

The Psychology of Power: The First Image Reversed and International Security^{*}

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April 2, 2021

Summary

Realists rely on two causal processes in International Relations: the lust for power motivates state behavior from the first image up, and the distribution of power constrains and enables states from the system-level down. Yet, our theories of war hinge critically on an underdeveloped premise: systemic power “out there” influences decisionmakers “down here.” Drawing on advances in psychological research on power, this paper explicates this first image reversed phenomenon, namely the ways in which relative state power alters the psychology of the humans who navigate issues of war and peace. The paper derives theoretical propositions for the effects of power across the levels of emotion, perception, and behavior, and provides evidence for the face validity of these claims through examples drawn from the Korean War, World War I, and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The conclusion points to the need for more behavioral realist research in general and work that seeks to ameliorate power’s more deleterious effects in particular.

Word count: 15,252 including references (11,698 excluding references).

^{*} The author thanks Andy Goodhart, Rick Herrmann, Josh Kertzer, John Mueller, David Peterson, Brian Rathbun, Randy Schweller, Daniel Verdier, Alex Wendt, and participants at Ohio State's Research in International Politics seminar, 2021 New Wave Realism conference, and Political Psychology Workshop.

1 Introduction

A central realist premise, and a source of much critique, is that International Relations (IR) is a tragic story of power and security competition under conditions of anarchy. Realists ground this claim in two primary causal processes. First, classical realists argue that a universal, power-seeking human nature motivates state action from the first image up (Morgenthau 1948: 4; Niebuhr 1932: 23). Second, neorealists counter that structure – the distribution of power against the backdrop of anarchy – compels and constrains state behavior from the system-level down (Waltz 1979; Walt 1985; Mearsheimer 2001). In either case, the balance of power and shifts in power are central components of our theories of war.

This paper argues for a third position: systemic power “out there” influences decisionmakers “down here.” Our theories of war hinge critically on the underdeveloped premise that relative state power affects humans, a special case of what Kertzer & Tingley (2018: 330) refer to as “first image reversed” causation. For Thucydides, in an oft-repeated yet timeless observation, “The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable” (quoted from Kirshner 2019: 5). In reverse, Wohlforth (1994: 96) argues that “The end of the Cold War was caused by the relative decline in Soviet power and the reassurance this gave the West.” Jervis (2009: 199) observes that “increased power brings with it new fears.” And, Gilpin (1983: 239) thought that “most important of all, hegemonic wars are preceded by an important psychological change in the temporal outlook of peoples.”

Of course, states do not feel fear or reassurance; humans do. These realist observations are so taken-for-granted that we have overlooked how controversial they are: in each case, human psychology *varies* as a function of relative state power, and this variable crucially intervenes on the causal path from power to war. We traditionally consider individuals and structure as independent and competing explanations of international politics. Leader-level differences explain international outcomes (Byman & Pollack 2001; Horowitz & Stam 2014). Psychological

biases cause deviations from rational, material baselines (Levy 1983, 1997). And, perceptions obscure the “true” balance of power (Wohlforth 1987). But, the above observations point to a different causal logic: rather than individuals deviating from structural expectations from the first image up, power and shifts in power change the humans who comprise world politics from the system-level down. To ground and interrogate these central observations about war, we need theoretical tools to examine the explicit effects of power on human psychology.

Over the past two decades, psychologists have amassed a large and growing literature on power: relative power systematically activates and deactivates psychological and behavioral tendencies (for reviews, see Keltner et al 2003; Guinote & Vescio 2010; Galinsky et al 2015; Guinote 2017; Cho & Keltner 2020). The sense of power – which derives from asymmetric control over resources – activates the behavioral approach system (BAS), with implications from the neurological to behavioral level. Among other effects, power induces confidence, optimism, attention to rewards and opportunities, a reliance on stereotypes, and assertive, aggressive behaviors. In contrast, the lack of power – or power under threat – activates the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), which, among other effects, induces anxiety, attention to threats, controlled cognition, and defensive behaviors. In short, “power changes people” (Guinote 2017: 357).¹

This paper draws on these advances to overturn the conventional structure versus psychology binary in international security theory: it is not structure versus psychology but rather structure *via* psychology that explains so much of world politics. A first image reversed account of international security opens controversial theoretical avenues, like the possibility that power increases threat perception and systematically erodes the bargaining range in the bargaining model of war, while grounding realist intuitions that are untenable under rationalist assumptions,

¹ An incomprehensibly large political science literature examines power’s effects on actors, across its four faces (Dahl 1957; Bachrach & Baratz 1962; Lukes 2004; Digeser 1992) and in its hard, soft (Nye 2004), discursive (Foucault 1980), and even quantum forms (Katzenstein & Seybert 2018), among many, many others (see also Barnett & Duvall 2005). The unique feature of the psychological literature on power is the explicit focus on power’s effects on human psychology, with effects that span the neurological to behavioral levels.

like the observation that interests expand and change with power. Wresting realism from rationalism, the psychological effects of power explain empirical phenomena that traditionally elude structural theory, like the misperceptions that preceded World War I and American imprudence during the unipolar moment. Structural realists are right about the causal source – relative power under anarchy – but miss the actor, having yet to trace the effects of relative power down to the first image. Classical realists are right about the actor – the first image – but overlook the causal source: the sense of power causes leader psychology, not a constant human nature.

The paper first introduces the psychology of power literature and argues that this approach to psychology starkly contrasts with traditional “bottom up” conceptions of psychological IR. The paper then derives eight, empirically-testable propositions for the effects of relative power on the humans who comprise world politics, across the levels of emotion, perception, and behavior. Examples from the Korean War, World War I, and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq provide evidence for the face validity of the propositions. The conclusion points to the need for more behavioral realist research in general and work that seeks to ameliorate power’s more deleterious effects in particular. Just as power constrains and enables states, so too does that power affect the humans who comprise the state.

2 Advances in the Psychology of Power

The atrocities of World War II motivated the first social psychological attention to power. This first wave of research primarily focused on the corrupting effects of power and control, including Zimbardo’s (1971; 1973) Stanford prison experiment, Milgram’s (1974) obedience experiments, and Kipnis’s (1972; 1976) corruption work. Guided by folk wisdom, such as Lord Acton’s adage that power corrupts, these studies suggested that humans are susceptible to power’s more deleterious effects. A desire to develop tighter links between power and rigorous psychological

theory inspired the current, second wave of power research, beginning with Fiske's (1993; 1996) work on social cognition and followed by the introduction of the approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al 2003), which arguably remains the present state-of-the-art.

In accord with much of IR theory, psychologists generally conceptualize power as “asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations” (Magee & Galinsky 2008: 361; Keltner et al 2003: 265-266; Anicich & Hirsh 2017: 662; Fiske & Bai 2020: 217).² In contrast to IR theory, the causal effects of these “objective” sources of power are mediated through the *subjective sense of power*, the feeling that individuals possess the ability to control or influence the experiences, behaviors, and outcomes of others (Anicich & Hirsh 2017: 662; Anderson et al 2012: 313-16; Guinote 2007a: 259). Thus, this conception of power retains a central role for social and material resources, but the interesting explanatory work is done by the psychological effects of that power. This intuition mirrors traditional, psychological conceptions of political power, such as Gilpin's (1983: 13-14) concept of prestige and Morgenthau's (1948: 14) argument that “Political power is a psychological relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised.” As Art (1996: 41) explains, “To influence political actors means to affect their perceptions, outlooks, and frames of reference; therefore, to use military power is to affect psychological states.”

Psychologists ask two questions, among others, that could be of particular interest to IR scholars: who seeks power, and how does power affect those individuals? First, akin to Morgenthau's (1948) emphasis on a “dominating personality,” we can conceive of power-seeking as an individual-level, dispositional tendency. In this conception, just as individuals display different genetic makeups, personality traits, and idiosyncratic beliefs, so too can individuals display nearly hard-wired desires for power. Contemporary psychological evidence provides

² The emphasis on control over resources helps to distinguish power from other relational concepts, like status. Status instead concerns respect or admiration in the eyes of others (Magee & Galinsky 2008: 359; Fiske & Bai 2020: 217).

surprisingly strong support for Morgenthau's (1948) intuitions about dominance. Trait dominance is the most consistent predictor of power-seeking behavior and power attainment (Winter 2010; Anderson et al 2012). Dominant individuals have strong agendas, exert effort to influence and prevail over others, and take assertive and decisive actions (Guinote 2017: 360-361). These displays of confidence make those individuals seem more competent, and others are more willing to give them power in turn (Anderson & Kilduff 2009).

This line of research provides an additional variable for IR's current, extensive battery of individual-level variables. But, a second line of psychological research demonstrates a striking finding: relative power changes people, no *animus dominandi* required. We can conceive of power as a situational phenomenon (or, in IR terminology, akin to a structural phenomenon) in which the sense of power in a given (interstate) relationship changes individuals, regardless of underlying traits and personalities.³ Over the past half century, IR scholars have learned much about power's effects on state behavior, but we know far less about power's effects on human psychology and behavior. To this author's knowledge, this literature has only made two appearances in IR: Renshon (2015) uses the sense of power scale (described below) as a moderating variable, finding that power moderates the effect of status on commitment escalation, while Fettweis (2018), primarily in chapter 3, provides an interesting first take on the psychological effects of power during the US's unipolar moment. The remainder of this paper more systematically introduces the approach-inhibition theory of power, addresses metatheoretic and translational issues from an interpersonal to international literature, and derives general propositions for the effects of power on the first image.

³ See e.g. Chen et al (2001: 173).

2.1 Approach-Inhibition Theory of Power

The approach-inhibition theory of power, proposed by Keltner et al (2003), represents one of the most concerted psychological research agendas on power.⁴ Most of human thought and behavior can be categorized according to whether we “approach” or “avoid” the world. Psychologists point to two neuropsychological systems that regulate these approach and avoidance tendencies: the behavioral approach system (BAS) and the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) (Gray 1987). The core expectations of the approach-inhibition theory are straightforward: *power activates approach tendencies, and the lack of power activates inhibited tendencies*. Because these neuropsychological systems are so basic to psychology and behavior, approach-inhibition theory motivates much of the past two decades of power research in psychology.⁵

An approach orientation is akin to living in “a world in which the traffic lights are always green (and damn the pedestrians).”⁶ Self-focused, such individuals display optimism and enthusiasm, prioritize prior beliefs over incoming information, and decisively act on opportunities, whether for hedonic pleasure or more “rational” goal pursuit. In contrast, inhibited individuals are meek and anxious, carefully aware of others, thoroughly processing incoming signals, while prioritizing safety and security. The BIS is “equivalent to an alarm-threat system” (Keltner 2003: 268). In the case of the former, think C-suite executive. In the case of the latter, think unpaid intern reporting to that executive (Fiske 1993: 624). Table 1 summarizes the effects across different levels, from emotion to behavior.

⁴ This paper focuses on the approach-inhibition theory of power, but for another prominent, social dominance approach to power, see e.g. Sidanius & Pratto (2001).

⁵ Two noteworthy extensions of the approach-inhibition theory are Guinote (2007c), who deemphasizes the reward/hedonic aspects of the BAS and instead emphasizes the role of the powerful’s goals, as well as Anicich & Hirsh’s (2017) extension of the theory to include a “middle power” category and updates to the underlying BIS/BAS architecture.

⁶ Conniff (2007) quoted in Winter (2010: 122).

	Behavioral Approach System (BAS)	Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS)
<i>Emotion/affect</i>	Desire, pride, ego, enthusiasm.	Fear, anxiety, insecurity.
<i>Cognition</i>	Automatic cognition; reliance on gut feelings, stereotypes, heuristics.	Systematic, controlled cognition; more thorough memory searches.
<i>Perception</i>	Attention to rewards and opportunities.	Attention to threats.
<i>Behavior</i>	Movement without constraints; assertive, aggressive behaviors.	Inhibited behavior; defensive, security-seeking behaviors.

Table 1. Correlates of the BAS and BIS. Power activates the behavioral approach system (BAS) with a range of effects from the neurological to behavioral levels. Most evidence suggests that the lack of power activates the behavioral inhibition system (BIS).

Psychologists study power both correlationally and experimentally. A common correlational measure is the "Sense of Power Scale" (Anderson et al 2012).⁷ Subjects report (dis)agreement with statements like "I can get others to do what I want," and aggregation of these responses provides a measure of subjects' felt power in interpersonal relationships. Common experimental primes include recall and situational scenarios, such as asking subjects to simply recall a time in which they felt either powerful or powerless (Galinsky et al 2003), or randomly assigning subjects disproportionate control over resources, like better outside options in a negotiation task (Anderson & Galinsky 2006). In either case, "What is remarkable about these different methods is that, regardless of the manipulation of power, the same basic effects of power tend to emerge" (Magee & Galinsky 2008: 368). That is, we can consistently prime the psychological effects of

⁷ See Anderson et al (2012) for the full battery of questions.

power in otherwise sterile, experimental settings, regardless of whether the subject is “actually” powerful in the real world. To the extent that IR scholars have direct access to human subjects – such as the mass public – IR scholars could amend these protocols to study the sense of interstate – rather than interpersonal – power.

Importantly, this project provides theoretical and practical rebuttals to three common critiques of psychology in international security theory. A first critique maintains that perceptions and psychology are simply “in our heads” and that ultimately the realities of (material) power will overwhelm these effects. While psychologists find that a genuine, often material, basis for power must exist, they also find that these effects ultimately rely on perceptions, just as neoclassical realists emphasize.⁸ As Wohlforth (1987: 353) explains, “If ‘power’ influences international relations, it must do so through the perceptions of those who act on behalf of states.” However, psychologists go much further. Neoclassical realism retains neorealism’s conception of power as a variable that affects *states* but innovates by showing that human perception can obscure the true material balance. In contrast, psychologists understand power as a variable that affects *humans*, actively changing those perceivers into something they would otherwise not be. For example, leaders might display different levels of hawkish versus dovish tendencies. In a neoclassical account, leaders perceive some level of relative state power and proceed to actualize on those hawkish or dovish preferences consistent with the realities of (perceived) power. But, as discussed below, a psychology of power account suggests that the sense of power actively changes those underlying tendencies, with power increasing hawkishness.⁹ That is, leaders become a *dependent* variable.

⁸ As the psychologists Anicich & Hirsh (2017: 662) explain, “Importantly, the subjective sense of power is the proximal variable of theoretical interest... one’s structural position in the organizational hierarchy is only relevant insofar as it affects one’s subjective sense of power.”

⁹ As Keltner et al (2003: 268) explain, “Researchers have largely focused on individual differences in approach and inhibition... Our theory reveals how one important aspect of social contexts – power – influences the relative balance of the tendencies to approach and inhibit.” That is, power serves as a cause of human psychology.

A second critique maintains that – even if power has perceptual and psychological components – empirical measurements of those components are too challenging in IR. As Gilpin (1983: 13-14) bemoans, “The concept of power is one of the most troublesome in the field of international relations and, more generally, political science,” going on to note the “psychological and frequently incalculable aspects of power.” As a result, IR scholars have largely focused on measurements of material capabilities.¹⁰ But, the above research shows that the psychological aspects of power are indeed calculable. While it is true that we cannot randomly assign resources and capabilities to states in IR, we most certainly can manipulate and examine *perceptions* of power, such as through experiments on mass publics or qualitative tracing of leaders’ perceptions of power in the “real world” of IR (see e.g. Wohlforth 1987).¹¹ A recovery of the psychological dynamics of power is especially important in a world today where “even countries with massive economies and militaries may not be able to get others to do what they want” (Drezner et al 2020). While steel production and population no longer map neatly onto state influence in world politics, the psychological dynamics of power are alive and well.

A final critique suggests that innumerable psychological variables and biases exist, and we should therefore pragmatically focus on structural variables to derive parsimonious and deductive theories. However, this is not a critique of psychology *per se*, so much as a critique of how we traditionally use psychology. As the introduction makes clear, central realist propositions intuit that the first image is at work in our theories of war. Rather, the problem is that we traditionally use power as a material baseline against which to locate psychological deviations. Instead, we can use power as a systematic cause of human psychology. Before deriving theoretical

¹⁰ For recent advances and debates surrounding capability measurement, see e.g. Beckley (2018), Carroll & Kenkel (2019), Pomeroy & Beckley (2019).

¹¹ Here, the psychology of power literature actually eases our research lives. In IR, innumerable factors might inform assessments of relative power: geography, weapons, diplomatic acumen, etc. For example, Wohlforth (1987: 360) shows that elites in pre-World War I France focused on different attributes of their Russian ally, some weighing positively the development of Russian railways, others concerned that domestic popular turmoil could impede mobilization. In the end, however, cabinets across Europe arrived at a general sense of the balance of power, with each side certain they had the advantage. This sense of power is more important for explanations of leader psychology than the specific attributes that comprised the calculation.

propositions, the next section argues that this first image reversed logic not only brings psychology closer to power – the central variable in realism – but so too provides a way to do psychology more aligned with the structural concerns of realism over the past half century.

3 Power and the First Image Reversed

Advances in the approach-inhibition theory of power lay the groundwork for what IR scholars would consider a first image reversed argument. As Kertzer & Tingley (2018: 330) explain, first image reversed causation “inverts the analytic focus... from micro-micro causation to macro-micro causation: from the effects of actor-level characteristics or individual differences on attitudes and behaviors, to the effects of environmental forces on actor-level characteristics.” This section explicates how this approach diverges from traditional approaches to psychological IR and why this emerging agenda holds particular promise for psychology in international security theory.

We traditionally use psychology in IR to examine the causal effects of individuals, especially by way of “microfoundations” for IR theories. Noting some confusion in the literature, Kertzer (2017: 83) provides one of the clearest definitions of microfoundations, “as an analytic strategy where one explains outcomes at the aggregate level via dynamics at a lower level,” and cites approvingly economic and social theorists who believe that macroeconomics is in principle reducible to microeconomics and that “social phenomena... are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs, and their actions.”

Consider Figure 1, which reproduces a version of the Boudon-Coleman model, a common scheme for mapping multilevel causal explanations (adapted from Coleman 1987: 161, figure 6.4; see also Kertzer 2017: 84). Many psychological IR theories center on individuals as the primary source of causation, the arrows colored gray. For example, in a form of micro-micro causation, members of the public influence other members’ foreign policy attitudes (Kertzer & Zeitzoff

2017). Or, in a form of micro-macro causation, leaders' concerns for status (Renshon 2015: 660) or perceptions of adversaries' intentions (e.g. Yarhi-Milo 2014) aggregate up to explain state-level decisions and behavior.

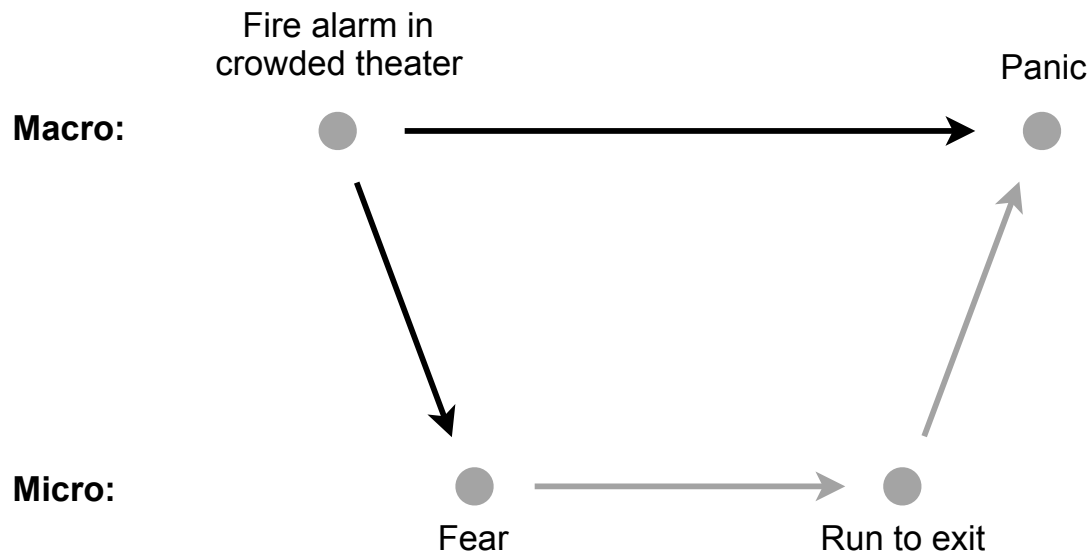


Figure 1. Macro and Micro Causation. Here, a fire alarm that causes mass panic represents a macro-macro form of causation. To arrive at this outcome, the fire alarm specifically causes fear (macro-micro causation), which causes individuals to run to the exit (micro-micro causation). This aggregated herd behavior causes the macro-outcome of panic in the theater, a micro-macro mechanism. Importantly, however, the fire alarm serves as the causal source of interest, as opposed to individuals' trait levels of fear, the effect of fear on sprinting behavior, or the effect of sprinting behavior on herd-level panic. Adapted from Coleman (1987: 161, figure 6.4).

While this “bottom-up” research approach has proven highly productive for questions in which the individual (or micro-level) serves as the primary source of causal interest, this approach is less well-suited for research questions that emphasize the causal role of structural variables, the black arrows in Figure 1. For structural theorists, the elephant (or fire) in the causal room is that macro-level factors constrain, enable, and change micro-level units. As Wolfers (1965: 13-14) explains, houses on fire compel actors to exit, and better views lure actors closer to racetracks, regardless of unit-level idiosyncrasies. For Waltz (1979), war recurs due to the system's structure, despite innumerable differences in regime type, ideology, and so on. While the effects of those structural factors, such as fire-induced fear, are certainly felt by humans, the

motivation is *not to study individuals' trait levels of fear or the effects of fear on sprinting behavior*. Rather, for structuralists, human psychology simply serves as an intervening variable on the causal path from power to outcomes like war and peace. Absent the fire alarm, there is no fear, no running, and no panic.

Rather than microfoundations, this theoretical and epistemological move is better described as “macrofoundations.” They are macro, because they derive from perceptions of external, situational, often systemic factors. They are foundations, because they operate on human psychology. Writing in defense of Keynesian macrofoundations for microeconomic theory, David Colander (1993: 451) argues that “before there is any hope of undertaking meaningful micro analysis, one must first determine the macro context within which that micro decision is made. It is that macro context that lets individuals choose among likely multiple equilibria and makes the choice theoretic foundation contextually relevant. In doing so, however, the macro context imposes institutional constraints on individual decisionmakers, and these constraints must be considered in deriving any microfoundations to macro.” Just as IR theories need microfoundations, so too do our theories need macrofoundations, which constrain and enable the emergence of psychological and behavioral tendencies.

This macrofoundational approach to psychology starkly contrasts with the traditional structure versus psychology binary in IR theory. Waltz (1959) arguably cemented the conceptualization of the first and third images as independent and competing explanations of war. Wolfers (1965: 13) concurred, arguing that we only need to study psychology if, despite the fire, individuals do not sprint for the exit: “Such ‘deviationist’ behavior, running counter to expectation, would justify and require intensive psychological inquiry.” Thus, psychological IR has largely evolved as a bottom-up enterprise, explaining deviations from structural expectations and providing microfoundational cogs and wheels that underpin macro-level theories. As a result, we actually know very little about the direct effects of structure on human psychology and have yet to systematically connect psychology to grand theory.

Of course, a host of environmental and structural factors could serve as sources of first image reversed causation, such as the experience of war or violence (e.g. Gilligan et al 2014) or distributions of identity, preferences, or threats (Allan et al 2018; Moravcsik 1997; Walt 1985). However, this paper focuses on the most natural starting point for international security theory: relative state power. Just as Waltz (1979) black boxed the state to isolate power's effects on state behavior, so too at the extreme we can black box the human to isolate power's effects on human thought and behavior. We retain the classical realist emphasis on human nature, but inject variance by way of power differentials, a way to do psychology structurally.¹²

3.1 From Interpersonal to International Relations

The psychology of power literature provides a promising basis for a first image reversed approach to international security. But, the move from the interpersonal to IR literature begs at least three considerations with respect to the actors, environment, and relevant power comparisons.

First, both elites and members of the mass public likely “feel” the state’s power in IR, such that relative state power is a psychologically proximate and relevant motivator of thoughts and behavior. Leaders who command a country’s military, decisionmakers and intelligence analysts who compare countries’ capabilities, and diplomats who bargain and negotiate on behalf of their state are all deeply attuned to their state’s relative abilities. However, beyond elites, psychologists find that power is an intuitive, pervasive phenomenon. Because individuals derive senses of self from their group memberships – in IR, especially national attachments (e.g. Herrmann 2017) – we should also expect that relative state power affects mass public perceptions and behavioral

¹² Two clarifications are worth noting. First, this paper organizes foundations according to the theory’s central source of causation – namely, macro versus micro sources – rather than according to whether the theory contains micro-level units (e.g., c.f. Kertzer 2017: 83-4). For example, Waltz’s (1979) structural theory contains state actors, but we would hardly refer to Waltz’s approach as microfoundational. Second, this paper diverges somewhat in its motivation to study first image reversed causation. Kertzer & Tingley (2018: 330) explain that “the first image reversed inverts the substantive focus of the discipline from the causes of war and conflict (Waltz 1959) to their effects.” While many scholars are indeed interested in stopping at psychology as the DV, this paper uses the first image reversed more akin to a mediating variable, in which psychology systematically varies according to relative power, but with the ultimate aim of understanding how that variation explains outcomes like war.

desires regarding foreign policy. In either case, individuals who believe that their state is powerful should display psychological and behavioral tendencies consistent with BAS activation when perceiving or conducting world politics.

Second, the context of IR likely injects greater insecurity into the expectations outlined above. Psychologists of power typically focus on *intragroup* relations against the backdrop of hierarchy, such as a CEO interacting with subordinates in a corporate setting (e.g. Chin et al 2013). Under these circumstances, individuals' relative power does not typically pose a potential threat to the survival of colleagues, because these individuals are ultimately on the same team. As such, psychologists typically conceive of power's activation of BAS and BIS as inversely related, where an increase in power (e.g. ascension to CEO) accompanies greater rewards (e.g. a larger salary) and greater security (e.g. better healthcare).

In contrast, IR scholars often focus on *intergroup* relations unfolding against the backdrop of anarchy. Under anarchy, states must fend for themselves, and one group's power could very well pose a potential threat to other groups. Further, as Dépret & Fiske (1999: 465) note, "Several lines of theory and evidence suggest that intergroup interactions inherently carry a more negative and competitive interdependence structure than interpersonal interactions." Thus, in the context of IR – namely intergroup competition under anarchy – we should likely expect results closer to the few psychology of power studies that examine the BAS activation associated with power alongside higher levels of insecurity (i.e. BIS activation). For example, Hildreth & Anderson (2016) show that interactions between multiple high-power individuals can lead to coordination failures, and Deng et al (2018) find that power under threat leads to BIS-BAS conflicts, that is, more negatively-valenced approach (see also Fast & Chen 2009). In sum, IR likely injects more negative and competitive dimensions into the usual psychology of power findings.

A third and final consideration is the relevant power comparisons in IR. We typically focus on dyadic (or bloc-level) comparisons, such as (shifts in) the US-China power balance today or the East-West distribution of power during the Cold War. These comparisons closely parallel

psychological work that studies interactions in dyadic (i.e. person-person) settings, and therefore, these comparisons pose little translational challenge: if US leaders perceive the US to be more powerful than, say, China, then US leaders should think and act in ways consistent with BAS activation in their perceptions of and interactions with China.

However, psychologists also point to a second, interesting form of power comparison: in addition to direct, dyadic comparisons (i.e. A versus B), multiple dyadic comparisons (e.g. A versus B, C, and D) also contribute to one's sense of power, becoming an almost trait-like attribute of a "powerful individual." For example, Anderson et al (2012: 322) find that the sense of power correlates moderately across relationships ($\rho = .23$). In IR, for example, perhaps some US decisionmakers believe that China is more powerful than the US but also believe that the US is more powerful than a host of other states, like Canada, France, and Russia. Here, the US could develop a generalized sense of "being a great power," such that power's psychological and behavioral effects spillover into the dynamics of the US-China dyad. Ultimately, the relevant power comparison is an empirical question, but both dyadic and extra-dyadic comparisons likely contribute to a nation's sense of power. With these presumptions in mind, the next section presents theoretical expectations.

4 The Psychology of Power Politics: Theoretical Propositions

Thus far, this paper has introduced the approach-inhibition theory of power, argued that this agenda provides a promising basis for a first image reversed account of international security, and discussed translational concerns from an interpersonal to IR literature. To facilitate future research, this section derives eight expectations about the effects of relative state power on the first image. The propositions work upward from emotion to perception and cognition to behavior. Examples from the Korean War, World War I, and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq provide evidence for the propositions' plausibility. These cases illustrate that, while reliant on relative

state power, the arguments do not depend on specific polar constellations, holding across conditions of relatively bi-, multi-, and unipolar distributions of power.

4.1 Power causes emotional oscillations.

Psychological research suggests that power activates positive affective states and emotions, such as happiness and pride, and generally deactivates negative affective states and emotions, such as anger, fear, and shame (Anderson & Berdahl 2002; Berdahl & Martorana 2006; Langner & Keltner 2008; Schmid Mast et al 2009; Cho & Keltner 2020: 198). For example, Sherman et al (2012) find that military officers and government officials report lower anxiety and have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol in comparison to non-leaders, in part explained by the stress-buffering effects of an increased sense of control. One source of this positive affect stems from the fact that the sense of power activates the same left frontal cortex that governs the neurochemical dopamine – the same transmitter that produces a “high” on drugs like cocaine and the same reward circuitry that governs drug addiction (Keltner 2003: 269). Far beyond cold calculations of CINC scores, Kissinger’s reference to power as the ultimate aphrodisiac reminds us that power pervades human physiology.

However, power has a darker affective side. When power is under threat or in contest, the powerful tend towards more extreme feelings and expressions of anger in attempts to reassert control (Deng et al 2018; Petkanopoulou et al 2019; Van Kleef & Lange 2020: 150). These oscillations between heightened positive states (e.g. pride, optimism) and heightened negative states (e.g. anger) can convey unpredictability. Indeed, individuals tend to perceive more powerful groups as more variable and less predictable than lower power groups (Guinote et al 2002).

In IR theory, rationalists omit emotion entirely, and realists traditionally emphasize the emotion of fear. However, these results suggest that, on average, the affective state of the powerful is better described as inordinately positive, punctuated by extreme swings in anger when power is in contest. These findings hold implications for the affective dimensions of

deterrence (Crawford 2000: 145-49) and threat overreaction (Mueller 2006), among others. However, one important implication of these findings is that power-induced emotional oscillations likely underpin preference reversals, a phenomenon that undermines the development of a credible reputation in IR (Schelling 1960, 1966: 124).

As Mercer (2013: 227-28) argues, preferences rely on emotional states. Predicting future preferences requires predicting a future emotion. These predictions are challenging for anyone, but the powerful should be more likely to project inordinate levels of positive affect into the future, forming rose-tinted expectations. When unexpected obstacles inevitably arise, sudden swings to anger should not only feel that much worse in the present, but also likely generate dire expectations of the future, such as expectations of continuing spirals and domino logics. These oscillations make a consistent, credible reputation harder to achieve. After all, drug addicts are not known for steady reputations.

Take for example the Korean War, and the US decision to commit troops to South Korea in particular. Despite Dean Acheson's reference to South Korea as a "tenth rate satellite" and its ambiguous nature with respect to the Cold War strategic and political balance (Mercer 2013: 235-36), the June 1950 North Korean invasion provoked incredible US anger, particularly on the part of Truman. As the president told Acheson, "Dean, we've got to stop the sons of bitches no matter what... By God, I am going to let them have it!" (Mercer 2013: 232). And, this surprise shift in anger was projected onto future expectations, spurring domino logics: "Truman warned congressional leaders: 'We had to make a stand some time, or else let all of Asia go by the board. If we were to let Asia go, the Near East would collapse and no telling what would happen in Europe...'" (Mercer 2013: 232).

Mercer (2013: 239) convincingly argues that "Emotion explains the American reversal of preferences." However, under the assumption that the Americans felt more powerful than the North Koreans, advances in the psychology of power provide a causal explanation for why those emotions change so drastically: the powerful occupy a world of inordinately positive emotion,

punctuated by immense anger when things do not go their way. The very sense of power alters human emotion in ways that work against the rationalist and structural realist emphasis on calm, calculating leaders, here in a way that explains preference reversals.

4.2 Power increases reliance on internal emotions and inhibits emotional empathy.

Beyond the intrapersonal, first order effects of power on emotion, the effects of power also spillover to inhibit emotional empathy in interpersonal interactions, that is, the ability to read, predict, and feel the emotions of others. The powerful are worse at accurately intuiting others' emotions (Galinsky et al 2006), less accurate at recognizing partners' emotions during interactions (Gonzaga et al 2008), and less responsive to others' emotions (Van Kleef et al 2008). These effects stem in part from the powerful's "tendency to experience greater social distance from others and to prioritize their own interests over others" (Van Kleef & Lange 2020: 150; Keltner et al 2008; Magee & Smith 2013). For example, in a buyer-seller negotiation scenario, Van Kleef et al (2004, study 3) randomly assigned managers drawn from three Dutch companies to high versus low power conditions (operationalized by outside options should the negotiation fail), as well as conditions that varied the emotion of the opposing negotiator (anger versus happiness). Whereas low-power negotiators conceded more to angry counterparts, high-power negotiators were unaffected by the other's emotion (Van Kleef et al 2004: 523), evidence for an emotional insulation effect.

These findings suggest that leaders' ability to successfully signal and coordinate in IR could vary in accord with their sense of relative power. Realists typically emphasize that uncertainty – caused by anarchy – erodes the ability to ascertain and trust signals (Mearsheimer 2013: 28), which serves as the basis of phenomena like security dilemmas and commitment problems (Fearon 1995). The above psychological research provides a basis to inject variance back into questions of signaling and coordination in IR: the problem could be less with the constant of anarchy and more with the powerful's inability to successfully send and receive signals. Indeed,

Crawford (2000: 133-34) points to a lack of ability to perceive others' fear as an emotional driver of security dilemmas and spirals of misperception, and psychologists find that the sense of power serves as one key driver of that lack of empathy.¹³

Further, an emerging literature on face-to-face diplomacy does engage empathy but overlooks the role of power (see e.g. Hall & Yarhi-Milo 2012; Holmes 2013; Yarhi-Milo 2013; Wong 2016). For example, Holmes & Yarhi-Milo (2017: 107) explain that empathy, including ascertaining others' affective states, "is critical in overcoming biases, transcending long-held enmities, and increasing the likelihood of cooperation." Their comparison of the 1978 and 2000 Camp David Summits show that Jimmy Carter enjoyed more success than Bill Clinton, because the former was better able to deploy empathy. However, while Holmes & Yarhi-Milo (2017: 108) argue that the summits "share many structural characteristics," one important structural difference stands out: Clinton, during the unipolar moment, was operating on behalf of the most powerful state in history, whereas Carter was not. Although this failure at diplomacy could be a function of individual-level idiosyncrasies, we can arrive at this expectation simply by specifying the effects of power on individuals in general.

Returning to the case of the Korean War, a consistent tendency existed among US decisionmakers: the simultaneous reliance on the emotional state of the self to make sense of the world, combined with failures to seek out and empathize with the emotional beliefs of external parties, notably allies. As Mercer (2013: 238) explains, "American decision makers never wavered in their belief that the Korean War jeopardized America's reputation. This belief rested on mere projection. I found no evidence that US policymakers asked either the State Department or the CIA to assess allied views of US resolve." Instead, "American decision makers used their own feelings of panic or alarm as evidence for what US allies had to be thinking," nicely

¹³ Conversely, we should expect weaker states in a security dilemma to have a more empathetic understanding of the other's sense of anxiety. This paper focuses particularly on the sense of power – rather than weakness – but Fettweis (2018: 85-8) provides some thoughts on the latter.

illustrated by Acheson's reliance on introspection, having all "messages kept out of my room for an hour or two while I ruminated about the situation" (Mercer 2013: 235, 238). This lack of engagement with allies is striking: despite the lack of concern among allies, "reassuring panicky allies" was one of two reasons Acheson gave for war (Mercer 2013: 238).

Whereas the first proposition provides a first order account for the ways in which the powerful's emotional oscillations underpin preference reversals, this proposition provides a second order account for challenges to emotional empathy. Among other implications, these propositions provide an emotional architecture to understand failures to credibly signal and coordinate in IR. Realists have something to say about these micro-level phenomena, even factors like emotions, but have yet to fully specify the effects of power on the first image. Next, this paper turns to three perceptual and cognitive expectations illustrated through examples from World War I.

4.3 Power increases selfishness and egoism.

A host of psychological research suggests that power heightens a focus on the self, increasing selfishness, egoism, and attention to opportunities for personal gain (Keltner et al 1998; Chen et al 2001; Keltner et al 2003: 276-277; Van Kleef et al 2008; Piff et al 2012; Laurin et al 2016). For example, Kraus et al (2011) find that individuals higher in socioeconomic status spend a smaller portion of their income on others. In a study of real-world executives in a large corporation, Hildreth & Anderson (2016, study 2) found that powerful individuals were less able to overcome differences in interests and effectively coordinate, where differences in interests were operationalized as advocating for the hire of different job candidates. These effects stem in part from the fact that the powerful contribute more to groups and therefore feel more deserving (Guinote 2017: 370). The competitive intergroup context of IR likely amplifies these effects, with more powerful groups displaying greater levels of egoism.

These findings provide a basis for the realist claim that states want, “in a word, more” (Kirshner 2012: 58) and that these desires grow with power, holding implications for the ways in which increased power fuels interest clashes, opportunistic expansion (Snyder 2013), and why egoistic interests “almost always trump transnational ideologies” or concerns for an “international community” (Mearsheimer 2011: 6, 35-36). Walt (2021) writes that, “As realist scholars have long argued, it is difficult (and maybe impossible) to draw reliable conclusions about another state’s intentions... China’s recent history is a perfect illustration of this tendency: As its power has increased, its ambitions have grown, and its definition of ‘core interests’ has expanded.” A key problem, however, is that we cannot arrive at this expectation – in theory – under the standard rational choice assumption of fixed and exogenously assigned preferences.¹⁴ As Walt, and countless other realists observe, interests vary in accord with power; psychological research on power provides a theoretical basis to ground this claim, with no loss in the parsimony traditionally claimed by rational choice theory.

While selfishness takes many forms in IR, one interesting implication of these findings is that relative power may serve as a source for nationalism, realism’s natural domestic variable (Mearsheimer 2005: 4, 2011; Schweller 2018) and a phenomenon that transforms otherwise unrelated groups of humans into the ideal typical, egoistic, almost unitary actor described by realists.¹⁵ Realists typically conceptualize nationalism as a process birthed from insecurity and threat (Mearsheimer 2011: 20; Posen 1993: 82). As Posen (1993: 122) explains, “A structural realist would argue that the propensity of states to engage in [nationalistic] activities should vary with the threats that they face.” In this conception, “States or stateless groups, drifting into competition for whatever reason, will quickly turn to the reinforcement of national identity because of its potency as a military resource” (Posen 1993: 122).

¹⁴ See Kirshner (2015) for a critique of “hyperrationalism.”

¹⁵ For example, Wohlforth (2008: 133) describes the realist conception of the egoistic state as follows: “When individuals and groups act politically, they are driven principally by narrow self-interest. This egoism is rooted in human nature.”

But, what causes these groups to “drift into competition”? Here, advances in the psychology of power call attention to a form of nationalism that has received less attention: nationalism caused by the sense of strength, not weakness. Realists show that domestic groups, like the military, can promulgate nationalistic myths birthed from insecurity as a source to generate state power. However, less work considers the ways in which an insecure, inward-looking nationalism can evolve into an assertive, outward-looking nationalism. The psychology of power provides that link: defensive nationalism undergirds the development of power, but that sense of power transforms nationalism birthed from insecurity into an outward-looking, potentially aggressive, nationalism. As Schweller (2018: 32) explains, “Within rising powers, outward-looking nationalism is a natural response to the country’s exalted growth and the national pride and patriotism that it inspires among its citizens.” The psychological evidence bolsters this claim. Perceptions of increasing power activate a chauvinistic sense that your country is “better” and more deserving. This outward-looking nationalism is more dangerous than nationalism induced by weakness. As Van Evera (1994: 25) warns, “Things are more dangerous when power and aggrievement coincide, since this combination brings together both the motive and the capacity to make trouble.”

Consider the example of World War I. Van Evera (1985: 93) convincingly argues that “Before World War I, a great tidal wave of hypernationalism swept over Europe,” demonstrating that self-glorifying national myths contributed to the onset of the war. However, Wohlforth (1987) meticulously details perceptions of relative state power during this period, concluding that each state felt certain that their side enjoyed a power advantage in the run-up to the war. Thus, while domestic, insecurity-induced nationalism may have existed, the onset of World War I makes far more sense (from a psychological perspective) as a nationalism stemmed from the sense of relative strength. In a counterfactual world, the situation is less dangerous when one side’s outward-looking, power-induced nationalism coincides with another side’s inward-looking, decline-induced nationalism (Schweller 2018).

Together, this proposition provides grounding for the realist claim that interests expand and change with power, one instantiation being a chauvinistic, even aggressive, nationalism. Nationalism birthed from insecurity explains defensive behavior, such as North Vietnam's unwillingness to concede to US aggression (Mearsheimer 2011). But, for many historical cases, we need to appreciate how an inward-looking nationalism eventually turns outward, activating offensive and aggressive tendencies.

4.4 Power causes overconfidence.

The sense of power increases confidence, optimism, and risk acceptance, effects that are often beneficial. For example, Magee et al's (2010) content analyses of individuals' reactions to the attacks of September 11 suggest that powerful individuals expressed greater confidence in their construal of the event.¹⁶ However, these effects very often bleed into hubris, overoptimism, illusory control, and the systematic underestimation of costs (Galinsky et al 2003; Anderson & Galinsky 2006; Fast et al 2009; Inesi 2010; Weick & Guinote 2010; Fast et al 2012; Brion & Anderson 2013). For example, Fast et al (2009: study 3) randomly assigned US adults to high power versus control conditions (where power was primed using the power recall scenario described above) and then had subjects respond to various measures of illusory control. The simple task of recalling a time the subject possessed power led to significantly higher perceptions of illusory control, such as the belief that the subject had personal control over the national economy.

In IR, hubris and overconfidence are classic explanations for war (e.g. Blainey 1973: 35; Van Evera 1999: 16). The Rubicon theory of war provides perhaps the most systematic psychological grounding for this phenomenon. Johnson & Tierney (2011) argue that the perception of war's imminence causes actors to adopt implemental mindsets, marked by overconfidence and risky war plans. In contrast, when war is not perceived as imminent, actors display deliberative

¹⁶ Confidence was measured as more abstract, positive, and certain statements.

mindsets, marked by relatively thorough cognition and greater receptivity to incoming information (Johnson & Tierney 2011: 12-24).

Because the *perception* of war's imminence does much of the causal work in the model, the natural question is: what causes the perception of war's imminence? Advances in the psychology of power suggest that the sense of power itself causes overconfidence, disabling thorough cognition, increasing the sense of illusory control, decreasing risk aversion, and so on – key effects in the Rubicon model (Johnson & Tierney 2011: 15, see especially Table 1). Thus, these findings directly tie power and the Rubicon model together: power causes overconfidence, and this overconfidence serves as a key mediator between power and conflict onset.

Returning to the example of World War I, Johnson & Tierney (2011: 38) explain that “In contrast to the common claim of blanket overconfidence on all sides prior to war, we found that confidence varied systematically. Overconfidence was initially suppressed and then grew as war drew near.” However, as Wohlforth (1987) demonstrates, this rise in confidence occurs simultaneously with perceptions of advantageous shifts in the balance of power. Therefore, we can return power to the role of the independent variable, with power-induced overconfidence pushing states towards the Rubicon. Indeed, this paper's final proposition on resolve suggests that the sense of power also fuels Johnson & Tierney's (2011) implementation phase once war is underway.

Of course, hubris and overconfidence might have independent, first image causes. For example, if leaders perceive their state to be weak and yet display high levels of overconfidence, then the Rubicon model provides an important intervention on the ways in which the perception of war's imminence can itself increase overconfidence. But, to the extent that leaders feel powerful and display overconfidence, we can explain that effect as a systematic function of relative power, as opposed to using power as a material baseline against which to locate psychological deviations.

4.5 Power increases reliance on priors and hinders perspective-taking.

A host of research suggests that power activates a greater reliance on prior beliefs, heuristics, and stereotypes of the other, as well as a lack of reliance on others' thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions (Fiske 1993; Goodwin et al 2000; Rodríguez-Bailón 2000; Operario & Fiske 2001; Galinsky et al 2006; Guinote 2010; Galinsky et al 2016; Schmid & Amodio 2017; Marineau et al 2018). This cognitive and perceptual simplification – like abstract thinking and less thorough memory searches – is often beneficial for the powerful, who must make decisive group decisions in a complex world. However, these effects can have deleterious consequences, such as an inability to perspective-take, that leaves the powerful out-of-sync with others' perceptions of reality (e.g. Galinsky et al 2006). For example, in a sample of C-level executives and senior government officials drawn from an executive workshop in China, Blader et al (2016: study 5) found that subjects randomly assigned to a high power condition reported lower intentions to perspective-take on the part of subordinates in an upcoming performance review, relative to subjects assigned to a control condition.¹⁷ Further, these effects can lead to the erosion of trust in social exchange (e.g. Schilke et al 2015) and dehumanization of others (e.g. Lammers & Stapel 2011; Gwinn et al 2013).

The role of priors and perspective-taking are central to IR theory, and the above research causally links these effects to relative power. A central component of strategy is the ability to discern others' intentions and perceptions (Schelling 1960: ch. 2; Kertzer et al 2019: 4-5). As Rathbun (2018: 27) notes, "Understanding the perspective of others is the essence of the 'security dilemma sensibility.'" Indeed, Lake (2010: 29) argues that research on origins and variance in prior beliefs is one of the "primary aspirations of a behavioral theory of war." Rather than use

¹⁷ Intentions to perspective-take were measured according to (dis)agreement with questions, like "I will take the time to see things from the subordinate's point of view" (Blader et al 2016: 732). The sense of power was primed using a prompt that reminded subjects of their "great deal of power" and "control over important resources" at their organization. The experiment also included a high status condition that reminded subjects of their "great deal of status," and respect and esteem in which they are held at their organization. The high status condition led to an increase in perspective-taking relative to the control group, further evidence for the often differential psychological effects of power and status.

power as a material baseline, with individual-level beliefs getting in the way, this agenda should consider that power itself can activate and strengthen priors.

However, one interesting implication of these findings is that power could paradoxically increase threat perception by way of increased reliance on priors. Threat perception is the key precursor to nearly every state decision (Cohen 1978: 93). Traditionally, realists expect that an increase in power reduces threats to security (e.g. Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1979). However, if leaders believe that they operate in an anarchical world where security is the primary aim and other states might harbor aggressive intentions, then an increased reliance on this prior belief – induced by the sense of power – would amplify threat perception.¹⁸

Contrast this proposition with expectations from balance of threat theory, arguably the predominant theory of threat perception in international security theory. Walt (1985) argues that states form expectations about threat as a function of aggressive intentions of the other, rather than simply the other's power. However, some criticize this theoretical move for the domestic-level reliance on intentions and disconnection of threat from relative power (see Schweller 2016: 6, 11-12). Research on the psychology of power suggests that beliefs about aggressive intentions certainly matter, but that these beliefs can form as a function of your own relative power, no action or buildup on the part of the other required. If leaders feel powerful, leaders rely more heavily on prior beliefs that other states could be threatening. This proposition reestablishes the theoretical link between relative power and aggressive intentions, with the surprising expectation that the sense of power increases threat perception.

Returning to the case of World War I, Van Evera (1985: 81) explains that “Europeans commonly overestimated the hostility of neighboring states; this paranoia eventually produced

¹⁸ Of course, an increased reliance on priors could also inflate positive beliefs about allies, an amplification of the “ally image” in image theoretic terms (e.g. Herrmann et al 1997). In fact, in IR we debate whether alliances entangle the powerful (e.g. Beckley 2015), but psychological research suggests a different perspective: the powerful hold illusions of alliance – overestimating the strength and commitments of partners – that lead to their downfall, like resource losses and future exclusion from alliances (Brion & Anderson 2013). That is, the inflation of positive beliefs about allies can work to the detriment of the powerful.

its own reality by justifying aggressive policies that provoked genuine hostility.” Van Evera (1985: 85) locates the source of this effect at the domestic level, such as militaries and nationalistic scholars. Although militaries might face incentives to inflate threats to gain domestic support and resources, advances in the psychology of power point to a structural source for this phenomenon: the sense of power causes stickiness of prior beliefs (here, the assumption that others held aggressive intentions) and erodes the ability to absorb signals to the contrary.

In sum, we often describe World War I as the “war of misperceptions” (Wohlforth 1987: 379). Stein’s (1988: 256-7) seminal work on perception explains that “The near ubiquity of cognitive biases and heuristics is an even more serious problem... they do not appear to be related in any special way either to specific kinds of needs and interests or to types of political and strategic situations.” Three decades after this observation, linking these mechanisms in a consistent way remains a challenge. The psychology of power literature points to a systematic source: *power itself causally activates each of these mechanisms*. We have missed this linkage, because we typically arrive at psychology after the distribution of power fails to explain outcomes. An appreciation for the ways in which the sense of power affects decisionmakers allows us to causally link relative power to the nationalism, overconfidence, and assumptions about aggressive intentions that marked the onset of the war. The remainder of this section presents three behavioral expectations illustrated through the US’s 2003 invasion of Iraq.

4.6 Power increases aggression.

In general, power facilitates action and approach behaviors, which allow the powerful to actualize on desires and obtain goals (e.g. Galinsky et al 2003; Guinote 2007c). For example, the powerful tend to make the first offer in negotiations, which provides bargaining advantages (Magee et al 2007). However, these approach behaviors also include aggression, particularly when the powerful face obstacles or threats (Keltner et al 2003: 277; Winter 2010: 123; Deng et al 2018). For example, in a sample of US adults, Fast & Chen (2009, study 4) measured subjects’

level of power at work and randomly assigned subjects to write essays about a time that they felt either competent or incompetent. Subjects high in power but primed with the sense of incompetence were significantly more likely to report aggressive tendencies, measured with questions like “Given enough provocation, I may hit another person.”¹⁹ As Guinote (2017: 369) explains, “maintaining power is important for power holders, who monitor their relative power and respond to threats with harsh power assertion.” Indeed, a number of the mechanisms outlined above, such as the tendency to dehumanize others, eases the psychological burden associated with doing harm to others.

In IR, most realists do not find puzzling that powerful states, under anarchy, can wield that power in aggressive ways (see e.g. Waltz 1959: 188). However, as Fearon (1995: 384-5) points out, it is not enough to say that the powerful can use aggression under anarchy simply due to the lack of a final arbiter above the state. Rather, we need to make the positive argument for why force appears to be a utility-maximizing option given that force is a costly option.

Here, psychological research suggests that the sense of power explains bargaining failures, that is, why leaders might believe that aggression (i.e. war) appears to be a utility-maximizing decision. Consider the canonical bargaining model of war (Fearon 1995: 380, 386-90). The sense of power erodes the bargaining space in three ways. First, the powerful fear costs less (Inesi 2010), which shrinks expected costs, c . Second, power increases overoptimism about the probability of success (Fast et al 2009), which inflates expectations about the likelihood of success, p . Finally, the feeling of power increases risk acceptance (Anderson & Galinsky 2006). This risk tolerance erodes the model’s assumption that leaders are risk-neutral or risk-averse. Each of these effects shrinks the bargaining range and increases the likelihood of war onset.

Consider the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. First, US decisionmakers systematically underestimated the costs of the war. As Lake (2010: 15-6) explains, “To date, the best available

¹⁹ This result was driven by a threatened ego: the competence manipulation was also fully crossed with a (no) self-affirmation manipulation, which allowed for estimation of the ego-defensiveness effect on aggression.

estimate is that the Iraq War will cost the United States more than \$3 trillion. Prior to the war, Office of Management and Budget Director Mitch Daniels suggested that it could be fought for \$20 billion, later revised to \$50-\$60 billion.” Thus, cost estimates were only off by about 50-fold. Second, US decisionmakers overestimated the probability of success and underestimated the requisite timeline. Although the initial ground campaign that pitted coalition forces against the Iraqi military went relatively quickly, spurring Bush to declare victory (Bennett & Stam 2006: 101-2), the Bush administration was overoptimistic about the subsequent occupation, expecting that the US would be greeted as liberators with only a minimal US presence required moving forward (Lake 2010: 36; Fettweis 2018: 81-2). Finally, US decisionmakers displayed a surprisingly high *ex ante* tolerance for risk. As Lake (2010: 47) explains, “the [Bush] administration was willing to run high risks in an effort to disarm Iraq once and for all.”

Our rational choice models – derived from the economic and decision sciences – purport to apply to human decision-making *in general*, from buying used cars to waging war. As such, we have yet to fully appreciate that the actors in our political models are often very, very powerful. Here, the simple assumption that the Americans felt more powerful than the Iraqis provides a parsimonious amendment to the bargaining model’s expectations. Because these effects result as a systematic function of felt power – and not idiosyncratic, individual biases – these findings provide a further advance towards a behavioral theory of war (see Lake 2010).

4.7 Power reduces norm adherence.

Norms provide one potential brake on the aggressive tendencies outlined above. However, in general, the sense of power causes individuals to violate norms more often (Galinsky 2015: 434-35; Guinote 2017: 369-70). This effect stems in-part from the findings that the powerful display more entitlement and less self-control (Fiske & Berdahl 2007; Ashforth & Anand 2003; De Cremer & Van Dijk 2005). Further, the powerful tend to promote and project their own ideologies and moral beliefs beyond the self. For example, in a study of CEOs, Chin et al (2013)

find that a CEO's power amplifies the correspondence between the CEO's political ideology and the firm's corporate social responsibility practices. That is, power amplifies the tendencies for CEOs to implement corporate actions linked to personal political ideologies. Finally, the powerful are less aware of their own normative violations and condemn the moral failings of others more often. As Lammers et al (2010: 742) conclude, "the powerful are more likely to engage in moral hypocrisy than are people who lack power."

These findings provide a psychological basis to ground realism's skepticism about the ability for norms to constrain the powerful (see e.g. Gilpin 1983: 35-6; c.f. e.g. Ikenberry 1999). For example, in the ongoing debate surrounding the nuclear taboo, recent empirical work finds a surprising propensity for members of the (typically American) public to support the use of nuclear weapons (Press et al 2013; Sagan & Valentino 2017; Pauly 2018; c.f. Tannenwald 1999; Carpenter & Montgomery 2020; Sagan et al 2020). The above research suggests that the sense of power associated with possession of those nuclear weapons could be one source of the lack of normative restraint. In short, might makes right.

Perhaps more interesting, however, the above findings point to the flip-side of the normative coin. While we typically focus on the extent to which norms constrain the powerful, the powerful also tend to judge the moral transgressions of others more harshly while attempting to project their moral and normative commitments beyond the state's borders. Here, norms act not as a constraint, but rather as a conflict enabler. In ways that exceed obvious benefits to a state's security, leaders who believe that their state is powerful likely view normative transgressions by other states as especially intolerable, while simultaneously attempting to spread their normative standards beyond the state's borders.

Returning to the case of the Iraq War, the US was convinced that the illiberal invasion of the sovereign state of Iraq was required to defend the liberal international order. The US was certain that democracy would flourish in Iraq, that "inside the heart of every Iraqi was a 'small d' democrat yearning to be free" (Lake 2010: 36), and that democracy would in turn spread

throughout the Middle East. Saddam's murder of civilians was intolerable; civilian casualties caused by the US, though regrettable, were justified as part of a larger, righteous mission. And, as President Bush explained, the US certainly "does not torture people" (Stolberg 2007). In turn, these actions only served to paradoxically undermine the very norms the US purportedly fought to defend.

Realists often maintain that norms fail to constrain the powerful and that morals simply serve as gloss to cloak self-interested behavior. But, research on the psychology of power suggests that there is likely a genuine sense of moral indignation – activated by power – that induces actions seemingly out of step with a calm, prudent assessment of the national interest and beyond obvious cost-benefit calculations. Such concerns for morality fit uneasily at best in a standard rational choice account of world politics but are entirely consistent with a psychology of power account.

4.8 Power increases resolve and determination.

Finally, the sense of power fuels resolve. The powerful focus on desired outcomes and pursue those outcomes with determination and creativity (Galinsky et al 2003; Guinote 2007c; Guinote 2007b; Hildreth & Anderson 2016: studies 1B and 4; Cai & Guinote 2017). For example, in a sample of British students, Guinote (2007c: study 3) randomly assigned subjects to high versus low power conditions (operationalized by "manager" versus "subordinate" roles) and then had subjects attempt to solve an unsolvable puzzle.²⁰ Subjects randomly assigned to the high power condition spent more time and attempted more alternative solutions to solve the puzzle. These effects could be considered desirable: Guinote (2007c: 1081) suggests that these results demonstrate the powerful's "ability to persist in the face of difficulties and to engage in flexible

²⁰ The puzzle consisted of "drawing a geometric figure without retracing any lines and without lifting the pencil from the paper" (Guinote 2007c: 1080).

strategies to pursue a goal.” However, a more pessimistic interpretation might be that the powerful single-mindedly and obsessively fixate, even on the unsolvable.

In IR, we often emphasize the benefits of resolve and lament the costs of overextension, quagmires, and failures to retrench. The above findings suggest that these are two sides of the same coin: the powerful approach goals with determination. Japan sought an empire throughout Asia (Snyder 2013). The US expended more firepower on Vietnam than used in the entirety of the Second World War. NATO expanded (Sarotte 2019). While resolve can be beneficial, the persistence of state action can also produce material costs that outweigh conceivable benefits. As the Rubicon theory of war expects, power fuels the persistence of an instrumental mindset, in which actors display “tunnel vision,” paying more attention to the tasks with which they are occupied and being less receptive to other information received in the meantime” (Johnson & Tierney 2011: 15). In short, the powerful double down.

Returning to the case of Iraq, one of the most striking features of the war is its persistence. Of course, an attack on the homeland would garner a response, but was a *global* war on terror necessary? Should militarized involvement in Iraq require threefold the time accorded to the defeat of Hitler? At the cost of immense Iraqi life and American blood and treasure, the region today is hardly more stable and animosity towards the US is unchanged at best and heightened at worst (Lyall et al 2013).

The unipolar moment produced a host of critiques of structural realism (e.g. Ikenberry 1999; Pashakhanlou 2013). But, psychology of power research suggests that structure was very much at play. The sense of power explains why the US “resorts to force more quickly and... is less patient with diplomacy,” why the US acts like an “international sheriff,” and why this all persisted (Kagan 2002: 4, 14). Unchecked power reveals, but that power also changes humans in predictable ways. In fact, the unipolar moment is by far the easiest case for the psychology of power. Structural realists simply have yet to specify the effects of power on the first image.

5 Conclusion: Towards a Politics Among Humans

Power drives politics. Conceptions of power abound, but we have yet to appreciate that power is a *feeling*, an experience that changes humans from the physiological to behavioral level. Commands of massive militaries, corps of skillful diplomats, and the soft power to set norms and customs *do something* to the humans who wield that power. Some of IR's most central observations about war and peace embody that intuition, but we have yet to rigorously explicate those implicitly psychological claims.

The psychologist Dacher Keltner (2016: 1-2) summarizes the power paradox: “we rise in power and make a difference in the world due to what is best about human nature, but we fall from power due to what is worst. We gain a capacity to make a difference in the world by enhancing the lives of others, but the very experience of having power and privilege leads us to behave, in our worst moments, like impulsive, out-of-control sociopaths.” If humans behave as described in domestic settings, the context of intergroup competition under anarchy likely amplifies these effects. Indeed, Bismarck is rare (Rathbun 2018), and this paper's propositions suggest that power – the very thing states pursue to survive under anarchy – often makes humans worse at power politics.

To find out, the field needs more behavioral realist work. Just as behavioral economics amends neoclassical economics, a behavioral realism can amend neorealism's rational, material, baseline expectations. Political psychologists and neoclassical realists traditionally incorporate additional independent variables to explain theoretical deviations, but a psychology of power account suggests that we simply need to appreciate the effects of power on humans, no additional variables required. Indeed, this paper's propositions open surprising new theoretical avenues: power – our central variable – often works to the very detriment of rational decision-making, including the possibility that the sense of power increases threat perception and erodes the bargaining space in the bargaining model of war. Beyond amendments to standard theoretical

expectations, however, this first image reversed account also seems to more naturally capture enduring realist intuitions about power – from interest expansion to skepticism about the stopping force of norms – in comparison to the economistic, rational choice frameworks that have dominated the field for the past half century.²¹ To the extent that scholars find themselves contorting their intuitions to fit the assumptions that underpin rational choice theory, then the psychology of power offers a parsimonious alternative framework, centered on power and groups of humans, entirely consistent with centuries of classical realist thought (see e.g. Gilpin 1984: 289-91).

Future work can also help to overcome this paper's shortcomings. Just as Waltz (1979) ignored state-level variation, this paper largely ignores individual-level variation to derive expectations about power's effects on individuals. But, average-level effects can hide nuance. For example, power increases selfishness on average, but prosocial humans might become even more prosocial under conditions of power (Chen et al 2001). Power heightens aggressive tendencies on average, but bureaucratic norms and organizational structures that vary across states might amplify or mute those tendencies (Horowitz & Stam 2014). Further, this paper ignores the aggregation problem for two reasons.²² First, before we can aggregate, we need baseline expectations for the effects of power on individuals. Second, more importantly, if the effects of power are relatively uniform – as psychologists so often find – then there actually is no aggregation problem, because the “problem” only exists when individual differences must be reconciled in group settings. Finally, how might we address the more deleterious effects of power? This question holds important practical implications in a world returning to great power competition, particularly for the dynamics of Sino-US relations. It is also a question on which psychological work currently provides relatively less guidance.

²¹ See Kirshner (2015) for a critique.

²² See Powell (2017) for the standard aggregation critique.

When the Vietnam experience motivated Morgenthau (1978: 7) to ask whether “modern psychology and psychiatry have provided us with the conceptual tools” to construct a “counter-theory of irrational politics,” modern psychology offered no such tools.²³ Today, psychology offers those tools, and the findings are striking. Power itself causes each of the components of the counter-theory Morgenthau (1978: 7-8) intuited, such as a reliance on priors and the tendency towards action, “any kind of action, that creates the illusion of mastery over a recalcitrant reality.” More pessimistically, those individuals need not display dominant dispositions: perceptions of power can activate these effects from the system-level down. But, this is no counter-theory of irrational politics. For too long, IR theory has conceived of the distribution of power and human psychology as contrasting explanations of world politics. Instead, engagement with power’s effects on the first image represents a further step towards a more complete theory of international politics.

6 References

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²³ On the Vietnam motivation, see e.g. Mearsheimer (2005), Fromkin (1993: 86-87).

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