Challenges from Below:

Provocations from Smaller States and Rising Power Status Dissatisfaction

Alex Yu-Ting Lin[±]

March 16, 2021

Abstract

Recent scholarship contends that rising powers which are dissatisfied with their status – influence, prestige, and ranking – are more likely to initiate conflict. What causes such dissatisfaction? Existing explanations suggest that rising powers become dissatisfied with their status when the established powers refuse to recognize them as equals. However, if status informs patterns of superiority and *inferiority*, then rising powers must also care about whether smaller states defer. My theory, "status insecurity", suggests that provocation from smaller states is a crucial but undertheorized reason for why rising powers become dissatisfied with their status – one which is especially important early in the power transition. Through automated text analysis of primary documents from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1978 to 2018 (N = 8581), I demonstrate that provocations from smaller states trigger the majority of China's complaints about its status, and they are especially salient in the early days of China's rise. In fact, provocations from smaller states trigger 70% of China's most severe status complaints. My analysis has implications for how and when status dissatisfaction drives interstate competition; it also highlights the complexity that provocations from smaller states create for US engagement strategies towards China and/ or the US' ability to remain offshore.

[±] Research Fellow, International Security Program, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University. PhD Candidate, Political Science and International Relations, University of Southern California. Email: linyutin@usc.edu

Introduction

Why do rising powers become dissatisfied with their status – influence, prestige, and ranking in the international system? Existing scholarship suggests that states which are dissatisfied with their status are more likely to adopt competitive policies to challenge the existing international order and/ or initiate interstate conflict.[1] Thus, understanding the causes of status dissatisfaction is essential for analyzing the causes and dynamics of interstate competition during power transitions,[2] or how the other states might manage rising powers.

Existing explanations suggest that a rising power can become dissatisfied with its status when the established powers fail to recognize it as an equal,[3] or when the rising power compares itself against the established powers.[4] Thus, virtually all existing explanations

---

[1] Johan Galtung, "A Structural Theory of Aggression," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1964), pp. 95–119; Thomas J. Volgy and Stacey Mayhall, "Status Inconsistency and International War: Exploring the Effects of Systemic Change," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (March 1995), p. 67; William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2009), pp. 28–57; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to US Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2010), pp. 63–95; Michelle Murray, "Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition Before the First World War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (November 2010), pp. 656–688; William C. Wohlforth, "Status Dilemmas and Interstate Conflict," in T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 115–140; Joslyn Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa," *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 2016), pp. 385–419; Joslyn Barnhart, "Humiliation and Third-Party Aggression," *World Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (July 2017), pp. 532–568; Jonathan Renshon, "Status Deficits and War," *International Organization*, Vol. 70, No. 03 (2016), pp. 513–550; Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017); Steven M. Ward, "Lost in Translation: Social Identity Theory and the Study of Status in World Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2017), pp. 821–834; Steven M. Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Andrew Q. Greve and Jack S. Levy, "Power Transitions, Status Dissatisfaction, and War: The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895," *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 2018), pp. 148–178; Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Joslyn Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2020); Joslyn Barnhart, "The Consequences of Defeat: The Quest for Status and Morale in the Aftermath of War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Online first.

[2] For a classical statement on the importance of status or prestige in power transitions, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[3] Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, chap. 6; Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, pp. 40–50; Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, p. 7.

[4] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers," pp. 68–70; Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," p. 37.

share a fundamental premise: status dissatisfaction, and the resultant interstate competition, unfold via a top-heavy process underpinned by the rising power's desire to become an equal to the established powers. However, these arguments are in tension with empirical records. As Lebow notes, most wars during historical power transitions were fought between rising powers and smaller states. [5] If status dissatisfaction comes from a rising power's interactions with the established powers,[6] why is it that most wars were fought between rising powers and smaller states? The existing arguments also have difficulty explaining why contemporary China is so fixated with affirming its superiority over smaller states. For example, during the 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF) Meeting, then-Chinese Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi, emphatically stressed that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact" when responding to perceived slights from smaller states.[7] Likewise, during his visit to the United States in February 2016, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, asked the Philippines to stop provoking China in the South China Sea. Wang considered these incidents to be insulting since it was impossible for the Philippines to outmuscle China: he warned that the tendency for smaller countries to "bully and disrespect" China should not continue.[8]

---

[5] Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 116–123.

[6] Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," p. 30; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, p. 220.

[7] The Washington Post, "U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone with China," July 29, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/29/AR2010072906416.html.

[8] BBC Chinese, "Wang Yi Defends Chinese Actions in South China Sea in Speech at CSIS (translated title)," February 25, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/china/2016/02/160225_china_us_sea_wangyi.

My theory, "status insecurity", suggests that perceived[9] provocations from smaller states[10] is an important but undertheorized reason for why a rising power can become dissatisfied with its status. Fundamentally, status informs patterns of superiority and inferiority. Hence, assessment of one's status involves looking up *and* looking down. That is, in addition to wanting recognition from the other established powers, a rising power must necessarily care about whether smaller states defer.[11] By neglecting the logic of "looking down", the existing explanations have an omitted variable problem. Provocations from smaller states can make a rising power become dissatisfied with its status by violating its self-conception as an actor which is currently is in the middle of the hierarchy (i.e., below the established powers but above smaller states), and by creating impression management problems for the rising power where the other actors in the system may deny the rising power's status claims because it is failing to secure deference from smaller states. In fact, as I will argue, there is a "life cycle" as to how status dissatisfaction develops: a rising power can start out by seeking deference from smaller states before becoming more concerned about recognition from the established powers. The existing literature cannot and does not explain this temporality due to its focus on the rising power-established powers interactions.

To demonstrate my theory's plausibility and the salience of the "looking down" logic, I use automated text analysis to examine an original dataset which contains statements from

---

[9] Smaller states may have perfectly legitimate reasons for resisting the rising powers. Hence, my argument focuses on provocations from smaller states as perceived by the rising powers.

[10] For stylistic consistency, I use "smaller states" to refer to smaller political actors, which says nothing about the political status of actors such as Taiwan or Tibet. In addition, whether they are sovereign states or not does not alter the basic intuition of my argument: that provocation from below is significant.

[11] Yuen Foong Khong, "The American Tributary System," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 2013), p. 23; Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics Of Asymmetry* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Reinhard Wolf, "Taking Interaction Seriously: Asymmetrical Roles and the Behavioral Foundations of Status," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (December 2019), pp. 1186–1211.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) from 1978 to 2018 (N=8581). My results indicate that provocations from smaller states trigger approximately 56% of China's complaints about its status, whereas the established powers trigger only 44% of the observations. In fact, provocations from smaller states trigger 70% of China's most severe status complaints, and provocations from smaller states are especially salient in the earlier days of China's rise.

I contribute to two bodies of literature: the conditions under which status dissatisfaction drives interstate competition, and US foreign policy in the context of China's rise. My theory has implications for how and when interstate competitions unfold because of status dissatisfaction. On the question of how: the existing literature posits that competitions unfold if the rising power and the established powers do not agree about their relative ranking vis-à-vis each other.[12] My theory suggests that whether competitions unfold also depends on whether smaller states defer to the rising power or not.[13] As I will elaborate in the conclusion, provocations from smaller states can trickle up to trigger and/ or exacerbate the competition between the rising power and the established powers. Thus, my argument points to the unexplored theoretical possibility that status competitions can unfold via bottom-up processes – not just through the top-heavy processes identified by the existing literature. On the question of when: if rising powers can be especially sensitive to provocations from smaller states early on, then competition could unfold even sooner than conventionally argued. Indeed, existing scholarship has suggested that rising powers and established powers sometimes have rational incentives to bargain incrementally early on

---

[12] Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," p. 30.
[13] Andrew Hurrell, "Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order: What Space for Would-Be Great Powers?" *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (2006), p. 6.

and only compete later in the power transition.[14] Similarly, for arguments which posit that rising powers turn towards revisionism after experiencing *persistent* status denials from the established powers,[15] competition also happens later in the process. My argument implies that provocations from smaller states and the resultant rising power status dissatisfaction can provide a factor for why the rising power and the established powers might deviate from these baselines and compete even sooner, reducing the time horizon for competition.[16]

Furthermore, observers are increasingly debating about the opportunities and challenges associated with China's rise.[17] If China might become more competitive and challenge the existing international order because of status dissatisfaction,[18] then it is necessary to pinpoint the sources of such dissatisfaction. Indeed, China is typically invoked to justify the relevance of the (re)emerging status research program to contemporary affairs,[19] since China often cites wanting to recover its lost status as a key feature of its

---

[14] Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), chap. 4. Also, on why the rising power and the established powers may want to cooperate early on and procrastinate on dealing with potential problems, see David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

[15] Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*.

[16] David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon,* pp. 24–25.

[17] E.g., Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2005), pp. 7–45; John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (December 2010), pp. 381–396; Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), pp. 41–72; G. John Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia: Between the Eagle and the Dragon," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 131, No. 1 (2016), pp. 9–43; David C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); David Shambaugh, "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?" *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 04 (May 2018), pp. 85–127.

[18] For how status concerns might shape US-China relations, see Christopher Layne's introduction in "Roundtable 11-11 on Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower," H-Diplo | ISSF, https://issforum.org/roundtables/11-11-unrivaled.

[19] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers"; T. V. Paul, Deborah W. Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Yuen Foong Khong, "Power as Prestige in World Politics," *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (January 2019), pp. 119–142; Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019); Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, chap. 7; Steven Ward, "Status, Stratified Rights, and

strategic narratives.[20] As I will elaborate in the conclusion, provocations from smaller states can complicate the execution of US engagement[21] or accommodation[22] strategies towards China and/ or its ability to remain offshore.[23] This is because whether smaller states defer to China or not is largely outside of US control, yet the consequences of such decisions from smaller states create complications for US foreign policy. This is not a naïve argument which offloads the responsibilities of US-China competition to the smaller states. However, it is an argument about the complexities of managing US-China-smaller state relations if status is a motive which drives Chinese foreign policy – and if such motive compels China to be fixated with provocations from smaller states, even if said provocations may not always create substantive material losses for China. That is, even disputes between China and smaller states over symbolic issues can create the potential for US-China tension.

Thus, regardless of whether the goal is to integrate China into the existing international order or to ensure that US can adopt a restrained posture, US foreign policy must find ways to manage the deleterious effects of status disputes between China and smaller states to remove these disputes as potential pathways to US-China conflict. To do so, getting China right is crucial.

Accommodation in International Relations," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, online first; Steve Chan, *Thucydides's Trap?: Historical Interpretation, Logic of Inquiry, and the Future of Sino-American Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), chap. 9.

[20] William A. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism," *Alternatives*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (March 2004), pp. 199–218.

[21] G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs*, January 2008, pp. 23–37.

[22] Charles L. Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (April 2015), pp. 49–90; T. V. Paul, "The Accommodation of Rising Powers in World Politics," in T. V. Paul, ed., *Accommodating Rising Powers: Past, Present, and Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 3–32.

[23] Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (April 1997), pp. 5–48; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2015); John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, June 2016, pp. 70–83.

This article will unfold as follows. The first section reviews the existing literature on status dissatisfaction and interstate competition. I present my theory in the second section. The third section discusses the research design and offers a new measurement of status dissatisfaction based on automated text analysis, guided by benchmarks of what high status actors expect in terms of privileges and rights, which I extract from the existing literature and empirically validate through an original nationwide survey in China. The fourth section reports the results of my text analysis, supplemented through archival evidence and case studies involving the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 and the ongoing South China Sea disputes. The conclusion highlights paths for future theoretical inquiries and implications for US foreign policy.

Definition of Concepts

I define provocations as actions that outrage the recipient and motivate the recipient to retaliate.[24] Provocations can either be substantive actions such as engagements which are inconsistent with standard operation procedures (e.g., buzzing airplanes)[25] or symbolic moves that disrespects the recipient (e.g., rude gestures).[26] These actions create outrage in the recipient by "challenging or violating [the recipient's] values and goals".[27] Indeed, "values and goals" can engender expectations as to how others should behave towards the actor. I focus on expectations derived from the recipient's (self-perceived) status. Provocation is

---

[24] See Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), pp. 49–80; Todd H. Hall, "On Provocation: Outrage, International Relations, and the Franco–Prussian War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (January 2017), p. 3.

[25] Allan Dafoe, Sophia Hatz, and Baobao Zhang, "Coercion and Provocation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Online first, p. 12.

[26] Dafoe, Hatz, and Zhang, 12–14.

[27] Hall, "On Provocation," 3.

thus in the eye of the beholder in that it requires some of sort of expectation held by the recipient as to how others should behave, and violation of this expectation.

Status includes two central elements. First, status entails social respect. A high-status actor possesses attributes which are held to be desirable in a community and are shown voluntary deference by others.[28] Second, status refers to ranking in the social hierarchy, making it a positional good.[29] Thus, it is different from other concepts such as reputation, which need not be positional or socially desirable – one could have a reputation for being lazy, which says nothing about ranking or desirability of this reputation. Likewise, status is distinct from wealth and power because material capabilities may not necessarily translate into social acknowledgement. Given the intersubjective nature of status, an actor's claim to high status is only valid if the other actors acknowledge it. In situations wherein actors claim high status but others disagree, this would create the impetus for status dissatisfaction.

Status Dissatisfaction and Interstate Competition

A line of scholarship links status dissatisfaction to interstate competition. However, where does such dissatisfaction come from? Existing scholarship focuses on the rising power's interactions with the other established powers. Broadly conceived, there are two mechanisms. First, status dissatisfaction arises when the established powers do not recognize the rising power as an equal or actively deny a rising power's status or identity

---

[28] Joe C. Magee and Adam D. Galinsky, "Social Hierarchy: The Self-Reinforcing Nature of Power and Status," *The Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 2008), pp. 351–398.

[29] Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," 39; Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers," 69; Jonathan Mercer, "The Illusion of International Prestige," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (April 2017), pp. 137–138; Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, p. 35.

claims. [30] Persistent denials may create the perception of status immobility; this can empower hardliner elites in the rising power and propel it to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy posture. [31] Second, since actors derive their identity from membership in social groups,[32] rising powers will compare their "achievements and qualities to a reference group, one that is equal or slightly superior".[33] Unfavorable results from such comparisons within relevant social groups can generate dissatisfaction.[34]

Unfortunately, the role that smaller states can play in triggering a rising power's status dissatisfaction is almost entirely absent from this discussion.[35] Indeed, dissatisfaction is the key independent variable which causes interstate competition in both power transition theory and the existing status literature in international relations (IR). For power transition theory, dissatisfaction comes from unfair distribution of resources. Here, power transition theorists might plausibly defend their focus on the rising powers' interactions with the other established powers because the latter actors tend to be the ones who design existing institutions and distribute resources. In this context, the existing status literature makes a powerful case that social variables need to be included in the set of motivations over which rising powers can become dissatisfied. Yet, by making this case, it is no longer defensible to only focus on the rising powers' interactions with the other established powers.

---

[30] Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, pp. 40–50; Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*, p. 7.

[31] Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*.

[32] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers"; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, ed., *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, California: Brooks/ Cole, 1979), pp. 33–47; Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War."

[33] Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers," pp. 68–70.

[34] Renshon, "Status Deficits and War."

[35] For a possible exception, see Lebow 2010 for a discussion as to why actors might care about slights from inferiors. However, there is less discussion on why would rising powers care about slights from smaller states and why this might lead to kinetic action.

As I will demonstrate below, the theoretical proposition that provocations from smaller states matter in triggering a rising power's status dissatisfaction is embedded within the very internal logic of how hierarchies function.

The Logic of Looking Up and Down

If status informs patterns of superiority and *inferiority*,[36] then rising powers will want recognition from superiors and peers *and* deference from inferiors. That is, for an actor which is currently somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy and is interested in moving up, (e.g. a rising power), there are two referent groups that it has relations with. The first referent group would be superiors or peers to the rising power. In this relationship, the rising power is the subordinate. Given that the rising power's objective is to rise to the top of the hierarchy, it follows that it would want these superiors and peers to recognize it as an equal and obtain the privileges that come with the improved ranking. The second referent group would be the inferiors to the rising power. In this relationship, the rising power is the superior. Given this, the rising power would expect the inferiors to show deference. Hence, a rising power has two missions: (1) equalize with peers and superiors by obtaining recognition from these actors, and (2) subjugate inferiors by obtaining deference from them. Since status acquisition requires recognition from above and deference from below, it follows that when an actor is acquiring and evaluating its status, it is looking up and looking down. This is the reason why countries manage their impressions in front of, and project

---

[36] Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (May 2014), p. 375; David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers"; Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, "Hierarchies in World Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 70, No. 03 (2016), pp. 624–625, 638; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, p. 33.

their status claims to, multiple audiences – the international audience (i.e., the established powers) and the regional audience (i.e., the smaller states).[37]

What exactly is the rising power looking for in terms of "recognition from above" and "deference from below"? Status claims are circumscribed by what the international community at the time thinks that high-status actors are entitled to and expected to perform. Indeed, the "looking up and down" logic is especially apparent in the acquisition of status markers in international politics – the "stratified rights [and] privileges restricted to actors with high enough standing".[38] Existing IR scholarship posits that contemporary high-status states enjoy two privileges: (1) participation in, and influence within, prestigious institutions and global governance,[39] and (2) greater ability to maintain and exercise sovereignty.[40]

First, high-status states exercise influence over international affairs by participating in prestigious institutions. Membership in these institutions and influence therein become litmus tests for the rising power to evaluate whether its superiors and peers consider it an equal. For example, Japanese leaders in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries thought that membership in the League of Nations or participation as one of the five great powers at the Paris Peace Conference cemented Japan's great power status.[41] Second, high-status states have more sovereignty. As Lake writes, by entering into a hierarchy, subordinate actors cede

---

[37] Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order*, chap. 3.

[38] Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987); Ward, "Status, Stratified Rights, and Accommodation in International Relations," p. 1.

[39] Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 84; Deborah Welch Larson, T. V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, "Status and World Order," in Deborah Welch Larson, T. V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 7; Paul, "The Accommodation of Rising Powers in World Politics," p. 5; Marina G Duque, "Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (September 2018), p. 578.

[40] David A. Lake, "Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2007), p. 48.

[41] Steven Ward, "Race, Status, and Japanese Revisionism in the Early 1930s," *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (October 2013), p. 611; Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, chap. 4.

a part or all of their sovereignty to the dominant state in exchange for security or economic benefits.[42] As such, moving up in the hierarchy requires acquiring more sovereignty, so that the rising power becomes the one interfering in others' affairs, not the other way around. Substantively, the pursuit and exercise of sovereignty can take shape in two ways: (1) self-governance without foreign interference, or (2) sovereignty as extraterritorial reach.

Sovereignty as self-governance without foreign interference is important to an actor's status because fundamentally, being treated as an equal means that others cannot get to dictate what the actor's policy would look like. This is a point that Radin and Reach make when commenting on how contemporary Russia thinks about great power status: unlike the other European powers which are "less sovereign" because they may have to consult "with the United States or other countries to develop or execute their policy", Russia should be entitled to great(er) autonomy given its great power status.[43] This is because the US-Russia relationship is one of equals, not superior-subordinate.

Another way in which the exercise of sovereignty happens is through extraterritorial reach. This can take shape in the form of attempting to establish a "sphere of influence" wherein the actor imposes "some amount of control over a given territory or polity and [exclude] other external actors from exercising the same kind of control".[44] In short, this means imposition of one's sovereignty at the expense of the target's sovereignty. There is consensus within the existing scholarship that great powers are marked by their right and

---

[42] Lake, "Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics," p. 48.
[43] Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2017), p. 18.
[44] Van Jackson, "Understanding Spheres of Influence in International Politics," *European Journal of International Security*, Online first, p. 1.

ability to intervene and stake claims in their sphere of influence.[45] For example, Barnhart suggests that status-conscious actors tend to double-down on the assertion of their sovereignty, especially in disputed territories, in order to reaffirm their claims to spheres of influence and "signal [their] intentions of maintaining the expansive foreign policy of…high-status state[s]".[46] Thus, status considerations create motivations for actors to impose their sovereignty on their surroundings to establish political control over other states.

To summarize: entry into prestigious institutions will require that the established powers recognize the rising power as an equal. Also, to exercise sovereignty and fend off interference, this would require that the established powers treat the rising power as an equal. Yet, to stake and defend a sphere of influence, this usually requires that the smaller states in that sphere show acquiescence towards the rising power's claims. Thus, acquisition of status necessarily requires recognition from above and deference from below.
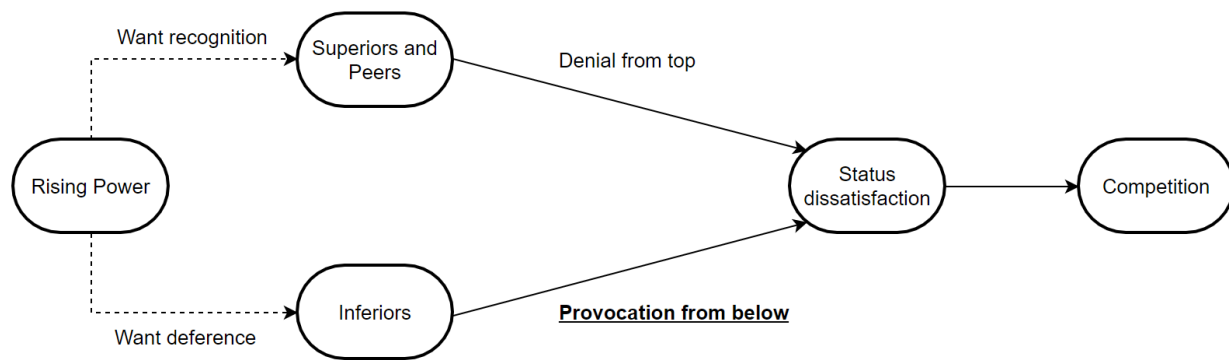
Looking Down: Mechanisms of Provocation from Below

Yet, by only focusing on the "looking up" dynamic, the existing scholarship has neglected the "looking down" aspect. How do provocations from below lead to the rising power's status dissatisfaction? Provocations from smaller states create two kinds of problems for the rising power. First, such provocations violate the expectations that the rising power comes to hold in terms of the privileges that it should already be entitled to, given its estimation of its social position. This mechanism has to do with self-conception. Second, provocations from smaller

---

[45] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression," p. 386; T. V. Paul, "Accommodating Rising Powers," Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 5; Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, pp. 189–190.
[46] Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression," p. 395.

states undermine the rising power's impression management. The other actors in the international system may refuse to confer status to the rising power upon witnessing the fact that the rising power is having issues dealing with smaller states. This mechanism has to do with audience perception. The following figure offers a stylized representation of my theory. The underlined text highlights what I will demonstrate in the subsequent section.

Self-conception and Violated Expectations

The first mechanism, "violated expectations", has to do with how provocations from smaller states undermine the rising power's self-conception as a rising power. When "looking down", the rising power is dealing with smaller states. In this relationship, the rising power conceptualizes itself as the superior. Consequently, the desire for deference from smaller states is neither prospective nor aspirational. From the rising power's perspective, it is not longing to be a superior to the smaller states. It already considers itself as being superior. After all, a rising power cannot *be* a rising power (i.e., somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy) if its superiority to the smaller states (i.e., at the bottom of the hierarchy) is not already a social fact. Hence, the rising power will readily expect a set of rights and privileges to govern its interactions with the smaller states. Furthermore, given the asymmetrical

relations in terms of material capabilities and social influence, the rising power will hold the estimation that receiving deference from smaller states should be easier than receiving recognition from the other established powers. Note that these expectations flow from the rising power's subjective estimation – not whether these estimations are objectively valid. In fact, the reason why status dissatisfaction might arise via violated expectations is precisely because there is often a disconnect between the rising power's subjective expectations and objective reality. Indeed, to the rising power, bending the will of social superiors is, all else being equal, a much harder enterprise than bending the will of social inferiors.

In fact, the weaker the smaller state, the more salient this belief would be. Thus, Barnhart is right to observe that "losing a war to a weaker state…will likely call into question the standing of the defeated state: the more rapid the defeat and *the weaker the opponent*, the more grave the status threat" (italics added).[47] When those below the rising power engage in provocative actions and/ or emerge victorious, this is status-threatening because it suggests that perhaps these smaller states are not below the rising power after all, and that the rising power's self-assessments of its social position is overly optimistic. This violates the rising power's self-conception as being above these smaller states.[48] This is a problem. If the rising power is not above smaller states, then it cannot be in the middle of the hierarchy. If it is not in the middle of the hierarchy, then the rising power is even further away from equalizing with the other established powers than initially conceived. Indeed, if even the smaller states, over whom the rising power should enjoy absolute advantage, do not defer,

---

[47] Barnhart, "Humiliation and Third-Party Aggression," p. 536.
[48] On ontological security and need for stable identity in relation to others, see Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (September 2006), pp. 341–370; Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*.

then who will? Thus, while the lack of recognition from the other established powers generates status dissatisfaction through "I cannot get what I really *value* from superiors and peers", provocations from smaller states does so through "I *expect* deference, but even the 'low-hanging fruits' are not falling in line".

In fact, there is also a difference as to when the rising power expects recognition from other established powers versus deference from smaller states. Research from social psychology has shown that actors who are rising in an organizational setting (i.e., risers) are more likely to seek de-escalation as a first strategy against superiors or peers, where confrontation is only used as a last-resort strategy.[49] This is because if recognition from superiors and peers are more valuable but harder to obtain, then risers are more likely to be patient even if the superiors and peers are not offering recognition quite just yet. This is also sensible because the superiors or peers have access to more resources and institutional influence with which they can impose costly punishment. Conversely, risers are more likely to immediately adopt retaliatory efforts in the face of provocation from below.[50] The willingness to engage in "down-hierarchy" escalation "signals a *readiness* to escalate in rank contests, through which the high(er)-ranking contestants intimidate low-ranking [counterparts]" to resolve the situation.[51] Risers expect inferiors to offer deference right away, and hence provocations from below can never be tolerated. The willingness to engage in "down-hierarchy" aggression against lower-ranking adversaries is also sensible since such

---

[49] M. Afzalur Rahim, "A Measure of Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict," *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1983), p. 370; Marc A. Fournier, D. S. Moskowitz, and David C. Zuroff, "Social Rank Strategies in Hierarchical Relationships," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (August 2002), p. 425; Helen X. Chen, Xuemei Xu, and Patrick Phillips, "Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Styles," *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (January 2019), pp. 458–470.

[50] Fournier, Moskowitz, and Zuroff, "Social Rank Strategies in Hierarchical Relationships."

[51] Fournier, Moskowitz, and Zuroff, p. 425.

endeavor is less costly (inferiors have less resources or institutional influence with which to wage retaliation) and more likely to be successful (because inferiors also fear punishment from the riser, so they, too, will adopt a more conciliatory strategy against the riser).

As such, obtaining recognition from the other established powers is a longer-term, aspirational mission in which the rising power will be more patient. This is certainly consistent with scholarship in IR which has pointed out why rising powers might prefer incremental revisionism in the early stages of the power transitions. [52] Yet, securing deference from smaller states is a mission that the rising power expects to actualize right away and is not afraid to engage in down-hierarchy aggression to enforce deference out of inferiors. In short, rising powers have incentives to "kiss up, kick down" in the early stages of power transitions. This temporal dynamic should be especially relevant for new rising powers, rising powers which recently started trying to restore their past glory,[53] or recently humiliated rising powers.[54] For rising powers like these, while they want recognition from the other established powers, such expectations would be unrealistic given their circumstances. On the other hand, these rising powers can still readily expect deference from smaller states despite their relatively weak(ened) position. As the Chinese proverb goes, the body of a starved camel is still bigger than a living horse: regardless of the weak(ened) position, the rising power (the "starved camel") nevertheless commands a higher position than a smaller state (the "living horse"). Thus, as far as the rising power is concerned, smaller states are in no position to engage in provocations of any kind under any circumstance.

---

[52] G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 40; Schweller and Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline"; Ward, "Lost in Translation," 27.

[53] Joshua Freedman, "Status Insecurity and Temporality in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (December 2016), pp. 797–822.

[54] Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression."

Audience Perception and Impression Management Failure

In the second mechanism, "impression management failure", provocations from smaller states undermine the rising power's status claims. This mechanism has to do with audience perception. Fundamentally, status recognition/ demotion in a community unfolds in three stages. First, both the actor and the audience will develop some baseline understanding of what high-status actors should do or have. Second, the actor will be judged on whether it succeeds or fails to perform on these metrics. Third, once the audience has had opportunities to assess whether the actor succeeds or fails to perform on these metrics, they update their beliefs about the actor's status. It follows that the rising power has an incentive to manage its impression to the audience. Indeed, status-seeking actors often offer "explanations…to support their claims to positive image or social identities".[55]

As noted earlier, one of the status markers in contemporary international politics is sovereignty in terms of extraterritorial reach: command of a sphere of influence[56] and/ or being the leader of some order wherein "smaller and weaker states [are] willing to accept [the actor's]…authority".[57] It follows that deference from smaller states is one of the requisite social capitals that a rising power must acquire to prove its qualification as a high-status actor. Provocations from smaller states, especially from the rising power's (perceived) sphere of influence, signal to the other actors that the rising power has not obtained this social capital. Indeed, this is at the heart of Barnhart's observation that humiliated actors

---

[55] Philip E. Tetlock and Ariel Levi, "Attribution Bias: On the Inconclusiveness of the Cognition-Motivation Debate," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 1982), p. 301.
[56] Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression," 386; Paul, "Accommodating Rising Powers," p. 5; Ward, "Lost in Translation," p. 822.
[57] Mario E. Carranza, "Rising Regional Powers and International Relations Theories: Comparing Brazil and India's Foreign Security Policies and Their Search for Great-Power Status," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, pp. 256–259; Hurrell, "Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order," p. 4.

tend to become more aggressive in asserting territorial claims in their sphere of influence. When an actor suffers an episode of humiliation, its claims to positive image or high-status are called into question. Hence, the humiliated actor has an incentive to (re)demonstrate to the international audience that it still deserves high-status despite the humiliating episode.

In fact, given my arguments earlier about smaller states being "low-hanging fruits", both the rising power and the audience are likely to perceive the task of securing deference from smaller states as being one of the easiest to perform. Given this, provocations from smaller states undermine the rising power's impression management strategies. After all, one cannot claim to have high status, if it even fails to secure deference from smaller states. This seems to be one of the first steps, if not *the first step,* to any meaningful pursuit of a high-status position. Thus, provocations from smaller states engender episodes during which the international audience might demote the rising power because it has failed to perform a crucial metric that is expected of the rising power.

From this, one could see why it is imperative that the rising power retaliates against provocative smaller states. Retaliations not only help the rising power preserve its self-conception as a rising power, but also signal to the audience that the rising power intends to stand firm in the face of provocations from below. This is because the rising power wants to show that it is willing and able to perform in line with expectations. To invoke a firm example: the mid-level manager will punish a provocative low-level worker not just to bring the low-level worker back in line, but also to signal to her superiors and peers that this is not going to be a problem moving forward. This is done to protect her chance at future promotion.

In fact, one can take a more pessimistic perspective: provocations from smaller states provide the *pretexts* through which the established powers can deny the rising power's

status claims. This implies that the other established powers might be driven by other (self-interested) motivations to secure their existing social positions. As such, they use provocations from smaller states as an excuse to deny the rising power's status claims to be an equal. This dynamic may unfold in the form of the established powers intervening to "mediate the problems" between the rising power and the smaller states. From the established power's perspective, this helps maintain stability. It also consolidates the established power's status because it reaffirms its extraterritorial reach: the ability to intervene in the rising power's (perceived) sphere of influence.

However, this happens at the expense of the rising power's status: its extraterritorial reach in its (perceived) sphere of influence is compromised by interventions from the other established powers. As noted earlier, spheres of influence are necessarily exclusionary: the extent to which one has control of the sphere is in part dependent on one's ability to exclude other actors from having the same influence. When the other established powers intervene, this creates the perception that the rising power needs the others' help to deal with smaller states. This creates, if not reaffirm, the perception that the rising power and the other established powers are not equals. After all, the former seems to be dependent on the latter to perform a basic task (securing deference from smaller states) that is expected of high-status actors. This makes the rising power not-high-status. In short, provocations from smaller states undermine a rising power's impression management efforts.

As such, my theory generates two expected observable implications:

> *H_1: Provocations from smaller states should be a significant source of a rising power's status dissatisfaction (cumulative logic).*

> *H_2: Provocations from smaller states should be especially salient in the earlier stages of the power transition (temporality logic).*

Conversely, if the existing explanations are right, we should observe the following:

> *H_0: Status denial from the established powers should trigger most, if not all, of the rising power's status dissatisfaction (alternative hypothesis).*

Table 1: Summary of Competing Theories and Expected Observable Implications

Theory	Mechanism	Expected Trigger of Dissatisfaction
Power transition theory[58]	Unfair distribution of resources	Established powers
Existing status literature[59]	Upward social comparison/ status denial	Established powers
Status Insecurity	Provocation from smaller states	Provocations from smaller states are significant
		Provocations from smaller states should be especially salient in the earlier stages of the power transition

---

[58] Organski and Kugler 1980.
[59] Wohlforth 2009; Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Paul et al. 2014; Renshon 2017; Ward 2017b.

Research Design

Case Selection and Generalizability

My theory aims to specify a wider range of inputs which can make rising powers become dissatisfied with their status, based on first principles of how hierarchies function: through the logic of "looking up and down". Contemporary China is selected as a plausibility probe to assess whether and how the "looking down" logic operates – that is, how salient the logic is, and when it is most salient. Theorizing and analyzing the "looking down" logic is especially important for understanding how status dissatisfaction develops within actors which operate in environments of asymmetry: actors whose most important political relations and/ or geopolitical context are populated by smaller states.

Late 19th and early 20th Century US would be one such example, where it was not landlocked against the other established powers but instead surrounded by Latin American countries and Canada. For instance, in explaining the US motivation for declaring war against Mexico in 1846, then-President James Polk, using "a language more common to dueling and…affairs of honor", noted that through a series of provocative maneuvers over low-material-stake issues, Mexico had "insulted the United States to such a degree that honor required the southern neighbor be punished".[60] The US had "borne more insult, abuse, insolence and injury [from Mexico] than any one nation has ever before endured…[and so has] no alternatives but to extort by arms the respect" it deserves from Mexico.[61] Indeed,

---

[60] Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Vintage, 2013), p. 95.
[61] Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, p. 95.

"Mexico, inferior in both race and power, must necessarily bend to the will of [the US]".[62] As Sarah Polk, James Polk's wife, explained: the US "honor must be upheld at all costs".[63]

Other such examples include: contemporary Russia, which sees Eastern Europe as an indispensable part of its identity as a great power while seeing military interventions therein as a legitimate exercise of its rights as a great power[64], or contemporary India with its continual skirmishes with Pakistan. This argument also travels to premodern Asia. In explaining why the relationship between China and Vietnam from 968 to 1885 was so enduring, Womack argues that the relationship was "a patriarchal one of unequal but stable roles that guaranteed China's recognition of Vietnam's autonomy and Vietnam's deference to China".[65] Conversely, when Koguryo – one of the three kingdoms of Korea – refused to pay tributes and acknowledge premodern China's centrality from 598 to 907, the Sui and Tang dynasties launched a series of wars against Koguryo to protect their position in the Confucian hierarchy, sometimes at the cost of domestic stability and financial ruin.[66]

Thus, my plausibility probe expands the existing status literature's focus, which tends to rely on evidence from European great power politics,[67] especially from the Concert of Europe and/ or World War I. If one were to start examining status politics through a multipolar setting wherein great powers were landlocked against each other with similar

---

[62] Greenberg, *A Wicked War,* p. 95.

[63] Greenberg, *A Wicked War,* p. 96.

[64] Ted Hopf, "Identity, Legitimacy, and the Use of Military Force: Russia's Great Power Identities and Military Intervention in Abkhazia," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31 (2005), pp. 225–243.

[65] Brantly Womack, *China Among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relationships In Asia* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2010), p. 186.

[66] Christina Lai, "Realism Revisited: China's Status-Driven Wars against Koguryo in the Sui and Tang Dynasties," *Asian Security*, Online first, pp. 1–19.

[67] E.g., Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War"; Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression"; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*; Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations.*

socio-cultural attributes, then one might be inclined to believe that status dissatisfaction comes misrecognition by the established powers. However, by examining other empirical cases, a different set of theoretical arguments becomes possible: provocations from smaller states matter, and that it is crucial for theories of status dissatisfaction to specify this ex ante.

Measuring Status Dissatisfaction

There are two conventional ways of measuring status dissatisfaction. The first approach calculates the gap between material capability and social respect, measured by the number and ranking of diplomats that other countries send to a country.[68] While this approach might reveal which actors could be suffering from status dissatisfaction, diplomatic stationing data does not allow me to assess my question: *who* triggers status dissatisfaction in these actors? In the second approach, scholars will look for smoking gun statements in which leaders claim that "we are going to war because we are dissatisfied with our status (or honor, respect, prestige, etc.)". While this approach has its merits, it is less suitable for my purposes since I am offering a systematic assessment of how salient provocations from smaller states are.

As such, I adopt a new measurement strategy based on automated text analysis. This approach offers another option for future studies of status politics – one which focuses on status dissatisfaction as expressed during state interactions, which is valuable because status is established and exercised in relational contexts.[69] I use Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a type of unsupervised topic model that is used to detect topics latent in a collection

---

[68] Melvin Small and J. David Singer, "The Diplomatic Importance of States, 1816–1970: An Extension and Refinement of the Indicator," *World Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (July 1973), pp. 577–599; Volgy and Mayhall, "Status Inconsistency and International War"; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*.
[69] Duque, "Recognizing International Status."

of documents. Here, as opposed to searching for smoking gun statements individually, I subject my empirical analysis to the entire collection of foreign policy statements from China's MFA from 1978 to 2018. The transparency allows for replication. Furthermore, as opposed to looking for smoking-gun statements with certain keywords such as "status", "respect", or "prestige", I identify status-related documents by using theoretically-motivated benchmarks on what status entails. The intuition is that if issue A is seen as being crucial to the obtainment of status, and the actor in question is complaining about issue A, then one might think of this instance as an expression of status dissatisfaction. Earlier, I argued that the existing status literature suggests that a rising power will try to obtain two privileges: (1) membership and influence in international organizations, and (2) greater exercise of sovereignty. These are the benchmarks I use.

Table 2: Status Issues

Target Audience Issue	Established Powers	Smaller States
Influence in international organizations	Yes	No
Sovereignty as lack of foreign interference	Yes	No
Sovereignty as territorial integrity	Yes	Yes

Critics might reasonably suggest that many of these issues, such as respect of territorial interests, are material issues.[70] Critics might further point out that the inclusion

---

[70] On why status and material issues need not be mutually exclusive, see Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," p. 382. Granted, one cannot call every material issue a status issue and vice versa. However, a reasonable line might be drawn based on the following criteria. If an issue has never been linked to a country's status, and status narratives are suddenly invoked to justify a country's actions during crises, then this justification is ad-hoc. Conversely, if an issue has consistently been referred to as being crucial to the country's status even during peacetime, then even if it generates material payoffs, then such issue is both a status *and* a material issue. For example, a state may want nuclear weapons to deter adversaries, but it could also want nuclear weapons because they could enhance the state's status. These motives can coexist; see Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1996), pp. 54–86..

of sovereignty as territorial integrity favors my argument. To directly validate the fact that these benchmarks reflect how China assesses its status, I fielded an original nationwide survey in China (N=4080) in July 2020. The survey asked respondents to rank a number of attributes-based and relational-based status markers proposed by the existing literature.[71] The results show that all the benchmarks I employ perform better than the possession of nuclear weapons, which the existing literature has long established as being a status symbol in international politics.[72] The results also show that sovereignty as territorial integrity is in fact the most important status marker to the Chinese respondents. Thus, its inclusion is justified. Granted, my survey does not draw from an elite sample. However, at a minimum, insights from the population – which is consistently exposed to party rhetoric on what it means for China to achieve (great power) status – provide useful first-cut evidence that complements my text analysis of statements from China's MFA.[73] For details on how the survey was administered and how the results were calculated, see Appendix 1.

Table 3: Chinese Respondents Rank Status Markers

Status Markers	Score (1-6, 6 highest)
Sovereignty as territorial integrity	4.06
Strong military	3.76
Strong economic performance	3.47
Influence in international organizations	3.32
Sovereignty as lack of foreign interference	3.27
Possession of nuclear weapons	3.11

---

[71] The difference between attributes-based and relational-based attributes is that the former focuses on acquisition of certain capabilities whereas the latter requires recognition from other actors. One might argue that the acquisition of attributes-based markers is precisely to obtain relational-based attributes (e.g., acquiring nuclear weapons might increase the actor's status and therefore the actor gets invited to prestigious clubs). See Duque, "Recognizing International Status." Both in my theory and text analysis, I only include the relational-based attributes since my focus is on *who* triggers status dissatisfaction.

[72] Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?"; Lilach Gilady, *The Price of Prestige: Conspicuous Consumption in International Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[73] For why the elite vs. population difference is sometimes overstated and misguided, see Joshua D. Kertzer, "Re-Assessing Elite-Public Gaps in Political Behavior," *American Journal of Political Science*, Online first.

Operationalization of Actors

By "established powers", I mean countries with the material capability and social influence to contend for global or regional leadership. Many conventional measures focus on material indices such as military or economic capabilities.[74] In line with my focus on status, I include social influence. I measure this through a country's contribution towards international institutions, which can be an important venue through which countries show their ability and willingness to exhibit leadership. For the material component, I average the CINC scores by country and year from 1978 to 2018.[75] For the social component, I use a country's contribution towards the United Nations regular budget from 2016-2018.

Table 4: List of Established Powers

CINC Top 10	UN Contribution Top 10
United States	United States
United Kingdom	Japan
China	China
Russia	Germany
Germany	France
France	United Kingdom
India	Brazil
Japan	Italy
Italy	Russia
Turkey	Canada

A country is an established power if it appears in either list. This results in eleven, not counting China: United States, United Kingdom, Russia, Germany, France, Japan, India, Italy, Turkey, Brazil, and Canada. Some of these countries are clearly established powers, whereas others are borderline. However, I adopt this broad definition to set up a hard test against my

---

[74] Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 15.
[75] German Federal Republic (GFR, 1955-1990) is collapsed with Germany (GMY)

argument: the more established powers I include, the less likely my empirical results will support my argument. This is because if my operationalization of "established powers" only includes the one or two actors at the very top, then my theory and empirics become trivial, since virtually every actor counts as provocations from below. For "smaller states", I mean states which cannot compete with the established powers for influence and leadership. I include any state which does not belong in the eleven aforementioned countries.

Methods and Results

My dataset includes statements made by MFA spokespersons during regular press conferences from 1978 to 2018 (N=8581). I selected these statements for two reasons. First, a survey of statements issued by Chinese leaders or foreign ministers reveals that their statements tend focus on China's accomplishments and rarely contain direct criticisms. Second, when fielding questions from domestic and foreign press, MFA spokespersons address tough questions regarding developments around the world while responding with the official stance. Consequently, statements from MFA spokespersons are a better fit given greater variation of displayed (dis)satisfaction and issues discussed.

In June 2018, I scraped the full transcripts of these statements from *People's Daily*, China's state-owned newspaper which is considered as the most authoritative media outlet that represents the official party line. To locate statements by Chinese MFA spokespersons, I used the search terms "外交部发言人[76] + the spokesperson's name" for all spokespersons from 1978 to 2018. The units of analysis are the correspondences: the press asks the

---

[76] Chinese for MFA spokesperson.

spokespersons about an issue and the spokespersons respond.[77] My quantity of interest is what I call status complaints: instances in which China is complaining about its status due to the action of other states. To identify them, I use sentiment analysis to find documents in which China is issuing a complaint. I then use LDA topic modeling to find documents in which China is talking about status-related topics. Documents that sit at the intersection of these two sets are status complaints. The following diagram illustrates the intuition.

Graph 1: Locating Status Complaints

Status documents
(LDA topic modeling)   **Status complaints**   Complaint documents
(Sentiment analysis)

---
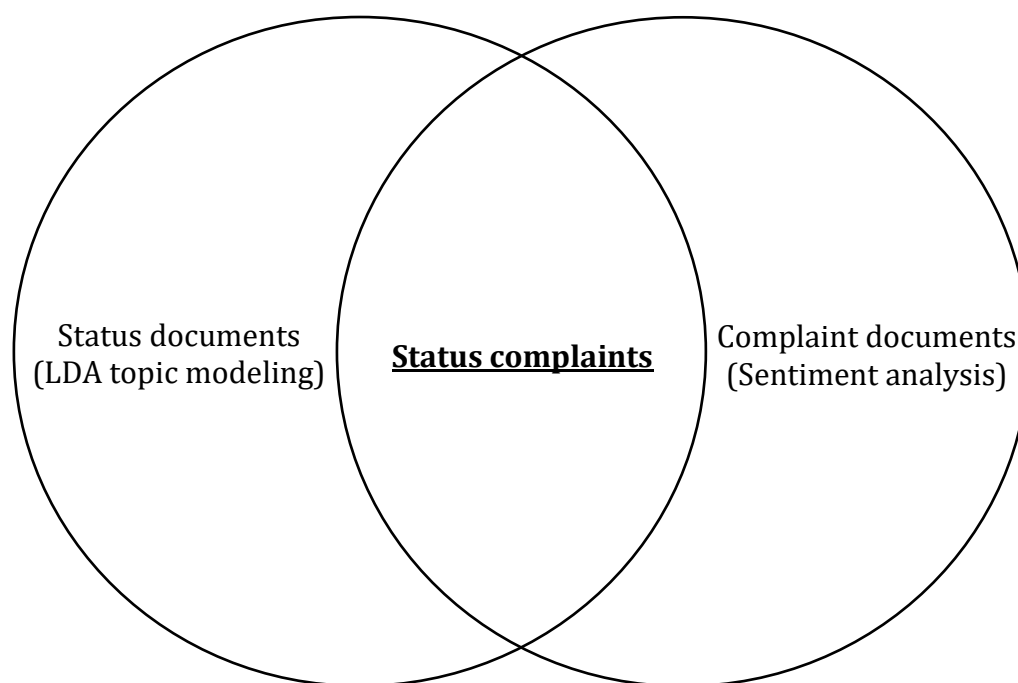
[77] I did not collect statements directly from MFA's website because it only makes statements from 2016 to 2018 available. Thus, while my corpus may not include *every* statement made by MFA's spokespersons, the statements that do get published in People's Daily are statements that the Party considers the most important. If anything, my corpus excludes perfunctory correspondences between MFA spokespersons and the press, as statements of this kind would most likely not make it into People's Daily. In addition, critics might question whether these statements are true representations of what Chinese elites think; instead, private meeting minutes might be better. Aside from data availability issues, this concern is less applicable for my research question. If the question is about Chinese strategic intentions, then Chinese officials might mispresent their views in public statements. However, if status acquisition requires recognition from other actors, then Chinese elites have an incentive to be clear and genuine about their status needs.

After preprocessing the texts such as removing punctuations or stop words, I first conduct

sentiment analysis through a dictionary-based method, using the Chinese lexicon dictionary

developed by the Natural Language Processing and Sentiment Analysis (NLPSA) Lab at

Academia Sinica in Taiwan.[78] In this dictionary, Chinese words are assigned a weighted score

based on how positive or negative they are, not just a 1 (positive) or 0 (negative) binary. For

each entry, I calculate its sentiment score by the following formula:

$$Sentiment = \frac{(positive\ words * weighted\ scores + negative\ words * weighted\ scores)}{total\ word\ length\ of\ the\ entry}$$

An entry is a "complaint" if it is below the 60th percentile of the sentiment scores. While 60th

percentile may seem high, it is reasonable because I am dealing with diplomatic statements

which are more circumspect than everyday statements. To demonstrate that my results are

not generated by this parameter choice, I conduct a sensitivity analysis, moving the

sentiment threshold by decrements of 5%. Results from the sensitivity analysis, detailed in

Appendix #5, suggest that my main results (in table 6) are robust at every threshold.

I then use LDA topic modeling to identify documents which are related to status based

on the theoretical benchmarks I established earlier. LDA assumes that each collection of

documents, such as my corpus, contains a set of topics. It uses co-occurrence of words to

detect topics across the collection of documents, as well as sorting documents into these

topics.[79] However, this does require researchers to select the number of topics. There is a

tradeoff between selecting a smaller number of topics versus a higher number of topics.

---

[78] Shih-Ming Wang and Lun-Wei Ku, "ANTUSD: A Large Chinese Sentiment Dictionary," *Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2016), Paris, France*, pp. 2697–2702.
[79] David M Blei, Andrew Y. Ng, and Michael I. Jordan, "Latent Dirichlet Allocation," *The Journal of Machine Learning Research*, Vol. 3, No. 3/1 (2003), pp. 993–1022.

Selecting a smaller number means that the topics will be broader. However, when sorting documents into topics, there is a higher likelihood for false positives – for example, a document which is not substantively related to the topic is categorized into the topic anyway because the topic is the best fit among bad fits. Conversely, selecting a higher number of topics means that the topics will be more granular, leading to higher precision. However, the tradeoff is that for any substantive theme (e.g., South China Sea), there may be multiple topics which are related to that theme.

I selected 150 topics. This is justified since my dataset covers forty years of Chinese diplomatic interactions with the world which necessarily entails a wide array of activities and actors. In addition, to mitigate the drawbacks of selecting a higher number of topics, I aggregate the topics based on their substantive similarity after modeling – for example, if there are multiple topics which have to do with the South China Sea, they are pooled together (see Table #5). This strategy is superior to selecting a smaller number of topics ex ante because it would reduce the likelihood for false positives while providing full transparency on how the pooling is done. Appendix #2 provides further detailed justifications. Appendix #3 lists the topics and their top words. Furthermore, LDA requires that researchers conduct validation tests to ensure that topics, and the ways in which documents are sorted, are interpretable and valid.[80] Appendix #4 contains the validation procedures and results.

---

[80] Justin Grimmer and Brandon M. Stewart, "Text as Data: The Promise and Pitfalls of Automatic Content Analysis Methods for Political Texts," *Political Analysis*, Vol. 21, No. 03 (2013), p. 4.

A document is identified as a status document if it belongs to the following topics.

Table 5: Status Topics and Top 20 Words

Theoretical Category	Topic	Words
More say in global governance	150	应对 (response), 发展中国家 (developing countries), 国际 (international), 全球 (global), 改革 (reform), 能力 (capacity), 框架 (framework), 目标 (objective), 挑战 (challenge), 加强 (improve), 共同 (common), 责任 (responsibilities), 各国 (all countries), 原则 (principle), 提供 (provide), 支持 (support), 承诺 (promise), 提高 (increase), 帮助 (help), 公约 (convention), 面临 (confront), 社会 (society), 联合国 (UN), 环境 (environment)
Sovereignty without foreign interference	4	人权 (human rights), 中国 (China), 中国政府 (Chinese government), 保护 (protect), 问题 (problem), 状况 (situation/ condition), 基本 (basic/ fundamental), 促进 (promote), 人民 (citizens), 民主 (democracy), 干涉 (interfere), 文化 (culture), 自由 (freedom), 内政 (domestic politics), 平等 (equal), 这是 (this is), 搞 (provoke/ manipulate), 事实 (fact), 取得 (obtain), 别国 (other countries)
	12	报告 (report), 中国 (China), 发表 (publish), 内政 (domestic politics), 干涉 (interfere), 自由 (freedom), 年度 (annual), 所谓 (so-called), 国际 (international), 停止 (stop), 委员会 (committee), 依法 (legal), 反对 (oppose), 宗教 (religion), 美国国务院 (US Department of State), 对此 (on this issue), 部分 (part), 事实 (fact), 指责 (condemn), 近日 (recently)
	57	台湾 (Taiwan), 联合公报 (Joint Communique), 反对 (oppose), 承诺 (promise), 三个 (three), 中美 (US-China), 一个 (one), 原则 (principle), 台独 (Taiwanese independence), 中美关系 (US-China relations), 美国政府 (US

		government), 美方 (US), 政策 (policy), 恪守 (abide), 武器 (weapons), 坚决 (firmly), 严重 (grave; serious), 干涉 (interference), 违反 (violation), 内政 (domestic politics)
	114	西藏 (Tibet), 中国 (China), 内政 (domestic politics), 干涉 (interfere), 分裂 (secession), 活动 (activities), 一部分 (a part of/ some), 停止 (stop), 支持 (support), 宗教 (religion), 接触 (come into contact), 从事 (involved in), 反对 (oppose), 外国 (other countries), 祖国 (motherland), 独立 (independence), 利用 (exploit), 事务 (affairs), 承认 (recognition), 领土 (territory)
Sovereignty as territorial integrity	18	主权 (sovereignty), 尊重 (respect), 国际法 (international law), 领土完整 (territorial integrity), 国家 (countries), 原则 (principles), 国际 (international), 维护 (protect), 违反 (violate), 准则 (principles), 独立 (independence), 遵守 (abide), 基本 (fundamental), 得到 (gain/ obtain), 侵犯 (violation), 承认 (recognition), 必须 (must), 宗旨 (principle), 法律 (law), 宪章 (charter)
	19	交涉 (negotiate), 提出 (raise/ express), 严正 (severe), 中方 (Chinese side), 要求 (demand), 立即 (immediately), 对此 (on this issue), 就此 (on this issue), 强烈不满 (strongly dissatisfied), 严重 (severe), 停止 (stop), 已向 (already), 多次 (many times), 切实 (firmly), 损害 (damage), 允许 (permit), 不顾 (disregarding), 再次 (again), 敦促 (demand), 违背 (violate)
	33	菲律宾 (Philippines), 中国 (China), 表示 (express), 进行 (in-progress), 方面 (side), 政府 (government), 国家 (country), 双边 (bilateral), 本报 (this report), 再次 (again), 建立 (establish), 解决 (resolve), 前 (previous), 主要 (main), 目的 (objective), 提交 (institute), 导致 (resulting in), 遵守 (abide)

	67	南海 (South China Sea), 争议 (dispute), 主权 (sovereignty), 行为 (actions), 宣言 (declaration), 海域 (sea), 领土 (territory), 南沙群岛 (Spratly Islands), 菲律宾 (Philippines), 建设 (build), 国际法 (international law), 非法 (illegal), 稳定 (stability), 自由 (freedom), 维护 (protect), 直接 (direct), 地区 (area), 单方面 (unilateral), 各方 (all sides involved), 尊重 (respect)
	82	钓鱼岛 (Diaoyu Islands), 领土 (territory), 主权 (sovereignty), 非法 (illegal), 岛屿 (islands), 固有 (existing), 日方 (Japan), 海域 (sea), 附属 (subsidiary), 拥有 (possession), 侵犯 (violation), 南沙群岛 (Spratly Islands), 无可争辩 (indisputable), 附近 (around/ surrounding), 日本 (Japan), 中国 (China), 争议 (dispute), 重申 (reiterate), 事实 (fact), 停止 (stop)
	108	台湾 (Taiwan), 一个 (one), 台湾当局 (Taiwan's "government"), 所谓 (so-called), 中国 (China), 两个 (two), 原则 (principle), 一部分 (a part of/ some), 参与 (participate), 制造 (building/ provoking), 分裂 (secession), 没有 (no), 承认 (acknowledge), 图谋 (plotting), 唯一 (only one), 主权国家 (sovereign country), 加入 (join), 世界 (world), 中华人民共和国 (People's Republic of China), 企图 (attempting)

After locating status complaints, I code them by hand into the following three categories:

> **Category #1:** China makes a status complaint against a smaller state, due to the actions of a smaller state.

> **Category #2:** China makes a status complaint against an established power, due to the actions of a smaller state.

> **Category #3:** China makes a status complaint against an established power, due to the actions of an established power.

An example of category #1 would be China complaining against Vietnam or the Philippines for incursions into the South China Sea. An example of category #2 would be Lee Deng Hui's visit to the US in 1995. China complained against the US for condoning and supporting Lee's actions, but the instance was triggered by Lee's alleged decision to symbolically promote Taiwanese independence through the visit. An example of category #3 would be China complaining against the US publishing reports that criticize China's human rights records, which China considers as an interference of its domestic politics and breach of sovereignty. Likewise, when China issues a complaint against Japan due to issues related to the Diaoyu Islands, that would be coded as 3. Finally, when China complains about the lack of representation in international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), or when China is complaining about unfair treatment over treaty negotiations, these instances are also coded as 3. Thus, the key difference between category #2 and category #3 would be who triggered the actions. For example, instances in which the US unilaterally passed legislations regarding Tibet or Taiwan are coded as 3, since Taiwan or Tibet does not have a role.

The main results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: China's Status Dissatisfaction, 1978-2018

Category	Number of Complaints
Smaller states	238 (32%)
Established powers, because of actions by smaller states	180 (24%)
Established powers	328 (44%)
Total	746

Assessing the Cumulative Logic

My results suggest that 32% of China's status complaints are caused by actions from smaller states. 24% of China's status complaints are directed at the other established powers but caused by actions from smaller states. 44% of China's status complaints are caused by actions from the other established powers. These results provide support for H_1. Cumulatively, 56% of China's status complaints from 1978 to 2018 are triggered by provocations from smaller states, whereas conventional explanations – upward social comparison and status denial from the other established powers – account for only 44% of the observations. This disconfirms H_0.

Indeed, one might reasonably point out that counting frequencies of China's status complaints is misleading. Perhaps China really cares about complaints against the other established powers, whereas its complaints against smaller states are perfunctory. In other words, entries should not be counted as if they were qualitatively equivalent. To address this possibility, I make use of the metadata on where an entry is published in People's Daily. If the entry is published in Section 1 ("front page/ important news"), there is good reason to

believe that China really cares about the incident. Likewise, the lower the sentiment score, the more likely that China is really provoked by the incident. Thus, I isolate entries which are published in Section 1 and have sentiment scores below the 25th percentile. These entries might be conceived as incidents which really provoked China, given the placement of the report and the language used.

The following table reports the results.

Table 7: China's Most Severe Status Complaints, 1978-2018

| Category	Number of Complaints
Smaller states	32 (52%)
Established powers, because of actions by smaller states	11 (18%)
Established powers	18 (30%)
Total	61

These results lend even greater support for my argument: 70% of China's most severe status complaints are triggered by smaller states, whereas only 30% of such complaints are triggered by the established powers.

Assessing the Temporality Logic

To assess H_2, the temporality logic, I plot the proportion of China's status complaints from 1978 to 2018 in Graph 2. Results provide support for *H2,* which suggests that provocations from smaller states should be more salient than misrecognition from the other established powers in the earlier stages of the power transition. As one can see from the graph, provocations from smaller states dominated China's status complaints until around early

2000s. As the power transition unfolded, misrecognition from the other established powers came to gain greater salience. This is in line with my theoretical expectations. Earlier in the power transition, China readily expected deference from smaller states, and hence status disputes between China and smaller states dominated the former's status grievances. However, as the power transition progressed and China became less patient with obtaining recognition from the other established powers, status disputes between China and the other established powers grew in proportion. The theoretical implication is that there is a "life cycle" as to how status dissatisfaction develops: the rising power will be more sensitive to provocations from smaller states in the early stages of the power transition before eventually becoming more concerned about misrecognition from the established powers. As the results show, this is a dynamic that the existing literature cannot and does not explain because of its exclusive focus on rising power-established power interactions.

Graph 2: The Temporality of China's Status Dissatisfaction, 1978-2018
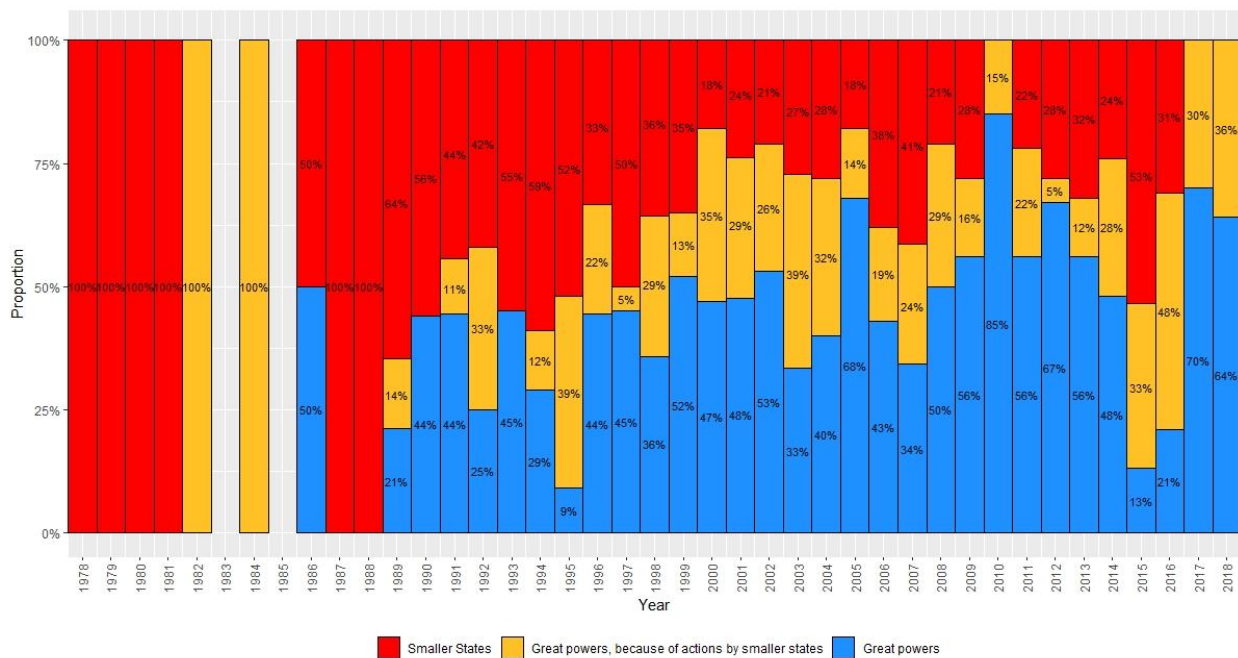
Illustrating the Mechanisms

Violated Expectations at Work

For category #1: China is not making social comparisons against Vietnam or the Philippines. These smaller states also have little say in deciding whether China can join prestigious international institutions. However, one can see that China frequently issues status complaints due to the actions of smaller states. Instead, the theoretical underpinning of category #1 is that for an actor which is aspiring for a higher position, provocations from smaller states violate its self-conception.

For example, during the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, Deng Xiaoping claimed that the Chinese motivation was to deal with continuous "provocations [from] the Vietnam[ese] troops inside the Chinese territory".[81] The fundamental problem, as Deng explained in his meeting with Jimmy Carter in Washington DC before China mobilized its forces, was that "the Vietnamese [were] extremely arrogant [and] claim[ed] to be...the third most powerful military nation in the world, after the United States and the Soviet Union". Deng was especially offended by the fact that "the Vietnamese [were] very conceited [by claiming] that one Vietnamese soldier can fight 30 Chinese soldiers"[82] – which the Chinese officials at the time considered to be a sign of growing "insolence" from Vietnam.[83] Indeed, Vietnam attempted to be, and acted as if, it were superior to China. Thus, the military campaign was

---

[81] Foreign Relations of the United States, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Document 212" (Department of State, United States of America, January 1979), Volume XIII, China - Office of the Historian.
[82] Foreign Relations of the United States, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Document 205" (Department of State, United States of America, January 29, 1979), Volume XIII, China - Office of the Historian.
[83] Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), p. 47.

a way for China to teach Vietnam an "appropriate limited lesson",[84] which Vice Premier Li

Xiannian described as a "slap in the face…to warn and punish [Vietnam]".[85]

To this end, Deng reassured Carter that the campaign will be a "limited action" where

Chinese troops will "quickly withdraw [and] deal with it like a border incident".[86] Citing the

precedent of the Sino-Indian War of 1962 where Chinese troops withdrew after the incident,

Deng promised Carter ahead of time that China's mission will last "10-20 days, to be followed

by withdrawal".[87] As revealed by the justifications prior to mobilization, and the actual

withdrawal of Chinese troops in line with the justifications, the motivation was less about

actually gaining territory, since China retreated from the advances it made during the

campaign. Instead, it was to put a provocative smaller state back to its place: Chinese

mobilization represented an "effort to shatter Hanoi's self-image of invincibility".[88] As one

Vietnamese general remarked after the war, the lesson for Vietnam was clear: "we must learn

how to live with our big neighbor".[89] That is, the dispute was less about territorial gain;

instead, the Chinese elites used it as a litmus test with which they assessed and affirmed

China's position relative to Vietnam – namely, whether Vietnam is showing China the respect

and privileges that it expected given its (self-perceived) superiority over Vietnam. Indeed, if

China was aspiring to equalize with the US and the Soviet Union, accepting provocations from

Vietnam would undermine this self-conception.

---

[84] Foreign Relations of the United States, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Document 205."
[85] Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 47.
[86] Foreign Relations of the United States, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Document 205."
[87] Foreign Relations of the United States, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Document 207" (Department of State, United States of America, January 30, 1979), Volume XIII, China - Office of the Historian.
[88] Foreign Relations of the United States, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Document 226" (Department of State, United States of America, March 1979), Volume XIII, China - Office of the Historian.
[89] Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 123.

A more recent example of this logic can be found in China's domestic debates over the South China Sea disputes, where hardliners are becoming more vocal in staking their policy positions. In the past, softliners who favored cooperation dominated policy thinking in the 2000s.[90] However, they are increasingly losing influence, especially in the face of persistent provocations from the Philippines and Vietnam. The softliners "now need to deal with the powerful arguments of... the hardliners" who believe that the "courage and ability to confront conflicts [against smaller adversaries]...is the *mind-set and criterion of a mature great power*" (italics added).[91] Indeed, given China's status as a "mature great power", it should be able to stake and defend claims in the South China Sea. And given its status relative to these smaller states, China should also not be subject to provocations from them over these issues. Hence, to *be* a mature great power (i.e., to fulfill its self-conception as a great power), China must confront provocations from below.

Impression Management Failure at Work

Entries in category #2 present an interesting dynamic. While China is complaining against the other established powers, the motivation is not demanding to be recognized as an equal, nor is it making social comparisons. Instead, these entries reveal dynamics in which provocations from smaller states are creating impression management problems for China – and China's subsequent attempts to defuse these problems. As noted earlier, provocations from smaller states can be status-threatening because China is failing to secure deference from smaller states. These dynamics create incentives for "blame transference", in which the

---

[90] Feng Zhang, "Chinese Thinking on the South China Sea and the Future of Regional Security," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 132, No. 3 (September 2017), pp. 435–466.
[91] Zhang, "Chinese Thinking on the South China Sea," 464.

rising power tries to blame the established powers for what the smaller states are doing to deflect the failure – and to caution the established powers from intervening, which will in turn undermine its sovereignty.

For instance, as far as China is concerned, the most recent tension in the South China Sea started in 2008/9 and intensified when the Philippines instituted arbitral proceedings against it in 2013. Aside from issuing complaints against the Philippines, China's MFA attempted to create a set of narratives to condemn the US, and sometimes Japan, for supporting the Philippines from the shadows. For example, in May 2015, Hua Chunying, MFA's spokesperson, stated that "some people in the Philippines are getting a little bit too hopped-up, playing a game of duets with some people in other countries [the US] while inflating the China threat. It is an eye-catching duet".[92] In another series of comments between March 2015 and April 2016, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Spokesperson Hua reiterated: "We have said many times already. The Philippines' decision to institute the arbitration is attempting to deny China's territorial claims over the Spratly Islands. Clearly someone [the US] is pulling the strings from the shadows and manipulating this entire incident – the so-called arbitration case has no legitimacy".[93] As Sun Jianguo, an admiral of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) put succinctly, "the other established powers are helping smaller states from the shadows, so that the smaller states can disrespect China".[94]

---

[92] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Regular Press Conference held by Ministry of Foreign Affairss Spokesperson Hua Chunying on May 15th, 2015 (translated title)," May 15, 2015, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/chn//pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206_9/fyrygth/t1264185.htm

[93] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Regular Press Conference held by Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Hua Chunying on April 20th, 2016 (translated title)," April 20 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1357119.shtml.

[94] Global Times, "PLA: Some Countries Are Engaged in 'Great Powers Support Small Powers, These Small Powers Then Bullies Other Great Powers' (translated title).," http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2016-06/9009529.html.

According to these Chinese narratives, the Philippines would only dare to challenge China on these territorial claims with support from the other established powers. Yet, as far as observers know, the US did not explicitly instruct the Philippines to initiate the arbitration. If anything, when the South China Sea disputes started to intensify in 2012, the US explicitly refused to clarify whether its security commitment to the Philippines entails involvement in a Spratly scenario. This was juxtaposed against the US position in the East China Sea, where it explicitly reaffirmed that the US-Japan Security Treaty applied to the Senkaku Islands. Granted, the US did eventually get more involved in the China-Philippines disputes as time went on; however, China's blame narrative began before that. For example, during the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Meeting in July 2010, China's Foreign Minister at the time, Yang Jiechi, said that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact", clearly displaying concerns about the lack of respect that China is subjected to. In that same speech, he warned against the US for using the South China Sea as a pretext to pivot back into Asia.

Hence, the Chinese blame narratives might be better understood as a deflection mechanism. That is, it is a way to ensure that the international audience does not attribute provocations from the Philippines to the disposition of China (i.e., low status) but rather situational factors (i.e., Philippines receiving help from the US). The purpose is to discourage other international actors from demoting China's status because of provocations from the Philippines. Furthermore, the narrative is to warn against the US for using the Philippines' actions to intervene and create further infringement of Chinese sovereignty.

<u>Counterarguments</u>

It is necessary to address two potential concerns. First, perhaps China is quite dissatisfied with the established powers but is afraid of complaining against them. This is theoretically plausible but empirically unsound. For example, China has always been quite vocal at voicing its displeasure against the US for criticizing its human rights records and interfering with its domestic politics. This practice started back in the 1980s and continues to the present. Likewise, China has always been quite vocal at voicing its displeasure against Japan over issues related to the Diaoyu Islands, frequently summoning Japan's ambassador to China or recalling its ambassador to Japan. For this counterargument to work, critics would have to demonstrate two propositions: that China is afraid of complaining against the established powers, and that, counterfactually, China would have complained even more if it were not afraid.

Second, critics might point out that there are more smaller states than established powers. Thus, of course there will be more instances in which smaller states trigger China's status complaints. At the theoretical level, if there are indeed more smaller states than established powers, then it is even more important that observers pay attention to how provocations from smaller states might trigger a rising power's status dissatisfaction. At the empirical level, there are only so many smaller states which are consistently at odds with China: Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Tibet, whereas China tends to be triggered by the established powers such as the US, Japan, India, and international organizations (IOs) led by said powers. The following graph shows the main triggers of China's status dissatisfaction.

Graph 3: Main Triggers of China's Status Complaints
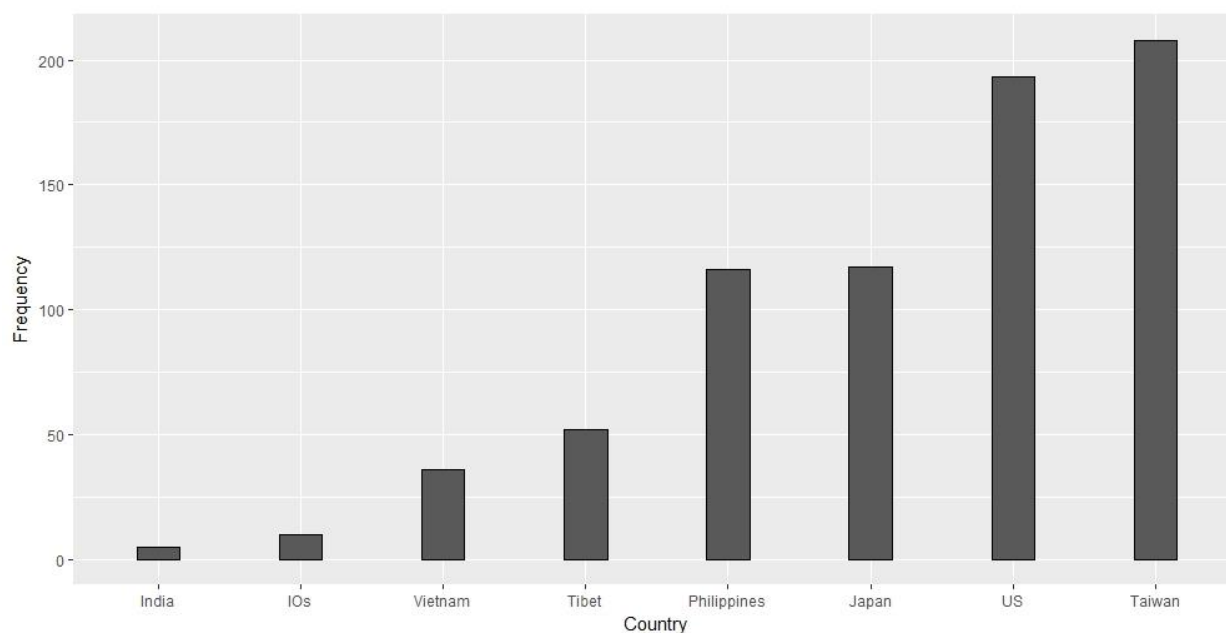
Indeed, China's status concerns are unlikely to be triggered by smaller states which are too far away and have limited diplomatic interactions with China. While it is true that the universe of smaller states is larger than the universe of established powers, not all smaller states are sufficiently close or politically relevant to China. In this way, status is local, as previous scholarship suggests.[95]

Conclusion and Ways Forward

Existing scholarship posits that status dissatisfaction can lead to interstate competition. In this article, I demonstrate that theories of where status dissatisfaction comes from are too preoccupied with the interaction between the rising power and the established powers. Status denial and upward comparisons are intuitive places to start. However, if the assessment of one's status involves looking up and looking down, then rising powers must

---

[95] Renshon, "Status Deficits and War"; Duque, "Recognizing International Status."

necessarily consider how smaller states treat them when assessing their status. Provocations from smaller states can violate the rising power's expectations in terms of privileges and rights that it should be entitled to given its (self-perceived) superiority over smaller states, and create audience perception problems by undermining the rising power's impression management strategy in front of other actors in the system.

My argument points to several lines of further theoretical inquiry. One could theorize how denial from the established powers and provocation from smaller states might interact to create variations in the dependent variable of interest: interstate competition. Deductive logic would suggest that power transitions should be most dangerous when the established powers do not offer recognition *and* when smaller states engage in provocations at the same time. It could be that provocations from smaller states make a rising power become insecure about its status, which "starts the fire" between the rising power and the established powers. Specifically, the rising power may adopt diplomatic or military actions to "discipline" a provocative smaller state to reaffirm its status, but these actions can elicit diplomatic or military countermeasures from the established powers. Thus, what begins as face-saving strategies for the rising power may create the social origins of suboptimal military strategies and security dilemmas between the rising power and the established powers.[96]

On the other hand, it could be that smaller states are emboldened to engage in provocative actions because they imitate the established powers who are also disrespecting the rising power. This can "add fuel to the fire" by motivating the rising power to adopt even

---

[96] For how status or identity concerns might contribute towards security dilemmas, see Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics"; Murray, "Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics"; Wohlforth, "Status Dilemmas and Interstate Conflict." For why standard security dilemma frameworks are incomplete because they exclude status as an important motive and only examine two actors, see Robert Jervis, "Dilemmas About Security Dilemmas," *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 2011), pp. 418–419.

more competitive strategies to avoid a scenario in which it simultaneously lacks recognition from above and deference from below. Provocations from smaller states may push previously-status-quo rising powers towards revisionism, or push already-revisionist rising powers into adopting predatory strategies even sooner. [97] As such, provocations from smaller states could be understood as a modifier that can amplify (or mollify) the status competition between the rising power and the established powers. However, the exploration of these lines of inquiry depends on expanding our analytical attention to the importance of provocations from smaller states.

Doing so will also enhance discussions of US foreign policy in the context of China's rise. Provocations from smaller states complicate the execution of the various grand strategy visions offered by the existing literature. For example, liberal internationalists contend that the US can and should engage China by socializing it into the existing international order through the potential for shared-leadership. My argument highlights a fundamental difficulty associated with implementing this strategy. Leadership-sharing is not only determined by whether the US recognizes China as an equal; it also depends on whether smaller states defer to China.[98] Unfortunately, these two dynamics do not always track at a one-to-one ratio. In other words, there are multiple potential veto players to China's bid for leadership. It follows that even if the US wants to engage China, periodic provocations from smaller states – and US responses towards these situations – may pull in the opposite direction and offer stimuli which China may misperceive as evidence of containment. On the

---

[97] On revisionist/ status-quo orientation, or "security-seekers"/ "greedy states", see Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other," *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (September 1997), pp. 114–155; Randall L. Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?," *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (March 1996), pp. 90–121; Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).
[98] Hurrell, "Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order," p. 4.

other hand, for proponents of offshore balancing and restraint, their strategies are predicated on whether the US can remain offshore for as long as possible. Yet, provocations from smaller states create episodes during which the US may be tempted or compelled to intervene. Thus, my argument implies that the execution of various grand strategy options such as liberal internationalism, offshore balancing, or restraint will all depend on whether the US can manage the status disputes between China and the smaller states in order to remove such disputes as potential pathways to US-China conflict.