UNIPOLARITY, STATUS COMPETITION, AND GREAT POWER WAR

By WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH*

DOES unipolarity promote peace among major powers? Would the return of multipolarity increase the prospects for war? Although unipolarity has been marked by very low levels of militarized competition among major powers, many scholars doubt whether the association is causal. Mainstream theories of war long ago abandoned the notion of any simple relationship between polarity and war, positing that conflict emerges from a complex interaction between power and dissatisfaction with the status quo. "While parity defines the structural conditions where war is most likely," one team of prominent power transition theorists notes, "the motivation driving decisions for war is relative satisfaction with the global or regional hierarchy."[1] High levels of dissatisfaction may prompt states to take on vastly superior rivals. To explain the low levels of conflict since 1991, therefore, scholars must look beyond the distribution of capabilities to account for the absence of such dissatisfaction.

To most observers, moreover, satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the status quo among today's great powers appear to be driven by factors having little or nothing to do with the system's polarity. "For most scholars," writes Robert Jervis, "the fundamental cause of war is international anarchy, compounded by the security dilemma. These forces press hardest on the leading powers because while they may be able to

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[1] Ronald L.Tammen, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, Carole Alsharabati, Brian Efird, Allan C. Stam III, and A. F. K. Organski, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000), 9. The increased importance of explaining dissatisfaction in a variety of theoretical literatures is noted and documented in Jason W. Davidson, "The Roots of Revisionism: Fascist Italy, 1922–29," *Security Studies* 11 (Summer 2002).

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guarantee the security of others, no one can provide this escape from the state of nature for them."[2] But for today's leading powers anarchy-induced security problems appear to be ameliorated by nuclear deterrence, the spread of democracy, the declining benefits of conquest, and changing collective ideas, among other factors. In combination, these factors appear to moderate insecurity and resulting clashes over the status quo, which most scholars believe drive states to war. Mainstream theories of war thus seem irrelevant to what Jervis terms an "era of leading power peace."

The upshot is a near scholarly consensus that unpolarity's consequences for great power conflict are indeterminate and that a power shift resulting in a return to bipolarity or multipolarity will not raise the specter of great power war. This article questions the consensus on two counts. First, I show that it depends crucially on a dubious assumption about human motivation. Prominent theories of war are based on the assumption that people are mainly motivated by the instrumental pursuit of tangible ends such as physical security and material prosperity. This is why such theories seem irrelevant to interactions among great powers in an international environment that diminishes the utility of war for the pursuit of such ends. Yet we know that people are motivated by a great many noninstrumental motives, not least by concerns regarding their social status.[3] As John Harsanyi noted, "Apart from economic payoffs, social status (social rank) seems to be the most important incentive and motivating force of social behavior."[4] This proposition rests on much firmer scientific ground now than when Harsanyi expressed it a generation ago, as cumulating research shows that humans appear to be hardwired for sensitivity to status and that relative standing is a powerful and independent motivator of behavior.[5]

[2] Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace: Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 2001," *American Political Science Review* 91 (March 2002), 11.

[3] For theory and evidence from two contrasting perspectives, see R. Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

[4] Harsanyi, *Essays on Ethics, Social Behavior, and Scientific Explanation* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1976), 204.

[5] For reviews, see Stephen Peter Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); idem, *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (New York: Free Press, 1999); idem, "Positional Externalities Cause Large and Preventable Welfare Losses," *American Economic Review* 95 (May 2005); Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1994); and C. Loch, M. Yaziji, and C. Langen, "The Fight for the Alpha Position: Channeling Status Competition in Organizations," *European Management Journal* 19 (February 2001).

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Second, I question the dominant view that status quo evaluations are relatively independent of the distribution of capabilities. If the status of states depends in some measure on their relative capabilities, and if states derive utility from status, then different distributions of capabilities may affect levels of satisfaction, just as different income distributions may affect levels of status competition in domestic settings.[6] Building on research in psychology and sociology, I argue that even capabilities distributions among major powers foster ambiguous status hierarchies, which generate more dissatisfaction and clashes over the status quo. And the more stratified the distribution of capabilities, the less likely such status competition is.

Unipolarity thus generates far fewer incentives than either bipolarity or multipolarity for direct great power positional competition over status. Elites in the other major powers continue to prefer higher status, but in a unipolar system they face comparatively weak incentives to translate that preference into costly action. And the absence of such incentives matters because social status is a positional good—something whose value depends on how much one has in relation to others.[7] "If everyone has high status," Randall Schweller notes, "no one does."[8] While one actor might increase its status, all cannot simultaneously do so. High status is thus inherently scarce, and competitions for status tend to be zero sum.[9]

I begin by describing the puzzles facing predominant theories that status competition might solve. Building on recent research on social identity and status seeking, I then show that under certain conditions the ways decision makers identify with the states they represent may prompt them to frame issues as positional disputes over status in a social hierarchy. I develop hypotheses that tailor this scholarship to the domain of great power politics, showing how the probability of status competition is likely to be linked to polarity. The rest of the article investigates whether there is sufficient evidence for these hypotheses to warrant further refinement and testing. I pursue this in three ways: by showing that the theory advanced here is consistent with what we know about large-scale patterns of great power conflict through history; by

[6] For example, E. Hopkins and T. Kornienko, "Running to Keep in the Same Place: Consumer Choice as a Game of Status," *American Economic Review* 94 (September 2004).

[7] F. Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

[8] Schweller, "Realism and the Present Great-Power System: Growth and Positional Conflict over Scarce Resources," in Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 29.

[9] Martin Shubik, "Games of Status," *Behavioral Science* 16 (1971). As Frank (fn. 5, 2005) stresses, positionality does not mean that zero-sum competitions are inevitable—it merely means that there is a large element of social comparison in the utility derived from a good.

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demonstrating that the causal mechanisms it identifies did drive relatively secure major powers to military conflict in the past (and therefore that they might do so again if the world were bipolar or multipolar); and by showing that observable evidence concerning the major powers' identity politics and grand strategies under unipolarity are consistent with the theory's expectations.

Puzzles of Power and War

Recent research on the connection between the distribution of capabilities and war has concentrated on a hypothesis long central to systemic theories of power transition or hegemonic stability: that major war arises out of a power shift in favor of a rising state dissatisfied with a status quo defended by a declining satisfied state.[10] Though they have garnered substantial empirical support, these theories have yet to solve two intertwined empirical and theoretical puzzles—each of which might be explained by positional concerns for status.

First, if the material costs and benefits of a given status quo are what matters, why would a state be dissatisfied with the very status quo that had abetted its rise? The rise of China today naturally prompts this question, but it is hardly a novel situation. Most of the best known and most consequential power transitions in history featured rising challengers that were prospering mightily under the status quo. In case after case, historians argue that these revisionist powers sought recognition and standing rather than specific alterations to the existing rules and practices that constituted the order of the day.

In each paradigmatic case of hegemonic war, the claims of the rising power are hard to reduce to instrumental adjustment of the status quo. In R. Ned Lebow's reading, for example, Thucydides' account tells us that the rise of Athens posed unacceptable threats not to the security or welfare of Sparta but rather to its identity as leader of the Greek world, which was an important cause of the Spartan assembly's vote for war.[11] The issues that inspired Louis XIV's and Napoleon's dissatisfaction with the status quo were many and varied, but most accounts ac-

[10] This is reflected in power transition and most other hegemonic war theories, as well as in the bargaining literature on war. See, for example, Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, "The Power Transition Research Program: Assessing Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," and Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Global War and the Political Economy of Structural Change," both in Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Robert Powell, "Bargaining Theory and International Conflict," *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (2002).

[11] R. Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chap. 3, esp. 99–104.

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cord independent importance to the drive for a position of unparalleled primacy. In these and other hegemonic struggles among leading states in post-Westphalian Europe, the rising challenger's dissatisfaction is often difficult to connect to the material costs and benefits of the status quo, and much contemporary evidence revolves around issues of recognition and status.[12]

Wilhemine Germany is a fateful case in point. As Paul Kennedy has argued, underlying material trends as of 1914 were set to propel Germany's continued rise indefinitely, so long as Europe remained at peace.[13] Yet Germany chafed under the very status quo that abetted this rise and its elite focused resentment on its chief trading partner—the great power that presented the least plausible threat to its security: Great Britain. At fantastic cost, it built a battleship fleet with no plausible strategic purpose other than to stake a claim on global power status.[14] Recent historical studies present strong evidence that, far from fearing attacks from Russia and France, German leaders sought to provoke them, knowing that this would lead to a long, expensive, and sanguinary war that Britain was certain to join.[15] And of all the motivations swirling round these momentous decisions, no serious historical account fails to register German leaders' oft-expressed yearning for "a place in the sun."

The second puzzle is bargaining failure. Hegemonic theories tend to model war as a conflict over the status quo without specifying precisely what the status quo is and what flows of benefits it provides to states.[16] Scholars generally follow Robert Gilpin in positing that the underlying issue concerns a "desire to redraft the rules by which relations among nations work," "the nature and governance of the system," and "the distribution of territory among the states in the system."[17] If these are the

[12] Lebow (fn. 3), chaps 7–9; Daniel S. Markey, "The Prestige Motive in International Relations" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2000); and David Sylvan, Corinne Graff, and Elisabetta Pugliese, "Status and Prestige in International Relations" (Manuscript, Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 1998). For general reviews, see Jeremy Black, ed., *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987); Evan Luard, *War in International Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

[13] Kennedy, "The First World War and the International Power System," in Stephen Miller, ed., *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[14] Ivo N. Lambi, *The Navy and German Weltpolitik, 1862–1914* (Winchester, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

[15] Keir A. Lieber, "The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory," *International Security* 32 (Fall 2007); Lebow (fn. 3), chap 7.

[16] J. M. DiCicco and J. S. Levy, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43 (December 1999), 690.

[17] Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 198, 186. There is a similar discussion in Tammen et al. (fn. 1), 9–10.

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issues at stake, then systemic theories of hegemonic war and power transition confront the puzzle brought to the fore in a seminal article by James Fearon: what prevents states from striking a bargain that avoids the costs of war?[18] Why can't states renegotiate the international order as underlying capabilities distributions shift their relative bargaining power?

Fearon proposed that one answer consistent with strict rational choice assumptions is that such bargains are infeasible when the issue at stake is indivisible and cannot readily be portioned out to each side. Most aspects of a given international order are readily divisible, however, and, as Fearon stressed, "both the intrinsic complexity and richness of most matters over which states negotiate and the availability of linkages and side-payments suggest that intermediate bargains typically will exist."[19] Thus, most scholars have assumed that the indivisibility problem is trivial, focusing on two other rational choice explanations for bargaining failure: uncertainty and the commitment problem.[20] In the view of many scholars, it is these problems, rather than indivisibility, that likely explain leaders' inability to avail themselves of such intermediate bargains.

Yet recent research inspired by constructivism shows how issues that are physically divisible can become socially indivisible, depending on how they relate to the identities of decision makers.[21] Once issues surrounding the status quo are framed in positional terms as bearing on the disputants' relative standing, then, to the extent that they value their standing itself, they may be unwilling to pursue intermediate bargaining solutions. Once linked to status, easily divisible issues that theoretically provide opportunities for linkages and side payments of various sorts may themselves be seen as indivisible and thus unavailable as avenues for possible intermediate bargains.

The historical record surrounding major wars is rich with evidence suggesting that positional concerns over status frustrate bargaining: expensive, protracted conflict over what appear to be minor issues; a propensity on the part of decision makers to frame issues in terms of relative rank even when doing so makes bargaining harder; decision-

[18] Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (Summer 1995). Needless to say, many scholars do not accept the bargaining literature's construal of the puzzle of war. See, for example, Jonathan Kirshner, "Rationalist Explanations for War?" *Security Studies* 10 (Autumn 2000).

[19] Fearon (fn. 18)., 390.

[20] Dan Reiter, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (March 2003).

[21] See, for example, Stacie Goddard, "Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy," *International Organization* 60 (Winter 2006).

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makers' inability to accept feasible divisions of the matter in dispute even when failing to do so imposes high costs; demands on the part of states for observable evidence to confirm their estimate of an improved position in the hierarchy; the inability of private bargains to resolve issues; a frequently observed compulsion for the public attainment of concessions from a higher ranked state; and stubborn resistance on the part of states to which such demands are addressed even when acquiescence entails limited material cost.

The literature on bargaining failure in the context of power shifts remains inconclusive, and it is premature to take any empirical pattern as necessarily probative. Indeed, Robert Powell has recently proposed that indivisibility is not a rationalistic explanation for war after all: fully rational leaders with perfect information should prefer to settle a dispute over an indivisible issue by resorting to a lottery rather than a war certain to destroy some of the goods in dispute. What might prevent such bargaining solutions is not indivisibility itself, he argues, but rather the parties' inability to commit to abide by any agreement in the future if they expect their relative capabilities to continue to shift.[22] This is the credible commitment problem to which many theorists are now turning their attention. But how it relates to the information problem that until recently dominated the formal literature remains to be seen.[23]

The larger point is that positional concerns for status may help account for the puzzle of bargaining failure. In the rational choice bargaining literature, war is puzzling because it destroys some of the benefits or flows of benefits in dispute between the bargainers, who would be better off dividing the spoils without war. Yet what happens to these models if what matters for states is less the flows of material benefits themselves than their implications for relative status? The salience of this question depends on the relative importance of positional concern for status among states.

Do Great Powers Care about Status?

Mainstream theories generally posit that states come to blows over an international status quo only when it has implications for their security or material well-being. The guiding assumption is that a state's satis-

[22] Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60 (Winter 2006).

[23] As Powell (fn. 22) notes regarding these two basic explanations, "Ultimately one may have to judge which mechanisms seem to provide a more compelling account of a set of cases. These judgments will have to await a better understanding of commitment problems" (p. 194).

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faction with its place in the existing order is a function of the material costs and benefits implied by that status.[24] By that assumption, once a state's status in an international order ceases to affect its material well-being, its relative standing will have no bearing on decisions for war or peace. But the assumption is undermined by cumulative research in disciplines ranging from neuroscience and evolutionary biology to economics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology that human beings are powerfully motivated by the desire for favorable social status comparisons. This research suggests that the preference for status is a basic disposition rather than merely a strategy for attaining other goals.[25] People often seek tangibles not so much because of the welfare or security they bring but because of the social status they confer. Under certain conditions, the search for status will cause people to behave in ways that directly contradict their material interest in security and/or prosperity.

Much of this research concerns individuals, but international politics takes place between groups. Is there reason to expect individuals who act in the name of states to be motivated by status concerns? Compelling findings in social psychology suggest a positive answer. Social identity theory (SIT) has entered international relations research as a psychological explanation for competitive interstate behavior.[26] According to the theory's originator, Henri Tajfel, social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."[27] Tajfel and his followers argue that deep-seated human motivations of self-definition and self-esteem induce people to define their identity in relation to their in-group, to compare and contrast that in-group with out-groups, and to want that comparison to reflect favorably on themselves. In a

[24] This is implicit in both power transition and most other hegemonic war theories, as well as in the bargaining literature.

[25] For extensive reviews, see sources in fn. 5, especially Frank (2005). On status as an end in itself, see, for example, K. Fliessbach, B. Weber, P. Trautner, T. Dohmen, U. Sunde, C. E. Elger, A. Falk, "Social Comparison Affects Reward-Related Brain Activity in the Human Ventral Striatum," *Science* 318 (November 23, 2007). Relevant here are findings from the empirical literature inspired by relative deprivation theory. See M. Olson, C. P. Herman, and M. P. Zannan, eds., *Relative Deprivation and Social Comparison* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986); and the discussion in Rupert Brown, "Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30 (November 2000), 748–50.

[26] Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* 49 (Spring 1995); Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott, "Identity as a Variable," *Perspectives on Politics* 4 (December 2006).

[27] Henri Tajfel, *Human Group and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 251. For a review, see Brown (fn. 25).

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remarkable set of experiments that has since been replicated dozens of times, Tajfel and his collaborators found that simply assigning subjects to trivially defined "minimal" in-groups led them to discriminate in favor of their in-group at the expense of an out-group, even when nothing else about the setting implied a competitive relationship.

Although SIT appears to provide a plausible candidate explanation for interstate conflict, moving beyond its robust but general implication about the ubiquitous potential for status seeking to specific hypotheses about state behavior has proved challenging. In particular, experimental findings concerning which groups individuals will select as relevant comparisons and which of many possible identity-maintenance strategies they will choose have proved highly sensitive to the assumptions made about the social context. The results of experimental research seeking to predict responses to status anxiety—whether people will choose social mobility (identifying with a higher status group), social creativity (seeking to redefine the relevant status-conferring dimensions to favor those in which one's group excels), social conflict (contesting the status-superior group's claim to higher rank), or some other strategy—are similarly highly context dependent.[28]

For international relations the key unanswered question remains: under what circumstances might the constant underlying motivation for a positive self-image and high status translate into violent conflict? While SIT research is suggestive, standard concerns about the validity of experimental findings are exacerbated by the fact that the extensive empirical SIT literature is generally not framed in a way that captures salient features of international relations. The social system in which states operate is dramatically simpler than the domestic social settings much of the research seeks to capture. Decision makers' identification with the state is generally a given, group boundaries are practically impermeable, and there are very few great powers and very limited mobility. For states, comparison choice and the selection of status-maintenance strategies are constrained by exogenous endowments and geographical location. Natural and historical endowments—size and power potential—vary much more among states than among indi-

[28] The original tripartite division of strategies is discussed in Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds., *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1979); on recent research concerning this choice, see Brown (fn. 25); Leonie Huddy, "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory," *Political Psychology* 22 (March 2001); and Jacques E. C. Hymans, "Applying Social Identity Theory to the Study of International Politics: A Caution and an Agenda" (Paper presented at the convention of the International Studies Association, New Orleans, March 24–27, 2002).

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viduals and so play a much larger role in determining hierarchies and influencing the selection of identity maintenance strategies.

Assumptions built into most SIT research to date generally do not capture these realities of interstate life. In particular, standard SIT research designs beg the question of the *expected costs* of competing for status. Experiments do not generally posit situations in which some groups are endowed with demonstrably superior means with which to discriminate in favor of their own group at the expense of out-groups. Indeed, built in to most experimental setups is an implied assumption of material equality among groups. Yet international politics is notable as a social realm with especially large disparities in material capabilities, and decision makers are unlikely to follow identity-maintenance strategies that are demonstrably beyond their means.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt the relevance for states of SIT's core finding that individual preferences for higher status will affect intergroup interactions. Individuals who identify with a group transfer the individual's status preference to the group's relations with other groups. If those who act on behalf of a state (or those who select them) identify with that state, then they can be expected to derive utility from its status in international society. In addition, there are no evident reasons to reject the theory's applicability to interstate settings that mimic the standard SIT experimental setup—namely, in an ambiguous hierarchy of states that are comparable in material terms. As Jacques Hymans notes: "In the design of most SIT experiments there is an implicit assumption of rough status and power parity. Moreover, the logic of SIT theory suggests that its findings of ingroup bias may in fact be dependent on this assumption."[29]

Status conflict is thus more likely in flat, ambiguous hierarchies than in clearly stratified ones. And there are no obvious grounds for rejecting the basic finding that comparison choice will tend to be "similar but upward" (that is, people will compare and contrast their group with similar but higher status groups).[30] In most settings outside the laboratory this leaves a lot of room for consequential choices, but in the context of great power relations, the set of feasible comparison choices is constrained in highly consequential ways.

[29] Hymans (fn. 28), 11

[30] For SIT-based findings related to the "similar but upward" comparison bias, see Rupert Brown and Gabi Haeger, "Compared to What? Comparison Choice in an Inter-nation Context," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 29 (February 1999), 31–42, esp. 39.

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How Polarity Affects Status Competition

SIT is often seen in a scholarly context that contrasts power-based and identity-based explanations.[31] It is thus put forward as a psychological explanation for competitive behavior that is completely divorced from distributions of material resources. But there is no theoretical justification for this separation. On the contrary, a long-standing research tradition in sociology, economics, and political science finds that actors seek to translate material resources into status. Sociologists from Weber and Veblen onward have postulated a link between material conditions and the stability of status hierarchies. When social actors acquire resources, they try to convert them into something that can have more value to them than the mere possession of material things: social status. As Weber put it: "Property as such is not always recognized as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity."[32] This link continues to find support in the contemporary economics literature on income distribution and status competition.[33]

Status is a social, psychological, and cultural phenomenon. Its expression appears endlessly varied; it is thus little wonder that the few international relations scholars who have focused on it are more struck by its variability and diversity than by its susceptibility to generalization.[34] Yet if SIT captures important dynamics of human behavior, and if people seek to translate resources into status, then the distribution of capabilities will affect the likelihood of status competition in predictable ways. Recall that theory, research, and experimental results suggest that relative status concerns will come to the fore when status hierarchy is ambiguous and that people will tend to compare the states with which they identify to similar but higher-ranked states.[35] Dissatisfaction arises not from dominance itself but from a dominance that

[31] Hymans (fn. 28).

[32] Weber, "Class, Status, Party," in R. Bendix and S. M. Lipset, eds., *Class, Status and Power*, 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1966); Thorsten Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Theory of Institutions*, rev. ed. (1899; New York: New American Library, 1953).

[33] See, for example, Hopkins and Kornienko (fn. 6); B. Cooper, C. García-Peñalosa, and P. Funk, "Status Effects and Negative Utility Growth," *Economic Journal* 111 (July 2001); K. A. Brekke, R. B. Howarth, and K. Nyborg, "Status-seeking and Material Affluence: Evaluating the Hirsch Hypothesis," *Ecological Economics* 45 (June 2003).

[34] Evan Luard, *Types of International Society* (New York: Free Press, 1976).

[35] See M. B. Brewer and R. J. Brown, "Intergroup Relations," in D. Gilbert, S. Fiske, and G. Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 2:554–94. These core propositions are supported throughout the theoretical and empirical literatures in sociology and psychology. See, for example, R. V. Gould, *Collision of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and, for general discussions, Joseph Berger and Morris Zelditch, Jr., eds., *Status, Power, and Legitimacy: Strategies and Theories* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1998).

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appears to rest on ambiguous foundations. Thus, status competition is unlikely in cases of clear hierarchies in which the relevant comparison out-groups for each actor are unambiguously dominant materially. Applied to international politics, this begins to suggest the conditions conducive to status competition. For conflict to occur, one state must select another state as a relevant comparison that leaves it dissatisfied with its status; it must then choose an identity-maintenance strategy in response that brings it into conflict with another state that is also willing to fight for its position.

This set of beliefs and strategies is most likely to be found when states are relatively evenly matched in capabilities. The more closely matched actors are materially, the more likely they are to experience uncertainty about relative rank. When actors start receiving mixed signals—some indicating that they belong in a higher rank while others reaffirm their present rank—they experience status inconsistency and face incentives to resolve the uncertainty. When lower-ranked actors experience such inconsistency, they will use higher-ranked actors as referents. Since both high- and low-status actors are biased toward higher status, uncertainty fosters conflict as the same evidence feeds contradictory expectations and claims. When the relevant out-group is unambiguously dominant materially, however, status inconsistency is less likely. More certain of their relative rank, subordinate actors are less likely to face the ambiguity that drives status competition. And even if they do, their relative weakness makes strategies of social competition an unlikely response. Given limited material wherewithal, either acquiescence or strategies of social creativity are more plausible responses, neither of which leads to military conflict.

The theory suggests that it is not just the aggregate distribution of capabilities that matters for status competition but also the evenness with which key dimensions— such as naval, military, economic, and technological—are distributed. Uneven capability portfolios—when states excel in different relevant material dimensions—make status inconsistency more likely. When an actor possesses some attributes of high status but not others, uncertainty and status inconsistency are likely.[36] The more a lower-ranked actor matches the higher-ranked group in some but not all key material dimensions of status, the more likely it is to conceive an interest in contesting its rank and the more

[36] The basic idea comes from G. E. Lenski, "Status Crystallization: A Non-Vertical Dimension of Social Status," *American Sociological Review* 19 (August 1954). Johan Galtung applied it to interpersonal and intergroup conflict; Galtung, "A Structural Theory of Aggression," *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 2 (1964).

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likely the higher-ranked state is to resist. Thus, status competition is more likely to plague relations between leading states whose portfolios of capabilities are not only close but also mismatched.

Hypotheses

When applied to the setting of great power politics, these propositions suggest that the nature and intensity of status competition will be influenced by the nature of the polarity that characterizes the system.

Multipolarity implies a flat hierarchy in which no state is unambiguously number one. Under such a setting, the theory predicts status inconsistency and intense pressure on each state to resolve it in a way that reflects favorably on itself. In this sense, all states are presumptively revisionist in that the absence of a settled hierarchy provides incentives to establish one. But the theory expects the process of establishing a hierarchy to be prone to conflict: any state would be expected to prefer a status quo under which there are no unambiguous superiors to any other state's successful bid for primacy. Thus, an order in which one's own state is number one is preferred to the status quo, which is preferred to any order in which another state is number one. The expected result will be periodic bids for primacy, resisted by other great powers.[37]

For its part, bipolarity, with only two states in a material position to claim primacy, implies a somewhat more stratified hierarchy that is less prone to ambiguity. Each superpower would be expected to see the other as the main relevant out-group, while second-tier major powers would compare themselves to either or both of them. Given the two poles' clear material preponderance, second-tier major powers would not be expected to experience status dissonance and dissatisfaction, and, to the extent they did, the odds would favor their adoption of strategies of social creativity instead of conflict. For their part, the poles would be expected to seek to establish a hierarchy: each would obviously prefer to be number one, but absent that each would also prefer an ambiguous status quo in which neither is dominant to an order in which it is unambiguously outranked by the other.

Unipolarity implies the most stratified hierarchy, presenting the starkest contrast to the other two polar types. The intensity of the competition over status in either a bipolar or a multipolar system might

[37] This core prediction mirrors the standard rendition of balance of power theory, except the causal mechanism driving it centers on threats to self-identity rather than on physical security. Original theoretical works on the balance of power were clear that the theory was about status as well as security. See the discussion in Michael Sheehan, *Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996), chap. 2.

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vary depending on how evenly the key dimensions of state capability are distributed—a multipolar system populated by states with very even capabilities portfolios might be less prone to status competition than a bipolar system in which the two poles possess very dissimilar portfolios. But unipolarity, by definition, is characterized by one state possessing unambiguous preponderance in all relevant dimensions. The unipole provides the relevant out-group comparison for all other great powers, yet its material preponderance renders improbable identity-maintenance strategies of social competition. While second-tier states would be expected to seek favorable comparisons with the unipole, they would also be expected to reconcile themselves to a relatively clear status ordering or to engage in strategies of social creativity.

General Patterns of Evidence

Despite increasingly compelling findings concerning the importance of status seeking in human behavior, research on its connection to war waned some three decades ago.[38] Yet empirical studies of the relationship between both systemic and dyadic capabilities distributions and war have continued to cumulate. If the relationships implied by the status theory run afoul of well-established patterns or general historical findings, then there is little reason to continue investigating them. The clearest empirical implication of the theory is that status competition is unlikely to cause great power military conflict in unipolar systems. If status competition is an important contributory cause of great power war, then, ceteris paribus, unipolar systems should be markedly less war-prone than bipolar or multipolar systems. And this appears to be the case. As Daniel Geller notes in a review of the empirical literature: "The only polar structure that appears to influence conflict probability is unipolarity."[39] In addition, a larger number of studies at the dyadic level support the related expectation that narrow capabilities gaps and ambiguous or unstable capabilities hierarchies increase the probability of war.[40]

[38] Exemplars of the last wave of status-war research include Maurice A. East, "Status Discrepancy and Violence in the International System: An Empirical Analysis," in J. N. Rosenau, V. Davis, and M. A. East, eds., *The Analysis of International Politics: Essays in Honor of Harold and Margaret Sprout* (New York: Free Press, 1972); Michael D. Wallace, *War and Rank among Nations* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1973); and Manus I. Midlarsky, *On War: Political Violence in the International System* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

[39] D. S. Geller, "Explaining War: Empirical Patterns and Theoretical Mechanisms," in M. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies II* (Anne Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 437.

[40] Ibid. See the reviews presented in Kugler and Lemke (fn. 10); DiCiccio and Levy (fn. 16); and Reiter (fn.20).

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These studies are based entirely on post-sixteenth-century European history, and most are limited to the post-1815 period covered by the standard data sets. Though the systems coded as unipolar, near-unipolar, and hegemonic are all marked by a high concentration of capabilities in a single state, these studies operationalize unipolarity in a variety of ways, often very differently from the definition adopted here. An ongoing collaborative project looking at ancient interstate systems over the course of two thousand years suggests that historical systems that come closest to the definition of unipolarity used here exhibit precisely the behavioral properties implied by the theory.[41] As David C. Kang's research shows, the East Asian system between 1300 and 1900 was an unusually stratified unipolar structure, with an economic and militarily dominant China interacting with a small number of geographically proximate, clearly weaker East Asian states.[42] Status politics existed, but actors were channeled by elaborate cultural understandings and interstate practices into clearly recognized ranks. Warfare was exceedingly rare, and the major outbreaks occurred precisely when the theory would predict: when China's capabilities waned, reducing the clarity of the underlying material hierarchy and increasing status dissonance for lesser powers. Much more research is needed, but initial exploration of other arguably unipolar systems—for example, Rome, Assyria, the Amarna system—appears consistent with the hypothesis.[43]

Status Competition and Causal Mechanisms

Both theory and evidence demonstrate convincingly that competition for status is a driver of human behavior, and social identity theory and related literatures suggest the conditions under which it might come to the fore in great power relations. Both the systemic and dyadic findings presented in large-N studies are broadly consistent with the theory, but they are also consistent with power transition and other rationalist theories of hegemonic war.

[41] Wohlforth, Richard Little, Stuart Kaufman, David Kang, Charles Jones, Victoria Tin-Bor Hui, Arthur Eckstein, Daniel Deudney, and William Brenner, "Testing Balance of Power in World History," *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (June 2007); Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth, eds., *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007).

[42] David C. Kang, "Stability and Hierarchy in East Asian International Relations, 1300–1900 CE," in Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth (fn. 41).

[43] Kaufman and Wohlforth, "Balancing and Balancing Failure in Biblical Times: Assyria and the Ancient Middle Eastern System, 900–600 BCE," in Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth (fn. 41); Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook, *Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Mario Liverani, *Prestige and Interest: International Relations in the Near East, ca. 1600–1100 B.C.* (Padovo: Sargon,1990).

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How much status competition matters in light of the many competing explanations remains to be seen. The theory is distinguished chiefly by its causal mechanisms rather than by its brute predictions—mechanisms that continue to operate in a world in which the mechanisms central to other theories do not. In experimental settings, competition for status can be neatly distinguished from behavior motivated by instrumental pursuit of material rewards. In actual world politics, by contrast, the quest for status is likely to be intertwined with other aims in extremely complex ways. Substantial further refinement, ideally informed by new experimental work, would be necessary to conduct convincing tests against aggregate data.

The question is whether the substantial investments such refinement entails are warranted. I address this question by checking to see whether status competition can actually bring states to blows in two exploratory case studies of status competition in multipolar and bipolar settings.[44] We want to see whether the postulated causal links actually occur between close gaps in material resources and uneven capabilities portfolios, status dissonance, competition, bargaining failure, and military conflict. If we find evidence of these causal mechanisms in play in historical cases with some resemblance to the current unipolarity but with different capabilities gaps separating states, then both the veracity and the relevance of the theory are strengthened.

In particular, the ideal cases would involve relatively secure leading states in multipolar and bipolar systems. If the evidence in such cases shows the causal mechanisms specified here leading to costly conflict, then confidence in the theory is strengthened, as is the counterfactual claim that if today's distribution of capabilities were bipolar or multipolar, status competition might have similar consequences. Accordingly, I examine leading states that represented relatively low-probability threats to the core security of other great powers. Two states most closely meet this criterion: Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the later cold war. Britain's offshore location and comparatively small army made it an exceedingly unlikely candidate for the military conquest and occupation of such formidable continental great powers as France and Russia. And the threat posed by the United States to the basic survival of the Soviet Union was clearly muted by Moscow's acquisition of a secure second-strike nuclear force in the 1960s and 1970s.

[44] As John Gerring notes, "Case studies enjoy a natural advantage in research of an exploratory nature"; Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39. Precisely these qualities may also limit their general inferential utility.

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Status Competition in Multipolarity

The great power subsystem of the mid-nineteenth century featured a typical multipolar structure with five great powers of roughly comparable capabilities. As Figure 1 illustrates, the unevenness of Britain's and Russia's portfolio of capabilities—Russia preeminent on land and Britain ruling the seas—increased the ambiguity of the hierarchy. Britain accounted for about one-half of total seapower capabilities in the great power subsystem, while Russia mustered more than one-third of total land-based military power. Less visible to contemporary observers was a dynamic cause of increased ambiguity: Britain's rising economic and industrial power. In the decades after 1815, Britain's GDP steadily gained on Russia's, with a "power transition" occurring just before 1850. Measured by iron/steel production, the ratio of Britain's industrial advantage increased from 4:1 to an astonishing 13.5:1 over the course of the 1815–50 interval.[45] Though Britain was, as historian Winfied Baumgart puts it, "the real and only world power," at the time many saw Russia as being "on the road to becoming her rival."[46]

The origins of the Crimean War demonstrate how such a material setting can create ambiguity about rank, setting the stage for states to fight over a minor and readily divisible issue that comes to symbolize relative status. In 1852 the sultan of the Ottoman Empire yielded to French pressure to increase the privileges of Roman Catholic clerics at the holy sites in Palestine, which had fallen under the control of Orthodox monks supported by Russia. None of the protagonists truly cared which monastic order controlled the dusty shrines in Jerusalem, and if they had cared, numerous compromise bargains were feasible.[47] But the issue came to symbolize the relative rankings of the powers. Correctly perceiving Napoleon III's aim of enhancing France's status at Russia's expense, the tsar immediately concluded that securing Russia's identity as second to none (and equal to Britain) required a counterdemand: that the sultan not only reverse the decision but acquiesce in exclusive

[45] GDP estimates are from both Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820–1991* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995); and Paul Bairoch, "International Industrialization Levels from 1759 to 1980," *Journal of European Economic History* 11 (Spring 1982); iron-steel from *National Material Capabilities dataset v. 3.02,* at http://www.correlatesofwar.org. The construction of these data is discussed in J. David Singer, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965," in Bruce Russett, ed., *Peace, War, and Numbers* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972).

[46] Baumgart, *The Crimean War, 1853–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999),16.

[47] Ample documentary evidence for this is presented in David M. Goldfrank, *The Origins of the Crimean War* (London: Longmans, 1994); and William E. Echard, *Napoleon III and the Concert of Europe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), chap. 2.

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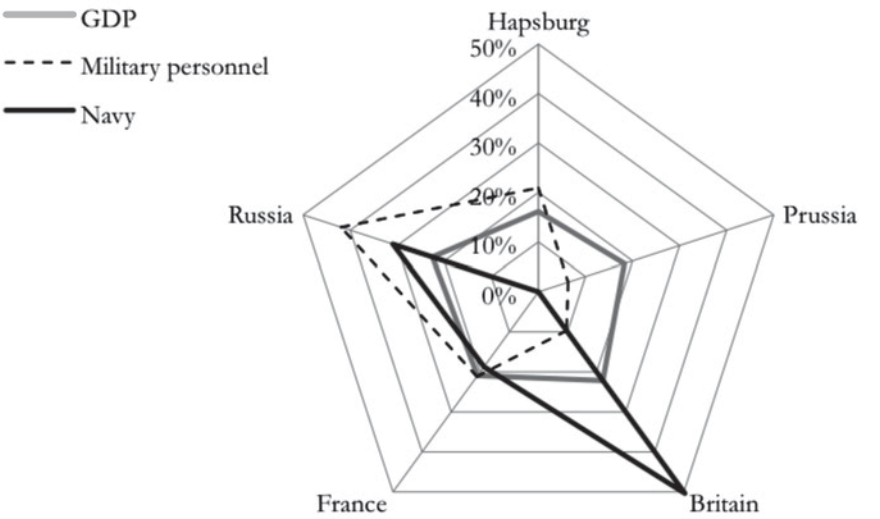


FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF GDP, MILITARY PERSONNEL, AND MAJOR NAVAL SHIPS (1850)

SOURCES: GDP: P. Bairoch, "International Industrialization Levels from 1759 to 1980," *Journal of European Economic History* 11 (Spring 1982); military personnel: National Material Capabilities data set v. 3.02, at http://www.correlatesofwar.org; navy (major ships index): George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

Russian rights over Orthodox religious sites and citizens within the Ottoman Empire, an objective he sought to meet by exerting military pressure.[48] Thus, Russia, which saw itself throughout as defending its identity as an upholder of the status quo, now became the revisionist.[49] Britain and all other great powers resisted, but it took four years of intricate diplomacy and bloody war to convince the Russians to back down.

Archives regarding this war have long been open and the historiography is vast.[50] What the documents say could not be clearer: the

[48] Echard (fn. 47), chaps. 1–2. For notes by the tsar explicating his reasoning, see A. M. Zaionchkovskiy, *Vostochnaia Voina* [The Eastern War], 4 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1908–13), vol. 1, *Prilozheniia*, 357–58.

[49] V. N. Vinogradov, "Nikolai I v 'krimskoi lovushke,'" *Novaia i Noveishaia Isotiriia* 34 (1992).

[50] On the earlier literature, see Brison D. Gooch, "A Century of Historiography on the Origins of the Crimean War," *American Historical Review* 62 (October 1956); and Gooch, ed., *The Origins of the Crimean War* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1969); for the later literature, invaluable guides are Goldfrank (fn. 47); David Wetzel, *The Crimean War: A Diplomatic History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and Norman Rich, *Why the Crimean War? A Cautionary Tale* (Hanover and London: University Press of America, 1985).

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war was *about* status.[51] The issue at stake became whether Russia could obtain rights in the Ottoman Empire that the other powers lacked. The diplomats understood well that framing the issue as one of status made war likely, and they did everything they could in the slow run-up to military hostilities to engineer solutions that separated the issues on the ground from matters of rank. But no proposed solution (eleven were attempted) promised a resolution of the Russians' status dissonance. The draft compromises accepted by Russia yielded on all points—except they included language that, however vaguely, codified Russia's rights vis-à-vis its coreligionists that the tsar and his ministers had demanded at the outset. For Russia, these clauses symbolized the restoration of the status quo ante. For Turkey, France, and Britain, they implied a dramatic increase in Russia's status unwarranted by any increase in its capabilities.

Nicholas escalated the situation to what he called "a crisis of coercion" in order to eliminate a perceived threat to his empire's identity as second to none, including Britain.[52] Confident of Russia's material power, dismissive of the salience of British sea power, and ignorant of the military implications of the industrial revolution, he expected London to acquiesce.[53] But Britain's cabinet saw the tsar's demand as an unwarranted presumption considering their assessment of Russia's real capabilities. Accepting that demand meant accepting a degradation in Britain's own position. The more the Russians sensed a refusal to acknowledge their status, the more strident they became; and the more they insisted on tangible signs of recognition, the more the British supported France and the Turks, the less willing the latter were to compromise, and the greater the status dissonance in St. Petersburg.

What the documents do *not* say is equally important. There is scant evidence of the main causal mechanisms of major contemporary theories of war. Theories based on security scarcity find little support. Russia escalated the crisis in full confidence that the Western powers had no credible military option in the theater.[54] Before the combat operations began, neither the British nor the French appeared concerned about the threat Russia posed to their security. Indeed, even after the war began, Palmerston insisted that Britain had little to fear militarily

[51] Sylvan, Graff, and Pugliese (fn. 12) make a powerful case for this point, citing relevant documents.

[52] Tsar Nicholas, quoted in Rich (fn. 50), 47.

[53] Though he expected Britain to acquiesce, he asserted that its refusal to do so "would not stop me. I shall march along my own path, as Russia's dignity demands." Quoted in Goldfrank (fn. 47), 170.

[54] Goldfrank (fn. 47), 8–10, chap. 2.

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from Russia.[55] There is scant evidence that British worries over access to India figured in prewar decision making, while concerns about Russian naval deployments in the Black Sea postdated the war and, in any case, had nothing to do with the security of the empire's sea lines. Nor is there evidence that Russia's dissatisfaction had anything to do with the material costs and benefits of the status quo. On the contrary, Russian decision makers saw their revisionism as a defense of their identity as a bulwark of the existing order. And there is no evidence concerning key implications of the bargaining model of war: that the parties saw themselves as disputing the allocation of a flow of goods that would be diminished by the costs of war; that negotiated bargains were frustrated by the inability to get commitments not to renege on agreements in the future; and that a resolution of the commitment problem is what allowed an agreement to end the war. Again and again, what frustrated intermediate bargaining involving issue linkage was the connection to status.[56]

In sum, to explain the Crimean War one needs to explain why Russia advanced a revisionist demand despite having no material reason for dissatisfaction with the status quo, why Britain and France resisted forcefully even when their security and wealth were not implicated, why Russia persisted in the face of determined, multiyear diplomatic efforts, and why it took years of costly conflict and the deaths of over 600,000 men (some 450,000 of them Russian) to force St. Petersburg to back down. While standard theories explain none of these things, the status theory offers plausible explanations. The war ended only when its escalating costs forced the Russians to accept peace terms that reduced their status as thoroughly and unambiguously as victory would have secured it.[57] The leaders of each of the main powers willingly took near-term security risks for status gains, and strong evidence links these decisions to the causal mechanisms of the theory developed here.

Status Competition under Bipolarity

New research documents the role of status competition in generating indirect military conflict among major powers operating in a world much more like our own: the cold war. By the early 1960s the nuclear

[55] And a lot to gain. See the documents collected in Hermann Wentler, *Zerstörung der Großmacht Rußland? Die britischen Kriegsziele im Krimkrieg* [The Destruction of Russia as a Great Power? British War Aims in the Crimean War] (Göttigen and Zürich: Vandenhoek and Rupprecht, 1993).

[56] There is, however, strong evidence for the salience of imperfect information.

[57] Russia was forced to accept clauses on the deployment of its navy on the Back Sea that had the effect of reducing its status to a level comparable to Turkey's. See Winfried Baumgart, *The Peace Of Paris,1856: Studies In War, Diplomacy, and Peacemaking* (Oxford : Clio Press, 1981).

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argument for insecurity could be turned on its head into a powerful argument for ultimate security.[58] As Figure 2 illustrates, bipolarity contained material sources of status uncertainty. While the Soviet Union was equal to or stronger than the United States in conventional military and raw industrial capabilities, the United States dominated all other categories of power.

As the status theory predicts, each saw the other as the main referent out-group, and their mutual struggle to establish or alter a hierarchy was a backdrop to their interaction during the cold war. The perception in Moscow was that the United States had emerged from World War II with rights and privileges that the Soviet Union did not possess.[59] Resentment of this perceived status inequality and an intense desire to achieve real superpower "parity" showed up in numerous diplomatic exchanges under Stalin and Khrushchev, but its relative significance is easier to distinguish under Brezhnev. American decision makers perceived this clearly, even as they negotiated the détente-era agreements that formalized superpower parity. Subsequent evidence from memoirs backs up this impression.[60] Thus, it was clear that détente and status were linked. What was not clear was how the formal parity enshrined in détente was to be reconciled with continued real status inequality between the two principals. Part of the problem was that Soviet responses to perceived status inequality could be perceived as claims to primacy. Exactly as happened with Russia and Britain a century earlier, arguably "defensive" identity-maintenance strategies adopted by decision makers in Moscow and Washington could spark conflict.

[58] A majority of scholars writing during the later cold war era assumed that security imperatives worked for cooperation; and hence that competitive behavior had to be explained by other factors. See, for example, Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 12 (Summer 1989); and Barry Posen and Stephen Van Evera, "Defense Policy of the Reagan Administration: Departure from Containment," in Steven Miller, ed., *Conventional Forces and American Defense Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). In addition, many analysts view the later cold war as a weak two-power concert, threatened intermittently by ideology and domestic impulses. See, for example, Roger E. Kanet and Edward A. Kolodziej, eds., *The Cold War as Cooperation* (London: Macmillan, 1991); and Allen Lynch, *The Cold War Is Over—Again* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992).

[59] See Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), chaps. 2–5; and William C. Wohlforth, *Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions in the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1993), chaps. 3–5.

[60] Zubok (fn. 59), chaps. 7–8; Wohlforth (fn. 59), chap. 7. Memoirs that attest to the importance of "equality and equal security" include Alexander Alexandrov-Agentov, *Ot Kollontai do Gorbacheva—Vosponimaniia* [From Kollontai to Gorbachev: Memoirs] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994); G. M. Kornienko, *Kholodnaia voina— svideltel'svto ee uchastnika* [The Cold War—A Participant's Testimony] (Moscow: Mezhdundarodnye otnosheniia, 1994); Georgy Arbatov, *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (New York: Times Books, 1993); and Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Random House, 1995).

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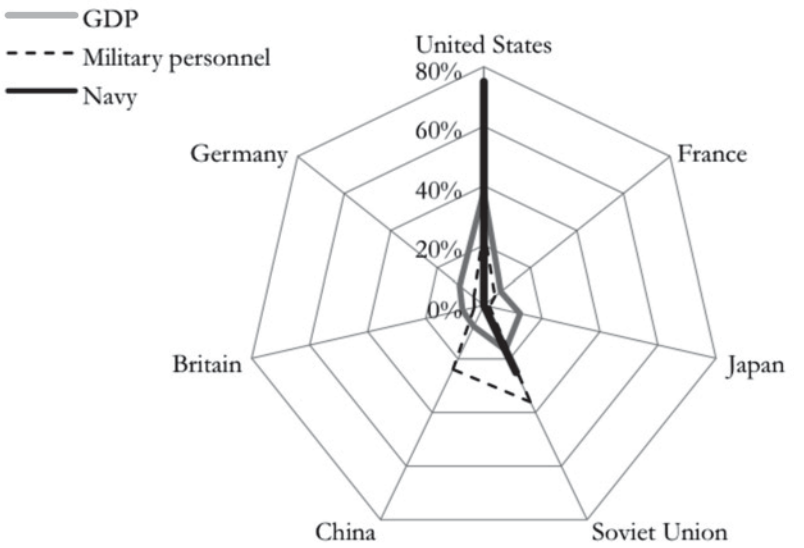


FIGURE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF GDP, MILITARY PERSONNEL, AND MAJOR NAVAL SHIPS (1970)

SOURCES: GDP: Angus Maddison, *Statistics on World Population, GDP, and per Capita GDP, 1-2006 AD*, at www.correlatesofwar.org; navy (major ships index): George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

This is exactly what transpired in the sequence of events that destroyed détente and set in motion the last round of the cold war. Neither the available documents nor the recollections of Brezhnev's aides paint a picture of a leadership taking on the United States for world primacy.[61] Instead, they reveal all the classic signs of status dissonance: that is, dissatisfaction with an inferior position brought about by the attainment of parity along some important dimensions but not along others. The issue was a modest enhancement in Moscow's position, made possible by a fortuitous combination of opportunity and means.

[61] Most responsible for this finding are the Carter-Brezhnev Project, sponsored by the Center for Foreign Policy Development, at the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University; the National Security Archive; and the Cold War International History Project, which declassified scores of important documents and organized a series of critical oral history conferences. A key publication of the project is Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations in the Carter Years* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997). Westad's summary of the new evidence on the Horn conflict is typical: "The main foreign policy aim for Soviet involvement in Africa was to score a series of inexpensive victories in what was perceived as a global contest with Washington for influence and positions in the Third World." "Moscow and the Angolan Crisis, 1974–76: A New Pattern of Intervention," Cold War International History Project [CWIHP] *Bulletin* 8–9 (Winter 1996–97), 21.

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Brezhnev and his aides sought to translate the détente-era declarations of parity and equality into reality by emulating the status-superior power. They sought to compete with the United States for influence outside traditional Soviet spheres of influence.

The available archival record of the late cold war cannot be compared to the extensive cache of archival material available for the Crimean case, and it is harder to reject alternative explanations for this behavior, explanations that center on domestic politics and ideas. Nevertheless, the available evidence does support Vladislav Zubok's contention that proxy wars in the Third World were "a manifestation of a major reason for Soviet behavior in the 1970s: to act as a global power equal to others."[62] In part this is a reflection of what is not to be found in the available documents and memoirs: evidence connecting the escalation of Soviet support for armed proxies to any concrete security or economic motivation. Instead, we have strong evidence that Brezhnev and his politburo comrades craved recognition and undertook their new activity in the Third World for the purpose of reducing status dissonance. Their identity as representatives of a superpower second to none would be more secure if they could successfully exercise the same rights—in this case armed intervention on behalf of proxy clients—that their main comparison out-group, the United Sates, had long enjoyed. Moreover, there is strong circumstantial evidence that the Soviet leaders knowingly took security risks in pursuit of status. Zubok uncovers a paper trail of warnings to Brezhnev that expanding Soviet involvement in the Third World would jeopardize détente, which Brezhnev saw as central to Soviet security interests.[63]

The problem was that Moscow's competitive identity-maintenance strategy had the effect of slowly shifting the Carter cabinet to National Security Adviser Brzezinski's hawkish view of a "Soviet thrust toward global preeminence."[64] As Carter described his "view of the Soviet threat" in 1980: "My concern is that the combination of increasing Soviet military power and political shortsightedness fed by big-power ambition, might tempt the Soviet Union both to exploit local turbulence (especially in the Third World) and to intimidate our friends in order to seek political advantage and eventually even political preponderance."[65]

[62] Zubok (fn. 59), 249.
[63] Ibid., chap. 7, esp. 252.
[64] Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 148.
[65] Ibid., annex 1, p. 2.

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The Americans' response was linkage. Washington would link the central strategic relationship—nuclear and conventional arms control, trade, cultural exchanges, and the relationship with China—to Moscow's behavior in the Third World. And linkage is the key, for the main decision makers on both sides believed that arms control and other forms of military cooperation were in their long-term security interests. By holding the central relationship hostage to the struggle for status, Carter was accepting a trade-off between security and status. By moving closer to Beijing, he was risking military tension in the one security relationship that could genuinely threaten U.S. survival—that with the Soviet Union. The Soviets, for their part, in refusing to acknowledge linkage and rein in the status-seeking policy, were accepting reciprocal risks. The result was a dramatic intensification of the cold war rivalry, as each side proved willing to allow the contest over status to infect the central strategic relationship.

As the U.S. response gathered momentum, status dissonance mounted in Moscow. U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance observed that Soviet leaders "were displaying a deepening mood of harshness and frustration at what they saw as our inconsistency and unwillingness to deal with them as equals."[66] They preferred renewed competition to acceptance of détente on terms that suggested reduced status. Brezhnev's problem was analogous to Nicholas's more than a century earlier: how to maintain détente without signaling acceptance of reduced status. Moscow's solution was similar to St. Petersburg's: offer to negotiate but subordinate the search for agreement to insistence on symbolic recognition of the status quo. At several junctures during the unfolding struggle in the Third World, Brezhnev and Gromyko made offers of cooperative conflict resolution in the spirit of a concert or "condominium." Following the precedent set by the Nixon and Ford administrations, Carter rejected these offers as provocative ploys. The problem for Washington was that the offers reflected Soviet insistence on superpower parity, a status the U.S. was willing to acknowledge only on strategic arms negotiations.[67]

In short, two superpowers relatively certain of their core security engaged in a series of expensive militarized disputes involving prox-

[66] Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1983), 101.

[67] The best example is Brezhnev's "condominium ploy" in the Yom Kippur War of 1972. Compare the Soviet and American views as reflected in Viktor Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), chaps. 5–7; and Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 299. For the similar logic behind U.S. rejection of "condominium offers" concerning Angola, see Brzezinski (fn. 64), 180–81.

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ies in the developing world. On both sides, policymakers' proposals for delinking positional concerns from the regional and global security agenda failed to persuade leaders. While much of the documentary record remains sealed in archives, available sources provide evidence of the link between small and asymmetrical capabilities gaps, status dissonance, and a willingness to sacrifice interests in security and prosperity in the competition for status.

Unipolarity And Status Competition

As Figure 1 in the introduction to this issue illustrates, the great power subsystem is currently stratified at the top to a degree not seen since the modern international system took shape in the seventeenth century. The foregoing analysis suggests a plausible answer to the question of unipolarity's implications for great power conflict: that a symmetrically top-heavy distribution of capabilities will dampen status competition, reducing or removing important preconditions for militarized rivalry and war. A unipole will provide a salient out-group comparison for elites in other major powers, but its symmetrical material preponderance will induce them to select strategies for identity maintenance that do not foster overt status conflict. And because its material dominance makes its status as number one relatively secure, the unipole itself has the option to adopt policies that seek to ameliorate status dissonance on the part of second-tier powers.

The Unipole

Studies of post–cold war U.S. foreign policy are rich with evidence that U.S. decision makers value their country's status of primacy.[68] Official U.S. strategies from the dawn of unipolarity in 1991 through the Clinton administration to the pre-9/11 Bush administration call explicitly for "maintaining U.S. predominance."[69] U.S. administrations continue to make massive investments in areas where no plausible competition exists—perhaps most notably in maintaining nuclear primacy.[70] They

[68] See, for example, Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003).

[69] Quote from Office of the Secretary of Defense/Net Assessment Summer Study, August 1, 2001, "Strategies for Maintaining U.S. Predominance," discussed in Niall Ferguson, "This Vietnam Generation of Americans Has Not Learnt the Lessons of History," *Daily Telegraph,* March 10, 2004, 19; on the 1991 Defense Guidance Planning document, see Barton Gellman, "Keeping the U.S. First: Pentagon Would Preclude a Rival Superpower," *Washington Post,* March 11, 1991, A1.

[70] Keir A. Lieber and Daryl Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30 (Spring 2006).

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have sought a large role in nearly every region of the globe despite facing no peer rival. Notwithstanding setbacks in Iraq, the United States continued to expand its global reach, with an annual defense budget of over $500 billion (likely $600 billion if supplemental spending is included) and a continued expansion of overseas bases (adding or expanding bases in eight countries since 2001). While there are many competing explanations for this pattern of behavior, one candidate that has thus far not figured in scholarly research is that U.S. decision makers derive independent utility from their state's status as a unipole.

Given its material dominance and activist foreign policy, the United States is a salient factor in the identity politics of all major powers, and it plays a role in most regional hierarchies. Yet there is scant evidence in U.S. foreign policy discourse of concerns analogous to late cold war perceptions of a Soviet "thrust to global preeminence" or mid-nineteenth-century British apprehensions about Tsar Nicholas's "pretensions to be the arbiter of Europe." Even when rhetoric emanating from the other powers suggests dissatisfaction with the U.S. role, diplomatic episodes rich with potential for such perceptions were resolved by bargaining relatively free from positional concerns: tension in the Taiwan Strait and the 2001 spy plane incident with China, for example, or numerous tense incidents with Russia from Bosnia to Kosovo to more recent regional disputes in post-Soviet Eurasia.

On the contrary, under unipolarity U.S. diplomats have frequently adopted policies to enhance the security of the identities of Russia, China, Japan, and India as great (though second-tier) powers, with an emphasis on their regional roles. U.S. officials have urged China to manage the six-party talks on North Korea while welcoming it as a "responsible stakeholder" in the system; they have urged a much larger regional role for Japan; and they have deliberately fostered India's status as a "responsible" nuclear power. Russia, the country whose elite has arguably confronted the most threats to its identity, has been the object of what appear to be elaborate U.S. status-management policies that included invitations to form a partnership with NATO, play a prominent role in Middle East diplomacy (from which Washington had striven to exclude Moscow for four decades), and to join the rich countries' club, the G7 (when Russia clearly lacked the economic requisites). Status-management policies on this scale appear to be enabled by a unipolar structure that fosters confidence in the security of the United States' identity as number one. The United States is free to buttress the status of these states as second-tier great powers and key regional play-

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ers precisely because it faces no serious competition for overall system leadership.

Second-Tier Great Powers: Russia and China

Research on the elite perceptions and discourse in Russia, China, India, Europe, and Japan reveals that there is a strong interest in a favorable status comparison vis-à-vis out-groups and that the United States looms large as a comparison group, but in no capital is there evidence of the kind of status dissonance that characterized, for example, Moscow in the mid-twentieth century or St. Petersburg in the mid-nineteenth.[71] Resentment of the U.S. role is evident, especially in Russia and China, but the operative assessment is that the capabilities gap precludes a competitive identity-maintenance strategy vis-à-vis the United States. Indeed, both countries attempted competitive strategies in the 1990s but reversed course as the evidence accumulated that their efforts had been counterproductive.

China's quest for great power status after "the century of shame and humiliation" is a staple of foreign policy analysis. Its preference for multipolarity and periodic resentment at what it sees as the United States' assertion of special rights and privileges is also well established. Chinese analyses of multipolarity explicitly reflect the predicted preference for a flat hierarchy over one in which a single state has primacy; that is, they express a preference for a world in which no power has a special claim to leadership.[72] In the early 1990s Jiang Zemin attempted to act on this preference by translating China's growing economic and military power into enhanced status in world affairs through competitive policies. As Avery Goldstein shows, this more forward policy soon provoked a nascent U.S. backlash against the perceived "China threat."[73] The signature event was Beijing's decision to heighten tensions around the Taiwan Strait in 1995–96 in order to curb Taiwanese president Lee

[71] See, for example, Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield,); Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); C. Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India United States and the Global Order* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2006); William C. Wohlforth, "The Transatlantic Dimension," in Roland Danreuther, ed., *European Union Foreign and Security Policy: Towards a Neighbourhood Strategy* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Richard J. Samuels, *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[72] See Leif-Eric Easley, "Multilateralism, not Multipolarity: China's Changing Foreign Policy and Trilateral Cooperation in Asia," *International Herald Tribune,* March 29, 2008; the article reports on research conducted on official Foreign Ministry sources.

[73] Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

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Teng-hui's independence policies and punish Washington for encouraging them. This resulted in the dispatch of two U.S. aircraft carrier groups to the area and a dramatic upgrading of the U.S.-Japan security relationship, including potential collaboration on a theater missile defense system covering the East China Sea (and possibly Taiwan).

According to many China watchers, the result was a clearer appreciation in Beijing of the costs and benefits of a competitive search for status under unipolarity. As Peter Gries puts it: "While many Chinese have convinced themselves that U.S. power predominance cannot last, they do grudgingly acknowledge the world's current unipolar nature."[74] As a result, Beijing adopted a "peaceful rise" strategy that downplays the prospect of direct competition for global parity with or primacy over the United States.[75] Thus, notwithstanding an underlying preference for a flatter global status hierarchy, in terms of concrete policies China remains a status quo power under unipolarity, seeking to enhance its standing via strategies that accommodate the existing global status quo.[76]

With its dramatic fall from superpower status, Russia presents the richest evidence concerning materially constrained identity-maintenance strategies. As noted, one response to status dissonance is to engage in "social creativity," that is, to seek to redefine the attributes that convey status. Deborah Larsen and Arkady Shevchenko argue that this is precisely what Gorbachev sought to do with his "new thinking" diplomacy.[77] Given Brezhnev's failure to translate military might into status parity and dim prospects for attaining peer status on other material dimensions, Gorbachev tried to " find a new domain in which to be preeminent" by positioning the Soviet Union as a "moral and visionary leader."[78]

The challenge—not explored by Larson and Shevchenko—is that such strategies require persuasion and that the ability to persuade is linked to material capability.[79] The higher-ranked state must somehow be persuaded to accept the downward revision in its rank implied by the acceptance of a new definition of what attributes convey status.

[74] "China Eyes the Hegemon," *Orbis* 49 (Summer 2005), 406.

[75] See, for example, Goldstein (fn. 73).

[76] Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security* 27 (Spring 2003); David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[77] Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy," *International Organization* 57 (Winter 2003).

[78] Ibid., 95, 96.

[79] Andrew Bennett, "Trust Bursting Out All Over: The Soviet Side of German Unification," in Wohlforth, ed., *Cold War Endgame* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

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And given that the higher-ranked state prefers to retain that rank, it will resist if it thinks it has the material wherewithal to do so. Gorbachev's problem was that his country was suffering from demonstrably declining material capability to persuade the United States to accept a redefinition of status that would redound to Moscow's benefit. The U.S. response was sensitive to Moscow's status concerns rhetorically, but the real terms offered on each specific issue reflected the reality of Gorbachev's shrinking leverage. The real lesson of the Gorbachev experience was that competing for status against an emerging unipole requires the commitment of real, measurable resources.

Russian discourse on identity and grand strategy has grappled with this outcome for fifteen years, veering from a failed attempt to retain superpower status as a U.S. ally under Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev to an equally ill-fated effort to regain it as leader of "multipolar" anti-U.S. policy coalitions under Kozyrev's successor Evgenyi Primakov. But while tumultuous debates continue, accompanied by endless assertions of great power status on the part of leadership figures, the deeper reality is acceptance of second-tier status for the foreseeable future.[80] The outcome resembles that in Beijing: strategies of social competition and social creativity appear to be foreclosed by material conditions, leaving a strategy of rhetorical resentment and substantive acquiescence to Russia's status as a regional great power.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that narrow and asymmetrical capabilities gaps foster status competition even among states relatively confident of their basic territorial security for the reasons identified in social identity theory and theories of status competition. Broad patterns of evidence are consistent with this expectation, suggesting that unipolarity shapes strategies of identity maintenance in ways that dampen status conflict. The implication is that unipolarity helps explain low levels of military competition and conflict among major powers after 1991 and that a return to bipolarity or multipolarity would increase the likelihood of such conflict.

This has been a preliminary exercise. The evidence for the hypotheses explored here is hardly conclusive, but it is sufficiently suggestive to warrant further refinement and testing, all the more so given

[80] See Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21 (April–June 2005).

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the importance of the question at stake. If status matters in the way the theory discussed here suggests, then the widespread view that the rise of a peer competitor and the shift back to a bipolar or multipolar structure present readily surmountable policy challenges is suspect. Most scholars agree with Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke's argument: "[S]hould a satisfied state undergo a power transition and catch up with dominant power, there is little or no expectation of war."[81] Given that today's rising powers have every material reason to like the status quo, many observers are optimistic that the rise of peer competitors can be readily managed by fashioning an order that accommodates their material interests.

Yet it is far harder to manage competition for status than for most material things. While diplomatic efforts to manage status competition seem easy under unipolarity, theory and evidence suggest that it could present much greater challenges as the system moves back to bipolarity or multipolarity. When status is seen as a positional good, efforts to craft negotiated bargains about status contests face long odds. And this positionality problem is particularly acute concerning the very issue unipolarity solves: primacy. The route back to bipolarity or multipolarity is thus fraught with danger. With two or more plausible claimants to primacy, positional competition and the potential for major power war could once again form the backdrop of world politics.

[81] Kugler and Lemke (fn. 10), 131.

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