

# **Cognitive Theory in International Relations: A Comparative Analysis of Neoclassical Realism and Constructivism**

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**Abstract:** The cognitive perceptions of states toward foreign affairs influence the evolution of international relations. In theoretical studies of cognition within international relations, both neoclassical realism and constructivism provide in-depth analyses at the systemic and state levels. Neoclassical realism adopts a vertical dimension to delineate cognitive hierarchies, illustrating how inter-state perceptions are shaped by the international system and domestic factors, ultimately manifesting through policy behavior. Constructivism, conversely, employs a horizontal lens to emphasize the social dimensions of cognition, examining systemic structures at the international level, state-level social practices, and political processes, with a focus on identity formation and interactive practices. Cognitive theory not only explains foreign policy formulation but also predicts diplomatic behavior. A case study of Japan's evolving perception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates how shifts in systemic culture and identity positioning transformed its stance from passive resistance to cautious engagement, reflected in adjustments to its foreign policy processes.

**Keywords:** Neoclassical Realism; Constructivism; Cognitive Theory; Belt And Road Initiative

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

"Cognition" refers to the outcome of individuals' observation and understanding of the world, encompassing the reception, storage, comprehension, and processing of information. It represents the subjective judgment and reflection by the human brain on the phenomena and essence of objective entities. Cognitive research focuses on the internal processing of external information. The subject of cognition resides in humans, and its content includes sensory perceptions (e.g., sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch), experiential interpretations, evaluations of specific matters, historical memories, and analytical reasoning. Cognitive processes involve attention, memory, language, thought, problem-solving, and decision-making. In international interactions, actors' perceptions of global affairs directly shape their foreign policy decisions and diplomatic behaviors. The study of cognition in international relations transcends traditional power dynamics between states. It is not merely a mechanical

calculation of national interests but involves psychological recognition and social interaction, offering a perspective to explain and predict state behavior. Within international relations theory, Neoclassical Realism and Constructivism explore how cognition shapes state behavior and global order from distinct angles. Neoclassical Realism prioritizes foreign policy analysis, emphasizing the interplay between systemic (international) and unit-level (domestic) factors. It positions systemic elements as independent variables, domestic politics as intervening variables, and foreign policy outcomes (including formulation, adjustment, and international consequences) as dependent variables. Pressures from the international system are filtered through domestic political processes to produce foreign policy outcomes. In this framework, bilateral perceptions and foreign policy interact causally: international structures and domestic politics form the backdrop for mutual perceptions, which inform policy decisions and diplomatic actions, thereby altering subsequent perceptions. Constructivism, emerging concurrently with Neoclassical Realism, integrates ideational, cultural, and identity-based factors into international relations research through social scientific epistemology, methodology, and idealist ontology. It posits that international relations are socially constructed, emphasizing the processes and logical linkages within this construction. As a systemic theory, Constructivism centers on the distribution of ideas (systemic culture) within international structures, establishing a causal chain: systemic culture determines state identities, identities shape national interests, and interests drive state behavior. Neoclassical Realism employs a vertical analytical framework to demonstrate how interstate perceptions, shaped by systemic pressures on domestic politics, manifest through governmental actions and societal cognition, ultimately influencing international relations. Constructivism adopts a horizontal social perspective, highlighting cultural contexts, identity formation, and interactive practices in shaping mutual perceptions among states.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF COGNITIVE LEVELS

In international relations, cognition encompasses not only the comprehension of specific events but also the formation of judgments through the interpretation of international and domestic contexts, ultimately manifested as policy actions. Neoclassical realism, when analyzing actors' cognition, emphasizes the interaction between systemic

and unit-level factors, integrating variables from both the international system and domestic politics. It posits that foreign policy formulation and international interactions must account for both systemic constraints and domestic political dynamics. Emerging in the 1990s from the realist theoretical tradition, neoclassical realism inherits classical realism's focus on unit-level analysis and foreign policy while incorporating structural realism's core tenets, such as anarchy, power distribution, and state-centrism. Distinct from its predecessors, it introduces intervening variables—domestic constraints and elite perceptions—through which systemic structures influence policy formulation and implementation. Simultaneously, it "unpacks" the state as a black box, emphasizing domestic politics as a dominant factor in shaping foreign policy. Thus, neoclassical realism retains structural realism's emphasis on the international system while augmenting it with domestic political variables. Neoclassical Realism originated from the perspectives of scholars such as Fareed Zakaria, Randall Schweller, Thomas J. Christensen, and William C. Wohlforth on the interplay between systemic and unit-level factors in shaping state foreign policies and behaviors. Gideon Rose synthesized the commonalities of these viewpoints, positing that the international system serves as the primary contextual driver (independent variable) of a state's foreign policy and diplomatic actions. Domestic politics acts as the intervening variable (mediating variable) influencing foreign policy decisions, while the dependent variable is the state's actual foreign policy and behavior. These three elements form a progressive causal chain. As noted by scholars, "changes in the international environment may lead to shifts in the balance of power among domestic interest and power groups, which in turn exert pressure on the state's security strategy, thereby shaping its strategic choices".(Lobell, 2006). Consequently, neoclassical realism asserts that analyzing cognition in international relations requires examining systemic, unit-level, and policy-level factors in tandem.

## 2.1 International System Level

Realism takes the anarchic state of international society as its theoretical premise, summarizing the contextual environment and survival principles of international relations. As a branch of realism, neoclassical realism derives its logical foundation from 'Thucydides' theoretical perspective in History of the Peloponnesian War—that the root cause of war lies in Sparta's fear triggered by Athens' rising power. This framework focuses on how shifts in the distribution of power among major states drive changes in international relations, explaining the impact of relative power dynamics

on foreign policy. Neoclassical realism adheres to structural realism's systemic theory, emphasizing that the distribution of power within an anarchic international environment remains a critical factor influencing states' external behavior. Neoclassical realism raises questions about the nature of the international system: "Anarchy is more an accepted condition than an independent causal force"(Walt, 2002). The uncertainty of the international system makes it difficult for states to discern whether the security environment is abundant or scarce, compelling them to rely on historical experience and subjective judgment to interpret unknown realities and navigate forward. Despite sharing the same international system, states with differing domestic political conditions and external constraints perceive security environments differently, necessitating assessments based on the distribution of national power within the existing system. For instance, EU and NATO member states, endowed with substantial power and influence, enjoy abundant security, whereas conflict-ridden states like Iran and Iraq, disadvantaged in power competition, face security scarcity. Even within the same international system, variations in perceived security levels and interstate power ratios lead to divergent foreign policies. On one hand, states with relative power advantages tend to prioritize maintaining the status quo: major powers may adopt balancing strategies if willing to bear high costs, while smaller states often choose bandwagoning if unwilling to pay such costs. On the other hand, states perceiving greater threats are more likely to challenge the existing order as revisionist actors: those prepared to incur high costs might pursue expansionist policies, sparking regional tensions, whereas smaller states unwilling to bear such costs may opt for appeasement or bandwagoning(Schweller, 1994)

## 2.2 National Unit Level

Neoclassical realism, with its focus on explaining state foreign policy, incorporates both international and domestic factors into its analytical framework. Building on classical realism's emphasis on unit-level analysis, this approach shifts theoretical inquiry from the systemic level to the attributes of individual states. As autonomous political entities, states operate within distinct geographic boundaries, coexisting and interacting under anarchy. Their internal properties—spanning political, social, and institutional dimensions—shape their behavior. Schweller identifies four critical domestic variables influencing foreign policy: elite consensus, elite cohesion, social cohesion, and government/regime vulnerability, which collectively define a state's *cohesiveness*.(Schweller, 2010) These variables can

be synthesized into three analytical categories: state capacity, decision-makers' perceptions, and societal forces.

### 2.2.1 State Capacity

National capability refers to the administrative capacity of a political regime's leadership to extract resources from state power for implementing foreign policies. When conceptualizing state power as an international systemic factor, national capability serves as a crucial indicator of state-level factors. This distinction manifests in temporal dimensions: over extended periods, the distribution of state power within the international system predominantly influences foreign policy formulation and execution, whereas systemic pressures prove insufficient to dictate specific behavioral details of states in short-to-medium terms. (Rose, 1998) The transformation of systemic-level state power into actionable foreign policy requires synergy with unit-level national capability, explaining why states with comparable international power but divergent domestic political structures exhibit distinct policy-making patterns. Neoclassical realism contends that changes in the international power structure do not inherently produce corresponding foreign behaviors. It necessitates an examination of domestic politics, particularly how state capacity "constrains and stimulates governments in translating national strength at the international level into concrete external actions" (Wei, 2009). Even with augmented state power, the attainment of foreign policy objectives may remain unfulfilled if state capacity is constrained by domestic political factors. Conversely, even absent growth in state power, effective diplomatic actions can be undertaken through maximal domestic resource extraction.

### 2.2.2 Decision-Maker Perception

The cognitive framework of decision-makers, as political elites, plays a critical role in mobilizing a state's administrative capabilities. Hans Morgenthau categorized state capabilities into "tangible capacities" (material and objective attributes) and "intangible capacities" (subjective elements such as ideology, perception, and culture). Departing from structural realism's exclusive focus on material factors, neoclassical realism posits that national interests are not preordained; rather, state capabilities must be operationalized through the cognitive processes of decision-makers. Decision-makers' perceptions directly shape the formulation of foreign policy. For instance, Wohlforth's analysis of the Cold War argues that "state behavior is not molded by objective external variables of power,

but by divergent perceptions of relative power." He attributes the Cold War's conclusion to three subjective factors: Soviet decision-makers' perception of power, U.S. decision-makers' perception of the Soviet Union, and Eastern European decision-makers' perception of socialism—thus emphasizing subjective cognition over objective shifts in power(Gonglong, 2006). Perception, as a subjective interpretation, may deviate from objective reality. Historical experiences and personal biases influence decision-makers' evaluations of geopolitical dynamics and their predictions of trends, introducing risks of miscalculation. The more volatile the international power structure, the greater the potential for perceptual distortions. Schweller's study of interwar diplomacy demonstrates that the turbulence of 1930s state behavior stemmed not from material power redistribution but from revisionist leaders' (notably Hitler) aberrant conceptions of national interests. Schweller concludes that while both state capacity and decision-maker cognition impact foreign policy and global outcomes, the latter exerts a more decisive influence.(Schweller, 1998)

### 2.2.3 Social Forces

For state capacity to function effectively, decision-makers must extract and mobilize domestic resources, a process in which social forces play a critical role. Neoclassical realism not only emphasizes state capacity but also focuses on social forces, incorporating sub-state actors at the domestic level as analytical units. Social structures comprise diverse groups, with the most influential on national policymaking being the general public and interest groups. Public sentiment directly shapes social cohesion and domestic politics, affecting the state's ability to extract societal resources. Schweller emphasizes ideology and public will, arguing that as the general populace becomes more engaged in political life, the state's external expansion diminishes. Any expansionist policy requires broad public support, which must be cultivated through state-led ideological mobilization of nationalism. Interest groups are defined as "membership organizations with political objectives"(Mahood, 1990)and prioritize "non-negotiable material goals." These groups exert significant influence on domestic and foreign policies, particularly in the 21st century, as international interactions intensify and the boundaries between global actions and domestic politics blur. By shaping decision-makers' assessments of international dynamics and cost-benefit analyses, interest groups drive variations in foreign policy formulation and implementation.

### 2.3 Foreign Policy Level

Neoclassical realism centers on a distinct and independent research object: national foreign policy, which emerges as a product of cognitive processes. Unlike international political theories, neoclassical realism functions primarily as a foreign policy theory. It emphasizes the application of theoretical frameworks rather than their construction, thereby bridging foreign policy analysis with international relations theory. This approach examines how domestic institutional structures respond to external opportunities or threats, and how state decision-makers assess the international environment, formulate foreign policies, and mobilize domestic support. By positioning the state as the principal actor, neoclassical realism elucidates the dual influence of international and domestic factors on decision-makers. Specifically, it explains how these actors evaluate national interests, devise foreign policy strategies, and execute external actions. The theory serves as a framework for interpreting state behavior, offering insights into the interplay between systemic pressures (e.g., relative power dynamics) and unit-level variables (e.g., domestic political constraints and leadership perceptions). Its analytical focus lies in explaining concrete foreign policy outcomes, such as strategic adjustments or crisis responses, while integrating both material capabilities and ideational interpretations of international systemic conditions.

## 3. THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COGNITION

The sociological perspective in cognitive studies primarily originates from constructivist theory. Emerging during the mid-to-late 1980s amid the third debate in international relations theory and maturing in the transformative 1990s, constructivism introduced interdisciplinary insights from philosophy and sociology into the study of international relations. While rooted in sociological theories addressing group dynamics and philosophical inquiries into the ontological status of states, constructivism transcends traditional frameworks by emphasizing the role of social interactions in shaping international systems. Unlike mainstream theories that analogize states to "economic agents" or material entities with dehumanized attributes, constructivism posits that states, as collective actors composed of individuals with subjective agency, co-construct international society through dynamic interactions. This perspective shifts focus from static structural analyses (e.g., anarchy in international systems) to socially constructed realities, prioritizing collective identity over

materialist self-interest. Alexander Wendt, a leading constructivist scholar, categorizes the theory through two lenses: Methodological Holism: Emphasizing systemic influences, constructivism examines how international structures—particularly shared cultural knowledge—shape state behavior, countering rationalist approaches. Ideational Ontology: While acknowledging material reality, constructivism asserts that meaning arises from intersubjective ideas. In international relations, actors' perceptions and norms determine the significance of material conditions, challenging purely materialist explanations. By integrating these principles, constructivism redefines international politics as a socially contingent process, where norms, identities, and practices evolve through continuous interaction rather than predetermined structural constraints.

### 3.1 Emphasize System Structure

Constructivism serves as a theoretical framework for analyzing system structure, emphasizing its social nature. By examining how system structures influence constituent units, constructivism challenges the realist school's focus on states while neglecting the systemic dimension. Realism prioritizes national interests, but constructivism argues that such interests are not exogenous to the system structure; rather, they are socially constructed within its boundaries. Unlike realist approaches, including neoclassical realism, which interprets structure through a microeconomic lens, constructivism conceptualizes system structure in sociological terms.

Table 1: Emphasize System Structure

Theory Name	Structural Significance	Structural Content	Structural Composition	Structural Nature
Constructivism	Sociological Significance	Distribution of Ideas	Shared Beliefs of Actors	Socially Constructed
Realism	Microeconomic Significance	Distribution of Material Power	Material Capabilities of States	Materially Determined

The structure of the international system is divided into material structure and social structure. Constructivism acknowledges the existence of the material structure but places greater emphasis on the significance of the social structure. The former refers to "the relative positions of actors within a given society and the distribution of material power among them," while the latter primarily encompasses the cultural elements in the actors' interactions, particularly mainstream social consciousness, ideologies, concepts, and norms.

The social structure comprises three components: shared knowledge (or



culture), material resources, and social practices.

1. The fundamental content of the social structure is shared knowledge (culture), which constitutes the collectively formed cognition of actors within a specific social context. This cognition determines actors' identities and thereby constructs their interests.

2. The social structure includes material resources, but their inherent significance is limited, as material resources can only meaningfully influence actors' behavior through social structures. Constructivism posits that material resources such as power and wealth are means, not ends, in international interactions. Without a comprehensive explanation of the social structure within the international system, it is impossible to discern the identity and positioning of states.

3. The condition for generating social structures is practice—specifically, the interactions among actors that construct the social structure. Because such interactions are dynamic rather than static, the social structure is in constant flux. Constructivism asserts that the structure of the international system determines actors' identities and interests, and once these identities and interests are established, actors formulate corresponding foreign policies and actions.

### 3.2 Emphasize Social Practice

Constructivism is a theory that emphasizes social practice, focusing on the interaction between agents and structures. In the context of international relations, constructivism views states as agents and the shared ideas (or international system culture) of the international system as the structure. These two elements produce a reciprocal effect: states' interactions construct the shared ideas of the system, which in turn shape states' identities and interests. Unlike realism, which treats anarchy as a precondition for analyzing international relations, constructivism argues that anarchy is the product of interactions among states. It concludes that "anarchy is what states make of it." (Wendt, 1992) Different state identities and interests generate distinct anarchic cultures through reciprocal interactions. Wendt categorizes anarchic cultures in the international system into three types: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. In the Hobbesian culture, states perceive each other as enemies, leading to interests centered on conquest, territorial expansion, and unrestrained use of force. The Lockean culture frames states as rivals that recognize mutual sovereignty; conflicts exist but are resolved through limited and restrained force. The Kantian culture fosters partnerships among states, prioritizing mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and collective security. Thus,

constructivism posits that states collectively construct the anarchic nature of the international system. Rather than merely analyzing state behavior, it examines how state identities and interests are ontologically shaped through interactions, thereby influencing international conduct.

### 3.3 Emphasize Political Process

Constructivism posits that the determination and alteration of national interests and behaviors stem from international political processes. Within these processes, systemic culture not only guides the motivations behind state actions but also constructs the identity positioning of states, i.e., identity recognition. Wendt categorizes "identity" into two types: "holistic identity" and "social identity." (Wendt, 1994) "Holistic identity" refers to the intrinsic essence that constitutes the individualization of actors, emphasizing their distinguishing characteristics from others in terms of collective consciousness, experiences, material resources, shared beliefs, values, or knowledge. "Social identity" denotes the meanings actors assign to themselves when interacting with others, reflecting the structural features of individual and societal ontology. Actors determine their identities or self-positioning within specific environments or social role structures characterized by shared understandings and expectations. Among these two types, constructivism prioritizes the study of "collective identity," asserting that identity forms the foundation of interests, and national interests arise from identity recognition. From the constructivist perspective, the internalization of systemic structural culture hinges on actors' identification with that culture. This identification integrates the culture and generalized others into the self-perception of actors. The process of identity delineates boundaries between "self" and "other," constructing a "shared in-group identity" or "group self-consciousness". Such consciousness positions identities and fosters common interests among actors to preserve the group's cultural framework.

## 4. CASE STUDY: JAPAN'S SHIFT IN PERCEPTION REGARDING THE "BELT AND ROAD" INITIATIVE

Since the 21st century, the acceleration of global integration, political multipolarity, economic globalization, cultural diversity, and societal informatization have heightened the interdependence among nations. Amidst profound changes unseen in a century, China-Japan relations have entered "a historically unprecedented new phase of development"(Hong,

2020). As China's proposed Belt and Road Initiative has garnered increasing global attention and participation, Japan has demonstrated a more proactive attitude and gradually positive perception, which China welcomes. Notably, Japan's perception of the Belt and Road Initiative did not initially exhibit positivity; it evolved from initial skepticism, resistance, and even wariness to a constructive trend shaped by shifts in systemic culture and identity positioning, manifesting through political processes.

#### 4.1 International System Level: The Systemic Culture of Shifts in Great Power Capabilities

In studying national perceptions and foreign policy behavior, neoclassical realism focuses on the anarchic nature of the international system, while constructivism emphasizes how systemic culture shapes the identity and interests of actors. Analyzing the evolution of the Japanese government's perception of the Belt and Road Initiative from a systemic-level perspective reveals that such perceptions are shaped by factors such as changes in the power dynamics of major states within the systemic culture.

##### 4.1.1 China's Enhanced Comprehensive National Strength

Since the 21st century, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis, emerging Asian nations have increasingly exerted influence on the global stage, accelerating the eastward shift of international political power. Western countries, including the United States, have recognized that the era of Western dominance in international politics is ending, with the so-called "Thucydides Trap" potentially reemerging as China challenges U.S. global hegemony. From an economic perspective, between 2000 and 2013, the share of developed economies in the global economy declined from approximately 77% to 60%, with the U.S. proportion dropping from 31.5% to 22.5% and Japan's from 14.4% to 8.2%. Conversely, developing economies saw their share rise from 21.6% to 35.8%, with China's GDP share increasing from around 3.6% to 11.5%. In terms of GDP growth, during the first six years of the 21st century, China's GDP expanded modestly at an annual rate of approximately 10%, while Japan's GDP remained stable without significant fluctuations. However, starting in 2007, China's GDP surged rapidly, narrowing the gap with Japan. By 2010, China's GDP (6.087 trillion USD) surpassed Japan's (5.7 trillion USD), establishing China as the world's second-largest economy. This shift heightened Japan's vigilance and unease.

**Figure 1:** Data Source: World Bank Website

From Japan's perspective, China's surpassing of Japan in GDP marked the arrival of "the era of U.S.-China dual supremacy" and signified the end of Japan's overwhelming dominance in Asia. Subsequently, Japan shifted its perception of China, redefining their relationship from "strategic mutual benefit partners" to viewing China as an "external threat." (Dahui, 2019) Between 2012 and 2015, Japan's GDP showed a downward trend, widening the gap with China. The term repeatedly used in Asahi Shimbun's coverage of China overtaking Japan's GDP was "Japan-China reversal." China's rapid economic development has triggered Japanese vigilance and concerns in both economic-trade and military-security domains. Influenced by longstanding cognitive biases toward China and conventional perceptions of emerging powers' development paths, Japan regards China as "an emerging hegemonic power with strong tendencies to 'disrupt the status quo' and 'challenge the system'" that will confront international rules. Simultaneously, Japan exhibits "significant unease and skepticism toward China's comprehensive economic-military rise and growing strength," perceiving China as a potential destabilizing factor threatening regional security. Consequently, when the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed, Japan instinctively misinterpreted it as China's policy to alter the existing international order and a confrontational move against major powers like the United States.

#### 4.1.2 Declining U.S. Influence

For decades following WWII, the U.S. factor remained pivotal in Japan's foreign policy formulation and diplomatic actions. Since the establishment

of the Obama administration in 2008, U.S. foreign policy has prioritized the Asia-Pacific region, prominently declaring a "Pivot to Asia" as the centerpiece of its global strategy. With America's strategic eastward shift, Asian affairs increasingly fell under U.S. influence. From 2010 to 2017, Japan further strengthened its alliance with the U.S., acting as Asia's "vanguard" under the "Asia-Pacific Rebalance" strategy. Japan joined the TPP in 2011, closely aligning with Washington to advance a joint China-containment strategy while adopting a passive or adversarial stance toward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, the Trump administration's "America First" policy after 2017 eroded the interests of ally Japan.

#### 4.1.2.1 U.S. Trade Protectionism

Japanese media analysis indicates that the TPP, once highly anticipated by Western nations as an optimal countermeasure to the BRI, aimed to unite like-minded democracies into a flexible military-economic coalition under a free economic zone framework. Yet the U.S. withdrawal dashed these hopes. Japan had sought to bolster U.S.-Japan relations through proactive TPP engagement, given its high dependency on U.S. trade. However, Trump's inauguration in 2017 ushered in "Trumpism"—characterized by isolationism, trade protectionism, conservatism, white supremacy, and anti-elitism under the banner of "America First." (Huaizhong, 2017) Subsequent U.S. protectionist policies and trade sanctions, including trade wars with non-allied China and disregard for allies like Japan and Western Europe, intensified anxieties. "The U.S.-China trade disputes evoke Japan's painful memories, forcing Tokyo to confront the fragility of its own trade reliance on America and the adage 'when lips perish, teeth feel the cold' (interconnected fates)." (Haoyu, 2018) These actions not only hindered global economic integration but also sowed doubts in Japan about the reliability of the U.S.-Japan alliance and fears of abandonment. Concurrent challenges—Brexit, stalled WTO negotiations, sluggish international financial reforms—further destabilized multilateral cooperation and Japan's external economic environment. To avoid "putting all eggs in one basket," Japan began pursuing diversified free trade partnerships to mitigate pressures from a deteriorating global economy. As articulated in Japanese policy circles: "While Japan and the U.S. share deep liberal democratic ties and should continue cooperating, blind adherence to Washington's lead becomes untenable if Trump persists with America First." Consequently, Japan turned to China—a neighboring advocate of free trade and WTO-based solutions—as a primary partner. As noted by Professor Shiro Armstrong of ANU's Australia-Japan Research Centre:

"Japan's BRI engagement serves not only as pragmatic outreach to China but also as a hedge against growing U.S.-Japan uncertainties. Washington's shifts have refocused Tokyo's strategic gaze on East Asia." (Liu, 2019) Recognizing the BRI's commitment to multilateral free trade and principles of "joint consultation, construction, and sharing," Japan now views the initiative as a potential contributor to Asian and global prosperity. Unlike the U.S.-Japan alliance, which demands political-security concessions, BRI-driven cooperation offers a low-cost framework for bilateral and multilateral gains.

#### 4.1.2.2 Improvement in U.S. Attitudes Toward China

In 2012, the concept of a "new model of major-country relations" between China and the U.S. garnered widespread international attention, leading to a subsequent thaw in bilateral ties. The U.S. government showed partial improvement in its stance toward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although Trump criticized China as a "currency manipulator" during his campaign, he expressed commitment to "win-win" cooperation with Xi Jinping in post-election phone talks. In May 2017, a U.S. delegation attended the BRI International Cooperation Summit, while the U.S. Embassy in China and American businesses established the "U.S. Belt and Road Working Group" to coordinate bilateral collaboration. By June, Trump publicly signaled willingness to cooperate on BRI-related projects. The U.S. stance on the BRI thus evolved from initial rejection to ambiguity and eventual cautious engagement. (Ruiche, 2017). As a U.S. ally, Japan maintained vigilant scrutiny of Washington's shifting posture while doubting America's resolve and capacity to uphold East Asian order: "If the U.S. recognizes China as an equal partner based on self-interest, a Sino-U.S.-led Asia-Pacific order could emerge." The Japanese Foreign Ministry voiced urgency, stating, "It is imperative to remind Trump of the value of the U.S.-Japan alliance. If Washington directly dialogues with Beijing, China's expanding regional influence will soon become irreversible." The shock of Nixon's 1972 "diplomatic bypass" to China haunted Tokyo, prompting accelerated BRI engagement to secure strategic maneuvering space and avoid geopolitical marginalization. Faced with the unpredictability of Trump's domestic and foreign policies, Japan adopted a "hedging strategy" through "postwar settlement diplomacy"—preserving alliance ties with Washington while deepening bilateral reconciliation with Beijing. This dual-track approach reflected Tokyo's governance philosophy: "prioritizing stability in political-economic progress, seeking equilibrium in relations with major powers like China, the U.S., and Russia,

and positioning itself as a nimble balancer."

#### 4.2 National Unit Level: Identity Positioning from Competition to Cooperation

Over the past several decades since the post-war era, the competitive-cooperative relationship has become a normalized characteristic of Sino-Japanese relations. Mutual competition does not inherently signify negative mutual perceptions; acknowledging and respecting the existence of competition while seeking cooperation for mutual or multilateral gains represents a constructive perspective conducive to objectively evaluating bilateral relations and fostering shared development. From the national unit level, Japan's evolving perceptions of China stem from the factors proposed by neoclassical realism: national capabilities, decision-makers' perceptions, and public sentiment. This transformation process is embedded in the interactive practices between the state and the system under the constructivist perspective, thereby prompting the Japanese government to recognize the necessity of redefining its identity positioning to more effectively pursue national interests.

##### 3.2.1 Decline in Cabinet Approval Rates Driven by State Capacity

Following Shinzo Abe's re-election as Prime Minister Japan in 2012, which ended the political instability of "seven prime ministers in six years," his administration implemented domestic and foreign policies that initially showed limited success but ultimately failed to sustain public support.

1) Ineffective Economic Policies: After Shinzo Abe's second term as Prime Minister, he introduced "Abenomics," a policy framework aimed at ending Japan's prolonged deflation and prioritizing economic revitalization. While initially gaining recognition for boosting stock prices and corporate profits, its long-term limitations became evident over time. Slow wage growth and widening wealth inequality meant many ordinary citizens saw little tangible benefit from economic improvements. Stagnant growth and rising living costs further eroded public confidence in these policies.

2) Public Discontent Over Consumption Tax Hikes: To address Japan's massive fiscal deficit, the Abe administration raised the consumption tax from 5% to 8% in 2014 and then to 10% in 2019. These hikes significantly increased living expenses for ordinary consumers, particularly amid economic stagnation, further dampening consumer confidence. Surveys revealed over 70% of citizens expressed anxiety about

the economic outlook after the 2019 tax increase.

3) **Unresolved Social Challenges:** Abe's goal of "Creating a Society in Which All 100 Million Citizens Can Be Active" aimed to tackle Japan's aging population and low birthrate, but implementation faced major hurdles. Inadequate childcare support and slow progress in social security reforms left families struggling. Structural reforms in labor markets and agriculture—key to enhancing long-term competitiveness—also lagged, despite promises to promote female employment and foreign labor.

4) **Scandals and Declining Public Trust:** During Abe's tenure, his administration was embroiled in scandals such as the Kake Gakuen "special treatment" incident and the Moritomo Gakuen scandal, which heightened public dissatisfaction. In the month of Abe's second election as Prime Minister, an Asahi Shimbun poll showed that over 50% of citizens expressed optimism for his cabinet, with approval ratings reaching 59%. However, by February 2014, support fell to 40%, and by July 2017—amid the Kake Gakuen scandal—it dropped further to 33%, the lowest level during Abe's time in office.

5) **Controversy Over Constitutional Revision and Defense Policies:** Shinzo Abe repeatedly pushed for revisions to Article 9 of the Constitution, aiming to expand the military authority of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). This proposal sparked widespread domestic and international debate. Domestic opponents argued that constitutional revisions could entangle Japan in more international conflicts and undermine national security. Despite Abe's claims that the changes were necessary to bolster Japan's defense capabilities, the push faced significant societal divisions and opposition.

6) **Duality in Foreign Policy:** In diplomacy, the Abe administration strengthened the U.S.-Japan alliance and promoted the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, increasing cooperation with Southeast Asian nations and India to counterbalance China's influence. These actions heightened tensions with East Asian neighbors. Some citizens expressed concerns over Japan's excessive reliance on U.S.-centric strategies and unease about potential regional conflicts. The exposure of the SDF's South Sudan peacekeeping mission records "cover-up scandal," combined with stalled progress on the Northern Territories issue and North Korea problem, contributed to the sustained decline in Abe cabinet's approval ratings. It is evident that during his second term as Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe implemented a series of measures aimed at revitalizing Japan's economy and strengthening national security to elevate its international



standing. However, the mixed results of these policies and the controversies they sparked led to fluctuating public approval ratings over time, reflecting citizens' complex reactions to government actions and uncertainty about future development. To stabilize public sentiment and restore cabinet support, the Abe administration needed effective policies in both domestic and diplomatic arenas. Japan's 2017 Diplomatic Bluebook identified three pillars of foreign policy: "strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance," "enhancing relations with neighboring countries," and "advancing economic diplomacy".(Japan, 2017) Participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aligned with the latter two pillars. The Japanese government began to recognize that integrating into the BRI framework—by shifting from a traditional competitive stance to seeking cooperative opportunities—could better serve national interests

#### 4.2.2 Cognitive Dynamics of Decision-Makers

The Japanese government initially refrained from actively responding to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and even adopted containment measures, a stance deeply influenced by former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's personal background. Born into a conservative political dynasty known as the "Three Prime Ministers Family," Abe inherited a right-wing ideology from his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi and granduncle Eisaku Satō, both of whom contributed to setbacks in Sino-Japanese relations during their premierships. Additionally, Abe's political career was shaped by Junichiro Koizumi, who mentored him as a form of "repayment" to Abe's father, Shintaro Abe, further embedding anti-China sentiments in his worldview. Abe's background as a scion of a conservative political family instilled in him a pro-American and anti-China political ideology. His administration formulated and promoted "values-based diplomacy," a concept that persisted throughout both of his terms as Prime Minister and became the cornerstone of his foreign policy. Compared to the "values-based diplomacy" proposed during his first term, the version in his second term was an upgraded iteration with an expanded scope. The Abe administration sought to strengthen alliances with the U.S. and Europe, while courting other Asian nations to build a diplomatic network based on so-called "shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law." This network aimed to strategically contain and counterbalance China's regional influence, serving as a soft countermeasure against its expanding global reach. It was described as "focused on constraining China, underpinned by Cold War-era and even anti-communist thinking"(Jing, 2014), creating a competitive dynamic with China's regional

influence. However, Abe's stance on the BRI evolved over time. By 2017, his administration shifted toward pragmatism, expressing willingness to pursue "coexistence and co-prosperity" with the BRI under certain conditions. This adjustment stemmed from Japan's recognition of potential economic benefits, particularly in infrastructure development and regional connectivity, where Sino-Japanese cooperation could yield complementary advantages. This cognitive shift underscores that decision-makers' perceptions are not static but undergo dynamic recalibration. Abe's transition from confrontation to conditional collaboration reflects Japan's complex strategic calculus in balancing geopolitical competition with economic pragmatism amid China's global economic initiatives.

#### 4.2.3 Public Sentiment Drives Bottom-Up Policy Shifts

Public perception, as a critical component of bilateral relations, shapes international dynamics. While national stances are guided by government policies, they also exert reciprocal influence on political decision-making, forming an internal factor affecting bilateral ties. Within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, Sino-Japanese exchanges and cooperation extend beyond governmental diplomacy to encompass grassroots engagement in trade, cultural exchanges, personnel mobility, and technological-educational collaboration. Japanese public perceptions of the BRI's competitive-cooperative dynamics thus not only shape government policy directions but also impact the initiative's implementation. As globalization deepens and BRI achievements accumulate, Japanese public opinion has increasingly favored proactive bilateral cooperation.

① Grassroots Pressure Triggers Governmental Reorientation: Driven by private enterprises and economic organizations, the Japanese government gradually softened its stance toward the BRI. Despite maintaining strategic caution due to security concerns, Tokyo adopted pragmatic flexibility in specific economic projects, such as third-country infrastructure partnerships.

② Civil Society Accelerates Project Implementation: Japanese firms have actively participated in BRI infrastructure projects across Asia and Africa, contributing technical expertise and financing. For example, Marubeni Corporation collaborated with Chinese counterparts on Indonesia's Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project, blending Japanese precision engineering with China's cost efficiency.

③ People-to-People Engagement Eases Political Tensions: Mutually beneficial economic cooperation has injected momentum into bilateral

relations, creating favorable conditions for resolving geopolitical disputes. Cultural initiatives like the Japan-China Youth Exchange Promotion Program and tourism reciprocity agreements exemplify this trend. The "public-driven governance" phenomenon played a pivotal role in Japan's BRI engagement. Through business lobbying and cross-border partnerships, civil society compelled policymakers to adopt a more open economic posture. This bottom-up dynamic not only advanced concrete BRI projects but also facilitated Sino-Japanese rapprochement and shared economic gains.

#### 4.3 Foreign Policy Level: The Political Process of Pursuing Recognition

Neoclassical realism focuses on foreign policy studies, emphasizing the role of systemic and unit-level factors in shaping foreign policy and behavior, while incorporating cognitive elements. Constructivism similarly prioritizes systemic structures but integrates ideational factors such as norms, culture, and identity into international relations research through social scientific epistemology, methodology, and idealist ontological explanations. Japan's evolving perception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reflects a political process of seeking recognition under the influence of systemic culture and identity positioning, manifested in the Japanese government's public declarations of cooperation and frequent high-level bilateral exchanges. Japan's attitude toward the BRI transitioned from skepticism and vigilance to objective assessment and active participation. 2017 marked a turning point, as Japan began integrating into BRI-driven Sino-Japanese cooperation. On May 16, 2017, Toshihiro Nikai, Secretary-General of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, led a delegation to the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, delivering Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's personal letter expressing enthusiasm for collaboration under the BRI framework. Subsequently, Abe repeatedly endorsed BRI cooperation, calling it a "vision with potential to connect East and West" and emphasizing its role in global peace and prosperity. (Mei, 2018). In 2018, frequent mutual visits between Chinese and Japanese leaders marked a new era of bilateral relations: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Japan in May, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited China in October, signaling a return to normalized ties. Premier Li's visit was the first by a Chinese premier to Japan in eight years. Unlike previous meetings held in international settings outside both countries, this trip involved direct engagement on Japanese soil, reflecting a qualitative upgrade in high-level exchanges and directly facilitating consensus on third-party market cooperation. Abe's visit to China was the first official

visit by a Japanese prime minister in seven years. Japanese officials likened the significance of Abe's trip to the bilateral relationship as "akin to the transition from New Year's Eve to New Year's Day," symbolizing the potential to forge a new China-Japan relationship amid major shifts in the international landscape and bilateral dynamics. Abe stated his desire to "open a new era of Sino-Japanese relations shifting from competition to coordination." During a roughly six-minute press conference, he used the terms "coordination" and "cooperation" eight times and repeatedly emphasized the word "new" when discussing bilateral ties, underscoring his commitment to advancing friendly relations. Post-2018, BRI cooperation institutionalized pragmatic collaboration across infrastructure, third-country markets, digital economy, and green energy. These efforts not only enhanced economic ties but also strengthened political trust and regional integration.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Neoclassical realism examines the analytical hierarchy of cognition from a vertical perspective, positing that the perceptions of international relations actors are shaped by both the international structure and domestic politics. Changes in the international structure (independent variable) act on a state's domestic politics (intervening variable), altering factors such as state capacity, decision-maker cognition, and societal forces. Under the combined influence of domestic and international conditions, state actors undergo shifts in their perceptions of international affairs, leading to corresponding foreign policies (dependent variable). Constructivism investigates cognition from a horizontal, societal perspective, emphasizing that the perceptions of international actors emerge within specific systemic cultures. It focuses on the interaction between agents (states) and structures (systems), arguing that systemic culture constructs identity, thereby determining and transforming national interests and behaviors. Grounded in holistic methodology and an idealist worldview, constructivism highlights the social attributes of systemic structures, which serve as both critical elements of the structure and manifestations of cognition.

The two theories exhibit complementary features:

- ① Neoclassical realism emphasizes the distribution of material power within the systemic structure, while constructivism prioritizes the distribution of ideational factors in systemic culture.
- ② Constructivism's dynamic focus on agent practices helps explain

changes in international phenomena observed at systemic and unit levels within neoclassical realism.

③ Neoclassical realism employs a vertical analytical framework (system → unit → foreign policy), whereas constructivism emphasizes horizontal interactions among actors and their social impacts on systemic structures.

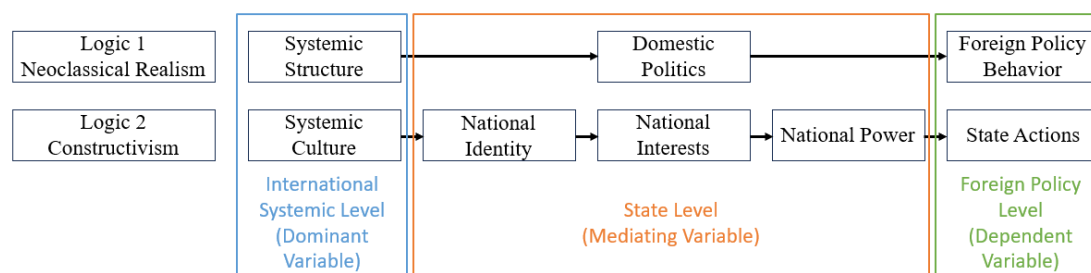
Despite differing emphases—neoclassical realism on material attributes and constructivism on social attributes—they share common ground:

① Both explore systemic influences on states from an international perspective.

② Both treat states as primary actors and research subjects.

③ Both address the logical connections among systemic structures, national interests, and foreign behavior.

These theoretical intersections underscore the interplay between systemic forces and actor agency, offering policy-relevant insights. A comparative analysis of their cognitive logics yields the following schematic.



**Figure 2:** Variables

Cognitive theory, by analyzing variables at both the systemic and unit levels, not only explains states' foreign policies but also predicts their diplomatic behaviors. With shifts in systemic culture and identity positioning, Japan's perception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has shown an improving trajectory, accompanied by corresponding political processes. Studying this evolution aids in contemplating how to reduce misunderstandings and contradictions in the development of China-Japan relations, steadily advance bilateral ties through cooperation, and rationally manage disputes amid competition.

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