issue and examine alternative policy options, costs and risks. The resulting studies were prepared by *Interdepartmental Groups* (IGs), organised according to regional or functional concerns and usually chaired by the relevant Assistant Secretary of State.[27] These studies were then submitted to the *Senior Review Group* (SRG), headed by Kissinger and staffed by Under Secretary-level officials. The SRG controlled the policy agenda by reviewing the studies and ensuring that all major alternatives had been considered (Kolodziej, 1969; Auerswald, 2011, pp. 38-39). Another important body within this structure was the *Washington Special Actions Group* (WSAG), also chaired by Kissinger. WSAG functioned as the NSC's principal contingency planning mechanism, designed to monitor situations and coordinate responses. WSAG dealt with major events of the Nixon years, including the Soviet–Chinese tensions of 1969, the Jordan crisis of 1970 and developments related to Cambodia and Laos during the Vietnam War, which reinforced the NSC's role in planning (Leacacos, 1971, pp. 7-8; Best, 2010, p. 13).

After review by the NSC committee system, presidential decisions were issued as *National Security Decision Memoranda* (NSDM). Through this mechanism, Kissinger effectively controlled the flow of information reaching the president, strengthening the role of the National Security Advisor and reducing the influence of traditional departments on security policy (Burke, 2009b, p. 108-110). This concentration of authority in the White House later generated criticism both within the bureaucracy and in Congress. Some observers argued that the system had become overly dominated by a single advisor, prompting one Senator to remark, "*It's clear that we have two secretaries of state… and it's time we made the other one accountable, too*" (Destler, 1980, p. 578).

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[27] *There were six Interdepartmental Groups (IGs) in the Nixon-Kissinger system organised by region, Europe, the Far East, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, and one functional group for politico-military affairs (Leacacos, 1971, p. 5).*

Therefore, when President Jimmy E. Carter entered office, his administration sought to move away from this centralised model. Reflecting the post-Watergate public anger, Carter attempted to create a system that relied on the traditional cabinet and reduced the role of the NSC Staff (Auerswald, 2011, p. 40). However, as always, the international environment prevented this; dealing with the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forced the administration to roll back and rely on the National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and his staff. Their role in strategic planning went back to resemble that of Nixon-Kissinger's (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 50).

SCOWCROFT MODEL

The current-day National Security System, which has now lasted through six administrations, is attributed to Brent Scowcroft. He started as a military advisor to President Nixon. It was there that he came to Henry Kissinger's attention, and he accordingly hired him as his Deputy National Security Advisor. Scowcroft foresaw the coming Nixon resignation; therefore, he started meeting with then-Vice President Ford to bring him up to date on national security issues. For that reason, as President, Ford later appointed him as his Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA) (Burke, 2009b, pp. 152-155). He was also a member of the Tower Commission, which President

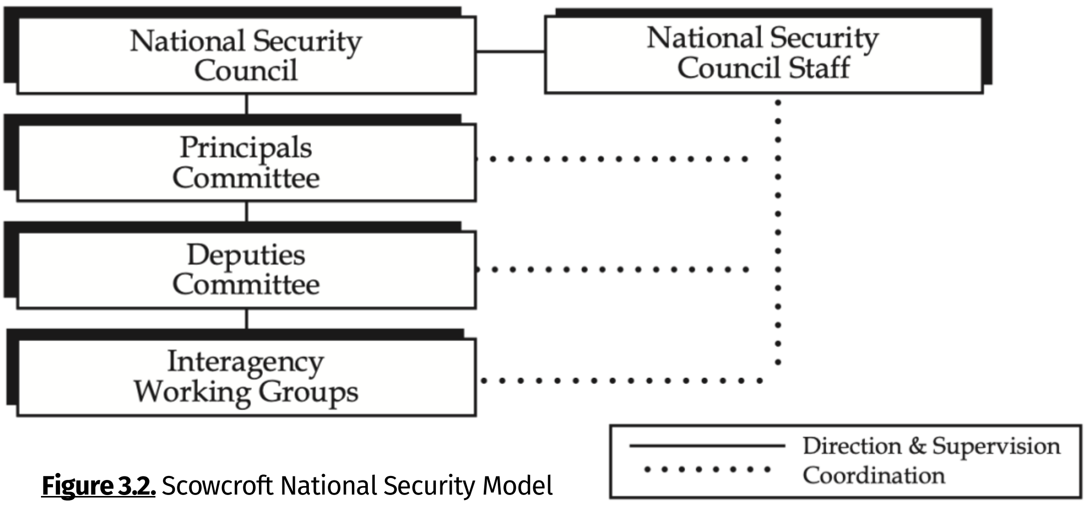

Figure 3.2. Scowcroft National Security Model

Source: Marcella (2010, p. 50)

Reagan established to investigate the Iran-Contra scandal.[28] There, he laid the foundations of his model (Burke, 2009a, p. 308).

President H. W. Bush had a long prior career in government and diplomacy, and he wanted to be involved in the details regarding national security and foreign policy. That translated into a White House-centred security policy apparatus. He invited Scowcroft back to serve as his APNSA, where he devised a four-level NSC process. Introduced in National Security Directive-1, the system consisted of: the National Security Council itself, the Principals Committee, the Deputies Committee and a set of lower-level interagency working groups, later known as Policy Coordinating Committees (see Figure 3.2) (Best, 2010, p. 20; Auerswald, 2011, p. 42).

The *Principals Committee* (PC), chaired by the APNSA, is the senior forum, composed of the same cabinet officials as the NSC but without the president. This allowed major issues to be discussed and disagreements solved, thereby preserving presidential time. Beneath it, the *Deputies Committee* (DC), chaired by the Deputy National Security Advisor, connected the middle level of government (where details are made) with the top level (where decisions are made). Because it processed inputs from lower groups and translated them into options, the DC became "*the engine of the policy process*" (Wilcox, 2014). At the lowest level, the *Policy Coordinating Committees* (PCCs) coordinated the interagency policy and prepared options for higher review (Burke, 2009a, pp. 307-309; Miller, 2013, pp. 593-595).

[28] *The Iran–Contra affair was a major political scandal in which senior U.S. officials secretly arranged the sale of arms to Iran, despite an arms embargo, and diverted part of the proceeds to fund the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, circumventing congressional restrictions. The operation involved members of the National Security Council staff (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 1). The Tower Commission report concluded that the NSC Staff had overstepped their role and criticised the administration's management of national security decision-making.*

The effectiveness of this model became evident as the NSC system managed several major geopolitical pressures between 1989 and 1993. These included German reunification negotiations, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the international coalition during the 1990–1991 Gulf War. In these cases, the system demonstrated how interagency coordination could support and manage broader strategic adjustments (Burke, 2009b, pp. 176–192). Further, although later administrations modified aspects of the system, particularly the size of the NSC Staff, the basic institutional framework has remained largely intact and continues to shape U.S. national security decision-making (Burke, 2009a, p. 310; Miller, 2013, p. 594).

One implication of the National Security Council's growing influence was that coordination could no longer be treated as a purely administrative matter. Rather, it became central to the exercise of presidential power itself. The Council was established in 1947 to "*advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies*" (National Security Act of 1947). Yet its significance extended beyond formal advisory tasks. And this institution should be understood as a response to the transformation of America itself. The increasing demands placed upon the executive branch required a permanent state apparatus capable of functioning in long-term strategic planning.

3.2. Functions and Strategic Operation

From the previous section, it is evident that the U.S. National Security System has never operated in a fixed bureaucratic design; rather, its structure and functions have mostly reflected presidential preferences in organising foreign and security policy making (Destler, 1977, pp. 145–146; Marcella, 2010, p. 49; Hoffman & Neuhard, 2016, pp. 220-221). At the same time, the NSC Staff expanded significantly from a small coordinating unit into a full White House apparatus, rising from less than fifteen to over two hundred personnel by the

2000s. Therefore, the NSC Staff, led by the National Security Advisor (NSA), continued to gain more influence in their functions as the president's national security gatekeepers (Destler, 1980, p. 576; Whittaker et al., 2008, p. 99).

NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

The Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA), as it is officially titled since the time of Henry Kissinger, or unofficially the National Security Advisor (NSA), has become an influential actor in the making of U.S. security policy, at times surpassing cabinet officials such as the Secretaries of State or Defense. The growth of the position reflects the centralisation of national security decision-making within the White House as the NSA operates in proximity to the Oval Office. And unlike cabinet secretaries, the NSA is neither established in law nor subject to Senate confirmation. Instead, it is a presidential appointment and therefore responsible to the President alone (Burke, 2009a, pp. 283-284; Blomdahl, 2023, p. 98).

The Tower Commission (1987) has identified the core functions of the NSA: They should act as an *honest broker* who ensures issues are presented to the President, all options are examined, and cabinet views are conveyed; They should provide counsel from the President's perspective, not constrained by departmental interests like cabinet secretaries; They should track whether executive departments are carrying out presidential decisions effectively; They should act as a *crisis manager* who coordinates rapid responses during emergencies and preserves secrecy; They should develop policy initiatives that translate broad presidential goals into strategies and actions; They should keep the President updated on international events and developments in Congress and the executive branch (pp. 112-113).

However, this is only the traditional functions, which present the National Security Advisor as an actor who only manages the process and fairly presents options to the President; the modern office has expanded beyond this. In practice, many advisors have also become policy advocates, political spokespersons and diplomatic actors (Destler, 1980, p. 577; Burke, 2009b, pp. 11-12; Dueck, 2014, p. 16). The relative degree of these roles, combined with traditional ones, varied according to presidential preferences, the advisor's own interpretation and their relationships with seniors on the Council (Whittaker et al., 2008, p. 111; Hooker, 2016, pp. 3-4). Therefore, the modern NSA must simultaneously remain loyal to the President while also managing the interagency process across competing departments. They must drive decisions, but also ensure all viewpoints are presented. Further, the assistant must provide strategic counsel to the President while preserving a reputation as an honest broker among principals (Daalder & Destler, 2009, pp. 114–115, 127-129). In sum, the effectiveness of this position depends on balancing presidential service with process management.

Accordingly, the Advisor's role is better understood within a typology of roles based on two variables: *policy-making responsibility* and *implementation responsibility*. Policy-making responsibility refers to the extent to which the advisor develops new foreign policy initiatives, advocates strategic choices, and enjoys a close personal relationship with the President. Implementation responsibility refers to the degree to which the advisor manages the interagency process, acts as a presidential surrogate, and oversees the execution of presidential decisions. Combining these variables produces four types of advisor roles (Mulcahy & Kendrick, 1991). At the lowest level is the *administrator*, who manages the day-to-day work of the NSC but has limited implementation and policy influence. The *coordinator* possesses greater implementation authority and focuses on managing the interagency process. The *counsellor* has significant policy-making responsibilities, serving as the President's trusted foreign policy advisor with access to and influence over strategic choices. Finally, the most powerful type is the *agent*, who combines high policy and implementation authority, centralises decision-making in the

White House, dominates the interagency process, and can rival the Secretary of State (Blomdahl, 2023, pp. 100-102).

Henry Kissinger represented the most expansive agent role of the National Security Advisor (Siniver, 2008, p. 52). As discussed prior, Richard Nixon deliberately sought to create a White House-centred National Security System. Consequently, Kissinger supervised interagency studies, screened policy options, controlled information flows and dominated access to the president. Further, he became the administration's main diplomat. Using back channels, he bypassed the State Department and limited its role; as Destler puts it: "*the staff man became the key line operator in every important respect*" (Destler, 1980, pp. 580–581; Burke, 2009b, pp. 105-150). This secrecy generated tensions with Secretary of State William Rogers and bureaucratic rivalry between the National Security Council and the State Department.[29] Kissinger therefore demonstrated both the strategic advantages and institutional costs of an agent NSA (Burke, 2009a, p. 301).

Examining the tenure of Condoleezza Rice as NSA demonstrates the effects of relationships among principals. Surrounded by powerful, experienced and assertive actors, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Powell, Rice struggled to act as an agent or honest broker and acted mostly as a counsellor. Cheney bypassed her on detainee issues, while Rumsfeld withheld information on war planning. Her leverage, therefore, rested on President Bush's personal trust. Therefore, Rice chose to "*channel*" Bush, translating his ideas into policy rather than testing alternative options (Daalder & Destler, 2009, pp. 125–126). This situation prevented serious questioning of the Iraq War, as claims about Weapons of Mass Destruction

[29] Kissinger conducted covert talks with Hanoi for more than two years, used a private backchannel with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to negotiate key Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) agreements, and secretly travelled to Beijing in 1971 to open relations with the People's Republic of China (Daalder & Destler, 2009, pp. 117–118).

(WMDs) and plans for governing Iraq after the invasion were not properly examined (Burke, 2009b, pp. 238–277). Here, the influence of NSC principals reduced the advisor's ability to control the policy process.

That is why Stephen Hadley's succession in 2005 marked a shift. Unlike Rice, Hadley operated in a more favourable political environment. President Bush had come to believe that the existing Iraq strategy was failing. The team had also changed: Rice moved to the State, Rumsfeld's influence declined before being replaced by Robert Gates, who was more cooperative (Daalder & Destler, 2009, pp. 126–127). Therefore, during the 2006 Iraq reassessment, Hadley organised meetings in which Bush heard outside experts with different views, questioned military commanders' strategies in detail and launched formal interagency reviews. However, he was not only a coordinator. He also helped drive policy change by connecting three: the worsening situation in Iraq, available alternatives and growing domestic pressure after the 2006 midterms. By linking these elements, Hadley helped prepare the ground for the adoption of the 2007 surge strategy, where around 20,000 additional U.S. troops were deployed to Iraq. It represented a major strategic change intended to restore security and create conditions for stabilisation (Dueck, 2014, pp. 17–32).

More recently, during the first Trump Administration, H.R. McMaster operated as a coordinator. Some observers viewed this as a return to the Scowcroft Model, in which the advisor manages deliberation rather than advancing his own preferences. McMaster's role was visible during the 2017 Afghanistan review, where he organised a policy process that helped present alternatives and led to Trump changing his mind and deploying additional troops. Yet McMaster's influence remained limited by his weak personal relationship with the President, who preferred informal decision-making (Blomdahl, 2021, pp. 7-9; Blomdahl, 2023, pp. 102-104, 106-108). His successor, John Bolton, represented a case closer to the counsellor role. Rather than reinforcing the interagency process, he reduced meetings and increased direct one-on-one access to the president. Bolton used the office to promote his preferred policies, especially regarding Iran, North Korea and China. For example, Bolton sought to maintain the U.S. military presence in Syria as leverage against Iran, but Trump abruptly announced withdrawal plans in December 2018, showing the gap between Bolton's strategic preferences and presidential priorities (Blomdahl, 2023, pp. 104-106, 108-111).

Ultimately, the National Security Advisor (NSA) is a strategic actor within the system, whose influence depends on presidential preferences. Yet the office does not operate alone. Its capacity to coordinate policy and monitor implementation depends on the professional staff that supports it. Accordingly, attention will now turn to the functions of the NSC Staff.

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL STAFF

Unlike the NSA, whose functions depend on presidential trust and personality, the National Security Council (NSC) Staff performs structurally necessary functions. Their roles arise less from the president's and more from the demands of the international environment; they are therefore "*functional requisites*" of modern national security governance. We can identify seven such functions: Administration, Policy Coordination and Integration, Policy Supervision, Policy Adjudication, Crisis Management, Policy Formulation and Policy Advocacy (Shoemaker, 1991, pp. 21-23; Whittaker et al., 2008, pp. 115-117; Marcella, 2010, p. 52).

Administration concerns the organisation of meetings, agenda control, document flow and communications. Although technical in appearance, it can be influential because tasks such as note-taking and summarising documents can border on policy formulation (Hooker, 2016, p. 2). *Policy Coordination* and *Integration* is where the Staff connects departments and helps translate fragmented bureaucratic input into a coherent strategy. *Policy Supervision* and *Adjudication* refers to monitoring whether presidential decisions are implemented and managing disputes among agencies before they reach the president. *Crisis Management* becomes significant during wars, emergencies, or exogenous shocks, when rapid information flows and coordinated responses are required. The final two functions are the most controversial. *Policy Formulation* means the Staff help generate strategic options rather than merely process others' ideas. *Policy Advocacy* goes further, allowing staff members to promote policies to the president (Shoemaker, 1991, pp. 23-48).

Further, the NSC Staff's strategic role is exercised through the *Policy Coordination Committees* (PCCs), as the chair of these meetings is the relevant Senior Director (Marcella, 2010, pp. 49-51). PCCs work generally follows a five-stage process: first, defining the problem through analysis of interests, objectives and intelligence; second, establishing procedures for interagency deliberation; third, setting objectives, evaluating alternatives and designing strategy; fourth, identifying operational instruments and resources for implementation; and fifth, drafting an integrated policy paper for Deputies and Principals Committees review and approval (Whittaker et al., 2008, pp. 123-130).

Another function of the NSC Staff is the preparation of presidential strategy documents, above all, the congressionally mandated *National Security Strategy* (NSS). Since the Goldwater-Nichols reforms of 1986, administrations have been required to submit an NSS to Congress as the highest public statement of U.S. national security priorities (Doyle, 2007, pp. 624-626; Stolberg, 2012, p. 70). Only the NSC Staff is positioned to serve in combining proposals and producing a whole-of-government document that incorporates all elements of national power across changing domestic and international conditions (Shoemaker, 1991, pp. 47–48). It communicates presidential priorities, strategic vision and broad guidance to Congress, bureaucratic actors and foreign and domestic audiences. It disciplines the executive branch around shared priorities. Yet, because it is a public document, observers note that the NSS often records already established policy more than it drives decisions (Marcella, 2010, p. 55).

For this reason, the instruments of strategy are often presidential directives, usually classified and more specific in operational content (Stolberg, 2012, p. 72). These documents have been renamed across administrations while preserving the same function. *National Security Decision Memoranda* (NSDM) under Nixon; *Presidential Directives* (PD) under Carter; *National Security Decision Directives* (NSDD) under Reagan; *Presidential Decision Directives* (PDD) under Clinton; and *National Security Presidential Directives* (NSPD) under George W. Bush (Whittaker et al., 2008, p. 167). Drafted through intensive interagency work, such directives translate broad strategic aims into executable policy (Marcella, 2010, p. 56). As will be discussed next, during the Nixon administration, NSSMs and NSDMs became central tools in the effort to rebalance U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union with the rapproachment to China (Goldgeier & Suri, 2015, pp. 43-44).

BALANCING THE SOVIET UNION: KISSINGER'S TRIANGULAR DIPLOMACY

During the Cold War and by the late 1960s, the international environment confronting the United States had shifted radically since the end of World War II. The Soviet Union achieved nuclear parity in 1968, eliminating the strategic drive of the American containment policy.[30] Allies such as Japan and Germany have recovered from wartime devastation, and Chinese power has significantly grown (Destler, 1980, p. 574). Further, the Vietnam War imposed heavy human and political costs. In 1968, an average of 200 U.S. soldiers were being killed every week. And the burden was asymmetric, as for every 1$ the Soviet Union spent supporting North Vietnam, the United States spent around 20$ (Caldwell,

[30] *Containment doctrine emerged from George Kennan's "Long Telegram" and became the foundation of early Cold War policy under President Truman. Its central objective was to prevent the spread of Soviet influence and communism through sustained American political, economic and military resistance (Caldwell, 2009, p. 634).*

2009, pp. 633, 645). These conditions are the systemic stimulus that confronted the Nixon administration when it came to office in January 1969. A relative capability decline that demanded grand strategic adjustment.

Nixon and Kissinger entered office accepting this change in international order. After all, both of them were realists and believed that American foreign policy should be based on national interest rather than idealism and ideology (Goh, 2005, p. 478). Therefore, rather than preserving a rigid bipolar system, they accepted the emergence of a more multipolar one. They sought to establish a moderate order supported by the United States, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Their grand strategies, the rapprochement to China and détente, were aimed at easing relations with the U.S.S.R. and increasing American flexibility amid the burdens of Vietnam (Goh, 2005, pp. 475-476; Caldwell, 2009, pp. 635, 645). Nixon had already been talking about an opening to China as early as 1965, viewing triangular diplomacy as essential to a new balance of power (Pardos, 1991, p. 282; Tucker, 2005, p. 116). His and Kissinger's subsequent centralisation of the National Security System provided the mechanism through which this adjustment was operationalised. Foreign policy and sensitive diplomacy are to be planned and implemented primarily from the White House (Siniver, 2008, pp. 45, 52).

In this system, the National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) became the central instrument. Designed as interagency study directives, NSSMs requested detailed analyses of strategic and foreign policy questions from the bureaucracy and required departments to examine courses of action, costs and risks (Siniver, 2008, pp. 60–62). Although intended to improve policy coordination, the NSSM process also strengthened White House control. Kissinger's office generated a continuous flow of study requests, flooding the bureaucracy with policy papers. They collected the perspectives of different bureaucratic actors without them knowing what it was for (Burke, 2009b, p. 109). Upon the principals' meeting, final presidential decisions were communicated through National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM), which stated operational directives for the bureaucracy (Prados, 1991, p. 266; U.S. Department of State, 2006a, Document 1, p. 6).

While NSSMs were interagency studies, the NSC Staff alone was responsible for drafting the administration's annual foreign policy reports (Prados, 1991, p. 263). Prepared primarily by NSC Staff members under the supervision of Kissinger and released as presidential reports.[31] These documents were intended to explain and legitimise the Nixon administration's emerging grand strategy. There were four reports in total, and all outlined a changing international system in which rigid bipolar confrontation was giving way to a more multipolar order. In doing so, they sought to weaken support for containment and justify a transition from ideological confrontation toward negotiation and détente with communist powers, particularly the Soviet Union and China (Caldwell, 2009, pp. 642–644).

One of the earliest indications of the administration's interest in rapprochement with China emerged through NSSM-14, issued on 5 February 1969. The memorandum demonstrated how the reorganised NSC system would assess this strategic change through a study directed from the White House. Signed by Kissinger, NSSM-14 ordered a comprehensive review of "*U.S. Policy Towards China*" and instructed the bureaucracy to examine "*Alternative U.S. approaches on China and their costs and risks*" as well as "*the interaction between U.S. policy and the policies of other major interested countries toward China*" (U.S. Department of State, 2006b, Document 4, p. 8). The memorandum's importance comes from its framing of the P.R.C., not as an ideological adversary, but as a strategic problem requiring reassessment. During the same

[31] Kissinger stated that he served as the "general editor" of the annual foreign policy reports, which were primarily drafted by NSC Staff members led by Peter Rodman. According to NSC press liaison Les Janka, approximately 80% of the reports were written by the NSC Staff and Kissinger, while Richard Nixon contributed roughly 20% (Caldwell, 2009, pp. 642–643).

period, Washington initiated private talks with China in Warsaw. Conducted through Ambassador Stoessel Jr., these informal discussions focused on the disputes between the two states, such as the status of Taiwan and Beijing's demand to assume China's seat at the United Nations (Pardos, 1991, p. 321).

NSDM-17 marked the administration's first concrete steps toward easing tensions with the People's Republic of China. Issued on 26 June 1969, it ordered the relaxation of selected economic and trade restrictions against China on "*broad foreign policy grounds*". The directive authorised limited trade in non-strategic goods and small-scale imports of Chinese products (U.S. Department of State, 2006b, Document 14, pp. 39–41).

The conceptual foundations of Nixon and Kissinger's triangular diplomacy were put forward in NSSM-63, issued in July 1969, and its October 1969 response. Amid escalating Sino-Soviet tensions, the memorandum directed an interagency study on the "*policy choices confronting the United States*" within the emerging "*U.S., Soviet, Communist Chinese triangle*" and examined possible American responses both in the event of continued rivalry and direct military conflict between Moscow and Beijing (U.S. Department of State, 2006b, Document 15, pp. 41–42). The subsequent report outlined three policy options. Option A proposed tacit support for China, the weaker power, through gestures toward Beijing. Option B favoured closer accommodation with the Soviet Union while maintaining hostility toward China. Option C advocated neutrality. The first version of neutrality (C.1) called for avoiding alignment with either side, whereas the second (C.2) recommended maintaining neutrality while simultaneously improving relations with both powers according to American interests (U.S. Department of State, 2006b, Document 40, pp. 109–110). The study anticipated the logic that would later underpin triangular diplomacy: each power feared "*collusion between the other two*" (U.S. Department of State, 2006b, Document 40, p. 111).

The first public phase of Sino-American rapprochement emerged through "*Ping-Pong diplomacy*" in April 1971, when China invited the American table tennis team to visit Beijing after the world championship in Japan. The visit signalled a shift in relations and demonstrated that both governments were preparing domestic and international audiences (Tucker, 2005, p. 120). Behind this symbolic diplomacy, however, the Nixon administration had already established more secret communication channels through Pakistan and Romania with Beijing, while the NSC Staff simultaneously prepared new internal China studies (Prados, 1991, pp. 321–322).

For example, NSSM-106, issued in November 1970, and its February 1971 response recognised that the continued hostility between the United States and the People's Republic of China was strategically unsustainable in a changing Asian balance of power (U.S. Department of State, 2006b, Document 97, pp. 246-247). The document set the long-range goals toward the PRC, which included avoiding direct Sino-American conflict, securing tacit Chinese recognition of a legitimate U.S. role in Asia, encouraging Beijing to become a "*constructive*" international actor, expanding political and economic relations, encouraging a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue and preventing a Sino-Soviet alliance directed against the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, 2006b, Document 105, pp. 258-266).

The implications of the People's Republic of China obtaining representation in the United Nations were examined in NSSM-107, issued in November 1970, and its response, particularly the question of replacing Taiwan (Republic of China) in the Security Council (U.S. Department of State, 2004, Document 312, pp. 545-546). The study acknowledged that growing international support for Beijing made continued exclusion increasingly difficult and warned that rigid American opposition could isolate the United States diplomatically. It concluded that the United States should continue opposing the expulsion of

Taiwan while preparing for the likelihood of eventual P.R.C. admission (U.S. Department of State, 2004, Document 326, pp. 580-584).

All this preparatory work by the NSC Staff ultimately facilitated the Sino-American rapprochement. But it was a demanding process on the staff as maintaining secrecy required the drafting of multiple parallel documents to conceal the negotiations even within the government itself (Burke, 2009b, p. 137). The culmination of these efforts came in July 1971, when Kissinger undertook his secret trip to the People's Republic of China.

Kissinger publicly visited Vietnam, Thailand, India and Pakistan as diplomatic cover before secretly departing from Pakistan to Beijing aboard a Pakistani aircraft. The mission, codenamed "*Polo I*", included a small NSC team composed of Winston Lord, John Holdridge and Richard Smyser, alongside Secret Service personnel (Pardos, 1991, pp. 322–323). In his opening discussions with Premier Zhou Enlai, Kissinger offered concessions far beyond what Beijing had anticipated. While stopping short of formal diplomatic recognition, he agreed to the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Taiwan, rejected support for "*two Chinas*" or Taiwanese independence and assured Beijing that Washington would not support military operations by Chiang Kai-shek against the mainland (Tucker, 2005, pp. 122–123). In compliance with NSSM-107, Kissinger further indicated that the United States would support the P.R.C.'s admission into the United Nations while only temporarily preserving the R.O.C. position (Tucker, 2005, pp. 127-133).

The rapprochement proved strategically successful because it intensified Soviet fears of encirclement within the triangular balance. Following Kissinger's July 1971 trip and Nixon's January 1972 Peking visit, Moscow showed more flexibility in negotiations with Washington (Caldwell, 2009, pp. 645–646). This led directly to the Moscow Summit, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) agreements and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Triangular diplomacy became fully operational during 1972, as simultaneous negotiations with both Beijing and Moscow enabled the United States to extract concessions from each side, reshaping the structure of the Cold War (Goh, 2005, p. 486). And central to this process was the NSC Staff, which provided the analytical and organisational machinery of the rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union.

This chapter examined the evolution, structure and functions of the U.S. National Security Council. It showed how the NSC developed from a limited advisory body into the principal institution of presidential national security decision-making, particularly through the expansion of the NSC Staff and the role of the National Security Advisor. Further, it demonstrated the system's operational role in strategic planning and policy coordination reached its peak under Nixon and Kissinger, where the NSC became central to the rapprochement with China and the broader Cold War strategy of triangular diplomacy against the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 4: Centralising Security:
P.R.C. National Security Commission

In the Chinese context, national security has traditionally been conceived in broader terms than Western traditions (Ji, 2016, p. 179). This logic can be understood starting with three concentric circles of external relations. The outer circle, *international relations* (*guoji guanxi*), refers to the interstate interactions and the external environment in which China operates. Within it lies *foreign relations* or *diplomacy* (*waijiao*), which concerns formal state-to-state political and diplomatic relations. At the centre is *foreign affairs* (*waishi*), encompassing interactions between Chinese and foreign actors, such as trade, culture, and other contacts occurring within China itself (Shambaugh, 1987, pp. 276–277). When interactions acquire political significance and rise to the leadership agenda, they move outward into diplomacy and, ultimately, may become matters of international relations (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Chinese Concept of International Relations

Source: Shambaugh (1987, p. 277)

This concentric understanding applied to national security reveals that it contains all interactions that affect state and regime stability. And it is evident in the contemporary *People's Republic of China* (P.R.C), where security framed through Xi Jinping's doctrine of "*Holistic National Security*", includes political, territorial, military, economic, technological, cultural and societal domains as its security logic, though with varying importance, as political security (state & regime) takes the circle center (Ji, 2016, pp. 179-183; Vuori & Gong, 2025, p. 565).

Further, this is also mirrored institutionally in China's political system, which also operates through concentric circles of authority (Zheng, 2017b, p. 252). Just as *waishi*, *waijiao* and *guoji guanxi* are connected, so too is the process of Chinese foreign and security policy making. It is organised through institutional layers, in which authority becomes gradually centralised toward the centre. Then, the *Chinese Communist Party* (CCP), sitting at the centre, resembles an "*owner*" of the state, echoing the imperial China notion that "*all under Heaven belongs to the emperor*", now transferred to the Party (Zheng, 2017a). For that reason, the owner can appoint or dismiss officials at will, treating the state apparatus as managerial. This understanding is institutionalised through the parallel Party and state systems established since Mao Zedong's time. Party committees exist within all state institutions, and state officials hold Party ranks (Zheng, 2017b, pp. 249–253).

The chapter is organised as follows: the first section examines the structure and institutional development of the P.R.C. Central National Security Commission (CNSC) within the broader Chinese Communist Party's national security system. It analyses how China's fragmented Leading Small Group system evolved into a more centralised "top-level design" under Xi Jinping through the establishment of the CNSC. The second section examines the functions and strategic operation of the CNSC. It first analyses the doctrine of Holistic National Security and the role of the CCP General Office in coordination and implementation before examining how Xi Jinping operationalised China's balancing strategy against the United States through the Belt and Road Initiative.

4.1. Structure and Institutional Development

The contemporary international system is shaped by the People's Republic of China's rise and the relative decline of the United States as the Unipole (Ishaque, 2022, p. 33). China's rapid accumulation of economic and military capabilities has expanded its room for manoeuvre in the system and enabled it to pursue more ambitious foreign and security policies. Since the 1990s, Beijing has relied on a peaceful development strategy to reassure states by maintaining a low international profile; however, as its power has grown, this approach has been reconsidered to one that facilitates taking its place as a great power in the system (Sørensen 2013, pp. 373–375; Xue, 2016, p. 24; Hu, 2019, p. 3). Nonetheless, this rise is accompanied by constraints. Chinese policy remains a reflection of tensions between the new, growing international expectations and the old, persistent domestic priorities, particularly regime stability and economic performance (Sørensen 2013, pp. 370-372). This produces a complex strategic environment in which China faces a need to enhance policy coordination and establish a centralised national security institution (Lampton, 2015, pp. 4-5).

However, China's foreign and security policy coordination has been described by scholars as a system of "*integrated fragmentation*".[21] This captures both the centralised authority and decentralised bureaucratic competition in its political system. While multiple agencies pursue their own interests, the CCP retains domination over the government by integrating them through party-operated bodies. This produces neither hierarchy nor fragmentation, but a hybrid system (Brødsgaard, 2012, p. 643). The main example of these bodies is the *Leading Small Groups* (LSGs) (Tsai & Zhou, 2019, p. 4; Cabestan, 2021, p. 320).

[21] This concept developed out of "Fragmented Authoritarianism", originally stated by Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988). It describes a system in which authority is formally centralised within the CCP, yet decision-making is dispersed across multiple bureaucratic actors that bargain and negotiate over policy outcomes, with no control by the top leader (Lieberthal, 1992).

Leading Small Groups (LSGs) are ad hoc superministerial coordination bodies designed to address the fragmentation of China's political system. Two main types can be identified. First, groups affiliated with the *State Council* focus on policy implementation. Second, *Central Leading Small Groups* (CLSGs) operate at a higher level, providing strategic guidance. They offer overarching principles rather than detailed policies and report directly to the *Politburo* and its *Standing Committee* (PBSC). As a result, they serve as the transmission links between top leadership and the bureaucracy (Zheng, 2017b, p. 261).

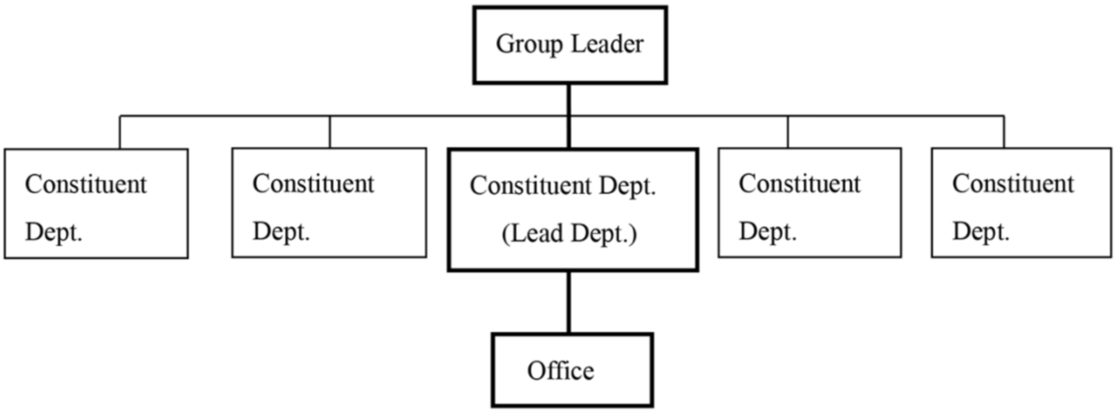

Figure 4.2. Components of Leading Small Groups
Source: Tsai & Zhou (2019, p. 6)

Any Leading Small Group is constituted of four components: Group Leader, constituent departments, Head of the Lead Department and an administrative office (see Figure 4.2). The Group Leader is typically a senior Party figure; his political weight defines the LSG's importance. Department heads from relevant ministries serve as members, while the lead department plays the most important role in coordination. The office, meanwhile, provides the secretarial work of the group and is usually situated in the lead department or, in some cases, established as an independent unit (Hu, 2016, pp. 8-9; Tsai & Zhou, 2019, p. 5). Each of these roles has formal and informal sources of power. The Group Leader derives influence not only from his personal prestige but also from controlling the "*nomenklatura*" system.[22] They often invoke senior leadership

[22] *The "nomenklatura" system regulates party domination of the state. It is how the CCP maintains control over personnel (cadres); it consists of a list of positions and a corresponding*

authority (i.e., PBSC) to forge consensus among competing actors. The Head of the Lead Department exercises influence through agenda-setting and through a patron–client relationship with the Group Leader. The office is crucial in practice: it drafts policy documents, conducts research, and once the LSG has issued instructions, it follows up on implementation, thereby shaping both the content and execution of policies (Tsai & Zhou, 2019, pp. 6–16).

Back to the Central Leading Small Groups (CLSGs), over time, eight primary groups emerged: *Finance and Economy*, *Politics and Law*, *Foreign Affairs* (est. March 1958), *National Security* (est. September 2000), *Hong Kong and Macao*, *Taiwan Affairs*, *Propaganda and Ideology*, and *Party-Building*. These groups are chaired by various PBSC members and are reshuffled every five years, in line with leadership turnover at the *National Party Congress* and the subsequent *National People's Congress* (NPC) (Miller, 2017, pp. 285–287). Importantly, CLSGs also establish future leaders, providing them with experience in high-level coordination. For example, before becoming China's top leader, Xi Jinping served as Hu Jintao's deputy in the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG) and National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG) (Cabestan, 2009, p. 71, 79; Cabestan, 2017, p. 16). As discussed below, Chinese paramount leaders, who navigated the early years of the PRC's great power rise, have continuously relied on these central groups in their attempts to better coordinate national security and foreign policies (Lampton, 2015, p. 9; Hu, 2016, p. 8).

THREE-IN-ONE SYSTEM

Following the 1992 transition from the revolutionary generation to younger leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced challenges to its political legitimacy. Unlike Mao Zedong or Deng

list of approved candidates. Through it, appointments, promotions, transfers and dismissals of officials in ministries and military institutions are controlled. This ensures political loyalty and policy compliance. For example, during the reform era, from class struggle to economic development, the CCP used the nomenklatura system to promote officials who supported market-oriented policies and to remove those resistant to them (Zheng, 2017b, pp. 255–261).

Xiaoping, these leaders lacked revolutionary prestige and therefore needed to institutionalise their authority. This was achieved through the consolidation of the Party with the state and the military into a unified leadership, the "*Three-in-One System*" (three powers in one person) (Ji, 2016, p. 184; Žigray, 2016, p. 154; Zheng, 2017b, p. 271). Consequently, this arrangement concentrated authority in a single paramount leader, the Party Leader.

The first dimension of this consolidation was the Party–military relationship; the control over the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Jiang Zemin's rise required firm civilian control of the military, which he achieved by securing the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 1989 and further consolidating his authority in 1992.[23] This was further institutionalised through the 1997 National Defence Law, which established the Party's command over the armed forces (Cabestan, 2009, pp. 65-66; Zheng, 2017b, pp. 271–272). The second dimension involves the Party–state relationship. The post-Deng leadership enhanced the political role of state positions. In particular, the offices of the President and Vice President, which had previously been ceremonial and held by Party elders, were endowed with political significance (Zheng, 2017b, p. 274). By ensuring that the same individual held the positions of CCP General Secretary, State President and CMC Chairman, the potential rise of power centres was eliminated, and vertical control was reinforced.

The consolidation of positions within the Three-in-One system also provided the top leader a formal way to exercise state authority. Therefore, an informal division of labour emerged between the State President and the State Council: the president assumed responsibility for foreign affairs, national defence, national security and public security, while the State Council and its Premier

[23] *Deng Xiaoping, although no longer holding a formal office, helped in this consolidation of leadership as he remained influential in China's politics in the early 1990s. He removed potential rivals within the military, most notably the Yang brothers, longtime allies of Deng whose influence over the PLA had grown sufficiently to challenge central authority. Following his 1992 Southern Tour, which reaffirmed economic reform, Deng backed Jiang Zemin, helping him secure control over the CMC (Zheng, 2017b, p. 271-272).*

managed economic and civil affairs. Although ministries are formally within the State Council, in this way, their strategic guidance is determined by the Party, with the State Council responsible for implementation (Zheng, 2017b, p. 274). The presidency also carried diplomatic and protocol advantages, enabling the leader to represent China externally (Cabestan, 2009, p. 69). However, despite this concentration of power, the system still lacked a dedicated institutional mechanism for national security planning and coordination. While the Three-in-One system marked an initial step toward centralising security affairs, it did not resolve coordination problems across multiple agencies. Unlike the Mao era, where the CMC acted as a de facto NSC, China's expanding international role and complex security environment prompted efforts to establish an institution comparable to the U.S. National Security Council (Cabestan, 2009, pp. 70-73; Žigray, 2016, p. 153; Wuthnow, 2017, p. 891).

TWO SIGNBOARDS, ONE BODY

As mentioned before, China's National Security System has historically suffered from fragmentation. Some scholars compared it to a software problem, rather than a lack of hardware, capabilities and resources (Hu, 2016, p. 5). In this view, all great powers require a national security institution capable of integrating foreign and security policy across agencies and long-term strategic planning. However, despite their successive efforts, under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, China's system remained fragmented and inefficient (Hu, 2016, pp. 6-7).

In the absence of a formal NSC, coordination was primarily carried out through the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG). This body functioned as the principal mechanism for integrating foreign and security policy at the top level of the Party-state (Hu, 2016, pp. 9–12). Chaired by the paramount leader, the FALSG brought together senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of State Security, the Central Military Commission and the CCP General Office Director, among others. Its composition typically included Politburo

Standing Committee (PBSC) members and leading figures for diplomacy, security and military affairs (Cabestan, 2009, p. 79; Miller, 2017, pp. 288–290). Supporting the FALSG is an administrative body known as the *Central Foreign Affairs Office* (CFAO). This office functioned as the staff responsible for information gathering and policy drafting. But despite its central role, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports to it, this office remained limited in size, constraining its ability to perform policy integration and long-term planning (Hu, 2016, p. 10; Cabestan, 2021, pp. 322-324; Zhao, 2023, p. 4).

The limitations of this system became evident during international events, such as the Taiwan Strait tensions of the 1990s.[24] In response to these challenges, proposals emerged to establish a more formalised national security coordinating body (Hu, 2016, p. 11; Cabestan, 2009, pp. 75–76). These discussions were further influenced by Jiang Zemin's exposure to the U.S. system during his state visit in October 1997. However, internal resistance within the PBSC, particularly concerns over excessive concentration of power and disruption of collective leadership norms, prevented the immediate establishment of such a body (Ji, 2016, p. 186; Lampton, 2015, pp. 9-10; Wuthnow, 2017, pp. 892-893).

In the aftermath of the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, it reportedly took several hours for Chinese leaders to obtain accurate information, which highlighted severe deficiencies in security coordination (Ji, 2016, p. 184; Hu, 2019, p. 13).[25] Therefore, a compromise

[24] *In response to President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States, China conducted missile tests and military exercises near Taiwan. The crisis prompted U.S. intervention through the deployment of aircraft carrier groups (Hu, 2016, p. 11).*

[25] *NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade was officially attributed to targeting errors during the Kosovo War. But the strike resulted in the deaths of three Chinese journalists and injuries to diplomatic personnel (Hu, 2016, p. 11). Coordination problems extended beyond delays in information to decision-makers. Senior leaders reportedly struggled to determine who should formally announce China's response. Although Jiang Zemin was the appropriate figure given the gravity of the event, some argued that a lower-level official would provide flexibility for diplomatic recovery (Ji, 2016, p. 185).*

emerged with the creation of the National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG) in September 2000 (Žigray, 2016, p. 154; Zhao, 2023, p. 4). Importantly, this new body did not replace the existing FALSG but operated alongside it, in what has been described as a "*two signboards, one body*" arrangement (Miller, 2017, p. 290). In practice, the two groups shared the same leadership, membership and staff office (i.e., CFAO), differing primarily in their functional emphasis. While the FALSG continued to focus on foreign affairs broadly, the NSLSG was oriented toward crisis management. In this way, rather than establishing a fully institutionalised National Security Council, the CCP opted to layer onto existing mechanisms (Cabestan, 2009, pp. 75–78; Ji, 2016, p. 188).

Despite this reform, the two identical LSG arrangements did not overcome the deficiency of China's coordination system. Both the FALSG and NSLSG were participating rather than leading bodies. Their effectiveness was constrained by the absence of permanent staffing capacity, restricting policy coordination and strategic planning (Ji, 2016, pp. 188-189). Consequently, the problem of "*stove-piping*", which has limited the ability of leaders to receive timely information, lasted (Wuthnow, 2017, pp. 892-893).[26] Then, there was still a growing mismatch between China's expanding international role and its decision-making structure; the need for a centralised national security body persisted (Xue, 2016, p. 28). Under Xi Jinping, whose leadership placed security at the utmost priority, institutional reforms to break down these stovepipes were sought (Zhao, 2016, pp. 93-94; Cabestan, 2021, p. 321).

TOP-LEVEL DESIGN

Xi Jinping reportedly stated in internal discussions that the fall of the Soviet Union occurred not simply because of structural weaknesses, but because "*no*

[26] For example, the 2001 EP-3 crisis, in which a U.S. surveillance aircraft collided with a Chinese fighter and made an emergency landing in China, reexposed national security coordination problems. Chinese leaders received delayed and inaccurate information from the military and Beijing failed to respond to repeated U.S. contacts for several days, worsening the crisis (Erickson & Liff, 2016, pp. 200–203).

one was man enough to stand up and resist" its unravelling (Zhao, 2016, p. 84). This view, especially from the leader of a similar party-led state, frames regime survival as dependent upon strong leadership. It follows that the bureaucratic fragmentation that characterised Hu Jintao's tenure, where his leadership and legitimacy were diffused, was, in Xi Jinping's assessment, an existential vulnerability. Accordingly, since his rise to power in 2012, Xi's institutional reforms have focused on power concentration within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), systematically shifting authority away from governmental institutions and into party-led bodies. These changes also reflect Xi's effort to concentrate foreign and security decision-making in his own hands by improving coordination among the agencies he chairs (Cabestan, 2017, pp. 114-115; Hu, 2019, p. 12; Cabestan, 2021, pp. 319-321).

Xi Jinping's military reform is one of the examples of his centralisation of national security authority (Ji, 2016, p. 183). Xi dismantled the People's Liberation Army (PLA) command structure and replaced it with a joint operational system subordinated to the Central Military Commission (CMC). The old seven military regions were regrouped into five theatre commands. At the same time, new strategic branches were created, including the *Strategic Support Force* (SSF), that combine traditional and high-tech capabilities (e.g., cyber, space). By concentrating authority in the CMC, which he chairs, Xi assumed a role comparable to that of the U.S. president as Commander in

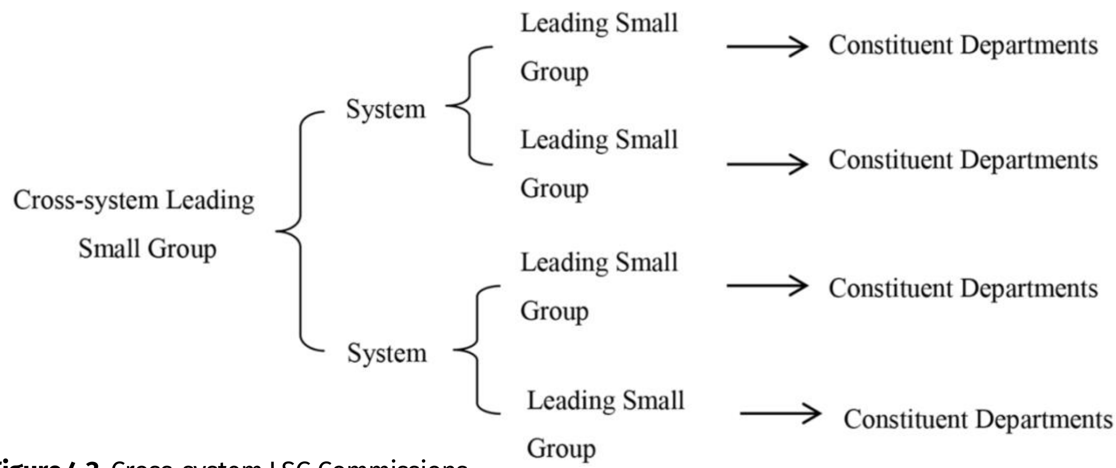

Figure 4.3. Cross-system LSG Commissions
Source: Tsai & Zhou (2019, p. 18)

Chief. This parallel became official in April 2016, when Xi adopted the title of "*Commander-in-Chief of the PLA's Joint Battle Command*", making the PLA a more direct instrument of the political leadership (Cabestan, 2017, pp. 118–120).

Another major institutional reform is regarding the Leading Small Groups (LSGs). After the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Xi Jinping expanded the traditional LSG by establishing cross-system commissions that operate across systems rather than within a single system, all chaired by Xi himself (see Figure 4.3). In CCP official terms, they serve as a "*top-level design*" system, whereby policies and strategic direction come directly from the apex of Party leadership; they resemble "*mini-Politburos*". For this reason, commissions have more authority than LSGs: LSGs coordinate among agencies while commissions directly make decisions (Tsai & Zhou, 2019, pp. 17–20).

The most significant of these commissions is the *Central National Security Commission* (CNSC), which marked a redesign of the country's national security architecture. Officially announced at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013 and formally inaugurated in early 2014, the CNSC emerged as Xi Jinping's response to the long-standing fragmentation of China's system (Lampton, 2015, pp. 10-12; Ji, 2016, pp. 183–184; Žigray, 2016, p. 154; Hu, 2016, pp. 1-2; Hu, 2019, p. 13). This marked the culmination of earlier unsuccessful attempts by Jiang and Hu to establish a centralised security body beyond the FALSG and NSLSG. Xi Jinping achieved this in just one year in office.

The CNSC spans three main systems: the National Security System, the foreign affairs system and the political-legal system. Within the National Security System are bodies such as the National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG), the National Anti-Terrorism Leading Small Group and the Central Leading Small Group for Military Reform. The foreign affairs system includes the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG), the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group and coordination groups for Hong Kong and Macau, Tibet and Xinjiang.

The political-legal system includes the Central Commission for the Comprehensive Management of Public Security, the Central Stabilisation Leading Small Group, and the Central Leading Small Group for Preventing and Handling Cult Issues (Tsai & Zhou, 2019, p. 18). In this way, the CNSC stands above all these bodies and brings them together into one unified commission. Rather than replacing them, it coordinates their work, requiring their leaders to attend CNSC meetings, where policies are discussed. It allows the Party leadership to connect foreign affairs, domestic affairs, military affairs and counterterrorism into a single coordinated national security framework (Tsai & Zhou, 2019, p. 19).

Then, the Central National Security Commission (CNSC) is designed to implement what Chinese official discourse calls an "*overall*" or comprehensive approach to national security, integrating domestic and external security (Hu, 2016, pp. 13-14). This is particularly important in military affairs: PLA officers are now participating in a civilian institution's meeting and can report directly on strategic developments such as tensions in the South China Sea. Further, beneath Xi as chair are two vice chairmen: the Premier and the Chairman of the National People's Congress. The Premier's role ensures that the State Council ministries are linked to CNSC. The NPC Chairman, by contrast, provides legislative authority, ensuring that new security policies can be translated into laws (Ji, 2016, pp. 191–193; Cabestan, 2017, pp. 117-118; Cabestan, 2021, p. 325). Its Office Director, who is also the director of the powerful CCP General Office, manages the daily administrative work.[27] Yet despite this, the CNSC remains secretive: its internal procedures, deliberations and outputs continue to be a black box (Wuthnow, 2017, pp. 897–898; Cabestan, 2021, p. 326).

[27] *Recent personnel changes show that the director of the CCP General Office, Cai Qi, appears to have assumed a vice-chairmanship of the Central National Security Commission. Making the total of CNSC vice-chairmen three (Greitens, 2023a, p. 4; Greitens, 2023b, p. 4).*

4.2. Functions and Strategic Operation

The creation of the National Security Commission marked a breakthrough in the centralisation of China's security governance under Xi Jinping. However, months after its establishment, the Politburo formally added the term "*Central*" to its title, signalling that it was a Communist Party (CCP) organ reporting to the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) rather than a State Council body (Wuthnow, 2017, p. 888). This symbolic change hinted at resistance from existing bureaucracies to the CNSC's possible influence on national security policy. Beijing security decision-making is difficult to observe, as the Commission still operate in secrecy, making internal processes unclear (Erickson & Liff, 2016, p. 198).[28] Nevertheless, despite resistance from the PBSC, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and established Leading Small Groups, the Central National Security Commission (CNSC) is likely to absorb authority over time and emerge as the lead institution of Chinese security policy (Erickson & Liff, 2016, pp. 211–212; Lampton, 2015, p. 11).

In the Chinese context, security has long been understood in broader terms than in Western systems (Ji, 2016, p. 179). There is no clear separation between internal and external security, as domestic unrest, separatism, terrorism and foreign pressure are viewed as interconnected challenges requiring coordinated responses (Lampton, 2015, pp. 5–6). This explains why the CNSC will address both regime stability at home and strategic competition abroad, and both traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

HOLISTIC NATIONAL SECURITY

At the first meeting of the Central National Security Commission on 15 April 2014, Xi Jinping explained the conceptual foundations of the new system. He argued that China faced simultaneous pressures from abroad and within. Externally, it needed to safeguard sovereignty, territorial integrity and

[28] *In ten years, only four meetings of the CNSC were declared (Greitens, 2023a).*

development interests; internally, it needed to preserve political stability and social order. Xi declared that China must adopt a "*holistic*" or "*overall*" approach to national security that integrated domestic and foreign dimensions (Lampton, 2015, pp. 11–12; Ji, 2016, p. 179; Žigray, 2016, p. 154; Hu, 2016, p. 5; Erickson & Liff, 2016, p. 209; Zhao, 2023, p. 9; Vuori & Gong, 2025, p. 565). This concept of national security covered eleven domains. Xi stated the following:

> *In implementing the overall national security concept, we not only need to stress external security but also internal security. We not only attach importance to traditional security but also non-traditional security. We build an integrated national security system encompassing political security, homeland security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, scientific and technological security, information security, ecological security, resource security, nuclear security, and others.*

He further stated that China should "*take the people's security as our purpose, political security as the foundation, economic security as the basis, military, cultural and social security as guarantees, and the promotion of international security as support*", while pursuing a "*national security path with Chinese characteristics*" (Wuthnow, 2017, p. 889).

This was also institutionalised through the 2015 National Security Law. It defined national security as the protection of China's political power, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, people's welfare and sustainable economic and social development, from internal and external threats together (Wuthnow, 2017, p. 889; Lampton, 2015, p. 12). Furthermore, holistic national security was also present in China's 2015 Defence White Paper, China's Military Strategy. The document argued that although the country still enjoyed a "*window of strategic opportunity*" for peaceful development, the international environment had become more uncertain. It stated that "*traditional and non-traditional security threats are interwoven*" (Erickson & Liff, 2016, p. 209; Wuthnow, 2017, p. 890). These echoed Xi's speech that China should maintain its diplomatic approach but must be institutionally prepared, through the CNSC, to rapidly respond to security pressures (Hu, 2016, p. 6).

Reportedly, the CNSC included a Standing Committee of roughly 17-18 principals drawn from major agencies and responsible for Xi's eleven security domains, indicating an effort to unite established institutions (Erickson & Liff, 2016, p. 210). Further, the Commission reportedly established sub-commissions for intelligence, strategy and crisis management, although their effectiveness remained uncertain (Wuthnow, 2017, p. 897). These reports suggest that the CNSC was intended to combine strategic planning and emergency response.

As for detailed responsibilities, according to a January 2014 Politburo decision, the CNSC would serve as the CCP Central Committee organ responsible for decision-making, deliberation and coordination on national security affairs. Its tasks included making overall plans, coordinating issues, constructing a rule-of-law system for national security, researching strategic problems, setting guidelines and implementing security strategies (Erickson & Liff, 2016, p. 209).

Observers interpreted these broad mandates as evidence that the Commission would perform four core functions. First, it would formulate long-term national security strategies wider than military planning, matching the growing complexity of China's external and domestic environment and the need for higher-level strategic guidance. Second, it would promote a comprehensive legal framework covering military, economic, diplomatic, technological, intelligence and other security matters. Third, it would define policy priorities across emerging issue areas such as terrorism, sovereignty disputes, maritime claims, cyber threats and space security. Fourth, the CNSC would likely become the main decision-making organ, overcoming China's bureaucratic fragmentation and coordinating implementation across Party-state-military institutions and improving crisis management during emergencies at home and abroad (Lampton, 2015, p. 12; Žigray, 2016, p. 155; Hu, 2016, pp. 13–14).

More recently, in May 2023, Xi chaired the first publicly announced CNSC meeting after the 20th Party Congress in 2022. He called for accelerating the modernisation of China's National Security System. The meeting also stressed risk monitoring, early warning mechanisms and governance of emerging issues such as data and artificial intelligence (Greitens, 2023a, pp. 4-5).

While the Holistic National Security Concept defined the scope of China's new institution, doctrine alone could not manage eleven security domains. Its implementation requires an administrative office. This function will mostly go to the powerful CCP General Office and its director.

GENERAL OFFICE DIRECTOR

The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a key part of China's political system as it links the Party to the state. Through its *General Office*, it manages information flows, document circulation and implementation oversight. In practice, this gives the General Office an important role in national security governance (Cabestan, 2017, pp. 125–126; Tsai & Liao, 2018, p. 47). The appointment of Li Zhanshu as Secretary General of the Central National Security Commission (CNSC) was, therefore, highly significant. Back then, Li was the Director of the General Office, which, as observers argued, made it the CNSC's functional institution (Hu, 2016, p. 13; Erickson & Liff, 2016, pp. 209-210). Li's appointment signalled that Xi prioritised loyalty and effectiveness over expertise, especially since the post did not go to a senior diplomat, as it had for the FALSG and NSLSG (Ji, 2016, p. 194).

This dual role mattered because the Director of the CCP General Office controlled what was described as the "*nerve centre*" of the entire Party-state (Wuthnow, 2017, p. 898). The Office functions as the administrative centre of the Party leadership. Its tasks include: organising Politburo and Secretariat meetings, managing confidential communications, controlling document circulation, gathering intelligence for top leaders, supervising secure communications, coordinating leaders' travel and protection and overseeing the transmission of classified directives throughout the Party-state hierarchy.

It has many bodies, such as the Secretarial Bureau, the Confidential Bureau, the Research Office, and the Security Bureau (Tsai & Liao, 2018, pp. 54-64).[29]

Therefore, the Director position can be loosely compared to a combination of the U.S. White House Chief of Staff and National Security Advisor, with direct access to the paramount leader and control over the agenda.[30] Further, the Director oversees around 300 staff personnel, some on temporary assignment from other agencies, who reportedly process paperwork, transmit decisions to Xi and serve as the emerging apparatus of the CNSC. This makes the General Office the backbone of the new commission (Lampton, 2015, pp. 14–15).

Subsequent personnel changes suggest that the same logic continued. Li was succeeded by Ding Xuexiang, who inherited both the CCP General Office and CNSC Office roles (Cabestan, 2021, p. 326). By 2023, Cai Qi, another Director of the CCP General Office, appeared as a CNSC vice-chairman, indicating that the General Office director, in addition to managing the Commission's office, occupied a senior leadership role (Greitens, 2023a, p. 4; Greitens, 2023b, p. 4).

Nevertheless, evaluating the operational role of the CNSC remains difficult due to the limited availability of official records of the Commission's internal deliberations. As a result, the CNSC's strategic significance will be inferred indirectly through broader Chinese foreign and security policy under Xi Jinping. One of the clearest cases during that period was China's active balancing behaviour in response to the United States' strategic pivot toward the Asia-

[29] *The Research Office is specifically significant for policy and strategy planning. It is responsible for gathering information from across the country and producing recommendations on policies sought by top leaders. Historically, it contributed to post-Mao reform programmes and was tasked with research for Deng Xiaoping's 1986 political reform agenda, including studies on Party-state separation and organisational restructuring (Tsai & Liao, 2018, pp. 61–62).*

[30] *Almost all General Office directors subsequently rose into the ranks of China's preeminent national leaders. Although formally a ministerial-level position, the officeholder usually held a concurrent Party rank as either a Secretariat secretary or Politburo member, the latter holds substantially greater influence (Tsai & Liao, 2018, pp. 49–51).*

Pacific. In this context, Beijing's westward turn through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides an important empirical case.

BALANCING THE UNITED STATES: XI'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The U.S. "*pivot to Asia*", later reframed as the "*rebalance to Asia*", emerged during the first term of the Obama administration as a strategic shift toward the Asia-Pacific region (Shambaugh, 2013, p. 10).[31] The policy was articulated in October 2011 when Secretary of State Clinton published an article titled "*America's Pacific Century*", emphasising that the United States would intensify its engagement in Asia. One month later, Obama stated in his speech before the Australian Parliament: "*[T]he United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay*". In January 2012, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that its forces would "*rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region*" (Zhang, 2016, p. 45).

The policy emerged for several reasons. American policymakers viewed China's rapid economic, political and military rise as a long-term challenge to U.S. primacy and to the post-Cold War order (Chan, 2017, p. 570; Ishaque, 2022, p. 32). After a decade of military overextension in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington sought to redirect attention toward the world's fastest-growing economic region (Davidson, 2014, p. 78). Asia had already become America's most important trading region, surpassing Europe decades earlier, while China and Japan had become central economic partners for the United States (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 11–12). And the rebalance was multidimensional. Diplomatically, the administration increased participation in regional forums and high-level visits in Asia (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 13–14). Economically, it promoted the *Trans-Pacific Partnership* (TPP) to shape regional trade rules in ways favourable to the U.S. while excluding China (Chan, 2017, p. 571).

[31] *The term "pivot" generated criticism because it implied abandonment of Europe and the Middle East. Therefore, the Obama administration adopted the term "rebalance" to emphasise that the strategy represented a redistribution of attention and resources rather than a turn away from other regions (Shambaugh, 2013, p. 10).*

Despite official American claims that the rebalance was not directed against China, Beijing largely perceived the strategy as a form of containment aimed at constraining China's rise (Chan, 2017, p. 572; Ishaque, 2022, pp. 32-34). It was within this context that Xi Jinping pursued westward-oriented geo-economic initiatives through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Xi Jinping unveiled the Initiative during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October 2013, respectively. Xi announced the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which later evolved into the broader BRI framework (Clarke, 2017, p. 71). The initiative combined land and maritime connectivity projects through six major economic corridors, infrastructure development, ports, logistics hubs, trade integration and financial coordination (Ishaque, 2022, p. 38). The BRI served multiple purposes simultaneously. On one level, it sought solutions for China's domestic problems, particularly the need to absorb industrial overcapacity and develop western Chinese provinces (Clarke, 2017, p. 75). The initiative also represented a broader grand strategy aimed at restructuring China's external environment in a manner more appropriate to its rise (Andornino, 2017, pp. 6–8).

As explained, this balancing behaviour followed the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia, particularly the promotion of the TPP. From Beijing's perspective, the TPP and related initiatives appeared to form an "*anyone but China*" access to major global markets (Zhou & Esteban, 2020). But rather than pursuing direct conflict against the United States, China adopted a strategy of soft balancing through economic instruments. Therefore, the BRI can be understood as a "*connective leadership*" strategy. Without openly challenging the current international order, China attempted to gain influence through infrastructure connectivity and diplomatic multilateralism, projecting non-hegemonic leadership while simultaneously socialising secondary states into a regional order centred on China (Andornino, 2017, pp. 13-16).

Another major development was the establishment of the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (AIIB) in 2015. It was designed to finance infrastructure projects associated with the BRI. Nevertheless, Washington viewed the institution with suspicion, fearing it would undermine the influence of the U.S.-dominated Bretton Woods system (Zhou & Esteban, 2020). Despite American opposition, numerous U.S. allies, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Australia, joined the AIIB as founding members, highlighting the growing attractiveness of Chinese-led initiatives (Chan, 2017, pp. 569–570).

This chapter examined the evolution, structure and functions of the P.R.C. Central National Security Commission. It showed how China's national security system developed from the fragmented Leading Small Groups into a centralised Party-led framework under Xi Jinping. Further, it demonstrated how the CNSC institutionalised Holistic National Security by integrating domestic and external security. Finally, the chapter illustrated the operational aspect of this system through China's geo-economic balancing behaviour against the United States, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to answer the question: how do great powers operationalise security through state institutions? The answer, demonstrated across two different cases, is that they do so imperfectly, institutionally and in ways that the character of the institution shapes the process. Part 1 established the analytical foundations. Chapter 1 constructed a neoclassical realist framework, positioning national security institutions as the intervening variable between stimuli and strategy. Chapter 2 showed that national security is not a fixed concept but a historically contested framework, one that expanded from military-centric definitions toward multidimensional ones. Together, these chapters established that what states define as security and how they institutionalise it are connected, not separate questions.

Part 2 applied this framework to two empirical cases. Chapter 3 showed that the U.S. National Security Council evolved in direct response to shifting international conditions. Each major restructuring, Eisenhower's Planning Board, Kennedy's informal dismantling, Nixon's centralisation, Scowcroft's four-tier model, reflected a presidential estimation of the external environment further shaped by their management style. The Nixon-Kissinger case demonstrated clearly how an institutional design can become a strategic instrument. By concentrating information flows, controlling interagency studies through the NSSM process and centralising diplomatic authority in the White House, Kissinger transformed the NSC into the machinery of triangular diplomacy. The grand strategic adjustments, rapprochement with China, détente with the Soviet Union, were not merely a response to Soviet parity; it was a response made possible by the institutional architecture.

Chapter 4 showed that China's path to institutional centralisation was longer, more contested and more constrained. The fragmentation of the Leading Small Group system, the "two signboards, one body" arrangement under Jiang and

Hu (Miller, 2017, p. 290), and the persistent stovepipe problem all reflected a political system characterised by bureaucratic competition. This hindered coordinated security governance, which China's growing international role increasingly required. Xi Jinping's establishment of the Central National Security Commission in 2014 resolved this, consolidating foreign affairs, domestic security and military affairs under a single party-led commission. The Belt and Road Initiative, examined as a strategic output of this period, demonstrated how a centralised architecture enabled a response to American strategic pressure, not through confrontation, but soft balancing.

Taken together, the two cases confirm the NCR proposition: systemic pressures are there, but alone insufficient for grand strategic adjustment (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016). The United States and China both faced structural stimuli, yet their responses differed. Those differences are not explained by the pressures themselves, which were there for both. They are explained by the institutions through which those pressures were processed. The NSC's flexibility, built around a professional staff, produced rapid and secretive adjustment. The CNSC's centralisation, built around party authority and Xi's personal consolidation, produced a broader but more opaque response.

Two limitations merit acknowledgement. The CNSC's internal deliberations remain inaccessible, requiring the analysis to infer function from observable policy outputs. Additionally, the cases are examined at different historical moments, constraining strict comparison. Future research might address these limitations through the new available records, or by extending the comparative framework to a third case, a middle power or a hybrid regime, to further test the generalisability of the transmission belt logic.

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