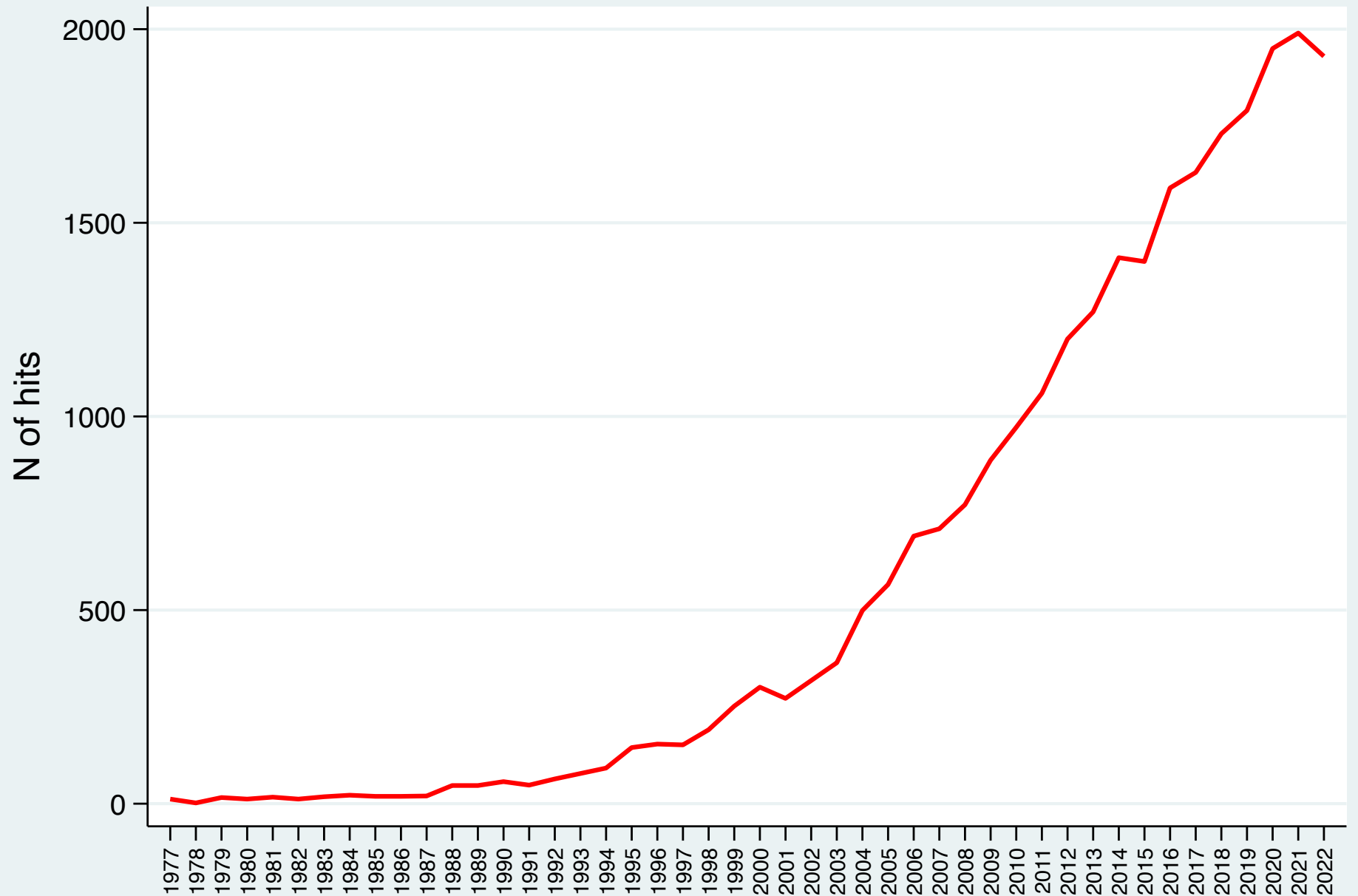# Caveat Emptor:
The Pros and Cons of Strategic Culture as an Analytical Concept

Alastair Iain Johnston
Harvard University

April 12, 2023
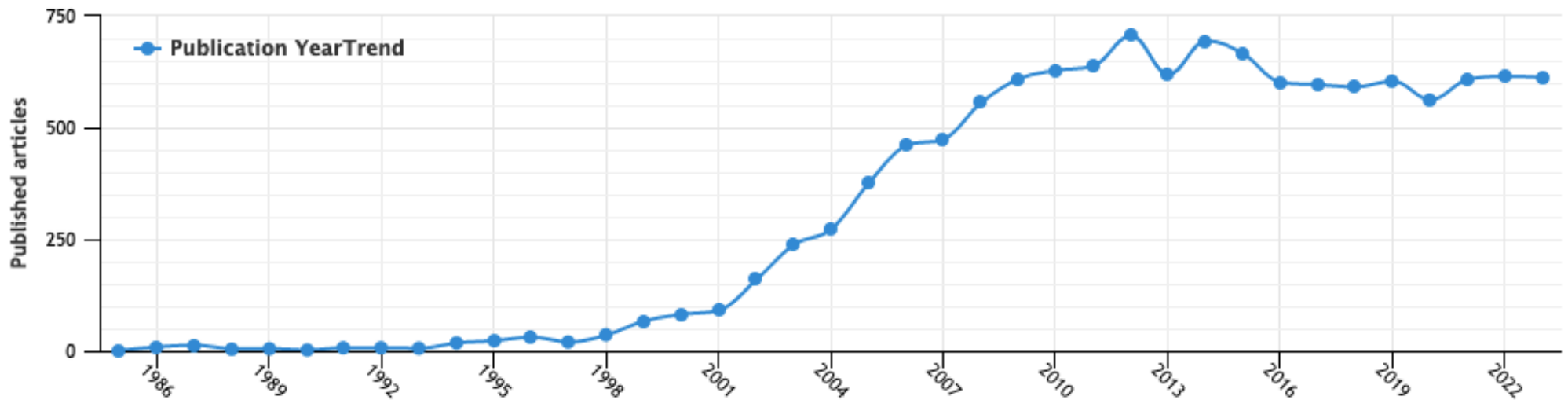
N of hits in Google Scholar referencing "strategic culture"

N of hits in CNKI articles referencing "strategic culture"

Data Sources： Total Number of Articles：12677 Piece；Search query: (全文='战略文化' or 全文='戰略文化')；Search Range：中文文献。

General Trend Analysis

Four generations of strategic culture research

1st generation (1970s-1980s)
definition: "modes of thought and action with respect to force" that resulted in a unique set of "dominant national beliefs" with respect to strategic choices.
problems: everything explained strategic culture, unfalsifiable, prone to stereotyping

2nd generation (1980s)
definition: widely available orientations to violence in order to legitimately use violence against putative enemies
problems: SC was a political justification for strategic choice, not an explanation

3rd generation (1990s)
definition: taken-for-granted concepts on the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs that establish a strategic preference ranking that seem uniquely realistic and efficacious
problems: focused on grand strategy, SC as an explanatory variable not a context
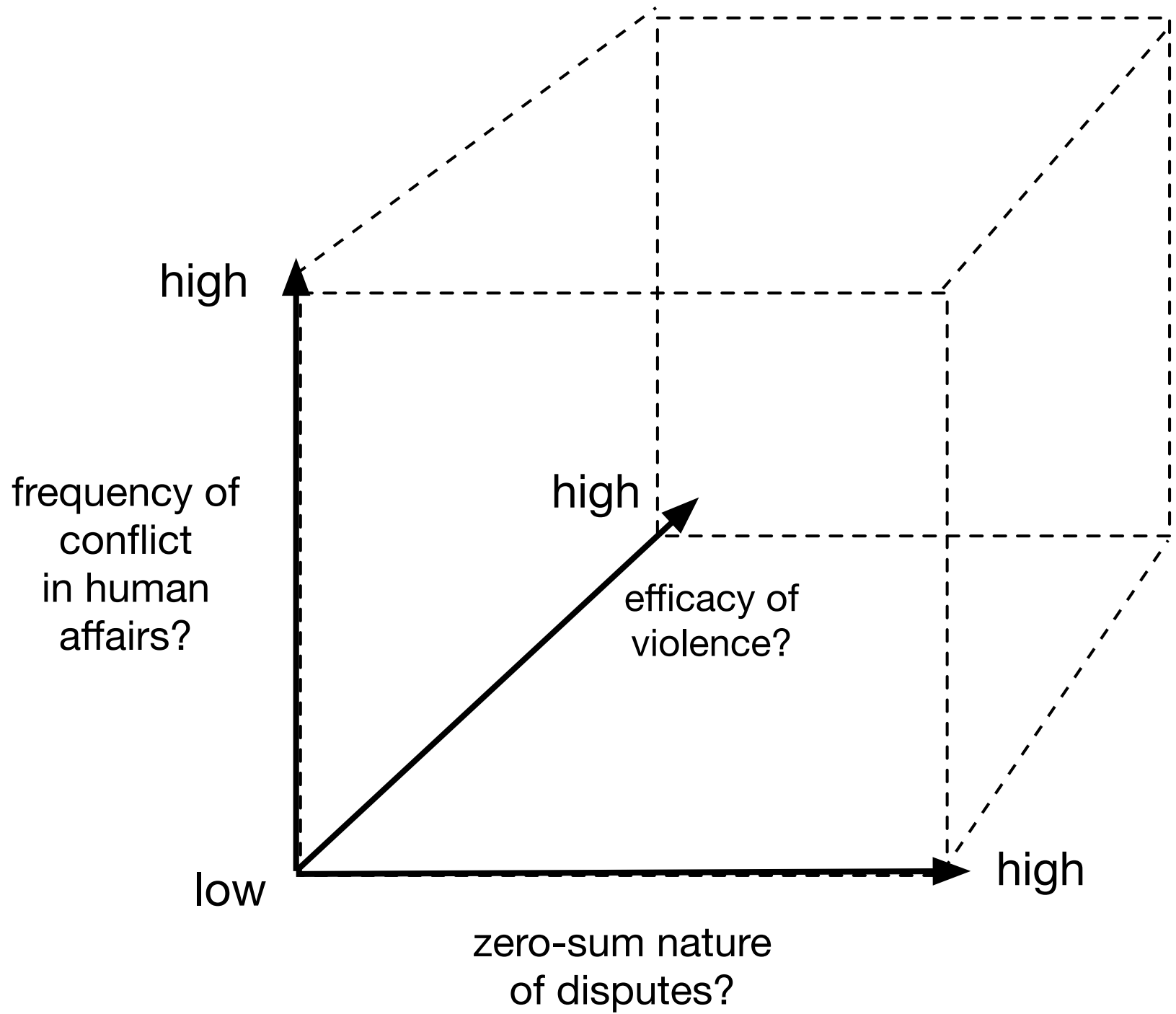
4th generation (2000s-)
definition: shared beliefs about collective identity that defines threats, role of military in providing security, operational concepts; expands to non-great powers, non-state actors; possibilities of change in SC
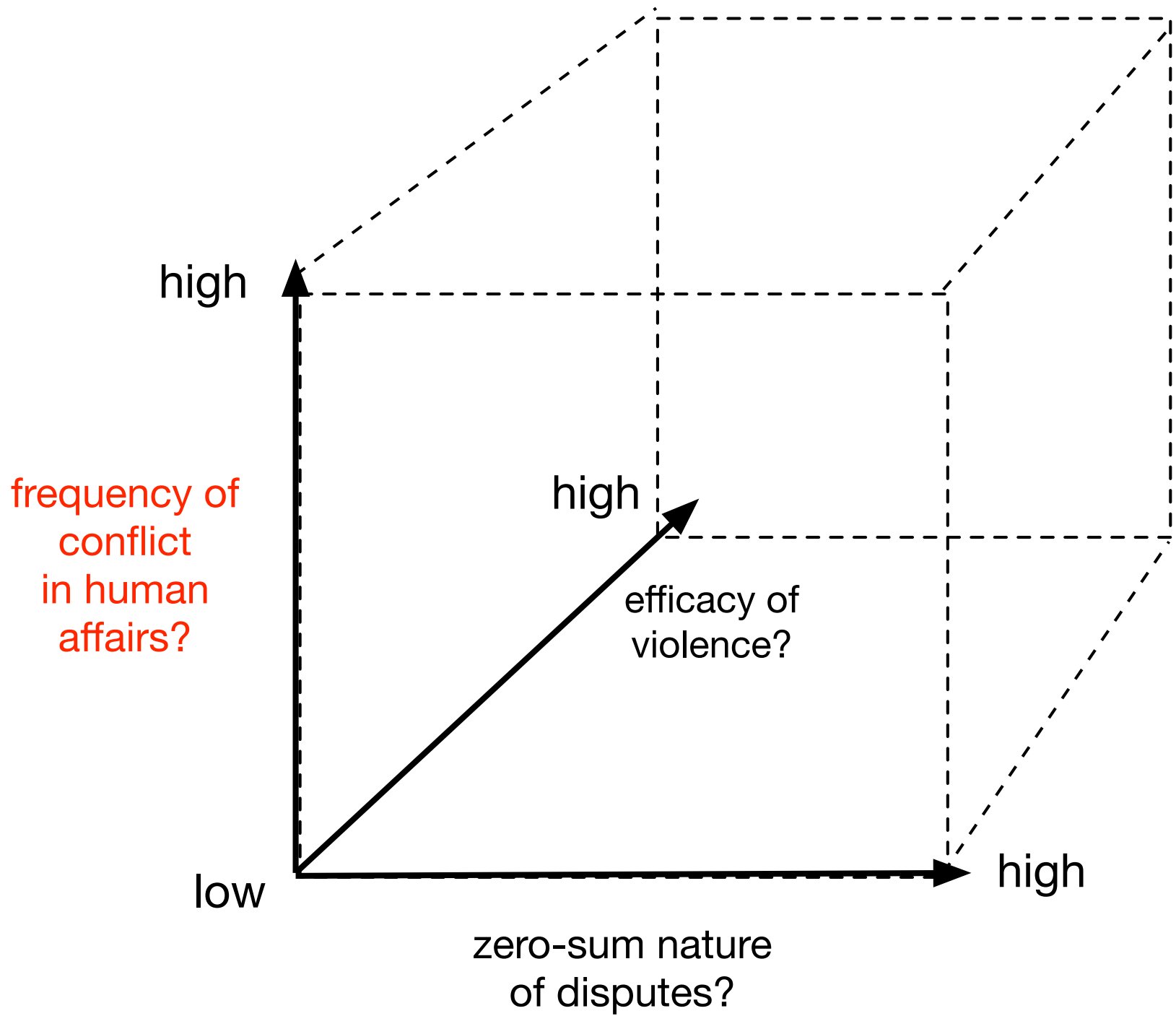problems: too much eclecticism; elements of all previous generations; persists in focusing on national level SC, though acknowledges role of sub-SCs

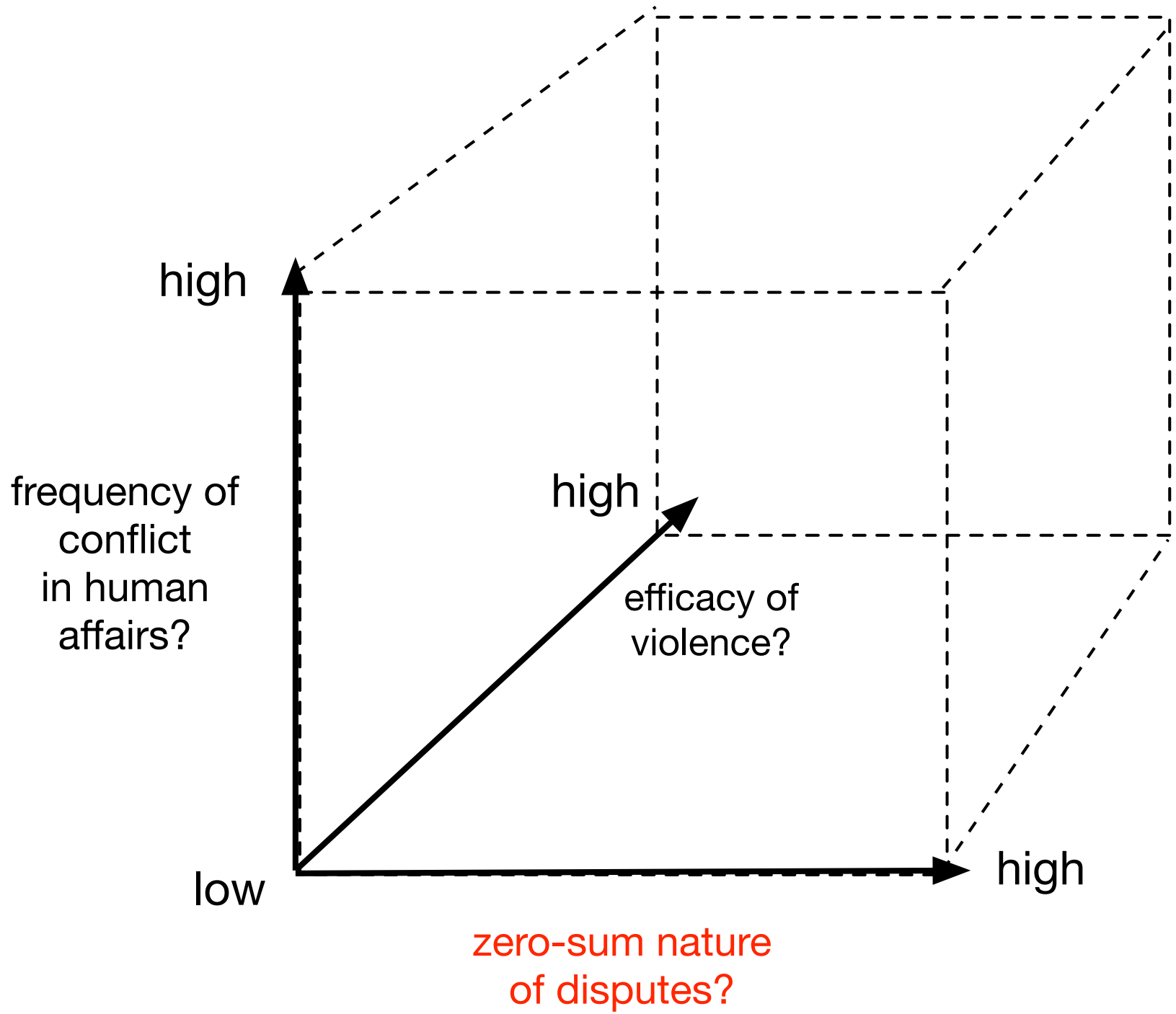**But, shared skepticism of rationalist, realist theories about strategic choice**

The central paradigm of a strategic culture

taken-for-granted concepts on the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs that establish a strategic preference ranking that seems uniquely realistic and efficacious

frequency of
conflict
in human
affairs?

high

efficacy of
violence?

low

zero-sum nature
of disputes?

frequency of
conflict
in human
affairs?

high

efficacy of
violence?

low

high

zero-sum nature
of disputes?

frequency of
conflict
in human
affairs?

high

efficacy of
violence?

low

high

zero-sum nature
of disputes?

frequency of
conflict
in human
affairs?

high

efficacy of
violence?

low

high

zero-sum nature
of disputes?

9

hyper-militarist

high

frequency of
conflict
in human
affairs?

high

efficacy of
violence?

low

zero-sum nature
of disputes?

high

10

frequency of
conflict
in human
affairs?

high

efficacy of
violence?

low
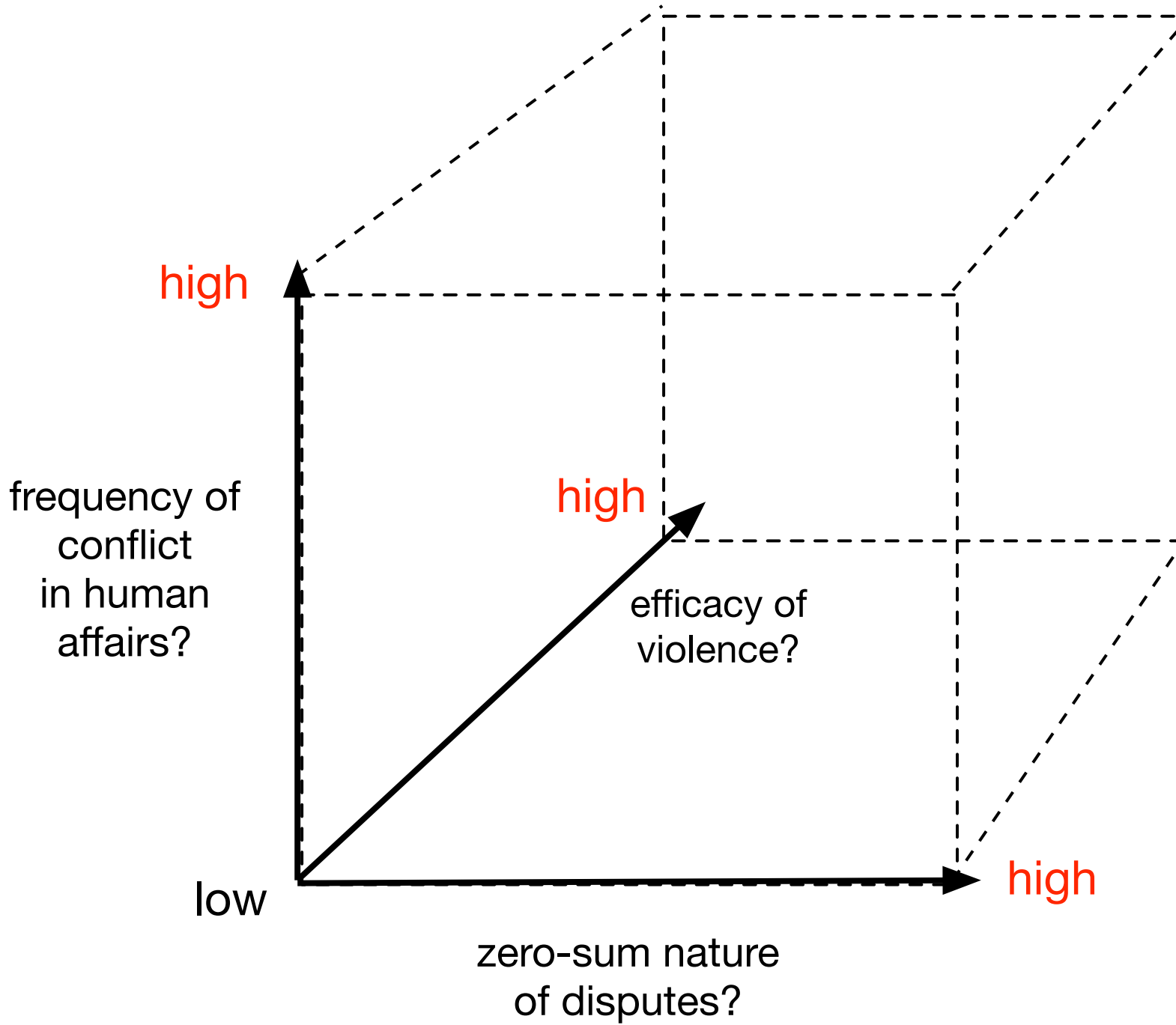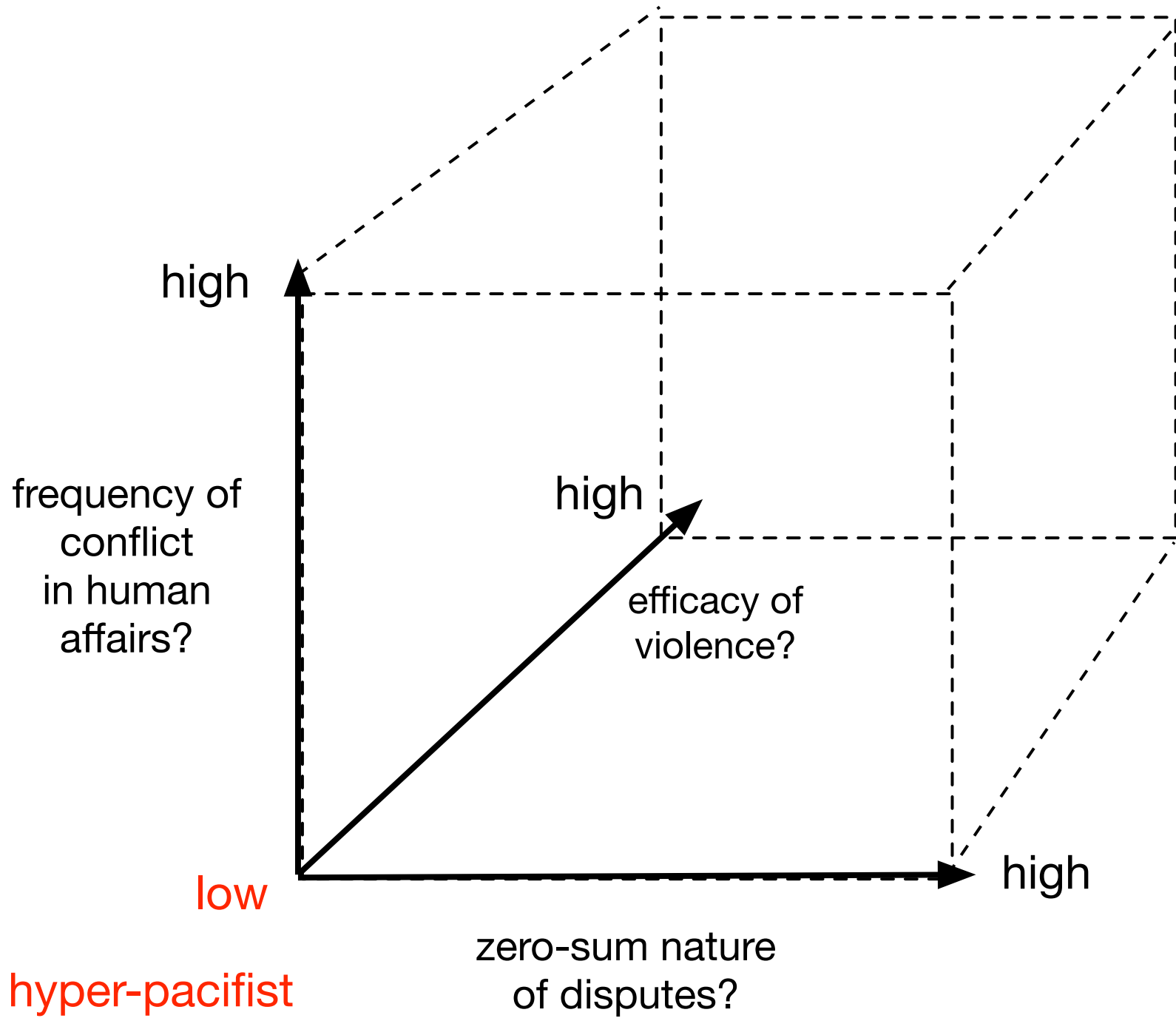
hyper-pacifist

zero-sum nature
of disputes?

high

11

Strategic cultural artifacts

- metaphors ("peace genes" — 和平基因)

- analogies (e.g Munich, Vietnam, 'century of humiliation')

- cause-effect statements that are consistently present (e.g. taken for granted axioms — "if you want peace prepare for war" "with sufficient preparation there will be no catastrophe (有备无患)

- cause-effect statements that are consistently missing (revealing the ignored, the unsaid, habitual)

Strategic cultural as an independent variable

- It is bad analysis to assume a factor explains an outcome without testing it against other factors

- Why might SC exist but not explain behavior?
  - disconnect between SC and actions (organizational SOPs, domestic opposition, leadership personalities, adversary's actions)
  - SC might change due to socialization or rise of alternative power sources
  - competitive SCs within a single country

Elements of different strategic cultures in China

- hyper-militaristic
  - conflict ubiquitous and zero-sum
    - Maoism - struggle, martial spirit
    - Leninism - threats of ideological contamination
    - ethno-national stereotypes of Self and Other (predicts to conflict)

- more standard realpolitik SC
  - conflicts of national interest, elements of shared interest
  - force and institutions to defend sovereignty

- liberal internationalist-oriented
  - development generally positive-sum
  - economic interdependence can regulate conflict
  - multilateral institutions can regulate conflict

Strategic culture: Pros

- treats the realm of strategy has having cultural properties (like religion, ideology)
  - deeply ingrained, sticky, taken-for-granted, habituated concepts and ranked preferences over behavior

- a check on mirror imaging

- self-awareness about your own unquestioned, habituated ways of answering the central paradigm questions

Strategic culture: Cons

- the opposite problem to "mirror imaging" — "maximum difference imaging"
  - stereotyping of Other, blind essentialization of Self

- US-China relationship may be especially prone to maximum difference imaging
  - common US stereotype of "Chinese"
    - excel at long-term strategic thinking, deception, due to tradition of non-linear thinking
      - Kissinger and 'weiqi'/Go
  - common PRC stereotype of "Americans" as hegemonist, and common self-stereotype as inherently peaceful

How to reduce the 'cons'?

• being aware of the possibility of multiple SCs within one society

• being aware that the dominant SC in another country can change

• being aware that the dominant SC in another country may be similar to your own.

• avoiding national names to describe a SC.
— e.g. at this point in time, PRC decision-makers have a type X strategic culture (or SCs) NOT Chinese strategic culture is X