

The Making of International Status

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1

How Do Countries Achieve Status?

Questions of status lie at the heart of international order. As Gilpin notes, governance in international politics is partly a function of the hierarchy of prestige, which determines which states will exert authority in the international system in a given period.¹ In any society, hierarchies of status have major political implications, providing an answer to the key question of “who gets what, when and how.” As research across the social sciences shows, status is a fundamental aspect of life in society, which shapes relations among actors and groups.² Ubiquitous in social contexts, status hierarchies impact valued outcomes: in social environments, actors differentiate themselves into social positions that imply unequal expectations, rewards, and obligations.

Within countries, we observe durable inequality among groups despite socioeconomic change.³ Even in high-income countries, women and racial minorities tend to earn lower incomes, get less prestigious jobs, and attain lower levels of education—outcomes that cannot be explained based on individual merit alone, in spite of what the negative stereotypes about these groups might imply. Yet in domestic societies, state authority somewhat attenuates the effects of status hierarchies. A central government adjudicates disputes among actors, monopolizing the legitimate use of force. Actors share a system of norms, embodied in the state’s constitution and enforced by those who occupy formal positions of authority. In addition, governments usually establish a system of redistribution, including policies aimed at improving social welfare or access to education. Left to their

¹Gilpin 1981, 33-34.

²Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Veblen 2007; Weber 1978.

³Ridgeway and Walker 1995; Ridgeway 2014; Tilly 1998.

own devices, many citizens might oppose redistributive policies for fear of losing status.⁴ But under state authority, redistribution assumes a mandatory character regardless of individual political preferences: as the saying goes, nothing is certain but death and paying taxes.⁵

When it comes to relations among states, by contrast, matters of status take on particular importance. In international relations, no clear authority stands above states. Shared norms and institutional structures are much weaker than in domestic societies. To the extent that foundational treaties like the UN Charter have a constitutional quality, no independent court with universal jurisdiction can enforce them. With few exceptions like the UN Security Council (UNSC), states rarely occupy formal positions of authority. And although the UNSC underwent an unusual period of activism in the 1990s, it has since reverted back to the gridlock that characterized most of its history. In the absence of a supranational authority to settle disputes, states often resort to more informal coordination channels, such as the Group of Seven (G7), or to unilateral action. As such, the policies that could attenuate the impact of status hierarchies in world politics, like development aid or refugee asylum, are not consistently enforced by a central authority. Rather, such policies are implemented at the discretion of states, in a piecemeal fashion if at all.

Under the circumstances that characterize international relations, status becomes much more important in determining who gets what, when, and how. When no central authority can settle disputes, states might resort to the use of force (or its threat) to get what they want. However, wars among major powers are increasingly costly, especially since the advent of nuclear weapons, and happen only rarely.⁶ And in the aftermath of wars, status hierarchies determine the ensuing distribution of privileges among states. To the extent that shared norms and institutional structures exist in international politics, they are strongly influenced by those states at the top.⁷ High-status states play a key role during critical junctures like the aftermath of major wars, shaping the institutions they use to manage international relations thereafter.⁸ As such, most of the time in international

⁴See McClendon 2018; Thal 2020.

⁵Except, in the latter case, for the very rich.

⁶Brooks 1999; Mueller 1989; Sagan and Waltz 1995.

⁷Hurd 2017; Kupchan 2014; Pitts 2018.

⁸Ikenberry 2001; Schroeder 1986.

politics we are arguably in the realm of status—where actors adjudicate disputes based on social esteem and voluntary deference, rather than based on the use of force or its threat. As Gilpin puts it, status is the “everyday currency of international relations, much as authority is the central ordering feature of domestic society.”⁹ While authority ensures that commands will be obeyed in domestic politics, in international politics “both power and prestige function to ensure that the lesser states in the system will obey the commands of the dominant state or states.”¹⁰

In this context, it is not surprising that states and leaders care deeply about international status. As Morgenthau notes, prestige “is as intrinsic an element of the relations between nations as the desire for prestige is of the relations between individuals.”¹¹ In fact, actors care so deeply about status that they may be willing to sacrifice blood and treasure for the sake of recognition. Following the humiliating loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Prussia in the late nineteenth century, for example, France initiated a scramble for colonial territory in Africa at the expense of its continental security, even though its colonial exploits provided little material benefit.¹² Motivated by a desire for recognition as a great power, Germany pursued naval ambitions at the turn of the twentieth century at the expense of its continental security, risking a security dilemma with Britain in the lead up to the First World War.¹³ During this war, moreover, status considerations motivated the Entente powers to reject Germany’s peace overtures, unnecessarily prolonging the conflict.¹⁴ As multiple studies indicate, states are more prone to conflict when they receive less recognition than they think they deserve¹⁵ or less recognition than their material capabilities would warrant.¹⁶ Drawing on a wide range of theoretical and methodological traditions, numerous studies show that status is a fundamental motivation behind foreign policy behavior. These findings are consistent with a rich tradition of research in the social sciences more broadly, which places status as a fundamental human

⁹Gilpin 1981, 31.

¹⁰Gilpin 1981, 30.

¹¹Morgenthau 2006, 83.

¹²Barnhart 2016, 2020.

¹³Murray 2010; Murray 2018, 87-140.

¹⁴Lanoszka and Hunzeker 2015.

¹⁵Lindemann 2011; Murray 2018; Ringmar 2002; Ward 2017; Wolf 2011.

¹⁶Maoz 2010; Renshon 2017; Volgy and Mayhall 1995.

motivation with important implications at the social or group levels.¹⁷

But whether states are satisfied or not with their status, a fundamental question remains: how do states achieve status? While status-seeking states may adopt different strategies, what determines whether such strategies will be successful (or evoke the desired recognition)? This question matters especially today. While Western powers initially harbored hopes of assimilating China and Russia into the liberal international order after the end of the Cold War, such hopes have since subsided.¹⁸ With great power rivalry on the rise again, many worry that struggles for status could lead to war. Bilateral relations between the United States on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other, have reached a low point in part because of disagreements about status. Acting out of a perception that it does not receive the respect it deserves from other countries, Russia has adopted increasingly confrontational policies toward the West—from sponsoring cyber attacks and election interference campaigns against Western targets to ultimately invading Ukraine.¹⁹ If U.S.-China relations during the Trump administration were marked by bravado and trade disputes, moreover, they have improved little under the Biden administration.²⁰ As a growing scholarly consensus indicates, disagreements over status can be dangerous, as status-dissatisfied states are more prone to conflict.²¹ And historically, most hegemonic transitions have been violent: unable to reach an agreement about their relative status, established and emerging powers often resort to arms.

To understand whether a potential power transition from the U.S. to China will be peaceful (or whether established powers like the U.S. will recognize as legitimate the status claims from an

¹⁷As Ridgeway notes, “people care about status quite as intensely as they do about money and power.” See Ridgeway 2014, 2. In psychology, numerous studies using experimental methods indicate that people value status (or social esteem) independently of material gain. See Fiske 2011; Huberman, Loch, and ÖNçüler 2016; Tajfel and Turner 1979; and Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015; Cheng, Tracy, and Anderson 2014 for reviews. Likewise, recent studies in American and comparative politics find that status motivates political behavior at the individual level, shaping preferences toward redistribution in domestic societies and driving support for right-wing populism in developed democracies. See, respectively, McClendon 2018; Thal 2020; and Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018.

¹⁸Sarotte 2021; Tan 2021.

¹⁹*Financial Times*, “Biden warns cyber attacks could lead to a ‘real shooting war,’” 27 July 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/5bbaa89b-2e85-4c5f-b918-566e6712d273>; *BBC News*, “Russia-Ukraine border: Why Moscow is stoking tensions,” 27 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59415885>.

²⁰*Economist*, “Talks between Xi Jinping and Joe Biden do not herald a thaw,” 18 November 2021, <https://www.economist.com/china/talks-between-xi-jinping-and-joe-biden-do-not-herald-a-thaw/21806328>; *New York Times*, “Tense Talks With China Left U.S. ‘Cleareyed’ About Beijing’s Intentions, Officials Say,” 19 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/19/world/asia/china-us-alaska.html>.

²¹Barnhart 2020; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; Lebow 2010; Murray 2018; Renshon 2017; Ward 2017.

emerging power like China), we need to understand the sources of international status. As Clunan notes, “The question of peace and stability in the twenty-first century may (...) depend to a great extent on international status politics—the international social construction of criteria for status recognition, the status desired by rising powers (...) and the ability and willingness of others to grant these desires.”²² To explain key phenomena like hegemonic wars, we need to understand how states ultimately achieve status. When should we expect the established powers to recognize an emerging power as an equal, or instead to deny it the desired recognition?

Although scholars rely on status to explain important phenomena in international politics, we still understand little about the sources of international status. Researchers traditionally assume that status is a function of the qualities of states, especially their material capabilities—such that the richer or militarily stronger a country is, the higher its standing should be. To be sure, the assumption that status is a function of the qualities of actors makes intuitive sense, since it is consistent with how most of us experience status in our everyday lives, as actors rather than researchers. This assumption is also convenient, since it allows researchers to measure status based on certain state attributes. However, this assumption is not examined systematically, and therefore remains unverified from an empirical standpoint. Because most research treats status as a foreign policy motivation, it tends to neglect the question of how countries actually achieve status.²³ The assumption that status depends on the qualities of states thus remains like a commonsense or folk theory of status—an explanation, based on contextual understandings that people employ in their everyday lives, which is taken to be true even though it has not been put to the test.²⁴

From a theoretical standpoint, moreover, theories of status that begin and end with state attributes leave important questions unanswered. Perhaps most importantly, although status is a relational concept, existing research does not study it relationally. Existing studies adopt an individualist approach, treating status as a function of the qualities of states.²⁵ In doing so, these studies

²²Clunan 2014, 274.

²³Notable exceptions are Duque 2018; Miller et al. 2015.

²⁴See Boudon 1988; Watts 2011, 2014. As these authors note, commonsense or folk theories tend to be taken for granted rather than explicitly articulated. As a result, these theories often remain unchanged even after people have reasons to question their logical consistency or empirical validity.

²⁵Pouliot’s positional conception of standing is a notable exception to this trend. See Pouliot 2016.

neglect the distinctive feature of status—its social nature. Because status is insufficiently differentiated from the qualities of states, it is not clear why we need the concept of status in the first place. As a result, status remains in the background in IR theories: When some aspect of international politics cannot be explained based on traditional factors like security or survival, scholars resort to status. IR scholars are thus caught in a conundrum: they claim that status is a fundamental element of international relations, but ultimately render it a residual category.

Far from new, this conundrum can be traced back to early studies of status in IR. Even though Morgenthau wants to highlight the importance of prestige for international politics, he ultimately renders it a residual category. At the outset, Morgenthau deems the policy of prestige “an indispensable element of a rational foreign policy” and one of the “basic manifestations of the struggle for power on the international scene.”²⁶ He notes that scholars nevertheless neglect the policy of prestige because they (1) privilege “the material aspect of power in the form of force” over intangible aspects like prestige;²⁷ (2) associate the policy of prestige with the diplomatic world and its archaic traditions; and (3) treat the policy of prestige as a means to achieve other ends, rather than as an end in itself. However, Morgenthau ultimately reinforces precisely these trends, as (1) he treats prestige as a function of material capabilities, asserting that “military strength is the obvious measure of a nation’s power” to later define prestige as the reputation for power;²⁸ (2) his discussion of diplomacy includes mostly anecdotes about how diplomatic practices express prestige;²⁹ and (3) he treats prestige as a means to an end, claiming that “only foolhardy egocentrics are inclined to pursue a policy of prestige for its own sake.”³⁰ That is, Morgenthau reinforces precisely the aspects that lead scholars to neglect the fundamental role of prestige in international politics.

We observe a similar trend in Gilpin’s work. At the outset, Gilpin deems prestige a fundamen-

²⁶Morgenthau 2006, 83, 92.

²⁷Morgenthau 2006, 83.

²⁸Morgenthau 2006, 89-90. Other work on international status from this period echoes this notion. See, for example, Lagos 1963, 131-32.

²⁹While Morgenthau claims that states pursue a policy of prestige via diplomatic ceremonial and the display of military capabilities, his discussion of the former includes mostly anecdotes about how diplomatic practices express prestige. By contrast, his discussion of the latter includes specific examples like the acquisition of nuclear weapons and the development of navies with global reach, providing a clear intuition that future research could (and would) explore.

³⁰Morgenthau 2006, 91.

tal aspect of international politics, positing that governance among states is partly a function of the hierarchy of prestige.³¹ Moreover, he acknowledges the intangible nature of prestige, comparing it to what E. H. Carr calls “power over opinion”—a form of power that involves persuasion, propaganda, and the use of rhetoric.³² Like authority, Gilpin argues, prestige has both moral and functional bases: less powerful states accept the leadership of a dominant state not only because they perceive the existing order as useful and predictable, since dominant states typically supply public goods; but also because less powerful states perceive the order as legitimate, since dominant states typically promote an ideology to justify their domination. Therefore, Gilpin concludes, “numerous factors, including respect and common interest, underlie the prestige of a state and the legitimacy of its rule.” Yet, Gilpin ultimately argues that “the hierarchy of prestige in an international system rests on economic and military power.”³³ This argument implies that authority in the international system depends primarily on coercion; as such, legitimation becomes epiphenomenal.³⁴ In the end, Gilpin allows only a limited scope for status: that of signaling coercive capabilities. Though initially acknowledged, the intangible aspects of prestige ultimately get lost in his argument.

In this book, I build on existing research by adopting a relational approach, from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoints, to investigate the sources of international status. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, I develop a *network theory of status*, which captures the fundamentally social nature of status. I argue that status depends on states’ positions in a social arrangement, rather than on the qualities of states. To explain how states achieve status, I theorize the underlying relational effects that drive recognition in the international system. I argue that the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. To begin, the relevance of state attributes is socially defined: an attribute matters for status recognition because of its symbolic value, which can only be understood in the context of state relations. Most importantly, I argue that status reinforces inequality, independently of material conditions, because it involves cumulative advantage: the higher standing a state enjoys, the more it attracts additional recognition.

³¹Gilpin 1981, 34.

³²Carr 1981, 120-130; Gilpin 1981, 14.

³³Gilpin 1981, 30.

³⁴See Gilpin 1981, 10-11, 30, 34, 199.

My theoretical framework implies that, to investigate how countries achieve status, we need to examine *the configuration of state relations*, rather than merely ranking states based on their attributes. Therefore, I adopt in this book an empirical strategy that is consistent with the social nature of status. Because status depends on recognition, I investigate empirically the factors that produce such recognition. Since embassies express recognition among states, I use embassy exchange data as a proxy measure of status recognition. But instead of measuring status at the state level, like previous studies do, I incorporate information about the structure of diplomatic relations that existing studies discard. Using social network analysis tools uniquely suited to the study of status, I examine how the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment in the international system. This approach enables me to detect relational patterns of status recognition that previous studies mention in passing but do not examine empirically.

Although we are hitting a critical mass of research on status in IR, we still lack a firm grasp of fundamental questions related to international status. In this context, this book leverages a relational approach to make four contributions to existing scholarship. To begin, while existing research treats status as an actor motivation, this book is the first to address the question of how countries achieve status, focusing on international relations rather than the state level. In addition, this book develops a theoretical framework that highlights the social nature of status and, accordingly, uses social network analysis tools ideally suited to the empirical study of status. By integrating interdisciplinary insights to develop a consistently relational approach to status, moreover, this book brings research on status in IR in line with research in the social sciences more broadly. As a result, my analysis offers new lessons in areas that have drawn increasing scholarly interest in recent years—such as international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions—but that are still rarely linked to status. By showing that status is a distinctive phenomenon both conceptually and empirically, this book aims to move status from its current position as a residual category in IR to its rightful place as a concept central to the study of international politics.

1.1 What We (Don't) Know

IR scholars traditionally assume that status is a function of the qualities of states or the things that states have. The conventional approach to status defines it as a state's ranking based on certain traits or attributes, especially material attributes like economic or military capabilities. One of the most commonly used definitions of status in IR describes status as "collective beliefs about a given state's ranking in valued attributes (wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, and diplomatic clout)."³⁵ Other popular definitions of status likewise emphasize state attributes, positing that status "refers to attributes of an individual or social roles, especially those attributes related to position in a deference hierarchy"³⁶ or that status is "based on a group's standing on some trait valued by society."³⁷ Recent research thus carries forward the tradition initiated by early realist studies, which define prestige as a state's reputation for power—or more precisely, as a state's reputation for military strength.³⁸ In particular, existing research mentions two types of state attributes as symbols of international status: (1) most often, scholars mention material resources such as economic, military, or technological capabilities, as well as nuclear weapons;³⁹ and (2) less often, scholars mention nonmaterial factors or fundamental values such as political system or ideology, culture or civilization, or "moral superiority."⁴⁰ According to the conventional approach, then, status is a function of the qualities of states—such that the larger a state's share of certain attributes, the higher its standing should be.

In other words, IR scholars usually rely on an *individualist framework* to account for inequality among states, assuming that states enjoy differential access to privileges because they differ in salient

³⁵Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 7.

³⁶Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014, 373.

³⁷Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 69.

³⁸Gilpin 1981, 30-31; Morgenthau 2006, 89-90. See also Wohlforth 2009, 39. These scholars tend to favor the term "prestige," sometimes using the terms "status" and "prestige" interchangeably—as I do in this chapter. But in the rest of the book, I use the term status, which is more in line with contemporary research in the social sciences more broadly.

³⁹Art 1980; Gilpin 1981; Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010; Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014; Luard 1976; Neumann 2008, 2014; O'Neill 2006; Schweller 1999; Thompson 2014; Wohlforth 2009.

⁴⁰Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010; Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014; Luard 1976; Neumann 2008, 2014; Schweller 1999; Thompson 2014; Wohlforth 2009.

qualities.⁴¹ This assumption resembles the idea of meritocracy, whereby actors obtain differential access to opportunities or resources because of their individual talent, ability, or effort.⁴² An individualist framework, which accounts for inequality based on the properties of actors, contrasts with a structural framework, which accounts for inequality based on the positions that actors occupy in a social system. In addition, IR scholars often combine an individualist framework with a *materialist approach*, assuming that status depends mostly on the possession of material resources. According to realist scholars, certain states become great powers—enjoying special rights and responsibilities in the international system—because their material capabilities surpass those of other states.⁴³ And while the criteria used to identify great powers sometimes remain implicit, scholars from different research traditions typically mention military and economic capabilities as fundamental attributes (often, necessary conditions) for major power status.⁴⁴ Coupling an individualist framework with a materialist approach, most scholars thus treat status as a function of disparities in the qualities of states, and especially in their material capabilities.⁴⁵

Although status is a social concept, most studies treat it as a function of the qualities of states. To be sure, the conventional approach acknowledges the social nature of status. Landmark studies of status, such as those by Larson and colleagues, observe that status “cannot be attained unilaterally; it must be recognized by others”⁴⁶ and that status “reflects *collective* beliefs, transcending individual

⁴¹See Gould 2002, 1144.

⁴²Individualist frameworks are commonly used in IR, where they are often called reductionism, as well as in the social sciences more broadly. As Goddard and Nexon note, “The majority of theories in the social sciences adopt a reductionist approach to the Hobbesian problem, explaining social order—international or otherwise—with reference to the properties and interactions of its component parts.” Goddard and Nexon 2005, 12. See also Jervis 1997, 12-13; Waltz 1979, 18-19.

⁴³Morgenthau 1948, Ch. 25; Waltz 1979, 88, 109.

⁴⁴See, for example, Bull 2002, 195; Levy 1983, 9-16; Buzan 2004, 69-72; Neumann 2008; Schweller 1993. Far from unique to realist approaches, materialism is a common assumption in IR research. See Gilpin 1981, 93-94; Wallerstein 1984, 5. See also Baldwin 2002.

⁴⁵As Wendt notes, this approach stems from the view that, because no supranational authority stands above states, international relations resemble a competitive, self-help system. See Wendt 1992, Wendt and Friedheim 1995, 78. Yet, this assumption persists even in studies that treat international relations as hierarchic rather than anarchic. The measure of hierarchy most widely used in IR, for example, disaggregates hierarchy into two dimensions: (1) security hierarchy, measured by troop deployments and alliance portfolios; and (2) economic hierarchy, measured by exchange rate regimes and diversification in trade partners. See Lake 2009, Ch. 3. As such, most scholars treat international hierarchy as a ranking of states along certain attributes or issue areas, especially military and economic.

⁴⁶Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 10.

state perceptions.”⁴⁷ Likewise, Dafoe and colleagues posit that status involves second-order beliefs (or beliefs about what others believe) and depends on the recognition of others.⁴⁸ But despite acknowledging the social nature of status, most studies do not explore this aspect in depth. By treating status as a function of the qualities of states, the conventional approach is ultimately inconsistent with its own acknowledgement of status as a social phenomenon.

But as I discuss next, theories of status that begin and end with state attributes leave important questions unanswered.

1.1.1 Why Do Status and Material Attributes Often Mismatch?

To begin, the assumption that status is a function of a state’s material capabilities contradicts important empirical patterns. When examining the historical record, we find prominent examples of countries that failed to achieve recognition despite their material capabilities. Wilhelmine Germany is a case in point. At the turn of the twentieth century, Germany’s material capabilities—including its manufacturing output, share of world trade, and land forces—rivalled those of neighboring countries.⁴⁹ In addition, Germany’s colonial possessions and naval capabilities were increasingly perceived as a challenge to British hegemony. And yet, despite marked improvements in Germany’s material conditions, its decision-makers continued to feel that the country received less than its “fair share” of recognition.⁵⁰ Similarly, significant ink has been spent on Russia’s dissatisfaction, since the time of Peter the Great, with the recognition it receives from other countries, especially Western powers.⁵¹ By the end of the Second World War, Russia had conventional forces large enough to cover half of Europe. During the Cold War, moreover, Moscow instituted pro-Soviet regimes throughout Eastern Europe, acquired a sizable nuclear arsenal, and often led the space race against the United States. And yet, despite repeated showings of military strength, Russian decision-makers continued to feel that Western countries did not recognize Russia as an equal.

⁴⁷Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 8. See also Renshon 2017, 21.

⁴⁸Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014, 374-76. See also O’Neill 2001, 193.

⁴⁹O’Nea 2014, 144-51.

⁵⁰Renshon 2017, 182-220. See also Barnhart 2016; Murray 2010.

⁵¹Clunan 2009; Larson and Shevchenko 2003, 2010; Neumann 2008; Ringmar 2002.

In fact, multiple studies indicate precisely that material capabilities are not a sufficient condition for international recognition. The mismatch between material resources and status is well documented, for example, in studies of the relationship between status dissatisfaction and war.⁵² As these studies show, states are more prone to conflict when they receive less recognition than their material capabilities would warrant. That is, despite assuming a causal link between material capabilities and status, this research deals precisely with states' difficulties in converting their material capabilities into status.⁵³ Similarly, studies that draw on Hegel's struggle for recognition emphasize the disjuncture between a state's material capabilities and the recognition it receives from other countries. These studies show that, even though decision-makers from Wilhelmine Germany or Soviet Russia felt that their country deserved more recognition as its material conditions improved, other countries refrained from recognizing either country as a great power.⁵⁴

Other cases illustrate well the disjuncture between status and material capabilities. Take the example of North Korea. Even though IR scholars traditionally think of nuclear weapons as one of the accoutrements of great power status, the acquisition of nuclear weapons seems to have consolidated North Korea's status as a pariah state, rather than earning it the status of a great power. North Korea may receive attention, and even gain leverage in negotiations, because of its nuclear weapons. But the attention given to North Korea is best described as the attention given to a low-status actor who misbehaves, rather than the attention given to a major power.⁵⁵ The established powers do not invite Pyongyang to sit at the main table and help manage international relations. Much to the contrary; high-status states do not even hold high-level bilateral meetings with Pyongyang. Repeated U.S. administrations denied North Korea a bilateral summit until 2018, when

⁵²Doran, Hill, and Mladenka 1979; East 1972; Gochman 1980; Maoz 2010; Midlarsky 1975; Ray 1974; Renshon 2017; Volgy and Mayhall 1995; Wallace 1973.

⁵³The mismatch between material capabilities and status is sometimes explained away in this literature as a problem of perceptual bias or incomplete information about material capabilities. However, there is neither an explicit theory about this, nor empirical tests to support this assumption.

⁵⁴Murray 2018, 87-140; Ringmar 2002, 127-29.

⁵⁵Although high status often commands attention, we should not conflate status with attention. As Magee and Galinsky note, the two constructs operate at different levels of complexity. As a process related to actor perception, attention is a more basic phenomenon than status. Giving attention to an actor is the same as taking notice or interest in them. But in and of itself, attention does not imply high status; in fact, low-status actors sometimes receive considerable attention, as the North Korean example illustrates. See Magee and Galinsky 2008, 360-61.

the heads of government from each country held their first-ever face-to-face meeting.⁵⁶ Besides Donald Trump, no other Western head of state or government has ever participated in a bilateral meeting with a North Korean leader. And since Xi Jinping assumed power in China in 2013, even the high-level visits between North Korea and China—traditionally considered one of North Korea’s closest allies—have reached a historical low.⁵⁷ Notwithstanding its nuclear weapons, North Korea remains at the margins of the international system.

If material capabilities do not ensure international recognition on the one hand, neither does international recognition require material capabilities, as some notable examples indicate. At the end of the Second World War, France received from the great powers precisely the invitation denied to North Korea—to sit at the main table and help manage international relations—despite having just been liberated by the Allied powers from years of German military occupation. As France became one of the five permanent members in the newly-created United Nations Security Council (UNSC), it was weak by any material metric. As Heimann notes:

France’s resounding defeat by the German army, its humiliating surrender, and its occupation were clear evidence of the final descent of what once had been Europe’s dominant power. Materially, France lay in ruins in the aftermath of liberation, with nearly its entire heavy industry destroyed or looted by the Germans. Militarily, France was a ‘virtual pygmy’. The French army was reduced to eight divisions, equipped entirely with American weapons. Its economy was shattered and its institutions in chaos. (...) The French nation in 1945 was deemed to be ‘internally divided, economically ruined and institutionally feeble.’⁵⁸

Based on material factors alone, few would have expected France to acquire the privileges it did in the post-war order. What is more, the military occupation by Nazi Germany would not be France’s last military defeat during this period. When fighting without help from its allies, France

⁵⁶*Council on Foreign Relations*, “Timeline: North Korean Nuclear Negotiations, 1985-2019,” <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations>, accessed 3 November 2021.

⁵⁷*Center for Strategic and International Studies*, “Dataset: China-North Korea High Level Visits Since 1953,” <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/china-dprk-high-level-visits-since-1953/>, accessed 3 November 2021.

⁵⁸Heimann 2015*b*, 185-86. See also de Gaulle 1956, 81-82.

would sustain unexpected losses in subsequent conflicts against smaller adversaries, both in Indochina (1954) and Algeria (1962). Yet historically, France is not alone in achieving a standing disproportionate to its material capabilities after a major war. Other countries—like China in 1945, or Italy and Japan in 1919—have similarly punched above their material weight during constitutional moments of the modern international order.⁵⁹ As Morgenthau notes, we observe a similar trend in the Concert of Europe: countries like Portugal, Spain, and Sweden were accorded the diplomatic rank of great powers in the Congress of Vienna (1815) only “out of traditional courtesy,” rather than because their material capabilities justified such recognition.⁶⁰

So what explains the observed mismatch between a state’s material capabilities and the recognition it receives from other countries? If status is not a direct function of a state’s material capabilities, how do states ultimately achieve status?

1.1.2 Why Do Certain Attributes Matter for Status?

In addition, the conventional approach leaves a second question unanswered: Why do certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition? IR scholars often emphasize material capabilities as status symbols. Behind this view is the often implicit assumption that material capabilities matter for status recognition because of their functional value, or because of what they enable the owner to do. This assumption is formulated most explicitly by Gilpin, to whom the value of prestige lies in allowing a state to compel or deter others without using force.⁶¹ According to Gilpin, the value of prestige (defined as a state’s reputation for material capabilities) lies in determining bargaining outcomes short of war, and sometimes even short of explicit threats of violence. Similarly, Morgenthau claims that the Cold War “was fought primarily with the weapons of prestige,” as the U.S. and the Soviet Union sought to assert their relative superiority without paying the costs of war.⁶² Following this line of reasoning, the higher a state’s reputation for military strength, the less other states will

⁵⁹See Buzan 2004, 62; Heimann 2015b, 186.

⁶⁰Morgenthau 1948, 270.

⁶¹Gilpin 1981, 31.

⁶²Morgenthau 2006, 92.

be willing to take to the battlefield their disputes with it. By signaling a state's coercive capabilities, prestige thus dissuades weaker states from challenging stronger ones.

That is, the connection between material capabilities and status relies on the traditional assumption that, because no supranational authority stands above states, force serves as the last resort in international relations—in line with the maxim from Thucydides' Melian Dialogue whereby “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”⁶³ This very assumption is present in Gilpin's work. While some parts of *War and Change* stress the similarity between domestic and international politics, tracing a parallel between authority and prestige, other parts of the book echo the conventional view of anarchy as the distinctive feature of international politics. As Gilpin claims, “International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy.”⁶⁴ He thus later conjectures that, were Thucydides to be “placed in our midst, he would (following an appropriate short course in geography, economics and modern technology) have a little trouble in understanding the power struggle of our age.”⁶⁵ In this view, military capabilities provide the ultimate measure of state power under anarchy.

However, the assumption that material capabilities matter for status recognition because of their functional value contradicts two important findings from existing studies. First, scholars typically notice that countries have acquired military equipment to “swagger,” in an attempt to achieve prestige, precisely because such equipment provides little strategic utility.⁶⁶ Wilhelmine Germany, for example, built a “luxury fleet” against its security interests in continental Europe.⁶⁷ More recently, China directed vast resources into aircraft carriers despite their limited strategic use.⁶⁸ And as Gi-

⁶³Thucydides 1951. This assumption is perhaps elaborated most explicitly in Waltz's work. To begin, Waltz posits a sharp distinction between domestic politics, where authority is the main ordering principle; and international politics, where anarchy is the main ordering principle. To explain how order results in the absence of a central authority, he then proposes an “analogy to microeconomic theory,” which “describes how an order is spontaneously formed from the self-interested acts and interactions of individual units.” See Waltz 1979, 88-89. When no central government can settle disputes, Waltz argues, force becomes the coin of the realm: “there is then constant possibility that conflicts will be settled by force.” See Waltz 1959, 188. Wars reveal information about military capabilities, telling apart the weak from the strong; and in a self-help system, states that fail to balance against threats risk falling by the wayside. See Blainey 1973; Waltz 1979, 112-18; but see also Fazal 2004.

⁶⁴Gilpin 1981, 7.

⁶⁵Gilpin 1981, 211; see also Gilpin 1981, 227-228.

⁶⁶See Art 1973, 23-24, 36-37; Art 1980, 10-11; Morgenthau 1962, 303.

⁶⁷Art 1973; Murray 2010. See also Herwig 1980.

⁶⁸Ross 2009; Pu and Schweller 2014, 152-59.

lady notes, countries like Brazil and France have spent a sizable portion of their naval budgets to acquire one aircraft carrier each, even though at least three carriers are typically needed to ensure that one carrier will be operational at any given time. Moreover, carrier owners usually lack the resources to properly maintain a carrier or to make it fully operational. Outdated and poorly equipped, most of the existing carriers today are unable to project power commensurate with their costs.⁶⁹ Status-seeking states invest scarce resources in actions that provide little strategic utility, from developing space programs⁷⁰ or nuclear weapons⁷¹ to buying fighter jets.⁷² But if status-seekers do not make choices based on strategic value, why do they invest in certain attributes?

In addition, the assumption that material capabilities matter for status recognition because of their functional value contradicts a second important pattern: status symbols comprise not only material resources, but also fundamental values—such as political system, ideology, or culture. As multiple studies indicate, high status nowadays requires adopting fundamental values such as liberal democracy.⁷³ As Morgenthau himself argues, the policy of prestige became particularly important during the Cold War era, when the struggle for power between Washington and Moscow turned largely into a struggle for the minds of people around the world. In Morgenthau's words, "the Cold War [was] fought primarily in terms of competition between two rival political philosophies, economic systems, and ways of life."⁷⁴ However, a materialist approach cannot explain why nonmaterial attributes matter for status recognition, since there is no direct correspondence between a state's fundamental values and its ability to deter or compel other states.

Alternatively, some scholars argue that certain state attributes, like nuclear weapons, symbolize status because they are costly or hard to obtain. By acquiring rare or costly attributes, a state thus signals its superior military or economic capabilities. Based on this logic, high-status states have an incentive to restrict access to status-symbolizing attributes: If such attributes became widespread,

⁶⁹Gilady 2018, 69-88.

⁷⁰Gilady 2018; Kinsella and Chima 2001; Musgrave and Nexon 2018; Paikowsky 2017; Van Dyke 1964.

⁷¹Hecht 2009; Hironaka 2017; Kinsella and Chima 2001; Miller 2014*a*; Sagan 1997.

⁷²Eyre and Suchman 1996; Martin and Schmidt 1987.

⁷³Neumann 2008, 2014; Pouliot 2014; Pouliot 2016, 79.

⁷⁴Morgenthau 2006, 92.

they would no longer be informative as signals of high status.⁷⁵ But again, while this logic seems to apply well to certain material attributes like nuclear weapons, it is less applicable to nonmaterial attributes like liberal democracy. On the contrary: Rather than restricting access to their values, dominant countries often attempt to diffuse them among the subordinate. As Gilpin notes, “every dominant state (...) promotes a religion or ideology that justifies its domination over other states.”⁷⁶ In the contemporary era, for example, repeated U.S. administrations have adopted a policy of promoting democracy abroad. Washington has spent significant resources on promoting democratic values, rather than restricting access to them.⁷⁷ As such, in and of itself, scarcity is insufficient to explain why certain state attributes matter for status recognition.

So why do actors consider nonmaterial attributes—or fundamental values like democracy, economic liberalism, or human rights—as symbols of international status? More broadly, why do certain state attributes (but not others) become relevant for status recognition?

1.1.3 How Are Attributes Converted into Status?

Finally, we still understand little about how state attributes are converted into status. Even if we assume that a state’s attributes determine its status, it is not clear how different attributes would combine to produce status. Multiple attributes are considered relevant for status recognition. So what is the status of states that rank differently across dimensions? For example, does a country like Germany or Japan—which is wealthy but invests relatively little into military capabilities—rank higher or lower in status than a country like Russia, which has less than half of the respective gross national products of Germany and Japan but outspends either country in the military area? Similarly, while alliances and trade flows may reflect states’ positions in the military and economic arenas respectively, it is not clear how these different positions would translate status.

Existing studies usually provide two answers to this question: either (1) they aggregate states’ attributes or positions across dimensions to estimate their status; or (2) they compare states based

⁷⁵See Gilady 2018; O’Neill 2006.

⁷⁶Gilpin 1981, 30.

⁷⁷See Gordon 2020; Owen IV 2010.

on each dimension separately. However, either answer relies more on personal taste than on theoretical considerations or empirical evidence. On the one hand, the aggregation of rankings across dimensions depends heavily on assumptions about the relative weight of different rank-dimensions that seem hard to justify a priori. On the other hand, the decision to compare states based on a given dimension likewise depends heavily on the researcher's assumptions about which dimensions matter for status recognition. Yet, such assumptions seem hard to justify a priori, in the absence of clear theoretical considerations or empirical evidence. Waltz himself warns against the dangers of this approach—which tends to rely on the researcher's biases, rather than on the facts on the ground.⁷⁸ Moreover, as I discuss below, this approach goes against relevant research in related fields, which demonstrates that people form impressions about others based on multiple dimensions (or traits) simultaneously, rather than based on a single dimension separately.

In sum, theories of status that begin and end with state attributes leave important questions unanswered. First, why is there a consistent mismatch between the material capabilities of states and the recognition they receive? Second, why do certain state attributes (but not others) become relevant for status recognition? Third, how are state attributes converted into status? That is, what is the relationship between attributes and status? Fourth, and more broadly, if status is not a direct function of states' qualities, how do states ultimately achieve status?

1.2 The Argument

In this book, I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than directly on the qualities of states or the things that they have. To understand how international hierarchies of status form, I trace their roots back to key transformations that magnified global inequality in the nineteenth century, a foundational period for the contemporary international order. As Europeans made a turn to imperialism, they increasingly relied on a self-proclaimed standard of civilization that distinguished between "civilized" Europeans entitled to indivisible sovereignty

⁷⁸Waltz 1979, 130.

on the one hand, and “uncivilized” non-Europeans unable to govern themselves on the other hand. Status distinctions thus served to legitimate inequality, drawing a boundary between those states deemed competent—and therefore deserving of privileges such as indivisible sovereignty—and the rest of the world. Once established, moreover, status distinctions reinforced inequality, independently from material conditions, via cumulative advantage mechanisms: the higher standing a state enjoys, the more it attracts additional recognition. It is no coincidence that, to this day, status evaluations rely on values associated with the West.

My argument couples the concept of status with assumptions that emphasize its distinctively social nature. In particular, I depart from the conventional approach in two ways. First, I develop theory using a *relational framework*—which ascribes inequality to the positions that actors occupy in a social arrangement, rather than to the qualities of actors.⁷⁹ I argue that states enjoy differential access to privileges in the international system to the extent that they occupy an advantageous social position. High-status states enjoy considerable advantages in maintaining high status, which result from their social position rather than directly from their attributes. Second, I focus on *symbolic* aspects, rather than material factors, to account for status inequalities among states. While status distinctions may initially stem from material arrangements, as in the case of nineteenth-century imperialism, status involves primarily symbolic factors.

In particular, my argument involves two new propositions about the relationship between status and inequality. First, I argue that status does much more than signal a state’s coercive capabilities; crucially, status *legitimizes* inequality.⁸⁰ As Tilly notes, unequal relations based purely on coercion are inherently unstable, as they ultimately give rise to contention or struggles between dominant and subordinate actors.⁸¹ Even an exploitative relationship like colonization cannot be sustained based on coercion alone, since such an arrangement would render domination too costly in the long run. To become durable, inequality requires some form of legitimation. Status distinctions

⁷⁹See Gould 2002, 1144. Relatively more common in sociology, this perspective is present in relational or network analytic approaches to international politics. See Goddard 2009; Jackson and Nexon 1999; McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018; Nexon 2010; Oatley et al. 2013.

⁸⁰See Jackman 1994; Ridgeway and Walker 1995; Ridgeway 2014, 3-4.

⁸¹Tilly 1998, 86-91. See also Weber 1978, 213, Goode 1978, Ch. 6.

play an important role in this context: they establish a relation of superiority and inferiority between types of actors.⁸² Based on status distinctions, certain types are presumed to be “better” or superior to others. By creating categorical differences among actors, status distinctions justify why certain types are entitled to privileges that the other types lack.

Second, I argue that, once status distinctions are established, status *reinforces* inequality, independently from material conditions, via cumulative advantage mechanisms.⁸³ To begin, consensus effects shape status recognition: the more a state receives recognition, the more others deem it worthy of recognition.⁸⁴ In addition, high-status states enjoy privileges that beget more status: they act as standard-setters, shaping the criteria for status recognition, and as gatekeepers, shaping recognition decisions.⁸⁵ Finally, status distinctions involve social closure—or the establishment of a boundary between a status group and outsiders.⁸⁶ As such, status distinctions encourage solidarity among high-status states but undermine solidarity among low-status states. While well-connected states attract additional recognition, sparsely-connected states do not.

By coupling the concept of status with a set of assumptions that highlight the concept’s distinctive features, this study offers new answers to fundamental questions about status that the conventional approach insufficiently addresses.

1.2.1 Status Depends on Relational Processes

To begin, my theoretical framework addresses the question of why material capabilities and status often mismatch. I argue that status depends on a state’s position in a social arrangement. Therefore, status does not go hand in hand with state attributes, including their material capabilities. Because status depends on social recognition, it depends on systematic social processes that cannot be re-

⁸²See Lamont 2012; Lamont and Fournier 1992.

⁸³See Smith and Faris 2015. Cumulative advantage is also known as positive feedback, the “Matthew Effect” (whereby the rich tend to get richer), or preferential attachment (whereby popular actors tend to receive more ties); in addition, it involves the dynamic of increasing returns that defines path dependence. See, respectively, Jervis 1997; Merton 1968; Newman 2001; Pierson 2000.

⁸⁴See Betancourt, Kovács, and Otner 2018; Gould 2002; Salganik, Dodds, and Watts 2006.

⁸⁵See Bourdieu 1993; Swartz 1997.

⁸⁶Weber 1978, 43-46.

duced to the qualities of states.⁸⁷ To begin, status results from a process of social closure, which involves two aspects. First, social closure involves connectedness: high-status actors share dense relations among themselves but sparse relations with outsiders.⁸⁸ Therefore, a state's existing relations influence its propensity to receive recognition. Second, social closure involves commonality: high-status actors differentiate themselves from outsiders by adopting a distinctive way of life.⁸⁹ Therefore, the relevance of a given attribute for status recognition is socially defined, rather than intrinsic to that attribute.⁹⁰ In addition, popularity itself brings status. Because status depends on peer attribution, it is subject to consensus effects: the more a state is recognized, the more others deem it worthy of recognition.⁹¹

These relational processes account for some puzzling cases from a conventional standpoint. On the one hand, states at the margins of the international system struggle to earn recognition, even despite changes in their qualities. Despite acquiring nuclear weapons, for example, North Korea did not become a great power because it maintains only tenuous connections with other states—including most recently China, one of its traditional allies. On the other hand, these relational processes imply that states at the core of the international system enjoy considerable advantage in gaining recognition, simply because of their social position. Despite its material weakness at the end of the Second World War, for example, France maintained its high standing by virtue of its relations with the Allied states. As these cases illustrate, status depends on a state's position in a social arrangement, rather than directly on their qualities.

1.2.2 Symbolic Value Depends on the Social Context

In addition, my theoretical framework addresses a second question the conventional approach leaves unanswered: Why do certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition? I ar-

⁸⁷Previous work suggests the existence of relational patterns in status relations, but does not systematically investigate these patterns. See, for example, Miller et al. 2015, 786-87.

⁸⁸Abbott 1995; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002.

⁸⁹Weber 1978, 932-33; Elias and Scotson 1994; Merton 1972; Tilly 2005.

⁹⁰Mark, Smith-Lovin, and Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway 1991; Ridgeway and Correll 2006.

⁹¹See Correll et al. 2017; Ridgeway 2014.

gue that state attributes matter for status recognition because of their symbolic value, which depends on the social context. For a given attribute to symbolize status, actors need to share the belief that it represents a given social standing.⁹² In particular, state attributes become relevant for status recognition when actors share the belief that such attributes symbolize a latent quality: state competence.⁹³ To explain why certain state attributes matter for status recognition, we thus need to understand how prevailing conceptions of state competence form, depending on who the high-status states are and what they do. High-status states act like standard setters, shaping definitions of state competence in a given era; and as gatekeepers, shaping group boundaries. Prevailing conceptions of state competence become more malleable during critical junctures like major wars, when the way of life associated with the winning state(s) shapes the standards that will be used to evaluate state competence thereafter. As such, critical junctures do more than establish a new pecking order: crucially, they update the standards that inform status recognition among states.

When it comes to its treatment of state attributes, my theoretical framework thus departs from the conventional approach in three ways. First, because status depends on estimations of social honor that may be connected to any kind of symbol, my argument accommodates both material and nonmaterial attributes as symbols of international status. Second, my argument implies that material capabilities impact recognition not because of their functional value, but rather because of their symbolic value (or what they communicate about state competence). Third, because status recognition depends on prevailing conceptions of state competence that change over time, state attributes play a secondary role in the process of status recognition, as I discuss next.

1.2.3 State Attributes Play a Secondary Role

Finally, my theoretical framework addresses a third question the conventional approach leaves unanswered: What is the relationship between state attributes and status? I argue that the relevance of a given attribute for status recognition is socially defined: attributes matter because of

⁹²See Dittmar 1992, 6, 79; Goffman 1951, 294-95; O'Neill 2001, 241; Pouliot 2016, 81.

⁹³See Cuddy et al. 2009; Fiske and Cuddy 2005.

their symbolic value, which depends on the social context. In particular, the social context mediates the relevance of state attributes via three mechanisms. First, it is attribute similarity, rather than the possession of attributes per se, that drives recognition among states. This happens because status distinctions involve social closure: By adopting a distinctive way of life, high-status states differentiate themselves from outsiders. Second, status recognition is based on a way of life, rather than on separate attributes like nuclear weapons. To evoke status recognition, state attributes need to effectively represent the way of life associated with high status. Finally, the relevance of state attributes for status recognition changes over time, along with the prevailing conceptions of state competence. In particular, because high-status states act like standard-setters and gatekeepers, it matters who they are and how they behave.

1.3 Contributions

This book makes four distinctive contributions to existing scholarship. To begin, while existing research treats status as an actor motivation, this book is the first to investigate the sources of status, focusing on international relations rather than the state level. As the first sustained, book-length effort to address the question of how countries achieve status, this book makes original contributions from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoint: it develops a theoretical framework that highlights the social nature of status and, accordingly, uses social network analysis tools ideally suited to the empirical study of status. By integrating an interdisciplinary body of research, moreover, this book brings research on status in IR in line with research in the social sciences more broadly. As a result, the book offers new lessons in important areas of research that are rarely linked to status—such as international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions. By establishing status as a distinctive phenomenon both conceptually and empirically, this book enables us to consider the key role that status plays in international politics.

1.3.1 Investigating the Sources of Status

To begin, this book addresses a new and noteworthy question: How do states achieve status? While existing studies treat status as a motivation behind foreign policy behavior, we still understand little about the sources of international status. Scholars traditionally assume that status is a function of the qualities of states, but do not put this assumption to the test. The conventional approach relies on restrictive assumptions about which state attributes determine status, typically emphasizing military and economic capabilities to the detriment of other factors. By choosing certain state attributes a priori, however, scholars cannot assess whether these attributes actually drive status recognition. So how can we know if decision-makers value the same attributes that scholars consider important for status recognition—or if state attributes determine status to begin with?

In this book, I move beyond ranking states based on attributes to develop and test hypotheses about status attainment in the international system. To be empirically tenable, the sources of status need to be subject to falsification, rather than assumed a priori. Instead of taking actors' claims to status at face value, I assess the empirical validity of these claims. The fact that states are more prone to conflict when their recognition falls below their material capabilities, for example, tells us that some actors think that status should be based on military capabilities. Yet, it does not tell us that status is in fact based on military capabilities. The study of status calls for an empirical strategy that moves beyond commonsense assumptions to hypothesis testing. Because status is historically contingent, scholars also need to develop strategies to detect when the conditions for status attainment have changed. While researchers may have strong priors about which state attributes matter for status recognition, it is important to update these priors over time.

1.3.2 A Consistently Relational Approach

In addition, this book makes a second contribution: it adopts a consistently relational approach to the study of status. Although status is a relational concept, existing studies treat it as a function of a state's attributes. In Tilly's words, previous research conjures an image of individual actors

“with variable attributes who pass through a screening process that sorts them according to those attributes into positions that give them differential rewards.”⁹⁴ In this view, states are sorted into social positions, such as great or emerging power, based on their qualities or the things they have. Empirically, scholars thus study status as a state property, measuring it by ranking states based on their attributes. Many studies measure status by ranking states based on certain characteristics chosen a priori, especially their economic or military capabilities. Another common approach measures status based on the proportion of diplomatic representations received. However, diplomatic exchange is a type of social relation, subject to the same relational processes that shape other kinds of social relations. By treating diplomatic exchange like a state attribute, researchers discard important information about the structure of diplomatic relations—including who sends a diplomatic representation to whom, what their previous history of relations (or lack thereof) is, and what ties they share with third parties. Without this information, it is not possible to examine empirically the relational processes that drive status recognition among states.

The conventional approach of treating status as a function of states’ qualities results in three limitations. First, this approach leads to *generalized fetishism*—that is, the act of mistaking social relations for actors’ properties.⁹⁵ By treating status as a function of state attributes, IR scholars equate status with the possession of status symbols. However, status is not reducible to symbols. A symbol is an entity that stands for another entity, but should not be mistaken for it.⁹⁶ For instance, even though a flag represents a country, no one would claim that it is the country. In fact, the symbolic value of a given state attribute depends on the social context. A given attribute only matters for status recognition if actors share the belief that it symbolizes status.⁹⁷ Status symbols are part of a social, communicative process: they work as symbolic mediators in the relation between self and other.⁹⁸ By conflating status with the possession of status symbols, the conventional approach neglects to specify the mechanisms whereby state attributes are converted into status.

⁹⁴Tilly 1998, 21-22.

⁹⁵Elster 1976, 252.

⁹⁶Dittmar 1992, 6; Goffman 1951, 294-95.

⁹⁷Dittmar 1992, 6, 79; Goffman 1951, 294-95.

⁹⁸Dittmar 1992, 9.

Second, the conventional approach leads to *material reductionism*, since it often equates status with the possession of material resources. Influential scholars in the realist tradition define prestige as a state's reputation for military strength.⁹⁹ Based on this notion, studies of status inconsistency and war define status dissatisfaction as a mismatch between a state's material capabilities and the recognition it receives.¹⁰⁰ This perspective ultimately reduces status dissatisfaction to a problem of perceptual bias or incomplete information about military capabilities. While some might claim that this perspective involves a social element (since it assumes that military capabilities are estimated collectively), such an element is treated as a nuisance rather than as an object of substantive interest. In this perspective, status refers to military capabilities plus an error term; if military capability estimations were accurate, the concept of status would no longer be needed. Moreover, such an element is more cognitive than social per se—as it focuses on subjective perceptions at the actor level, rather than on social processes that take place among actors.

From a theoretical standpoint, this approach is dissatisfactory for two reasons. To begin, the observed mismatch between status and material capabilities is substantively important: as many studies indicate, states are more prone to conflict when they receive less recognition than expected based on their material capabilities. Yet, by assuming that status is a function of material capabilities, scholars cannot explain why the two factors often mismatch in practice. Existing research ultimately treats cases of status dissatisfaction as empirical anomalies, rather than as information about how the world actually works. In addition, by assuming that status refers to a state's military capabilities plus an error term, this perspective advances a concept of status that does not differ enough from material capabilities to prove analytically useful. Because status remains insufficiently differentiated from military capabilities, it is unclear why the concept of status is needed in the first place.¹⁰¹ In fact, a term like “estimated military capability” would be more accurate than status in this case. By reducing status to material capabilities, this perspective strips away the very aspects that make the

⁹⁹Gilpin 1981, 31; Morgenthau 1948, 52, 55; Wohlforth 2009, 39.

¹⁰⁰East 1972; Midlarsky 1975; Renshon 2017. While the two strands of research (early realist studies and studies of the relationship between status dissatisfaction and war) differ in their methodological orientation, they share common assumptions—emphasizing state attributes (and especially material capabilities) in their treatment of status.

¹⁰¹Clunan 2014, 274.

concept useful analytically. Once stripped of its distinctive feature—its social nature—the concept of status has limited usefulness for IR theories.

Finally, the conventional approach incurs a *fallacy of composition*, since it assumes that we can study status in the international system simply by examining the system's component parts (states).¹⁰² In particular, previous studies assume that we can understand how countries achieve status simply by examining either the qualities of high-status states or the behavior of status-seeking states. First, because high-status states have certain attributes, scholars assume that status depends on these attributes. As Tilly notes, “individualistic analyses of inequality ... lend themselves nicely to retroactive rationalization; confronted with unequal outcomes, their user searches the past for individual differences in skill, knowledge, determination, or moral worth that must explain differences in rewards.”¹⁰³ From this perspective, status achievement becomes an actor-level phenomenon, which depends on the individual merit of a given state rather than on the social environment. Second, a fallacy of composition likewise afflicts those approaches that explain status attainment based on the behavior of status-seeking states. The key finding from status inconsistency studies—that states are more prone to conflict when there is a mismatch between their material capabilities and the recognition they receive—is often taken as evidence that status depends on material capabilities. That is, because some actors think that status should be based on military capabilities, scholars conclude that status is in fact based on military capabilities. In other words, this perspective makes the faulty assumption that outcomes follow from actors' intentions—even though in complex systems like international politics, actions often have unintended consequences.¹⁰⁴

To address these limitations, I adopt in this book a consistently relational approach to status. To begin, I develop a network theory of status: I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than on the qualities of states.¹⁰⁵ To explain how states achieve status, I theorize the underlying relational effects that drive recognition in the international system. I argue that the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. Because status

¹⁰²See Jervis 1997, 12-13.

¹⁰³Tilly 1998, 33.

¹⁰⁴Jervis 1997, 61-68; Schelling 1978.

¹⁰⁵See Borgatti and Halgin 2011.

distinctions involve social closure, a state's existing relations influence its ability to achieve status. That is, connectedness itself brings status. Moreover, consensus effects shape status recognition: the more a state is recognized, the more others deem it worthy of recognition. As such, popularity itself brings recognition. Finally, the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition is socially defined: state attributes matter for recognition because of their symbolic value, which depends on the social context. My theoretical framework implies a switch from a substantialist perspective to a relational one—as I take as units of inquiry not self-subsistent or preformed entities (substances), but rather unfolding, dynamic relations whose changing meaning affects the very identity of actors.¹⁰⁶ In my argument, relations come before states: status emerges from the way state relations are configured over time, rather than from the internal attributes of states.¹⁰⁷ That is, status emerges from relational processes that take place among, rather than inside, states.

My argument implies that, to understand how states achieve status, we need to examine the configuration of state relations, rather than merely ranking states based on their attributes. In line with my theoretical framework, I adopt a relational empirical strategy. Because status depends on recognition, I examine empirically the factors that produce such recognition. Since embassies express recognition among sovereign states, I use embassy exchange data as a proxy measure of status recognition. But instead of collapsing these data to the state level, by counting the proportion of embassies received by each state, I preserve the relational structure of the data. My analysis incorporates information about the structure of diplomatic relations that previous studies discard. Using this information, I examine how the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment, detecting relational patterns that previous studies mention in passing but do not examine empirically. My empirical approach provides the added advantage of generalizability. Because it does not depend on assumptions about which state attributes matter for recognition, my approach can be used to study the sources of international status during any historical period.

More broadly, this study contributes to existing knowledge by showing that status is a distinctive phenomenon both conceptually and empirically—and, as such, is a useful concept for theories of

¹⁰⁶See Emirbayer 1997, 282-91.

¹⁰⁷See Jackson and Nexon 1999, 304-7.

international relations. Although status appeared in two strands of research in IR during the twentieth century, research on status eventually fizzled out. Insufficiently differentiated from material capabilities, status became a residual category. Compared to the first wave of status research in IR, the current wave seems to be at a lower risk of meeting the same fate, since it provides cumulative evidence that status motivates state behavior. At the same time, status has not reached its full potential in IR research yet. By studying status in its own right—as something distinguishable from material capabilities and other state attributes—I hope to show why it matters for international politics. The concept of status can achieve its full potential in IR scholarship when we give due attention to its distinctive feature: its fundamentally social nature. By doing so, we can consider not only how status may increase a state’s propensity for conflict, but also how it plays a key role in international cooperation and the maintenance of international order, as I discuss below.

1.3.3 An Interdisciplinary Approach

In addition, this book makes a third contribution to the study of status: it adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating strands of research that rarely come into dialogue. Existing research on status relies on assumptions that, though commonly adopted in IR, have limited usefulness for the study of status. To begin, status does not fit well with a materialist approach: as Ridgeway notes, “status, in contrast to resources and power, is based primarily in *cultural* beliefs rather than directly on material arrangements. That is, status is based on widely shared beliefs about the social categories or ‘types’ of people that are ranked by society as more esteemed and respected compared to others.”¹⁰⁸ Neither does status fit well with an individualist framework: as Ridgeway notes, “these cultural status beliefs work their effects on inequality primarily at the *social relational level* by shaping people’s expectations for themselves and others and their consequent actions in social contexts.”¹⁰⁹ The assumption that status depends on the qualities of states contrasts with research in the social sciences more broadly, which understands status as fundamentally social.

¹⁰⁸Ridgeway 2014, 2-3.

¹⁰⁹Ridgeway 2014, 3.

Because its assumptions fundamentally depart from those of other disciplines, the conventional approach to the study of status in IR is a *particularistic* approach. IR scholars traditionally assume that status depends on state attributes, and especially material capabilities. Behind this assumption is the often implicit notion that, because of anarchy (defined as a self-help system), status attainment among states follows causal processes unlike those in any other social realm. As Tilly notes, particularistic approaches were likewise common in early research on inequality within domestic societies. This research initially assumed that inequality based on dimensions like gender, race, or nationality followed processes unique to each dimension. As such, “Observers often ground explanations for each form of inequality separately in perennial but peculiar forces. Each one seems *sui generis*, constituting its own mode of existence.” As Tilly argues, however, “the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in all these cases have such striking resemblances. They must have more common causal properties than particularistic accounts suggest.”¹¹⁰

Following Tilly’s insight, I argue in this book that categorical inequalities among states result from mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that are remarkably similar to those observed in other social realms. To adequately capture the social nature of status, I develop a network theory of status. My theoretical framework relies on assumptions that reflect the distinctive features of status: its relational and intangible aspects. To begin, I posit that status inequalities depend on processes that take place among states and groups of states, rather than being a matter decided at the individual or the bilateral levels. In addition, status recognition involves primarily intangible or symbolic aspects, rather than material ones. To capture what status is and how it matters for international politics, this book focuses on relational processes and symbolic factors. This book builds off research on status in the social sciences. At the same time, it contextualizes status in the international realm by integrating interdisciplinary insights with IR research that examines key economic and cultural developments in international relations since the nineteenth century.

¹¹⁰Tilly 1998, 16.

1.3.4 General Lessons

Finally, this book makes a fourth contribution to existing scholarship: it offers new lessons for research on international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions—areas that, despite drawing increasing scholarly attention in recent years, are still rarely linked to status. To begin, my analysis demonstrates that international hierarchies of status are far from meritocratic systems. By assuming that status is a function of states' qualities, existing studies suggest that the best strategy to achieve status involves acquiring certain attributes. By contrast, I demonstrate that the established powers enjoy a cumulative advantage in status attainment, which derives from their social position rather than from their attributes directly. For emerging powers, this study implies that status recognition is not simply a matter decided at the state level. Rather, recognition as a great power depends on the broader social environment, as it ultimately involves reconfiguring social arrangements and reshaping predominant conceptions of state competence.

In addition, this book demonstrates that the role of status in international politics is broader, and more complex, than commonly assumed. Existing studies tend to equate status-seeking behavior with aggressive behavior, showing that status-dissatisfied states are more prone to conflict.¹¹¹ But while status may exacerbate conflict, it can also promote global governance. Since fundamental values like liberal democracy shape status recognition, status hierarchies create structural incentives for states to adopt international norms. This carries with it important implications. Among them: status-seeking behavior may also be cooperative behavior—that is, status may contribute to the maintenance of international order, as status-seeking states have an incentive to adopt prevailing international norms. And while mainstream approaches posit that great powers maintain international order using military or institutional instruments, this book demonstrates that great powers also lead by example, setting standards that other states adopt. As such, hegemony requires upholding existing standards not only internationally, but also domestically.

Finally, the book offers new insight into why disagreements about status can lead to hegemonic

¹¹¹Notable exceptions are [de Carvalho and Neumann 2015](#); [Gilady 2018](#), 90-120; [Wohlforth et al. 2018](#), which argue that status may motivate pro-social or cooperative behavior among states.

wars. Previous work argues that war can result when states receive less recognition than their capabilities would warrant or when the established powers resist change. However, we still understand little about why the established powers treat some rising powers as legitimate but others, as revisionist. Building off previous research, my analysis suggests that disagreements about status emerge when established and emerging powers have conflicting conceptions of state competence. As such, to assess whether hegemonic transitions will be violent, we should compare the models of statehood put forward by either side. If the hegemonic transition from Britain to the U.S. was peaceful, since both countries shared a similar conception of state competence, a potential transition from the U.S. to China is more likely to spell conflict—as China increasingly questions the liberal democratic foundations of the contemporary international order.

1.4 Plan of the Book

This book is presented in seven chapters. To begin, Chapter 2 develops a network theory of status. Drawing on the Weberian tradition, I define status as an actor's position in a hierarchy based on social esteem. As such, the concept involves two necessary dimensions. First, status requires recognition: for an actor to achieve status, others need to recognize it. Second, status involves hierarchy: depending on an actor's social esteem, they acquire certain privileges. This definition emphasizes the social nature of status and differentiates status from material capabilities or hierarchy. I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than on their qualities. To explain how states achieve status, I theorize the underlying relational effects that drive status recognition in the international system. I argue that the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment. To begin, the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition is socially defined: an attribute becomes relevant for status recognition not because of its intrinsic properties, but rather because of its symbolic value—which depends on the social context, especially on who the high-status states are and how they behave. Moreover, status reinforces inequality, independently of material conditions, because it involves cumulative advantage: the higher standing

a state enjoys, the more it attracts additional recognition.

Chapter 3 then presents the empirical strategy I use to investigate the sources of status in Chapters 4 through 6. Rather than examining status at the state level, I use the network of embassies as my unit of analysis—treating the network structure itself as an object of substantive interest. Social network analysis is ideally suited to investigate the observable implications from my theory due to its ability to infer social structure by examining the patterns of relations among actors. In particular, network analysis enables me to empirically uncover relational patterns in status recognition that are not observable using conventional methods. Chapter 3 then operationalizes the concept of status and validates the proposed measure using multiple sources of evidence. Because status is a quality that cannot be directly observed, I use embassy exchange data as a proxy measure of status recognition. Under international law, embassy exchange is a longstanding practice that signifies recognition and creates social inequalities among states. Compared to other potential measures of status, embassy exchange provides unique advantages: it is relational, behavioral, and multidimensional; moreover, it covers all states over a significant period and avoids measurement bias. Next, I validate embassy exchange as a measure of status by showing that the network of embassies adequately captures both recognition and hierarchy, the two necessary dimensions of status; and that states' positions in the network of embassies are not determined by their material capabilities. Finally, I dispel common misconceptions about embassy exchange and its use as a measure of status. The chapter ends with a presentation of my empirical analysis plan.

Chapter 4 examines the implications of my argument for the formation of ties in the diplomatic network. Leveraging inferential network analysis, which enables me to directly test hypotheses involving network effects, I assess why states send embassies to certain destinations and not others. I show that my relational model performs much better than conventional explanations in theorizing the underlying dynamics of the diplomatic network. To begin, a state's existing relations affect its ability to achieve status: states prove more likely to recognize states that recognize them in return or that share diplomatic partners with them. Moreover, status is self-reinforcing: the more a state receives recognition, the more it attracts additional recognition. Finally, it is attribute similarity—

rather than the possession of attributes per se—that drives recognition: states recognize those states that are like them, rather than the states with the largest share of attributes.

Next, Chapter 5 examines the implications of my argument at the structural level of the diplomatic network. First, I show that the network has a core-periphery structure—whereby states can be divided into a well-connected core, comprised mostly of Western or Western-aligned states, and a sparsely-connected periphery. States in the core are very likely to exchange embassies among themselves but not to send embassies to the periphery. By contrast, states in the periphery are more likely to send embassies to states in the core than in the periphery. As a result, the size and the composition of the network's core remain stable over time, even as the number of states in the system increases. Second, I show that membership in the network's core depends on a Western way of life that includes fundamental values like liberal democracy. Predominant conceptions of state competence thus involve not only the ability to fend for oneself under anarchy, as argued by the conventional approach, but also a Western standard of civilization.

In Chapter 6, I use the case of nuclear weapons to examine why certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition. While the conventional approach treats nuclear weapons as a symbol of international status, the relationship between nuclear weapons and status remains unexplored. I argue that state attributes matter for status recognition because of their symbolic value, which depends on the social context, rather than because of their functional value, or their destructive capacity. Since nuclear weapons became stigmatized under the nonproliferation regime, I do not expect nuclearization to improve a country's standing after 1970. Using the synthetic control method, I first show that the acquisition of nuclear weapons does not increase the recognition a state receives. Using network analysis, I then show that nuclear weapons states do not tend to recognize those states that acquired nuclear weapons despite the nonproliferation regime.

To conclude, Chapter 7 offers three general lessons based on this study for research on international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions.