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Fears of Falling Short versus Anxieties of Decline: Explaining Russia and China's Approach to Status- Seeking

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Andrej Krickovic, akrickovic@gmail.com

Chang Zhang, carlycici@gmail.com

Abstract

Although recent scholarship has advanced our understanding of status, little attention has been paid to the factors that shape states' status-seeking behaviour. Consequently, existing theories are unable to explain why Russia has been more aggressive and confrontational in its status-seeking than China. What is missing is a detailed examination of the ways in which status-seekers' power trajectories affect their status-seeking behaviour. Whether a status-seeker is rising or in decline shapes its propensity to take risks in pursuit of status, its calculations regarding the utility of attaining more status, and its ability to use non-confrontational and non-aggressive status-seeking strategies to induce other states to accord it higher status. Declining powers, such as Russia, engage in aggressive status-seeking to avoid imminent status losses. Decliners need to initiate confrontations with other states to compel them to recognise their status. Risers, such as China, are more cautious and restrained. Recognising that aggressive status-seeking can jeopardise imminent gains, they are conscious of the costs that accompany elevated status. Their admirable successes and growing power, moreover, make other states all the more willing to accord them higher status. Risers, therefore, can enhance their status without resorting to aggressive or confrontational methods.

Introduction

Although recent scholarship has contributed much to our understanding of status in International Relations (IR), it has had little success in formulating comprehensive explanations as to why some states are cautious and restrained in their status-seeking behaviour while others are more aggressive and risk-acceptant.

Some studies have considered how general incentive structures, such as the distribution of power in the international system, may encourage more aggressive status-seeking by certain states.¹ Yet, they cannot explain why states that face similar incentive structures often seek status in quite different ways. Others see aggressive and confrontational status-seeking as a response to status inconsistency (the situation where a state is accorded less status than its material capabilities would warrant),² or as a reaction to the humiliation that status-seekers feel when their peers repeatedly deny them status.³ These reactive explanations generally do not specify how inconsistency or frustration translate into status-seeking behaviour. When they do, however, their explanations tend to focus on the most extreme cases of aggressive status-seeking by radical revisionist states.

These questions are of interest not just to academics; their significance extends to contemporary international politics, where the distribution of power is in flux and there is growing potential for conflict over status. This study tries to fill the existing gaps in the literature by examining how power trajectories—whether a state’s power and material capabilities are rising or in decline—shape status-seeking behaviour. Since as far back at least as Thucydides, a large body of IR scholarship has examined the role that power shifts play in compelling declining states to display more aggressive behaviour and initiate conflict.⁴ We draw on and apply this scholarship to the study of status-seeking. Our argument is that power shifts influence status-seeking behaviour in three important ways that make declining powers relatively confrontational and aggressive, and rising powers more cautious and restrained in their status-seeking. First, drawing on prospect theory, we can expect states facing imminent power and/or status losses to be risk-acceptant when it comes to status-seeking, and those facing power and status gains to be risk-averse. Secondly, power trajectories also affect risers and decliners’ utility calculations with regard to status-seeking. Risers are more

- 1 William Wohlforth, ‘Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War’, *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2009), pp. 28–57.
- 2 Johan Galtung, ‘A Structural Theory of Aggression’, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1964), pp. 95–119; Michael Wallace, ‘Power, Status, and International War’, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1971), pp. 23–35; Thomas Volgy, Renato Corbetta, Keith Grant and Ryan Baird, ‘Major Power Status in International Politics’, in Volgy, Corbetta, Grant and Baird, eds., *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 1–27.
- 3 Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, ‘Status-seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to US Primacy’, *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2010), pp. 63–95; Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 4 For some key works see: Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Vol. 1, trans. by C.F. Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920); Jack Levy, ‘Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War’, *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1987), pp. 82–107; James Fearon, ‘Rationalist Explanations for War’, *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1995), pp. 379–414; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 73–104; Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

conscious of the costs that accompany elevated status than are decliners, who are more willing to accept such costs as the price of clinging on to their current status. And thirdly, power trajectories determine the means that states can effectively use to increase their status. Expanded material capabilities enable risers to employ less aggressive and confrontational strategies to induce other states to confer higher status on them than decliners, who must initiate competition and conflict to compel other states to accord them the status they believe they merit.

Power trajectories are not the only factor shaping states' status-seeking behaviour. They are, however, an important one whose effects have been under-theorised, leading theorists and decision-makers to adopt misleading expectations of how rising and declining powers pursue status. Established theories of status-seeking predict that rising powers will be more aggressive and decliners more cautious.⁵ Changes in the distribution of material capabilities occur more rapidly than states' perceptions of them. This generates a lag between the rising state's growing power and its status gains. It is assumed that, to correct this status inconsistency, rising powers will adopt risky and aggressive status-seeking behaviour that sparks conflict between them and the states at the pinnacle of the existing status hierarchies. Status inconsistency is assumed to operate in reverse for decliners, who are accorded a higher status than their declining capabilities would warrant. Decliners, therefore, should be satisfied with the status-quo and avoid reckless and aggressive status-seeking behaviour.

Russia and China's status-seeking behaviour challenges these assumptions. Russia, the declining power, has been risk-acceptant and aggressive in its status-seeking, demonstrating that it is prepared to challenge US leadership and the US-led liberal in order to defend and improve its status.⁶ China, the preeminent rising power, has shown caution and restraint in seeking to improve its status by advancing within established international hierarchies and doing its utmost to demonstrate that it is a 'responsible power' committed to preserving the established international order.⁷ Although China has become more assertive in its status-seeking as its power has grown it has nevertheless refrained from directly challenging the United States. Yet the country continues to send mixed signals about its status claims—alternating between declarations that it is an up-and-coming superpower and modest insistence that it is still a poor developing country.⁸

5 Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Aggression'; Wallace, 'Power, Status, and International War'; Volgy et al., *Major Power Status in International Politics*.

6 Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, 'A New World Order: A View From Russia', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4 October, 2018, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/A-new-world-order-A-view-from-Russia-19782>.

7 Deng Yong, *China's Struggle for Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Pu Xiaoyu, *Rebranding China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

8 Zeng Jinghan, 'Is China Committed to Peaceful Rise? Debating How to Secure Core Interests in China', *International Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 5 (2017), pp. 618–36; Pu, *Rebranding China*.

The theory developed in this article can explain this puzzling divergence.⁹ As a rising power, China has both psychological and material reasons for adopting a cautious approach to status-seeking. Chinese leaders and the Chinese public may not be satisfied with their country's current standing, but they can nevertheless reasonably expect China's status to improve in the future. China finds itself in the domain of gains, which makes its leaders risk-averse, and unwilling to engage in risky, status-seeking behaviour that could jeopardise the country's imminent status gains. They are also conscious of the costs and tradeoffs that accompany higher status, and hence wary of taking on new burdens and responsibilities, or engaging in aggressive status-seeking that may induce other states to contain its rise. Moreover, because of its growing material capabilities and admirable record of (economic) success, other states are willing to grant China increased status (albeit grudgingly). Therefore, China has no need to engage in belligerent and confrontational status-seeking in order to make others acknowledge its growing status.

Russia's dissatisfaction does not stem from worries that its status fails to reflect the country's material capabilities, but rather from anxieties of losing its current status as its overall capabilities (relative to those of the United States and other great powers) continue to decline. Russian leaders and the Russian public fear that unless their nation takes drastic action it will lose its status as one of the three most important Great Powers (alongside the United States and China) in the international system. As Russia finds itself in the domain of losses the desire to avoid imminent losses of status makes its leaders risk-acceptant. They are hence less mindful of the costs and tradeoffs that accompany high status because they seek not to increase but to maintain their current status. The consequences of status loss, therefore, are their main worry, because diminished material capabilities force them to rely on Russia's high status to defend its interests. The Russian leadership is thus prepared to take on the risks and costs attendant upon challenging American leadership in order to shore up Russia's status. Diminished capabilities and an inconsistent domestic economic and political performance render the less risky or adversarial status-seeking strategies that work for China inappropriate for Russia, whose options are confined to fighting for the status it so desperately needs to hold on to.

The article will proceed as follows. In the next section, we will review the literature on status, focusing on the ways in which it has tried to explain states' status-seeking behaviour. We find that the literature fails to offer a comprehensive explanation for why status dissatisfaction leads to aggression and risk-taking

9 For earlier works that explore this empirical puzzle see: Andrej Krickovic, 'The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2017), pp. 299–329; James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz and Ali Wyne, 'Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses', *Rand*, 2019, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE310/RAND_PE310.pdf. An earlier version of the theory developed in this article was introduced in Krickovic, 'The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership', pp. 17–8.

in some states and caution and restraint in others; also that existing studies cannot adequately explain the divergence between the Russian and Chinese cases. Next, we will expand on the contributions these existing theories make towards building a theory that shows how a state's power trajectories produce diverging status-seeking behaviour, whereby that of declining powers is risky and confrontational status-seeking while rising powers are more cautious and restrained. We then examine the Russian and Chinese cases, focusing on how power trajectories have shaped their status-seeking behaviour.

We conclude by exploring the theoretical and policy implications of these findings. The article allows us to develop a better understanding of the forces that shape states' status-seeking behaviour. It also highlights the predicaments that declining powers face—a factor largely overlooked in the status and power transition literatures.¹⁰ As rising powers tend to be status quo oriented, satisfying their status aspirations may be easier than hitherto acknowledged. A more immediate threat to peace and stability is most likely to be that emanating from declining powers desperate to hold on to their current status. These insights have significant implications for contemporary international relations. They suggest that the United States and other status quo powers should be less fearful of China's rise and more willing to accord China elevated status and greater responsibilities as its power grows. They might also be advised to consider ways of ameliorating Russia's status anxieties and thus steering its status-seeking behaviour away from that of posing destructive and destabilising challenges to the international order and towards more constructive manifestations.

Status and Status-seeking in IR Theory

A growing body of literature demonstrates that states are status conscious; high status is a valued attribute, and maintaining or improving status is a central goal of states' foreign policies.¹¹ Status can be defined as the collective belief that states and statesmen hold about a country's ranking in the international hierarchy and/or its placement within a specific group (e.g. great power group; regional power group, etc.), based on their subjective judgments about the country's possession of valued attributes, such as military power, material wealth, cultural attractiveness, socio-political organisation, or adherence to principles and values.¹² Status is important to states for both socio-psychological and instrumental reasons. High status enhances individuals' sense of self-esteem and helps foster a

10 The Power Transitions and Status literatures have devoted attention to declining hegemonic states but not to lesser declining great powers (such as contemporary Russia or Austria-Hungary leading up to WWI).

11 Volgy et al., *Major Power Status in International Politics*; T.V Paul, Deborah Larson and William Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

12 Paul et al., *Status in World Politics*.

sense of identity and social belonging.¹³ High status also offers states more tangible benefits in contributing to their power and capabilities, thus giving states decision-making autonomy and inducing deference on the part of other states to their interests.¹⁴ Status enhances the bargaining position of a state by making others think that that state is more likely than others to stand firm when disputes arise. High status can thus help their possessor win contests of expectations.¹⁵ States care about other states' beliefs in regard to their ranking in status hierarchies, because other states' recognition of a state's high status enable it to achieve its goals without actually exercising material power. 'The higher a given state's status, the more other states adjust their policies to accommodate its interests . . . the success or failure of all international policies, however grandiose or mundane, is crucially dependent on status.'¹⁶

States try to improve their status by acquiring the valued attributes used to measure status, by redefining what such attributes should be to include those in which they have a comparative advantage, and/or by seeking to outdo other states in geopolitical competition.¹⁷ However, states cannot improve their status solely through their own efforts. Status is intersubjective; it depends on the shared beliefs of the community of states. Status gains thus ultimately depend on others' recognition of a state's achievements (their judgments in regard to the valued attributes that states do or do not possess) and updating accordingly their beliefs about status hierarchies.¹⁸

As these judgments are subjective, states may differ in their understanding of the distribution of status in the system. *Status inconsistency* occurs when there is a disjuncture between these subjective judgments and the status that a state may objectively deserve, based on its actual (rather than perceived) possession of these valued attributes. Status inconsistency can thus refer to the situation where one state or group of states refuses to confer status on a given state despite its possession of the valued attributes used to measure status. States experience *status dissatisfaction* when they believe that the level of status that other states confer on them does not measure up to the level of status that they believe they deserve.¹⁹

13 Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Russia Says No: Power, Status, and Emotions in Foreign Policy', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3/4 (2014), pp. 269–79.

14 Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

15 *Ibid.*

16 William Wohlforth, 'Honor as Interest in Russian Decisions for War, 1600-1995', in Elliott Abrams, ed., *Honor Among Nations: Intangible Interests and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1998), p. 26.

17 Larson and Shevchenko define these as the three primary status-seeking strategies that states employ, labelling them as *social mobility*, *social creativity*, and *social competition* (respectively). See Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status-seekers'.

18 Volgy et al., *Major Power Status in International Politics*.

19 Renshon, *Fighting for Status*.

The literature has devoted little attention to the question of how status inconsistency and dissatisfaction translate into status-seeking behaviour. It consequently struggles to explain why some states adopt risky, aggressive forms of status-seeking, while others are comparatively cautious and restrained. Some studies link risky, aggressive behaviour to changing status-seeking opportunity or incentive structures. From this perspective, states will engage in aggressive status-seeking when changes to the relative costs and benefits of status-seeking make it profitable for them to do so. William Wohlforth finds that the polarity of the international system decisively influences status-seeking behaviour.²⁰ Where power is concentrated and status hierarchies are clear and unambiguous (as is the case under unipolarity), lower-ranked states will find that competitive status-seeking is not worth the risks and costs that it entails, because the status hierarchy is not readily subject to change. However, where power and material capabilities are more evenly distributed (as is the case with multipolarity and bipolarity), status hierarchies will be ambiguous and malleable, so encouraging aggressive status-seeking and generating intense status competition.

Wohlforth's study may help us to understand how systemic conditions shape states' status-seeking behaviour, but it does not account for the variations in status-seeking between states that are operating under the same general opportunity/incentive structures that polarity produces. Wohlforth's theory explains why, in the 1990s, China and Russia stepped back from more aggressive policies of status-seeking in recognition of continued US polar dominance. It also correctly predicted that both countries would become more assertive in their status-seeking as US unipolar dominance began to wane. However, it cannot explain why China has been restrained and risk-averse, or why Russia has been more aggressive and risk-acceptant.

Other studies see risky and aggressive status-seeking as a reaction to status inconsistency and status dissatisfaction, or to the psychological frustrations that status-seekers experience when other states repeatedly refuse to accord them status. Volgy et al. examine whether the level of status accorded to a state is consistent with their actual material capabilities. They differentiate between *status underachievers*—countries accorded less status than their material capabilities would warrant, and *status overachievers*—countries who are accorded more status than their material capabilities would warrant.²¹ Status dissatisfaction is most acute among underachievers. They will adopt risky and aggressive status-seeking behaviour in order to correct status inconsistencies and compel other states to confer on them a higher level of status. Overachievers, on the other hand, tend to be satisfied with their current status and, having more to lose, will be more cautious and restrained.

Volgy et al.'s framework tells us much about the degree of status dissatisfaction that any state is likely to experience, yet it does not specify how dissatisfaction translates into status-seeking behaviour. Although a state's overall level of

20 Wohlforth, 'Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War'.

21 Volgy et al., *Major Power Status in International Politics*.

dissatisfaction is an important consideration, other factors specific to each case also shape behaviour, namely, the status-seeking state's risk propensity, its willingness to accept the costs and tradeoffs that higher status entails, and its ability to employ effectively different status-seeking strategies. Moreover, Volgy et al. ultimately fail to account for the observed divergence in the Chinese and Russian cases. According to their theory, China, the status underachiever, should be more aggressive and risk-acceptant than Russia, the overachiever.

Steven Ward argues that risky and aggressive status-seeking behaviour is a reaction to *status immobility*, i.e. a status-seeker's perception that states at the pinnacle of the status hierarchy are unjustly or unfairly denying them the level of status they deserve.²² Status immobility engenders powerful feelings of humiliation and discrimination that cause status-seekers to lash out against the existing status quo order in order to rectify perceived injustices. The reactions that status immobility elicit are directed not so much at enhancing status as at addressing the powerful feelings of humiliation and injustice that frustrated status ambitions engender. Similarly, Larson and Shevchenko argue that the refusal of members of higher status groups to recognise the status claims of lower status states causes deep feelings of humiliation and anger. Humiliated states engage in aggressive and confrontational status-seeking behaviour in order to get even with those states that have shunned them. Seeing those states that have denied them status 'taken down a peg' can be emotionally satisfying—even when competition yields only marginal material or status gains.²³

Ward's theory of status immobility is geared towards explaining the most extreme cases of aggressive revisionism, such as Imperial Japan or Nazi Germany, where frustrated status-seekers completely reject and seek to destroy the existing status hierarchy and normative order. It is less useful, however, in explaining the status-seeking behaviour of dissatisfied states that still recognise the legitimacy of existing hierarchies and want to improve their positions within them. Applying Ward's theory to contemporary China and Russia is problematic, because neither has completely rejected the existing status quo and both have yet to emerge as the kind of full-blown revisionist challenger his theory envisions. Ward suggests that both states are in danger of coming under the influence of status immobility in the future. Yet this does not explain the variations in behaviour we are currently witnessing. Larson and Shevchenko are able to trace the divergence in China and Russia's status-seeking behaviour to Western states' responses to their status claims, whereby those of China have largely been accommodated while Russia's have generally been ignored or denied, so engendering intense feelings of frustration and humiliation that have triggered risky, aggressive status-seeking behaviour on Russia's part. However, a more comprehensive explanation would also consider why it is that states at the pinnacle of the hierarchies deny the status claims of some states (such as Russia), while accommodating those of others (such as China).

22 Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*.

23 Larson and Shevchenko, 'Russia Says No', p. 4.

Jonathan Renshon argues that explanations that rely on irrational behaviour, such as ‘frustration’ and ‘anger’, obscure the more likely and rational ones for why states engage in aggressive and belligerent status-seeking.²⁴ Status is based on the intersubjective beliefs states hold whereby one can improve one’s status only by altering the beliefs that others hold. As such beliefs are slow to change, they lag behind objective material changes. Moreover, because status is positional, other states will often be reluctant to cede status of their own volition. Therefore, states can only gain status through dramatic ‘status-altering’ events like war and geopolitical conflicts that force other states to update their status beliefs. Renshon finds that states which initiate conflicts significantly improve their position in the status hierarchy, regardless of whether or not they win such conflicts.²⁵ Status-seekers, therefore, ‘fight for status’ not to soothe their bruised egos, but to force other states to update their beliefs and grant them the higher status to which they aspire.

Renshon’s theory, however, does not tell us why some states adopt riskier, more aggressive status-seeking strategies than others. We would consequently expect all states seeking to elevate their status to initiate conflict. Yet ‘fighting for status’ is risky. Although the need to update others’ beliefs incentivises all status-seekers to initiate conflict, differences in risk perception will make certain actors more likely to adopt this risky strategy than others. Moreover, as Renshon himself acknowledges, initiation of conflict is only one class of ‘status-altering events’ that compels states to re-evaluate their status beliefs.²⁶ States can accomplish the same objective by providing global public goods at times of crisis, or by demonstrating impressive technological achievements (Sputnik or the US Moon landing come to mind). Such ‘status-altering events’ may be preferable to the more aggressive ones that may initiate conflict because they are less likely to alienate and compel other states to balance against the status-seeking state.

The literature reviewed above gives us key insights into the difficulties that states face in inducing other states to grant them higher status, and the factors that can shape status-seeking behaviour. In the next section we will draw on these insights to formulate our own theory. None of these theories is able to provide us with a general explanation for why states are willing to adopt different levels of risk and aggression in seeking to improve their status. Nor are they able to explain fully the divergence we observe in this respect in the Russian and Chinese cases. Wohlforth and Renshon’s frameworks cannot explain variations in the status-seeking behaviour of states operating under the same general opportunity/ incentive structures. Ward attempts to explain such variation, but he focuses on a narrow set of extreme cases where states have completely rejected the existing status hierarchy and aim to overturn it, so excluding the more moderate (and numerous) cases where status-seekers still accept existing status hierarchies and are simply looking to improve their position within them. Larson and Shevchenko

24 Renshon, *Fighting for Status*.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 160–2.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 58–60.

consider these more ‘moderate’ cases (focusing on Russia and China), yet their analysis stops short of examining the underlying causes of variation, i.e. they do not explain why other states are willing to grant elevated status to certain status-seekers but not to others. Volgy et al. can explain variations in the level of status dissatisfaction, but do not explore how dissatisfaction translates into concrete action. Moreover, Volgy et al. claim that risers will experience a higher level of status dissatisfaction than decliners, which does not hold in the case of China and Russia.

Explaining Variation in Status-Seeking Behaviour

What has been missing in the literature is a detailed examination of how status-seekers’ power trajectories affect their status-seeking behaviour. Numerous studies show that states facing imminent losses are more willing to engage in risky and aggressive behaviour, either because potential losses make them psychologically more risk acceptant (the argument of prospect theory),²⁷ or because they see imminent power shifts as an existential threat that warrants preventive action.²⁸ We draw on and apply these insights to status-seeking, arguing that whether a status-seeker’s material capabilities are rising or in decline decisively shapes their status-seeking behaviour.

Our analysis treats status-seeking states as unitary actors, and does not examine the internal debates and discussions related to status within China and Russia. With regard to theory building, adopting a unitary state actor approach is justified, because it is consistent with most of the literature on status upon which this study will expand. Moreover, we are developing a structural theory that examines how rising and declining material capabilities condition states’ status-seeking behaviour. As with most structural theories, the focus is on the ways in which structural factors impose constraints on states’ choice in regard to the policies they pursue (including their choices about status-seeking).²⁹ For heuristic purposes, we can treat states as unitary actors, because structural factors restrict policy choice, thus privileging some sets of policies over others, even where a diversity of opinions about policy continues to exist. The unitary actor assumption is also empirically justified. There is a remarkable degree of domestic consensus across the political spectrum in Russia with regard to the importance of retaining high status in the international system, and strong support for aggressive status-seeking policies.³⁰ The situation is more complicated in China, where there is still a good deal of domestic debate on the level of status to which China should aspire

27 Jack Levy, ‘Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Applications and Analytical Problems’, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1992), pp. 283–310.

28 Levy, ‘Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War’; Van Evera, *Causes of War*; Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*.

29 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), pp. 73–7.

30 Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 20–1.

and how aggressively it should be pursued. However, a consensus seems to have emerged that favours a less aggressive, more restrained mode of status-seeking.³¹

Loss Aversion and Status-seeking

Prospect theory suggests that actors (including states) are averse to loss, and are willing to take greater risks to prevent losses than they are to pursue gains.³² Actors are risk-averse when facing imminent gains, so will exercise caution in pursuing such potential gains. They are, however, risk-acceptant when facing imminent losses, and will engage in risky behaviour in order to reverse losses—even if there is a high probability that such behaviour will exacerbate their losses in the long run. From the ‘rational utility’ perspective, this behaviour is ‘irrational’, because it goes against the odds which would dictate that actors accept imminent losses in order to avoid the potential risk of even greater ones in the future.³³ Actors tend to place a higher value on things already in their possession than on those they may acquire. They are hence willing to expend more on holding on to what they already have than on acquiring the same thing from another actor (the so-called ‘endowment effect’).³⁴ Actors, moreover, are disinclined to ‘cut their losses’, and will continue to pursue failed policies and even escalate their commitments, throwing ‘good money after bad’, in a futile effort to recover ‘sunk costs’ (costs that have already been incurred and cannot be recovered).³⁵

IR theorists have used insights derived from prospect theory to explain a wide range of behaviour that cannot be explained by rational utility calculations, such as actors opting for risky strategies during international crises,³⁶ Great Power interventions in strategically inconsequential regions,³⁷ and conflict between rising powers and declining hegemons.³⁸ Much of the established status literature argues that rising powers, as status underachievers, will be risk-acceptant, while declining powers, as status overachievers, will be risk-averse.³⁹ However,

31 Pu Xiaoyu, ‘Controversial Identity of a Rising China’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2017), pp. 131–49.

32 David Kahneman and Amos Tversky, ‘Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decisions Under Risk’, *Econometrica*, No. 47 (1979), pp. 263–91.

33 Steve Chan, *China, the U.S., and Power-Transition Theory: A Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

34 Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

35 Chan, *China, the U.S., and Power-Transition Theory*.

36 Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); He Kai, *China’s Crisis Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

37 Taliaferro, ‘Balancing Risks’.

38 Zhou Jianren, ‘Power Transition and Paradigm Shift in Diplomacy: Why China and the US March towards Strategic Competition?’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2019), pp. 1–34.

39 Volgy et al., *Major Power Status in International Politics*.

prospect theory suggests that the opposite may be true.⁴⁰ Rising powers find themselves in the domain of gains, and thus prefer status-seeking strategies that are less costly and risky and which will not jeopardise imminent status gains. Declining powers, meanwhile, find themselves in the domain of losses, and are willing to adopt risky and aggressive strategies to prevent imminent status losses. 'Endowment effects' and concerns about 'sunk costs' make decliners invest greater value in the status they stand to lose than risers do in the status they stand to gain.⁴¹ *Ceteris paribus*, they will be willing to go to greater lengths to defend the status they stand to lose than risers will be to win the status they stand to gain.

Both risers and decliners may be dissatisfied with their place within the international status hierarchy, but their dissatisfaction takes different forms. Tudor Onea distinguishes between the *status anxiety* of states experiencing status losses and the status inconsistency that risers experience because their status does not keep pace with their growing power and capabilities.⁴² 'Status anxiety is likely to be more severely resented than status inconsistency, because losses are resented harder than gains, which implies that diminishing status will also be more significant for an actor than further advancement'.⁴³ Status anxiety can induce the same feelings of discrimination and injustice in decliners, which Ward attributes to 'status immobility', as in risers, to whom it seems that dominant states have unjustly blocked the elevation of their status. Eventually, therefore, both risers and decliners may experience similarly destructive feelings of resentment and frustration if other states repeatedly deny them the status they feel they deserve. However, other states may be more willing to grant higher status to risers, whether out of genuine admiration for their achievements or fear that, unless their status aspirations are met, risers will use their growing power against the status quo.

Calculations of Rational Utility

In addition to these psychological reasons, there are also more 'rational' (utility calculating) reasons why risers should be more cautious and decliners more risk-acceptant and aggressive. Most studies generally assume that rising powers will seek to maximise status; that they will be willing to take on the costs and risks and accept the tradeoffs that are part and parcel of higher status. However, as Xiaoyu Pu observes, higher status is not 'free', as it entails costs and tradeoffs. States that are awarded higher status will be expected to take on greater responsibilities for the maintenance of international order and provision of global public goods. Rising powers may accept a lower level of status in order to avoid these

40 Tudor Onea, 'Between Dominance and Decline: Status Anxiety and Great Power Rivalry', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2014), pp. 125–52.

41 Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks*.

42 Onea, 'Between Dominance and Decline'.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

burdens, preferring to 'free ride' on leading states' efforts. Rising powers are also conscious of the fears that their rise may arouse in other states, and want to avoid policies that provoke other states into balancing against them or containing their rise. They may thus moderate their status-seeking in order to reassure other states that they do not seek to overturn or undermine the existing hierarchies.⁴⁴

Risers may also refrain from aggressive status-seeking due to concerns about the detrimental effects it may have on the international order. As beneficiaries of such order, they have a stake in its continued stability. Why would rising powers want to overturn an existing order that has demonstrably worked to their advantage and replace it with an untested one that they must pay the costs of establishing and maintaining?⁴⁵ Rising powers, such as China, may be dissatisfied with their progress in accruing status. However, as long as other states are willing to grant them elevated status by virtue of their material and other achievements (thereby avoiding the pitfalls of 'status immobility') risers can reasonably hope that their status will improve over time.

For decliners, the costs and trade-offs entailed in high status operate differently. Decliners are not looking to increase their status but rather to maintain its current level, or reverse any recent declines. The responsibilities and costs entailed in an elevated status are of lesser concern to them than the consequences of a decline in their status. A state's ranking in the status hierarchy shapes other states' expectations of how it will act, as well as its ability to defend its interests. In any contest of expectations, states defer to those of higher status than themselves.⁴⁶ Declining great powers, such as contemporary Russia or Austria-Hungary in the 19th century, face the dangerous predicament of inheriting a patrimony of interests from earlier times when they were grand and all-powerful. Yet their declining material capabilities make defending these interests even more difficult, and they must rely ever more heavily on their status to do so. Upon losing status, decliners will be challenged to defend their interests with material capabilities that are in diminishing supply. They thus care deeply about status, and are willing to go to great lengths to avoid any losses in that respect. Moreover, decliners have few reservations about adopting policies that destabilise the existing order because it no

44 Pu, *Rebranding China*. Pu's analysis focuses on status signalling, i.e. a state's efforts to communicate to other members of the international community how much status they believe they are due. He seeks to explain why China has sent out mixed signals about its status, at times portraying itself as a great power and at other times insisting that it is still a poor developing state. We argue that these same factors can influence the cost calculations of states when it comes to choosing how aggressively they are willing to press their status demands.

45 Jonathan DiCicco and Jack S. Levy, 'Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (1999), pp. 675–704; Randall Schweller, 'Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory', in Alastair Johnston and Robert Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1–23.

46 Renshon, *Fighting for Status*.

longer benefits them and (from their perspective) may even be a contributing factor to their decline.

Retrenchment—shedding responsibilities they can no longer bear in order to avoid future collapse, should be the logical and rational option for declining powers.⁴⁷ However, actors' psychological aversion to losses may inhibit their adoption and carrying out of the (seemingly) rational decision to retrench. Moreover, actors may make a rational choice to forego retrenchment if it results in status losses, as devolution of status will erode their bargaining position vis-a-vis other actors and their overall ability to protect their interests. Decliners may also avoid retrenchment because it will be seen by others as a sign of weakness, thus exposing them to the dangers of abandonment by their allies or predation by their rivals.⁴⁸

Ability to Use Different Status Seeking Strategies

Material capabilities also affect states' ability to induce other states to update their beliefs and grant them the status they seek. Risers' growing economic and political power makes acquiring the valued attributes through which to measure status relatively easy. They may also use the example of their success to redefine these valued attributes. Declining powers, however, struggle to 'keep up with the Joneses' by acquiring these valued attributes. Moreover, their lack of success in this regard has detrimental impact on their credibility.

Status ultimately depends on the beliefs and judgments of others, which do not readily change. Therefore, to change other states' beliefs status-seekers must initiate dramatic 'status-altering' events that induce such states to confer higher status on them.⁴⁹ As noted above, the initiation of violence is not the only type of 'status-altering event' that may compel others to re-evaluate and update their beliefs. Growing material capabilities may enable rising powers to find peaceful ways of inducing other states to update their beliefs and grant them elevated status. Such strategies are preferable to initiating conflict in being less alienating, and in diffusing any threat risers may appear to pose to other states. Diminished material capabilities, however, make it difficult for decliners to generate 'dramatic events' that do not involve conflict. 'Fighting for status' by initiating conflict may be the only strategy that can effectively arrest the decline in their status—especially if they can leverage the residual military, intelligence, and diplomatic capabilities necessary to take on and compel the countries that are above them in the status hierarchy to accord them the status they have heretofore denied them.

But why should the logic of prospect theory and the instrumental concerns and strategic calculations outlined above trump the over/underachiever dynamic as

47 Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent, 'Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,' *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2011), pp. 7–44.

48 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 194.

49 Renshon, *Fighting for Status*.

outlined by Volgy et al.⁴⁹ Status aspirations are inherently subjective, and can be strongly influenced by emotional considerations, particularly a riser's sense of justness or fairness. People are most assertive when hurt or angry, or when they feel others have treated them unjustly or unfairly—emotions to which rising underachievers, but not declining overachievers, are particularly prone. Indeed, there are several prominent historical cases where rising powers have behaved aggressively and violently in pursuit of status, for example, Germany in the period before World War I, and Germany and Japan in the interwar period. These cases seem to challenge the theoretical model developed above.

Steven Ward has convincingly demonstrated that it is not *status underachievement*, but the more extreme condition of *status immobility*, that engenders risky and aggressive status-seeking behaviour in risers.⁵⁰ Under the condition of status immobility, the underachieving riser, despite sustained growth in material capabilities and other valued attributes that confer status, has been repeatedly denied status to an extent where they believe their status has been irrevocably stunted. Risers experiencing status immobility succumb to intense feelings of humiliation and frustration that compel them not only to act more aggressively in pursuit of status, but also to set about deposing the existing status hierarchy which seems so profoundly unfair and unjust. Status immobility explains the aggressive status-seeking of past risers such as Wilhelmine Germany and inter-War Germany and Japan. As Ward demonstrates through the detailed case studies in his book, leaders and publics in these states came to believe that the problem was not that of their gains in status lagging behind objective achievements, but rather that the dominant states had conspired to block their country's progression up the status hierarchy with the specific and unfair intent of preserving their own privileged positions. From their perspective, therefore, this unjust treatment both necessitated and justified extreme action.⁵¹ In cases where rising underachievers have steadily experienced status gains they have generally refrained from belligerent and aggressive status-seeking, even though their status gains continue to lag behind their expectations.⁵² It is thus important to differentiate between *status underachievement* and *status immobility*. The logic of the arguments outlined in this article suggests that, as long as risers continue to find themselves in the realm of status gains, they will be more cautious and restrained in their status-seeking.

Russia: Fighting for Status

Russia has recovered from its low point after the Soviet collapse in the mid-1990s, and its material capabilities have increased substantially in recent years.

50 Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*.

51 *Ibid.*, chapters 3–5.

52 Bismarckian Germany and the US in the 19th to early 20th century are cases of rising powers that did not experience 'status immobility' and thus refrained from aggressive and reckless status-seeking behaviour. See: Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, chapter 6, pp. 73, 159–80.

However, from a longer-term perspective, and compared to its main referential peers—China and the United States, Russia is a declining power. The growth of its material capabilities will lag behind China's, and it will find closing the huge gap in material capabilities between itself and a declining United States difficult. Russia experienced steady economic growth from the period 1998–2008, the country's share of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), measured in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), having risen from 3% in 1998 (the year Russia's share of global GDP fell to its lowest point in the post-Soviet period) to 3.9% in 2008. However, growth has dramatically slowed in recent years. Russia's economy has entered a period of stagnation and lost much of the relative ground it regained in the period between 1998 and 2008. By 2017, Russia's share of global GDP had regressed to 3.12%—only slightly higher than its 1998 share.⁵³ Most Russian economists believe that Russia's current model of economic development, based mainly on exploitation of natural resources, has exhausted itself. They predict that Russia's growth will stagnate over the next few decades, with Russia's share of World GDP declining to about 2% by 2030.⁵⁴ Russia already lags far behind China (18.2% of world GDP measured in PPP) and the United States (15.2%). These gaps will widen as Russia's stagnating GDP growth struggles to keep up with that of China and the United States.⁵⁵ Although Russia currently has the world's second most powerful military, its weak economic base will make maintaining its lead over China, which continues its rapid military modernisation, or catching up with the United States, which is ratcheting up military spending under Trump, difficult for Russia.⁵⁶

The spectre of decline has loomed large in Russia's calculations throughout the post-Soviet period, ultimately convincing Russian leaders to adopt riskier, more aggressive status-seeking behaviour. In the immediate post-Soviet period, Russia tried to transform itself into a 'normal' liberal democratic country that the United States would recognise as an equal partner.⁵⁷ Efforts to find a place in the US-led order also continued under Putin's initial leadership. At that time, however, rather than attempting to transform into a model liberal democratic state, Russia

53 World Bank, 'World Development Indicators 2018', <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/source/world-development-indicators>.

54 Natalia Akindinova, Yaroslav Kuzminov and Evgeny Yasin, 'Ekonomika Rossii: Pered Dolgim Perexodom' ('Russia's Economy: Before the Long Transition'), *Voprosy Ekonomiki (Economic Issues)*, No. 6 (2016), pp. 5–35.

55 Price Waterhouse Cooper, 'The World in 2050', 2018, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/economy/the-world-in-2050.html>.

56 In 2017, China's \$228 billion military budget was three times larger than Russia's (\$66.3 billion), and the US's military budget (\$610 billion) was nine times larger. The US plans to boost military spending by 11% by 2019—almost as much as Russia annually spends on its military. See: SIPRI, *Yearbook 2018: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

57 Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

tried to establish itself as a valuable partner to the United States in the 'War on Terror' and to emerge, by virtue of its natural resource wealth, as an 'energy superpower'.⁵⁸ On each occasion, however, these hopes were dashed by the realities of Russia's continued relative decline, evident in its failure to keep pace economically and technologically with other great powers, or to adapt to larger changes in the world economy.

Some analysts argue that Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy is simply a reaction against Western policies, specifically the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) enlargement and the US's development of its Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense System (ABM), both of which threaten Russia's vital security interests.⁵⁹ Yet, in reality, neither NATO's enlargement nor the ABM represents a direct threat to the country's physical security. Although NATO has expanded to Russia's borders, the forces it deploys in new member countries are small, and could rapidly be outstripped by Russian conventional forces. By enlarging NATO to include states that its core Western members may not have the political will to defend, the North Atlantic Alliance has become more vulnerable to Russia's attempts to test alliance commitments. Nor does the ABM present any threat to Russia's nuclear deterrent. Even a fully functioning ABM system would be overwhelmed by a massive Russian retaliatory strike, or by a more limited one using the advanced hypersonic weapons President Vladimir Putin unveiled in his March 2018 address to the Duma. Russia opposes NATO enlargement and the ABM not because they are a threat to its security but because they undermine its status as the regional hegemon in the post-Soviet space and nuclear equal of the United States.

Imminent decline has made Russian leaders more aggressive and risk-acceptant in their choices of foreign policy strategies. Both Russia's decision to invade and annex Crimea and its intervention in Syria were incredibly risky moves. We do not (and may never) have access to reliable accounts of the decision-making processes in either instance. Second-hand journalistic accounts of both episodes suggest that Russian decision-makers (first and foremost Putin) were well aware of the tremendous risks involved (international isolation and direct military confrontation with the United States and West), but nevertheless decided to go ahead with these policies in order to avoid or roll back losses to Russia's status.⁶⁰ In both cases, Russia's leaders decided to 'fight for status' by initiating dramatic military events that would force others to recognise the country's continued importance and relevance. They believed that a failure to respond to the violent overthrow of the Yanukovich government would not only

58 *Ibid.*

59 John Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (2014), pp. 77–89; Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*.

60 See: Vladimir Shiriaev, 'Krym, God spustia' ('Crimea One Year Later'), *Novaya Gazeta*, 20 February, 2015; Mikhail Zygar, *Vsia Kremlevskaia rat (All the Kremlin's Men)* (Moscow: Intellektualnaia Litteratura, 2015).

lead to the 'loss' of Ukraine to the West but also jeopardise Russia's plans for regional integration, which Russian leaders saw as the key to preserving Russia's Great Power status.⁶¹ 'The Russian leadership has come to the conclusion that if things continue to develop in the same way [as in Ukraine], Russia will have no chance for a breakthrough and will be destined to decline.'⁶² Intervention in Syria prevented the reputational damage that would have resulted from the loss of Russia's last client in the Middle East. It also provided Russia with an opportunity to break out of its post-Crimea isolation by demonstrating its still formidable military capabilities and geopolitical influence. 'Syria was essential because after Ukraine the unpleasant situation arose where no one in the world wanted to talk to [Putin] about anything more than Ukraine, yet after the Syria operation Russia is now an equal arbiter of [geopolitical] destinies.'⁶³

Rational utility calculations also played a part in Russia's increasingly aggressive and risk-acceptant behaviour. Russia deeply values status and does not shy away from the costs and risks that accompany an elevated standing. Throughout the 1990s, even as the country faced almost terminal economic and political difficulties, Russia continued its efforts to play a major role in global politics. Russia used its seat on the UN Security Council to insinuate itself into international conflicts and weigh in on such international issues as the UN sanctions on Iraq and the Yugoslav crisis.⁶⁴ Russia continues enthusiastically to put forward proposals on global issues in which it lacks the material capabilities to play a key role, such as the country's efforts at the G-20 to promote its vision for a new International Economic order.⁶⁵ Whereas rising powers may curb their status-seeking in order to avoid risking status conflicts with powers holding higher positions in status hierarchies, Russia seeks out conflict with the United States and the West to compel them to acknowledge its continuing relevance. 'Putin's incorporation of Crimea represented a statement that these issues do, in fact, concern Russia and that it is no longer prepared to retreat.'⁶⁶

Russia sees the status quo order as detrimental to its interests and status, and thus has few qualms about engaging in aggressive status-seeking that may disrupt

61 For a discussion of Eurasian integration and its place in Russian strategic thought and the threat that the 'loss' of Ukraine represents to this vision see: Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*, pp. 144–52.

62 Feodor Lukyanov, 'What the World needs is 19th-Century Behavior', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2 March, 2014, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/What-the-world-needs-is-19th-century-behavior-16513>.

63 Mikhail Zygar, 'Kremly vazhno utverditsya v kachestve mirovoi sily' ('The Kremlin Wants to Confirm its Status as a World Power'), *Delfi*, 9 March, 2016, <https://ru.delfi.lt/news/live/mihail-zygar-kremlyu-vazhno-utverditsya-v-kachestve-mirovoj-sily.d?id1/470643452>.

64 Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

65 Andrej Krickovic and Yuval Weber, 'What Can Russia Teach Us About Change? Status-Seeking as a Catalyst for Transformation in International Politics', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2018), pp. 292–300.

66 Lukyanov, 'What the World Needs is 19th-century Behavior'.

or delegitimise the existing order. For Russian leaders, there was no establishment of a legitimate and stable world order after the Cold War ended. They view the post-Cold War settlement as a ‘velvet-gloved Versailles’ that was unjustly imposed on them after the Soviet collapse.⁶⁷ They moreover see US unipolar dominance and Western leadership as self-serving and destructive, advocating the transition to multipolarity and Great Power Concert wherein the United States would have to follow the rules and share power with other great powers as the first among equals.⁶⁸ Some analysts believe that Russia is deliberately trying to destabilise the existing order in order to expose its contradictions and deficiencies and thus highlight the necessity for the United States and the West to work with Russia to build a more stable system of international governance. ‘Russia’s annexation of Crimea was a revolt against the hypocrisy of the West. Russia has now broken the West’s monopoly on breaking the rules . . . and has thus forced the world to choose between new rules or a world without rules.’⁶⁹

Russia has difficulties in inducing others to recognise its high status through non-aggressive and non-confrontational means. Material constraints have limited Russia’s ability to acquire the valued attributes used to measure status. In today’s world these attributes centre on economic performance, technological achievement, and effective governance—areas where Russia’s relative decline has been most pronounced, and where it has experienced the greatest difficulties in keeping pace with its peers.⁷⁰ As a society still undergoing the difficult transition from totalitarianism, Russia also finds it difficult to adhere to the norms of democracy and human rights, which confer status within the community of Western liberal nations.⁷¹ The reality of Russia’s decline limits its ability to redefine the valued attributes that states use to measure status. Russia’s advocacy of preserving sovereignty and its promotion of cultural conservatism resonates with certain Western conservatives and with audiences in the developing world. However, Russia’s corrupt authoritarian political system, which lacks the economic and technological dynamism of more successful authoritarian modernisers (such as China), and the often heavy-handed way in which it has dealt with smaller neighbouring states, undermine Russia’s ability to portray itself as a credible champion of either principle.

Although Russia lacks the material capabilities and ideological appeal that would allow it to pursue status successfully through peaceful, non-confrontational means, it has nevertheless been able to retain (and in some respects

67 Sergey Karaganov, ‘Budushii Miroporyadok’ (‘The Future World Order’), *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (Russian Newspaper), 7 September, 2017, p. A3.

68 Karaganov, ‘Budushii Miroporyadok’.

69 Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev, ‘Tearing off the Masks! Why Did Putin Lie About Crimea?’, 2015, http://www.springerlin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=3038&lang=en.

70 Simon Saradzhyan and Nabi Abdullaev, ‘Measuring National Power: Is Vladimir Putin’s Russia in Decline?’, *Russia Matters*, 20 May, 2018, <https://russiamatters.org/analysis/measuring-national-power-vladimir-putins-russia-decline>.

71 Iver Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018).

even improve) its coercive and military capabilities. Despite the continued power disparities between it and the United States, Russia can find opportunities to leverage these strengths and fight for status by confronting the United States. Confrontation with the United States thus becomes the only effective status-seeking strategy for Russia. Backed into a corner with little to lose, and possessing few other ways to improve its situation, Russia is compelled to initiate conflict and geopolitical competition with the United States in order to maintain the level of status it feels is its due, and to assure its continuing relevance in world politics.

Russia's risky and aggressive strategy of 'fighting for status' thus seems to be working. Respondents to the US News & World Report of 2018 considered Russia to be the world's second most powerful country, just slightly behind the United States and ahead of China (which held the third position).⁷² World leaders are also according Russia more status. Shortly after its annexation of Crimea, Obama dismissed Russia as 'a regional power' of little global influence or prospects for the future.⁷³ By the time he was about to leave office in 2016, however, Obama grudgingly conceded that Russia was a 'military superpower' whose cooperation the United States would need to seek out in addressing major global issues.⁷⁴ His successor, Donald Trump, initially made a partnership with Russia one of his foreign policy priorities, much to the delight of many Russian observers. The Trump administration has since backed away from this goal and conducted a generally adversarial policy towards Russia, yet it accords the country elevated status by virtue of treating Russia as one of the US's principal competitors, and as a major threat to the liberal world order.⁷⁵

Elevated status has also produced certain tangible material benefits for Russia. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova's accession to NATO, which seemed imminent before the Ukraine crisis, has been put on indefinite hold.⁷⁶ Russia's Syrian intervention, meanwhile, boosted its standing with authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space and beyond. Moscow has demonstrated its willingness to intervene militarily to support its allies against democratic threats. Consequently, authoritarian regimes—from Central Asia to Egypt—now seek to curry favour with

72 Paul Shinkman, 'Americans Defer to China, Russia', *US News and World Report*, 8 May, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2018-05-01/data-americans-consider-china-russia-more-powerful-than-us>.

73 Scott Wilson, 'Obama Dismisses Russia as "Regional Power" Acting Out of Weakness', *Washington Post*, 25 March, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8f90cc59992f.

74 TASS, 'Obama Calls Russia "Military Superpower", "Important Partner"', 18 November, 2016, <http://tass.com/world/913174>, accessed 10 November, 2018.

75 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, 18 December, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

76 Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2017).

Moscow through arms deals and other preferential treatment.⁷⁷ Russia's being regarded as a major player in the Middle East has allowed it to broker a deal with Saudi Arabia to stabilise global oil prices. According to prominent foreign policy observer Feodor Lukyanov, 'The deal with Saudi Arabia would have been impossible without the intervention in Syria, as the Saudis never really took us seriously before'.⁷⁸

Although effective, Russia's strategy of 'fighting for status' is costly. The conflicts in Ukraine and Syria could develop into quagmires from which Russia would have difficulty extricating itself. Its pugnacious foreign policy has alienated and isolated Russia from the West, jeopardising its prospects for economic development and growth. Estrangement from the West also makes Russia more dependent on China, whose growing power looms as a potential threat to Russia's security and independence. Although Russia has succeeded in shoring-up its status in the short term, it still faces the prospect of long-term decline. Like a man trying to struggle out of quicksand, decliners such as Russia find themselves in the precarious situation of being compelled to struggle to keep afloat, but where their desperate efforts to cling on to their existing status make their situation more perilous still.

China: Caution and Restraint

Amid Russia's struggles with relative decline China has emerged as the preeminent rising power. China's share of global GDP, measured in PPP, has more than doubled from 7.1% in 1998 to 18.2% in 2018. China has surpassed the United States in total GDP (if measured in PPP) and, according to most forecasts, will surpass the United States in GDP, measured in constant dollars, within the next two decades.⁷⁹ Although its military power is still weaker than that of either the United States or Russia, China has nevertheless increased its military spending by an average 11% per year since 1996, and its 2017 military budget of \$228 billion ranked second to the US's and was triple that of Russia (\$67 billion).⁸⁰ China has dramatically increased its aviation, ballistic missile, and submarine warfare capabilities—areas that would be critical in any confrontation with the United States in the Pacific—and its technological advances have reduced China's dependence on Russia for high-tech weaponry.⁸¹

China has avoided direct competition and confrontation with other states in its status-seeking, instead looking to acquire status by integrating itself into the international economic and political order as a 'responsible power'.⁸² For the most part, China has followed Deng Xiaoping's famous *tao guang yang hui* (hide

77 Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

78 Feodor Lukyanov, interview with author, Moscow, 8 October, 2019.

79 Price Waterhouse Cooper, 'The World in 2050'.

80 SIPRI, *Yearbook 2018*.

81 *Ibid.*

82 Deng, *China's Struggle for Status*.

our strength and bide our time) dictum through a low-key approach to foreign policy that secures a peaceful international environment for China's internal development and reassures Western powers and China's neighbours of the benevolent nature of its rise. 'The Chinese policy elites seem to have understood that if their country were to achieve its great-power dream, a full-blown security dilemma surrounding its rise would have to be forestalled.'⁸³

China's status-seeking has focused on acquiring the valued attributes according to which status is measured, including adherence to certain norms and values of the open Western liberal order, such as economic openness and active participation in international institutions. China has, however, stopped short of adopting norms and values that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regards as a potential threat to domestic stability and its hold on power. China rejects the West's universalistic conceptions of human rights and democracy, instead advocating a pluralistic approach where each 'civilisation' has the right to make its own decision on these issues.⁸⁴ China has also sought to position itself as champion of an alternative set of status-enhancing norms and values by promoting its particular vision of international affairs through concepts such as 'peaceful rise' and 'harmonious world'.⁸⁵ These concepts were initially inchoate and geared towards reassuring other states about the benign and peaceful nature of its rise, rather than staking out the new dimensions along which status should be measured.⁸⁶ As China's power has grown, however, they have taken on a new significance. China emphasises its identity as a great power that is at the same time a developing state. As such, it understands the plight of the developing world and will use its growing power to help create a more balanced, just, and fair international economic order.⁸⁷ China also tries to portray itself as advocate of a 'new type of international relations', where increased interdependence binds states into a 'community of common destiny' that transcends the power politics and zero-sum thinking of the past.⁸⁸ In doing so, China draws on its inherent cultural and civilisational traditions, which emphasise harmony and coexistence as opposed to the conflict and division that characterise most Western conceptions of international relations.⁸⁹ China is no longer reticent about promoting its visions of global political and economic order. However, it looks to do so through established institutions, and by portraying the changes it

83 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

84 Zhang Feng, 'Rethinking China's Grand Strategy: Beijing's Evolving National Interests and Strategic Ideas in the Reform Era', *International Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2012), pp. 318–45.

85 Deborah Larson, 'Will China Be a New Type of Great Power?', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2015), pp. 323–48.

86 Zhang, 'Rethinking China's Grand Strategy'.

87 Zeng, 'Is China Committed to Peaceful Rise?'.

88 Deng Yong, 'China: The Post-Responsible Power', *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2015), pp. 117–32.

89 Yan Xuetong, 'From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), pp. 153–84.

advocates as complementary to the fundamental principles of the existing order, so avoiding outright conflict and competition with the visions of global order that the United States and its Western allies promote.⁹⁰

Its power and capabilities having grown as US unipolar dominance has waned, China no longer rigorously adheres to the 'hide strength, bide time strategy'. Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has begun to articulate openly a bolder, more ambitious domestic and foreign policy. Xi's 'Chinese Dream' envisions the 'rejuvenation' of the Chinese nation and its return to the very apex of great power status.⁹¹ China's aggressive policies in the South China Sea, its ambitious plans for economic expansions through the Belt and Road Initiative, and Xi's efforts to centralise power and strengthen the party's control over the economy and society have unsettled Western observers. Many now fear that China has become a revisionist power that seeks to seize the reins of global leadership from the United States.⁹² Yet despite its newfound assertiveness, China continues to be more cautious and restrained in its status-seeking than Russia. It has generally refrained from competing directly with the United States for status, preferring to pursue status through peaceful and non-confrontational means, even as its power has grown.

Owing to their country's rising wealth and power, manifest in its spectacular and historically unprecedented economic growth, Chinese leaders find themselves in the domain of gains, making them risk-averse with regard to status-seeking. China's reactions to the Obama administration's pivot to Asia and the Trans-Pacific Partnership are illustrative of this cautious approach. China's leaders perceived both as thinly disguised plans to contain China militarily and economically.⁹³ They nevertheless refrained from exerting pressure on regional states not to join either of the initiatives; nor did they take concrete steps to counter US military deployments, or to try to undermine the US regional Alliance system.⁹⁴ China's leaders remained confident that China's power would continue to grow, and were cautious about engaging in provocative behaviour that would stoke fears about China's rise.⁹⁵ Their stance was in stark contrast to Russia's response to the Eastern Partnership and to the EU's efforts to negotiate a partnership agreement with Ukraine, which was to pull out all stops and immediately exert

90 Zeng, 'Is China Committed to Peaceful Rise?.'

91 Yan, 'From Keeping a Low profile to Striving for Achievement'.

92 The Economist, 'Is China challenging the United States for global leadership?', 1 April, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21719828-xi-jinping-talks-china-solution-without-specifying-what-means-china-challenging>.

93 Zhou Fangyin, 'Between Assertiveness and Self-Restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea Policy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (2016), pp. 869–89.

94 Adam Liff, 'China and the U.S. Alliance System', *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 233 (2018), pp. 137–65.

95 He Kai and Feng Huiyun. 'China's Institutional Balancing Strategies for Multilateral Leadership in the Asia Pacific', in Hanes Ebert and Daniel Flesmes, eds., *Regional Powers and Contested Leadership* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 165–88.

economic and coercive pressure on Ukraine to back out of negotiations. Russia so set in motion a series of events that ultimately led to the annexation of Crimea and insurrection in East Ukraine.⁹⁶

The status literature often treats China as a status maximiser seeking to enhance its status at every opportunity. However, Chinese leaders are well aware of the costs, tradeoffs, and risks that accompany high status. This has moderated their status aspirations.⁹⁷ The level of status that China should aspire to is still a matter of intense debate within China. Despite Xi's activism, many Chinese elites believe that China is still a developing country whose focus should be on internal development, rather than taking on the responsibilities and costs of global leadership.⁹⁸ According to Cui Tiankai, China's Ambassador to the United States, 'We have been elevated by others against our will. We have no intention to compete for global leadership.'⁹⁹ In curbing its status aspirations, China can shirk the responsibilities attendant upon higher status and continue to 'free ride' on the global order that other states provide. Free-riding and avoiding global responsibilities may be the optimal strategy from the standpoint of maximising Chinese power, as it allows it to focus on internal development.¹⁰⁰

Unlike Russian leaders, who are deeply dissatisfied with the status quo order which they see as detrimental to Russia's interests, China's leaders regard their country as one of the main beneficiaries of the existing order.¹⁰¹ Although China had little say in establishing the rules and institutions of the international order, it has exploited them to its advantage, thus becoming the order's biggest and most successful 'free rider'.¹⁰² Chinese leaders would like to see gradual changes to the order whereby it better reflects China's interests. China does not openly seek to overturn the established order or status hierarchy, but rather to work towards its gradual change. As regards the status hierarchy, this means slowly changing the way in which valued attributes are defined by promoting Chinese ideas about international order, cooperation, and domestic social and economic development, based on Chinese historical traditions and the astounding economic success the country has achieved in the last few decades.¹⁰³ For the time being, however, the leadership is generally committed to the order's preservation, and thus reluctant to engage in status-seeking behaviour that could undermine it. According to Fu Ying, a former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, 'As a member of the international

96 Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*.

97 Pu, *Rebranding China*.

98 Zeng, 'Is China Committed to Peaceful Rise?'

99 Quoted in Pu, *Rebranding China*, p. 3.

100 Zhao Suisheng, 'A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 113 (2018), pp. 643–58.

101 Pu, *Rebranding China*.

102 Zhao, 'A Revisionist Stakeholder'.

103 Yan Xuetong, 'Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1–22.

order, China has adhered to its rules and benefits from it. It has neither the intention nor ability to overturn the existing order.’¹⁰⁴

China’s elites have also restrained their status-seeking in order to reassure other countries about China’s intentions. Avoiding the mistakes that past rising powers (such as Germany) have made and not giving those in the West who are opposed to China’s rise any reason promulgate the ‘China Threat Thesis’ are focal points of discussion among Chinese policymakers and experts.¹⁰⁵ Although China has become more assertive as its power has grown, China’s leaders are still conscious of the fears that growing Chinese power may elicit in other states, and moderate their status-seeking accordingly.¹⁰⁶ Chinese leaders insist that China does not aspire to global hegemony, and that they are not looking to overthrow the existing global order. ‘Signalling a lower status is related to China’s alleviation of fears among other countries about its growing power, not a strategic deception of the international audience, and maintaining a low profile on the global stage is China’s long-term strategy.’¹⁰⁷ While they are generally supportive of China’s foreign policy under Xi, most Chinese experts caution against taking China’s newfound assertiveness too far, and argue for prudence and restraint.¹⁰⁸ In 2018 a group of prominent Tsinghua University graduates petitioned for the sacking of Professor Hu Angang, who also served as a top advisor to the CCP leadership on economic policy, for ‘misleading the public’ and ‘raising vigilance in other countries’ with his ‘triumphalist’ claims that China has equalled or surpassed the United States in national power.¹⁰⁹

China has been able to improve its status by acquiring and redefining the valued attributes that states use to measure status. China’s growing financial might and the dynamism of its economy have also given it greater authority in global institutions. Many countries now defer to China on major global economic

104 Fu Ying, ‘Under the Same Roof: China’s View of Global Order’, *Huffington Post*, 11 November, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/fu-ying/china-global-order_b_8537918.html?utm_hp_ref/4world.

105 Song Wei, ‘Zhongguo weishenme bushi zhengbaguo? shili zhuanhuan lilun shijiao xiade zhongmei guanxi’ (‘Why China is not a Contender? Sino-American Relationship from the Perspective of Power Transition Theory’), *Taipingyang xuebao (Pacific Journal)*, Vol. 25, No. 7 (2017), pp. 1–8.

106 Pu, *Rebranding China*.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

108 Wang Yizhou, ‘Guoren dangqian daguo xintai cunzai yinyou, zhanlue jiyuqi yao zhi jintui’ (‘Great Power Mentality is Worrying, One Should be Particularly Cautious in the Strategic Era’), *Global Times*, 1 March, 2017, <http://mil.huanqiu.com/strategysituation/2017-03/10226207.html>; Jia Xiudong, ‘Zhong mei guanxi hequ hecong mianlin lishi jueze’ (‘Sino-US Relation Facing Historical Choices’), *People’s Daily*, 9 October, 2018, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrhwb/html/2018-10/09/content_1884749.htm.

109 Asia Times Staff, ‘Alumni Demand Firing of Economist Who Misled Leaders’, 2 August, 2018, *Asia Times*, <http://www.atimes.com/article/tsinghua-alumni-demand-sacking-of-left-ist-economist-that-misled-central-leadership/>.

issues.¹¹⁰ The country's successes with economic development and modernisation are widely admired, and other developing states now seek to emulate certain elements of the Chinese political-economic model.¹¹¹ China's advocacy of the interests of developing countries and its defence of sovereignty, non-interference, and the right of each country to choose its own model of economic and social development has also gained it much international support.¹¹² China may thus continue to use less risky and aggressive strategies to enhance its status since it has no need to 'fight for status' to gain recognition from other states of its status aspirations. Most leaders and experts acknowledge that China is the world's second most powerful and influential country after the United States, and many expect that China will continue to close the gap between itself and the United States in the years to come.¹¹³

China's aggressive pursuit of its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas would suggest, however, that China has begun to act more recklessly and aggressively in pursuit of status. Some observers have gone so far as to claim that China seeks to dislodge the United States from the Asia Pacific and emerge as the regional hegemon.¹¹⁴ A closer look at the evidence, however, shows that although China has indeed been more assertive in pressing its territorial claims, it has also practiced restraint. China used coercive tactics to establish de facto control over the Scarborough Shoal at the expense of the Philippines, but has refrained from using similar tactics in other island disputes—even where it has also held the military advantage.¹¹⁵ China has backed away from provocative actions, such as island-building and energy drilling in disputed waters, when these policies have caused alarm in neighbouring states.¹¹⁶ In their detailed analysis of official Chinese security documents and expert discourses, M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher P. Twomey conclude that China does not have a concerted 'salami slicing tactics' strategy to dismantle US security presence in Asia, and that discussions about denying US military access to the Asia-Pacific region are almost

110 Zeng Jinghan and Shaun Breslin, 'China's "New Type of Great Power Relations": A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?' *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (2016), pp. 773–94.

111 Shaun Breslin, 'The 'China Model and the Global Crisis: from Friedrich List to a Chinese Mode of Governance?', *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (2011), pp. 1323–43.

112 Zeng, 'Is China Committed to Peaceful Rise?'

113 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

114 Timothy Heath and Andrew Erickson, 'Is China Pursuing Counter-Intervention?', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2015), pp. 143–56.

115 Zhou, 'Between Assertiveness and Self-Restraint'.

116 Zhang Feng, 'Beijing's Master Plan for the South China Sea', *Foreign Policy*, 23 June, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/23/south_china_sea_beijing_retreat_new_strategy; M. Taylor Fravel, 'Threading the Needle: The South China Sea disputes and US-China relations', *Massachusetts Institute of Technology Political Science Research Paper*, No. 23 (2016), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=142807181.

always tied to specific crisis scenarios, such as that of Taiwan.¹¹⁷ Even if China were able to assert control over the disputed South China Sea territories, it would be highly unlikely to lead to a ‘Sudetenland moment’ that emboldens China to engage in more expansive territorial revisionism at the expense of neighbouring states.¹¹⁸

When China has engaged directly with the United States and other regional powers in military or geopolitical competition it has primarily been over issues that have direct repercussions for domestic politics, such as the maritime disputes and Taiwan. China’s assertive behaviour in these regional disputes is less about forcing other states to recognise China’s elevated status than about appealing to domestic audiences, and defending the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.¹¹⁹ The CCP’s legitimacy rests on its ability to portray itself as a defender of China’s sovereignty and as the great national unifier after the ‘Century of Humiliation’ China suffered at the hands of Western and Japanese imperialism.¹²⁰ China has been ready to sacrifice the broader goal of ‘keeping a low profile’ to deter the United States, Taiwan, and regional states from pressing their demands in these disputes, and to signal that China will resolutely defend its claims.¹²¹

Declining US power and Washington’s retreat from global responsibilities in favour of an ‘America First’ foreign policy under Trump provides Beijing with new opportunities to assert its status. The fear in Washington is that it may encourage Chinese revisionism and China’s competitive status-seeking.¹²² Yet, from Beijing’s point of view, it is the United States that is dragging China into a ‘fight for status’ that it neither needs nor wants.¹²³ Chinese leaders and experts fear that China’s rise has awakened ‘status anxieties’ in the United States which, in response, is downsizing its commitments in order to be in a better position to contain China’s rise.¹²⁴ Rather than encouraging US retrenchment, Chinese leaders have signalled their desire that the United States continue to play a leading role in

117 Taylor Fravel and Christopher Twomey, ‘Projecting Strategy: the Myth of Chinese Counter-Intervention’, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2014), pp. 171–87.

118 Benjamin Herscovitch, ‘A Balanced Threat Assessment of China’s South China Sea Policy’, *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*, No. 820 (2017).

119 Zhao Kejin and Zhang Hao, ‘Projecting Political Power: China’s Changing Maritime Strategy’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2019), pp. 229–261.

120 Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

121 Zhou, ‘Between Assertiveness and Self-Restraint’; Pu, *Rebranding China*.

122 David Shambaugh, ‘China Rethinks Its Global Role in the Age of Trump’, *Bloomberg*, 13 June, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-06-14/can-china-really-rein-in-credit>.

123 Pu, *Rebranding China*.

124 Wang, ‘Great Power Mentality is Worrying, One Should be Particularly Cautious in the Strategic Era’.

global politics.¹²⁵ China's response to aggressive US moves, such as Trump's trade war and the administration's efforts to label China as a 'revisionist power', have also displayed restraint. China has made no attempt to take advantage of the disruptions Trump has caused to try to erode further and weaken the existing order, but is instead stepping up its commitments to ensure the order's preservation and continued stability.¹²⁶

China has remained cautious and restrained in its status-seeking behaviour—not *despite* but *because of* its rising power. China's power and status are on a steady upward trajectory, and Chinese leaders find themselves in the domain of gains. However, risk-averse, they have no wish to jeopardise future gains by adopting unnecessarily risky and bellicose behaviour. As Chinese leaders have also been conscious of the costs and tradeoffs that accompany higher status, this has curbed the country's status aspirations. As one of the primary beneficiaries of the existing global order, China is reluctant to engage in behaviour that will destabilise this order or turn the United States or other states against it. Finally, China's economic and material successes enable its successful acquisition of valued attributes that are used to measure status and to redefine what those attributes should be in ways that are favourable to China. China has thus been able to induce other states to acknowledge its greater status without having to engage in belligerent and confrontational behaviour. It has gained status by virtue of the positive impact its economic growth has had on other countries and its willingness to provide economic leadership after the 1998 and 2008 economic crises, rather than because of its newfound military prowess or increasingly muscular policies in the South China Sea.

Alternative Explanations for China and Russia's Divergence—Culture, Identity, and Domestic Politics

Although our analysis has focused primarily on the status literature, other theories may also explain the divergence between Chinese and Russian status-seeking. Observers may point out the considerably different historical and cultural identities of the two countries. Such identities shape the way in which each country defines the status community with which it compares itself. They hence imply the overall importance the two countries may attach to status advancement in the existing Western-centric status hierarchy. The West has always been Russia's relevant reference group; the West's recognition with regard to matters of status and prestige is integrally important to Russia's identity and sense of self-esteem. The West, however, has repeatedly denied Russia's status claims. Centuries of status inconsistency and status dissatisfaction have fuelled a deep sense of anxiety and

125 'China State Media Warns Trump Against Isolationism, Calls for Status Quo', 10 November, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-china-mediaidUSKBN1350P6>.

126 Zhao, 'A Revisionist Stakeholder'.

resentment, thus engendering Russia's competitive and antagonistic attitude towards the West.¹²⁷

Thousands of years of tradition as an advanced civilisation are believed to have endowed on the Chinese people an unshakeable confidence in their particular culture, and a distinct sense of identity that is independent of recognition by the dominant Western status hierarchy.¹²⁸ As the Chinese are secure in their sense of identity and self-worth, status recognition by the dominant Western states is of far less importance to China than it is to Russia.

Arguing that China has adopted a more restrained and cautious approach to status-seeking because, in light of their 'historical identity' and sense of self-esteem, status is of lesser importance to the Chinese people than it is to the Russians, however, is difficult. Cultural and identity-based arguments often exaggerate historical continuities, and underplay the degree to which culture and identity change over time. Having experienced nearly two centuries of intense interaction with the West and integration into international society, modern China is starkly different from ancient China.¹²⁹ Like Russia, China harbours intense grievances against the West. The experience of European and Japanese imperialism imposed on China in the 19th and early 20th centuries during its 'Century of Humiliation' is an integral element of the modern Chinese national identity.¹³⁰ Attaining a high status relative to the very European powers that humiliated China is hence vital to expunging this deeply felt sense of national humiliation. According to Yong Deng, 'Judging by the frequency of the term's use in official Chinese discourse and scholarly analyses, the PRC may very well be the most status-conscious country in the world'.¹³¹

Perhaps the most common explanation for Russia's aggressive pursuit of great power status is that ascribing it to the country's corrupt and authoritarian regime; its attempts to rally the public around Russian nationalism, and to stoke fears of illusory external threats that divert attention from domestic failures.¹³² Extrapolating from the logic of this argument (which has mainly been applied to Russia) one could argue that Chinese leaders are not under the same domestic pressure to engage in diversionary status-seeking, because they have been far more successful in delivering on economic growth and prosperity.

This line of thinking overestimates the degree to which the Chinese public is satisfied with the current pace of economic growth, and underestimates the

127 Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*.

128 For a representative example of this kind of 'essentialist' approach to exploring Chinese identity and culture and its effects on foreign policy see: Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

129 Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (London: Basic Books, 2012).

130 Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*.

131 Deng, *China's Struggle for Status*, p. 8.

132 Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, 'Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2015), pp. 167–87.

degree to which the CCP relies on nationalism for its legitimacy. Increased prosperity often generates increased public expectations of continued growth, which developing states often find difficult to keep pace with.¹³³ There is evidence that China has already crossed this point, and that the regime increasingly relies on nationalism for domestic legitimation.¹³⁴ Under these circumstances, a diversionary status-seeking foreign policy would also be an attractive option for Chinese leaders. The domestic political context, therefore, is not so different for the two countries as might be thought—at least not in a way that would produce such divergence in their respective approaches to status-seeking.

The biggest problem with the diversionary/domestic politics explanation is that it does not work—even for the Russian case. The regime does not face the degree of legitimacy crisis or domestic political opposition that would warrant such a drastic policy. Studies of public opinion demonstrate general satisfaction with the regime's domestic performance, particularly its ability to deliver social stability after the chaos of the 1990s.¹³⁵ The 2011 street protests took the regime by surprise and were, at least initially, perceived as a threat to its very survival. However, the opposition proved unable to mount a sustained challenge that would lead to regime change. In the immediate period leading up to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention in Ukraine (the turning point at which Russia began engaging in open geopolitical competition with the United States and West), therefore, the regime faced no direct threat to its rule.¹³⁶

The important differences in their domestic political situations, cultural traditions, and historical experiences notwithstanding, these do not explain the two countries' diverging approaches to status-seeking. Authoritarian leaders in both countries have incentives to use aggressive status-seeking to divert public attention from domestic problems, yet there is little evidence that they have done so, even in Russia—the country to which this behaviour is most frequently ascribed. Nor do cultural and ideational factors offer an adequate explanation. The dominant Western states are the significant reference group for both countries, and improved status in their eyes is critical to the identity and self-esteem of both the Chinese and Russian publics and elites. Thus, from a cultural/ ideational perspective, both countries should be just as prone to aggressive status-seeking. Their diverging status-seeking behaviour is better explained by systemic factors, namely, their different power trajectories and the powerful psychological and material effects that these—rather than culture, identity, or domestic politics—produce.

133 Andrew Janos, *Politics and Paradigms: Changing Theories of Change in Social Science* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1986).

134 Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*.

135 Daniel Treisman, 'Putin's Popularity Since 2010: Why Did Support for the Kremlin Plunge, then Stabilize?', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (2014), pp. 370–88.

136 Andrei Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2015), pp. 279–303.

Conclusion

The scholarship on status and power transitions has focused primarily on rising powers, and how the status inconsistencies created by their rise foment conflict. These theories have, however, overlooked the ways in which states' power trajectories influence their propensity to take risks and shape their policy choices in pursuing and asserting status. The powerful instrumental and psychological incentives to which rising powers adhere make them disinclined to challenge the status quo directly. The same incentives operate in reverse for declining powers, in driving them to take on greater risks to defend their status.

These findings offer some guidance on how the United States and other status quo powers may best react to China and Russia's status aspirations. They suggest that most rising powers will demonstrate restraint in their status-seeking, and be reluctant to push for abrupt changes to the status quo as long as they believe that the leading states will recognise their achievements by granting them higher status. Moving forward, the United States and its allies should not be overly concerned about China's possible transmutation into a radical revisionist if they were to cede it more authority and status. The actual problem may be to convince Chinese leaders that it is in their best interests to accept the duties that accompany higher status and power. Denying China the status which it believes is its due gives Chinese leaders an excuse to shirk responsibilities and avoid the burdens of leadership. It may also awaken feelings of status immobility, causing them to be more aggressive in their status-seeking, or to lash out against the status quo.

The challenge with declining powers, such as Russia, is somewhat different. Declining powers are risk-acceptant if such risks promise substantial status payoffs. Status quo states could take advantage of Russia's willingness to take on the burdens of leadership by encouraging the country to seek status through comparatively peaceful means. They could, for example, support Russia's efforts towards economic integration of the post-Soviet space. This would contribute to the economic development and stability of a problematic and dangerous region and also enable Russia to improve its international status through peaceful and constructive means. Rather than support these efforts, however, Western powers have pushed back against them, thus threatening Russia with further status losses. This has provoked a backlash, compelling Russia to adopt more aggressive and violent forms of status-seeking.

Some may argue that granting China and Russia elevated status would undermine the US's position at the pinnacle of the status hierarchy, by whetting China and Russia's appetite for further status gains and encouraging them to be more aggressive and reckless in their status-seeking. From this perspective, status concessions would be tantamount to appeasement—a term that has become an epithet in IR and a policy that status quo powers should be advised to avoid at all costs.¹³⁷ Such views are short-sighted and prevent states from adopting conciliatory policies that address legitimate grievances and aspirations. Recent studies of

137 Norrin Ripsman and Jack Levy, 'Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s', *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2008), pp. 148–81.

appeasement show that it does not always end in disaster, and that it can be an effective foreign policy when applied in the right context and circumstances.¹³⁸ Concessions need not embolden aggressive behaviour as long as the state making the concessions does so conditional upon reciprocal cooperation, and maintains a reputation for strength and resolve.¹³⁹

Status is positional: one state's elevated status diminishes the status of others. In recognising the elevated status of other powers, declining hegemonies, such as the United States, risk diminishing their own status. Despite these costs, however, status concessions can also produce tangible gains for the hegemonic state. Declining hegemonies have trouble managing the international system solely through their own efforts. States whose status has been elevated within the existing international order must take on new responsibilities and burdens within that order. It is, therefore, rational that declining hegemonies recognise other powers' elevated status as long as these powers reciprocate by assisting the declining hegemon in preserving and stabilising the existing order. Declining hegemonies may be more receptive to status accommodation if, despite concessions, they can retain their top position in the status hierarchy. Bearing in mind its declining material capabilities, Russia is in no position to mount a challenge for the top spot. And despite its rapidly rising economic might and technological prowess, China still lags far behind the US as regards most of the other valued attributes that confer status.¹⁴⁰ Although the United States may not retain the level of dominance it enjoyed during the first two decades of the Cold War, its position at the top of the international status hierarchy would seem to be secure for the foreseeable future. Even Winston Churchill, a vehement critic of British appeasement in the 1930s, acknowledged that 'appeasement from strength is magnanimous and noble and might be the surest and perhaps the only path to world peace'.¹⁴¹

The success or failure of a strategy of either inducement or appeasement is highly dependent on the nature of the target state.¹⁴² Making concessions to status-seekers whose revisionist aims are 'unlimited' or 'revolutionary' and who will be satisfied with nothing less than complete global domination and ideological supremacy is bound to be a disastrous and self-defeating policy.¹⁴³ Fortunately, neither China nor Russia harbours such ambitions. Both largely accept the

138 Stephen Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000); Ripsman and Levy, 'Wishful Thinking'.

139 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–9.

140 Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position', *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2016), pp. 7–53.

141 Winston Churchill quoted in Ripsman and Levy, 'Wishful Thinking', p. 153.

142 Rock, *Appeasement*, pp. 156–9.

143 Randle Schweller, 'Rising Powers and Revisionism in Emerging International Orders', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 7 October, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/valday/Rising-Powers-and-Revisionism-in-Emerging-International-Orders-17730>.

legitimacy of the existing international order.¹⁴⁴ At times they may be unhappy with US unilateral policies, and would like to see their place in the status hierarchy improve. But neither is trying to overthrow the existing order or supplant the United States at the pinnacle of the status hierarchy. China remains unwilling to accept the attendant burdens of pole position in the international status hierarchy.¹⁴⁵ Russian leaders are well aware of their country's limited capabilities and recognise that it could never be restored to the superpower status it enjoyed in its Soviet heyday.¹⁴⁶

Revolutionary revisionism does not stem solely from a state's inherent predilections; it is also a consequence of how other states treat it. According to Steve Chan, 'If one treats a state with limited demands as if it were bent upon overthrowing the existing system, one runs the risk of converting it into such a state.'¹⁴⁷ Any attempts to contain China and Russia and 'unjustly' deny them the status that they feel they are due could awaken deep feelings of resentment, and put these powers on a revisionist path. This would paradoxically bring about the very outcome that those who now call for China or Russia's containment are trying to avoid. A better understanding of rising and declining powers' status-seeking behaviour would avoid these mistakes, and help ensure that the power transitions currently underway are peaceful, and that both risers and decliners may thus contribute to the order and stability of an increasingly complex and chaotic world.

144 Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status-seekers'.

145 Pu, *Branding China*.

146 Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's Last Stand'.

147 Chan, *China, the U.S., and Power-Transition Theory*, p. 210.