Lost in Translation: Social Identity Theory and the Study of Status in World Politics

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Abstract: Chinese and Russian foreign policy, in part, reflects both countries’ ambitions for higher status in the international system. Can the accommodation of these ambitions prevent, or even reverse, turns toward geopolitically competitive grand strategies by Moscow and Beijing? Might accommodation lead them to channel their efforts in more benign directions? The dominant framework for analyzing the ways in which states seek status – a framework rooted in the insights of Social Identity Theory (SIT) – suggests that the answer is yes: status-seekers will most likely turn toward geopolitically competitive strategies when they face apparently “impermeable” obstacles to their ambitions. I argue that this framework depends on a ‘mistranslation’ of SIT. Properly translated, the theory tells us little about the consequences of persistent status denial for international politics. Instead, it implies that status-seeking will resolve into geopolitical competition when, first, participants view geopolitically significant resources as markers of status and, second, when leaders believe that they can successfully change the distribution of status. I use analyses of two prominent cases that should prove friendly ground for the conventional translation of SIT—Germany before World War I and Imperial Japan—to demonstrate the serious problems that plague the framework favored by international-relations scholars, especially with respect to its central claim about the link between persistent status denial and geopolitical competition.
The recent resurgence of Russian adventurism and the continued rise of China have
prompted prominent analysts to call for Washington to accommodate Moscow and
Beijing. Christopher Layne (2015) thinks that American policymakers must
reconsider their “commitment to maintaining [the United States’] privileged spot
atop the international pecking order,” and Jeremy Shapiro (2015) warns that
“conflict is only inevitable if the United States behaves as great powers often have in
the past and seeks to deny rising powers what they feel is their due.” These are not
lonely voices. Charles Glaser (2015), Lyle Goldstein (2015), Hugh White (2012), and
others advance similar arguments about the need to accommodate the ambitions of
rising and reemerging great powers in order to avoid geopolitical conflict.

Claims about the utility of accommodation as a tool for avoiding conflict find
apparently compelling theoretical and empirical support in an increasingly
influential analytical framework that dominates the growing literature on status in
world politics.\(^1\) Developed and popularized by Deborah Larson and Alexei
Shevchenko (2003; 2010; 2014a; 2014b), and rooted in the insights of Social
Identity Theory (SIT), it suggests that ambitions for higher status lead dissatisfied
states to behave in geopolitically competitive ways only when elite status clubs
appear “impermeable,” or permanently closed, to aspiring members. This means
that established powers can deflect states with outstanding status ambitions—like
China and Russia—from engaging in costly arms races, threatening or using force

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\(^1\) For overviews, see Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth (2014) and Larson, Paul, and
Wohlforth (2014). The expansion of this literature has taken place within the
context of growing interest in social hierarchy in international relations more
broadly. See Bially Mattern and Zarakol (2016).
against their neighbors, or otherwise driving conflict and instability. They can do so, the argument goes, by finding ways of accommodating those states’ claims to higher standing.²

I argue that this framework derives from a misreading of the insights of the social psychology to which it appeals for authority. Most important, the original SIT framework is multidimensional. It describes both individual-level (that is, human-level) and group-level strategies for managing unsatisfactory group status. It conceptualizes impermeability as an obstacle to an individual's attempt to leave one group and join another. It does not see impermeability as an obstacle to the improvement of a group’s status. As a result, its understanding of the consequences of impermeability differs dramatically from that supposed by international-relations scholars. Instead of causing conflict, impermeability merely forces individuals to solve the problem of unsatisfactory social status collectively—by changing the group’s status in some way.

This framework has been “flattened” on its way into international relations. The theoretical scheme developed and popularized by Larson and Schevchenko drops the distinction between individual and collective approaches to managing dissatisfaction with a group’s status. The resulting framework is unidimensional. This creates two serious problems.

² On Chinese status ambitions, see Wolf (2014a) and Deng (2008); on Russian status ambitions, see the special issue of Communist and Post-Communist Studies (Forsberg et al. 2014).
First, the conceptual distinctions between the status-seeking strategies proposed in the flattened framework are ambiguous and inconsistent. Second, and more problematic, the flattened framework’s central theoretical claim – that blocked status ambitions cause states to turn toward geopolitical competition – is inconsistent with SIT. Properly understood, SIT implies no such thing. Nor does SIT suggest that accommodation can prevent, or stop, geopolitically competitive behavior motivated by status concerns. In fact, SIT implies nothing at all about what happens when groups are persistently denied recognition of their status ambitions. SIT lacks any conception of impermeability as an inter-group concept.

Instead, SIT implies a straightforward story in which status ambitions lead to geopolitically competitive behavior under two jointly necessary conditions: when leaders believe that geopolitically significant resources or characteristics—such as weapons, military power, or colonies—constitute consensually valued markers of the status the state aspires to; and when leaders think that the state can feasibly acquire these markers. In short, the theoretical foundations of the social psychological version of SIT contradict its most influential application to the study of status in world politics. This calls into question the logical and empirical validity of the latter framework’s account of the causes of geopolitical conflict. It also means that its implications for policy rest on rather shaky ground.

The article proceeds in five sections. First, I establish the significance of the study of status in world politics and the influence of the flattened SIT framework. Second, I
outline the social-psychological version of the theory. Third, I describe the flattened translation, and highlight its ambiguous conceptual distinctions and flawed account of geopolitical conflict. Fourth, I use two “most likely” cases for the flattened framework (Wilhelmine Germany and Imperial Japan) to demonstrate the empirical significance of these theoretical and conceptual problems. I conclude by exploring the way forward for applications of SIT to the study of status in world politics, as well as the implications of the analysis for the way policymakers should think about the role of accommodation as a tool for managing dissatisfied rising and reemerging powers.

**Status and Social Identity in World Politics**

Status refers to “collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes.” In international relations, status has two common meanings: “membership in a defined club of actors,” and “relative standing within such a club” (Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 7). In either case, acquiring status involves two requirements.

First, states seeking a particular status must achieve the characteristics necessary for entry into that status club or category. These are socially constructed and historically contingent. The characteristics of – for instance – “great power” status have historically included both military power and civilizational characteristics that have varied across time (Neumman 2014). Second, status claims must be granted by relevant others through accommodation (Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 11). In
the context of international relations, accommodation involves action that signals an adjustment of the status hierarchy, including accession to exclusive institutions like the UN Security Council; acknowledgment of the validity of claims to “spheres of influence;” treaties that articulate rights to equal treatment; and the initiation or upgrading of diplomatic representation (Paul 2016, 5).

The idea that status matters for international relations is not new, but only in the past fifteen years has status emerged as a central concern of mainstream international-relations scholarship. The concept has been subjected to analysis using every major mainstream analytical method, and has been linked to a wide range of empirical phenomena. Research shows that status concerns help account for war and militarized conflict (Lebow 2010; Renshon 2016; Barnhart 2016; Murray 2016), withdrawal from international institutions (Ward 2013), arms-racing (Murray 2010; Fikenscher et al. 2015), the development of civilian space programs (Early 2014), foreign aid provision (Bezerra et al. 2015), norm compliance (Miller et al. 2015), and more.

Moreover, many analysts of Chinese and Russian foreign policy agree that it is impossible to understand the behavior of Beijing and Moscow without taking account of their drives for increased or restored standing in the world.3 Even those

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who are dispositionally skeptical of the idea that states care much about something as intangible as status cannot afford to dismiss its significance.

Scholarship on status in world politics draws upon a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, but none is more important or influential than Larson and Shevchenko’s adaptation of SIT. SIT is a natural place to reach for insights about international politics, and Larson and Shevchenko were not the first to do so. But their particular translation of SIT – in which status seekers choose between the strategies of peaceful and emulative “mobility,” conflictual “competition,” and innovative “creativity” – has emerged as a convenient orienting framework for empirical work, and has established itself as the conventional wisdom for applications of SIT to the realm of world politics.

The influence of Larson and Shevchenko’s translation of SIT is clear in an analysis of recent peer-reviewed journal articles. Since the beginning of 2014, at least 27 articles about status and international relations have appeared in 13 journals. Among these, 11 (40.7%) adopt or endorse the central elements and claims of Larson and Shevchenko’s framework. Some mostly accept or apply the framework (Malinova 2014; Miller et al. 2015; Bezerra et al. 2015; Evans 2015; Larson and

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4 These are: Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth (2014); Onea (2014); Forsberg, Heller, and Wolf (2014); Larson and Shevchenko (2014b); Clunan (2014); Forsberg (2014); Heller (2014); Tsygankov (2014); Urnov (2014); Malinova (2014); Smith (2014); Wolf (2014a; 2014b); Jones (2014); Early (2014); Heimann (2014); Miller et al. (2015); Dolan (2015); Bezerra et al. (2015); Lanoszka and Hunzeker (2015); Evans (2015); Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth (2015); Renshon (2016; 2015); Lee (2016); Barnhart (2016); and Freedman (2016).
Shevchenko 2015; and Lee 2016); others combine elements of the framework with other theoretical propositions or endorse its conceptual distinctions and causal claims as established wisdom in the study of status in IR (Forsberg, Heller, and Wolf 2014; Clunan 2014, Wolf 2014a; Heimann 2015; Freedman 2016).

No other framework has as much influence. Of the 16 pieces that do not apply or endorse Larson and Shevchenko’s version of SIT, 8 are not aimed at explaining how states seek status (Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; Onea 2014; Jones 2014; Wolf 2014b; Dolan 2015; Lanoszka and Hunzeker 2015; Renshon 2015; Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth 2015). The rest apply a mix of theoretical perspectives rooted in a variety of mechanisms and hypotheses. Only Larson and Shevchenko’s translation of SIT has generated a serious constituency among analysts of status in world politics.

Another way to understand the influence of Larson and Shevchenko’s framework is to limit attention to work that applies SIT. Of the 27 articles about status in international relations that have appeared since the beginning of 2014, 8 explicitly use SIT as their primary explanatory framework (Larson and Shevchenko 2014; Clunan 2014; Malinova 2014; Miller et al. 2015; Bezerra et al. 2015; Evans 2015; Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth 2015; Lee 2016); two consider but reject it as an explanatory framework (Renshon 2016 and Barnhart 2016). Of the eight pieces that adopt SIT, seven use the Larson and Shevchenko translation. Both of the pieces that explicitly consider and reject SIT as an alternative framework cite the Larson
and Shevchenko translation as the conventional application of SIT to the study of status in international relations. Thus, 90% of recent scholarship that either applies or takes seriously the application of SIT to international relations accepts Larson and Shevchenko’s translation as conventional.

This deep influence raises an urgent question: are scholars who use SIT to study the role of status in world politics translating its arguments and findings accurately? The answer requires a careful description of the original version of SIT, which is the objective of the next section.

**Social Identity Theory in Social Psychology**

Social Identity Theory is a social-psychological account of intergroup relations. The meaning of “intergroup relations” merits unpacking. Social psychologists do not primarily study the behavior of groups toward each other. What social psychologists mean by “intergroup relations” is the way that the attitudes and behavior of individual human beings are influenced by their identification as members of social groups (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 17-19). While SIT’s independent variables are partially social phenomena (perceptions of the existence and characteristics of groups), its dependent variables are individual phenomena (for instance, the

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5 The discussion below draws primarily from four sources with which Larson and Shevchenko support their own adaptation of Social Identity Theory: Tajfel (1978a) and (1982); Tajfel and Turner (1979); and Hogg and Abrams (1988). For recent work consistent with the theoretical framework described in these sources, see Terry et al (2006) and Martiny et al. (2012).
tendency of an individual human being to discriminate against a member of an out-group), and its causal mechanisms operate within the heads of human beings. This does not mean that SIT lacks any implications for collective group behavior. But we need to keep in mind that the analytical framework and associated empirical research aim at explaining the manner in which social identifications influence the behavior and attitudes of people.

SIT's analysis of intergroup relations begins from the proposition that humans identify as members of social groups, and that they derive self-esteem from the status of “in-groups” relative to “out-groups”. The status of an in-group derives from its rank along a set of consensually valued dimensions of comparison – these could be money, intelligence, or (in many experimental studies) simply “points.” In-group status also depends on recognition by the out-group of the legitimacy of that rank (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 40-43; Brown and Ross 1982, 155-62; Hogg and Abrams 1988, 51-61).

Because humans derive self-esteem from in-group identification, they care about in-group status. This observation motivates one of the questions at the core of the SIT paradigm: how do people respond when an in-group has unsatisfactory status?

SIT posits two categories of responses to subordinate group identification. These operate at distinct levels of analysis. The first, which Tajfel and others call “mobility,” occurs when an individual dis-identifies from a low-status group and
replaces it with a high-status group. This is an “individualistic” strategy: it requires no mobilization of other in-group members to succeed, and it does not alter the intergroup status hierarchy (Tajfel 1978b, 46-48; Tajfel and Turner 1979, 43).

A football player, for instance, could manage the dissatisfaction stemming from playing for a bad team by joining a better one. Hogg and Abrams (1988, 54-56) suggest that other manifestations of mobility include women seeking traditionally “male” jobs, and the tendency for black children to identify more strongly with white than black dolls. In all of these examples, an individual member of a disadvantaged group leaves that group behind through a process of “exit” (dis-identification) and “passing” (identification with another group).

The other category of strategies involves what social psychologists call “social change.” This occurs when individuals remain within the low status group but work to change its status. Social change strategies are collective. They involve the mobilization of other group members, and they aim to alter the intergroup status hierarchy (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 43-44).

SIT distinguishes between two kinds of social change strategies (Brown and Ross 1982, 157). The first is “social competition.” Competition increases the in-group’s status by improving its rank along consensually valued dimensions of comparison (understood as characteristics that in-group and out-group members agree are valuable). Improving the group’s rank along consensually valued dimensions of
comparison and achieving recognition of having done so from relevant out-groups solves the dilemma of identification with a subordinate in-group by increasing in-group status (Tajfel 1978c, 96).

The other social change strategy is “creativity.” Here, the idea is not to achieve a higher rank for the in-group along a consensually valued dimension of comparison, but to reinterpret the comparative situation in a way that mitigates the in-group’s experience of low status. Members of the subordinate in-group can use reinterpretation in three different ways to alleviate the psychological discomfort that comes from their low rank along accepted dimensions of comparison. First, they can emphasize a new dimension of comparison along which they rank highly. Second, they can reinterpret as desirable a characteristic of the in-group that is typically seen as undesirable. Finally, they can select a different out-group to compare themselves against (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 43-44). These responses remain located at the collective level (since they do not involve dis-identification from the in-group), but are clearly distinct from social competition.

SIT also proposes two hypotheses about the conditions under which these responses will seem attractive. First, mobility is only possible when group boundaries are “permeable,” when human beings can exit an inferior group and pass into a superior one. Otherwise, people are stuck inside the in-group and left to choose between collective strategies (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 44).
This claim is straightforward, but impermeability is a complex concept. It does not refer only to obstacles to joining the out-group. Boundaries around the *old* in-group also matter. These can be *psychological*: sometimes, membership in a particular in-group (regardless of its status) plays such an important role in constituting an individual's social identity that mobility is impossible (Tajfel 1978b, 52). Tajfel (1978b, 52-55) suggests that national identities often work this way. Chinese nationalists are unlikely to be able to manage dissatisfaction with China's standing in the world by abandoning their Chinese identities and becoming American. This is due to the salience of Chinese nationalism, not to any obstacle imposed by the United States.

Obstacles to exit can also take social or material form. Tajfel (1978b, 57) cites the possibility of suffering sanctions for dis-identifying from the in-group. A striking example from his discussion of impermeability involves two football teams competing in front of a crowd. If one team falls behind, its players may experience the angst associated with inferiority. But attempting to alleviate inferiority through mobility is impossible. No player could switch from the losing team to the winning team in the middle of the match. This would seem illegitimate to members of both teams and by the crowd. It would thus likely encounter prohibitive social (and possibly material) sanction.6 Players on the losing team, confronted with

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6 In some scenarios, changing teams may not face social sanction – for instance, politicians sometimes find ways to explain changes in party affiliation just before or even during electoral campaigns. This underlines the point that impermeability varies across social context and individual actor. Only when it is high are actors forced to address status dissatisfaction collectively.
impermeability stemming from the structure of the social context, must respond to inferiority collectively, either by working together to win the game (competition) or by taking comfort in some reinterpretation of the comparative situation (creativity – by, say, consoling themselves with the thought that they display better sportsmanship).

At its core, the first hypothesis claims that impermeability forces individuals to pursue strategies of social change. This does not result from anger leading from an obstruction to antipathy towards an out-group. It is simply because the inability to exit a subordinate in-group and pass into an out-group means that no option exists besides collective action aimed at boosting the in-group's status.

The second hypothesis explains the relative attractiveness of the collective strategies, contingent on the unavailability of mobility. This hypothesis revolves around the “security” of the status hierarchy. When the superior group's position seems secure (when it is legitimate and when improving the inferior group's ranking along consensually valued dimensions of comparison seems infeasible), creativity is attractive. This makes sense, since competition appears futile. When the superior group's advantage seems “insecure,” competition is attractive (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 45; Brown and Ross 1982, 157; Hogg and Abrams 1988, 56-58).

Three points are worth highlighting by way of summary. First, the social-psychological version of SIT (depicted in Figure 1) has multiple dimensions, spans
multiple levels of analysis, and proposes reasonably straightforward conceptual distinctions.

Strategies for managing status dissatisfaction vary along two dimensions. The vertical dimension captures whether they operate at the individualistic or collective level. The distinction between mobility and the two collective approaches describes this variation, and SIT’s impermeability hypothesis accounts for it. The horizontal dimension describes variation in the way that collective approaches function: by accumulating consensually valued attributes, or by reinterpreting the comparative situation. The distinction between social competition and social creativity captures this variation, and SIT’s security hypothesis seeks to account for it.
Figure 1: The Social Psychological SIT Framework

- Individualistic Responses
  - MOBILITY
  - CREATIVITY
- Collective Responses
  - COMPETITION

- Permeable Social Groups
- Impermeable Social Groups

Reinterpretation
- Secure Intergroup Status Hierarchy
- Insecure Intergroup Status Hierarchy

Accumulation
But this dimension, along with the security hypothesis, only enters the analysis when people are stuck inside their in-groups.

Second, the experimental findings that allow analysts of international relations to claim that SIT enjoys strong empirical support derive from this version of the framework. Substantial evidence exists in favor of the impermeability hypothesis. But all it shows is that individual human beings display a greater willingness to work for an increase in the status of an in-group (to adopt a collective strategy) when they cannot leave the in-group and pass into an out-group with higher status. The evidence is mixed on the security hypothesis, but the form of the hypothesis that this work tests is that depicted above: given the inability to exit the in-group, a secure intergroup status hierarchy should make reinterpretation more attractive than competition.7

Third, this theoretical framework implies a straightforward – but incomplete – story about how status ambitions lead to militarized conflict over resources like territory and influence or costly arms races. Only two strategies aim to change the status of a group: creativity and competition. States are groups, which means that – according to SIT – their status can only change via one of these two processes. Creativity involves reinterpretation, which may lead to diplomatic conflict over the terms of, for instance, great-power status. But it does not require actions – like war-fighting, empire-building, or arms-racing – that are geopolitically competitive. Thus,

7 See Hogg and Abrams (1988, 59-61), Brown and Ross (1982), and Bettencourt et al. (2001) for overviews of evidence related to SIT’s theoretical claims.
conditions that favor the pursuit of social competition over creativity are necessary – according to SIT – for status-seeking to translate into geopolitical conflict. This means the status-seeker must believe that improving its ranking along consensually valued dimensions of comparison is feasible. Changes in the distribution of capabilities, for instance, might make leaders optimistic about changing the status hierarchy, thereby leading them to favor competition over creativity.⁸

But the pursuit of competition is not a sufficient condition for geopolitical conflict. Competition refers only to the acquisition of consensually valued characteristics, which does not have to involve conflict or violence. Consensually valued dimensions of comparison in international relations can also involve attributes like cultural achievement, civilizational markers, and domestic institutions. Competition along these dimensions can result in peaceful emulation. It only produces geopolitical conflict when consensually valued characteristics include geopolitically significant resources – like control over territory, administration of colonies, or possession of certain kinds of weapons systems. What matters, in other words, is how leaders understand what constitutes a consensually valued characteristic (a status marker) in a particular context. This part of the story is critical, but external to SIT. Status markers are social constructs, and explaining their origins and evolution – why, for instance, empire was once valued as a marker of high standing but is no longer – requires going beyond the world of social psychology.

⁸ For a similar account, see Wohlforth (2009). This story is also consistent with prominent accounts of status and conflict that are not rooted in SIT – see Volgy et al. (2014) and Renshon (2016).
The “Flattened” Translation

The dominant translation of SIT into international relations begins from the proposition at the core of the social-psychological version: that individuals derive self-esteem from the status of the groups with which they identify. This provides a micro-foundational account of why states seek status. Individual leaders and others care deeply about the state’s standing and pursue or promote policies aimed at improving it when they find it unsatisfactory (Larson and Shevchenko 2003; 2010; 2014a).

Larson and Shevchenko’s translation also proposes that there are three broad ways of addressing unsatisfactory status (though they are concerned exclusively with the status of states). The names of these – mobility, competition, and creativity – come out of the social-psychological version of the theory. Here the similarities largely end. The framework that emerges departs from the social-psychological version in ways that have significant, problematic consequences for its ability to make sense of status dynamics in world politics.

The most striking difference is that Larson and Shevchenko’s framework is “flat.” The social-psychological version of SIT revolves around a clear distinction between individualistic and collective status-seeking strategies. This distinction has disappeared in Larson and Shevchenko’s translation. Instead, all three strategies are
collective: they are pursued on behalf of the group (the state) in order to raise its status.

Larson and Shevchenko (2010, 71; 2014a, 38-39) define mobility as an attempt by one state to emulate the values, practices, and institutions of high status states to join their ranks.9 There is a degree of superficial similarity with the social-psychological framework here. Both versions of mobility involve passing through emulation. But two critical characteristics of the social-psychological definition of mobility are absent from the IR conception. First, the social-psychological version is an individualistic strategy. It is pursued by the human beings that make up social groups, not by the groups themselves or by individuals working on behalf of groups.10 From this perspective, mobility does nothing to change the intergroup status hierarchy. Larson and Shevchenko have redefined the concept as an effort to deal with status dissatisfaction by changing the status of the state via membership in an elite “club” of states, like the great powers or the UN Security Council. Second, the social-psychological version of mobility necessarily involves exit, or dis-identification from the in-group (Tajfel 1975). This process often gets in the way of mobility, but it plays no role in Larson and Shevchenko’s redefinition of the term.

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9 Interestingly, in their first articulation of the SIT framework, Larson and Shevchenko do acknowledge the distinction between individual and collective strategies (2003, 89-90).

10 In terms more familiar to students of international politics, “individualistic” strategies do not involve what Wendt (2004) called “collective intentionality” – that is, they do not involve individuals acting in ways that they understand as being consistent with or driven by the objectives of a group with which the individual identifies. Rather, they involve behavior aimed at leaving that group.
Mobility has thus been scaled up, so that what originally described the individualistic behavior of human beings now describes the behavior of a state. There is nothing inherently wrong this move: international-relations theorists from Waltz (1979) to Wendt (1999; 2004) have productively deployed a sort of anthropomorphism in their work. The problem with this particular instance of scaling up is that the rest of the framework has not been treated consistently. In Larson and Shevchenko’s translation, competition and creativity continue to be defined as collective strategies – alternative ways in which states can raise their standing (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 72-74; 2014a, 39-40). The social-psychological framework has thus been flattened. The difference captured by the vertical dimension of Figure 1 no longer exists in the dominant translation of SIT into international relations.

*Conceptual Ambiguity in the “Flattened” Framework*

The flattening of the SIT framework introduces significant ambiguity in the conceptual definitions of the three status-seeking strategies. The key distinction between mobility and social competition, according to social psychologists, is precisely the difference that the Larson and Shevchenko transformation erases: that between individualistic and collective responses. These categories imply clear differences in the behaviors different strategies entail and in how they function to address unsatisfactory group status. Individualistic strategies imply individual dissociation from a low status group, and resolve the human being’s status
dissatisfaction by replacing one social identity with another. Collective strategies
imply behavior undertaken *on behalf of* the low status group, and resolve the human
being’s status dissatisfaction by raising the group’s status.

Because this distinction constitutes the conceptual boundaries at the core of the
social-psychological version of SIT, its erasure raises an immediate problem for the
flattened model. How is mobility to be distinguished from competition and
creativity? The flattened framework addresses this problem by redefining the
boundaries between these concepts. The distinction between mobility and
competition becomes a distinction between a *state* emulating the values and
practices of higher status states to be admitted to their ranks, and a state competing
for status by accruing military and economic power. Thus, mobility denotes an
attempt to join a particular status club by acquiring the characteristics necessary for
entry, while competition denotes geopolitical conflict aimed at improving status.
Creativity denotes a residual category, encompassing non-emulative and non-
conflictual forms of status-seeking, including concrete behaviors as wide-ranging as
national branding campaigns, diplomatic initiatives, and athletic competition.

This new framework lacks the clear structure of the social-psychological version,
which defined each strategy according to one of three different, generalizable
mechanisms through which an individual human being might manage unsatisfactory
group status: by leaving the group, by raising the group’s standing along
consensually valued dimensions of comparison, or by reinterpreting the
comparative situation. The flattened version abandons or distorts these definitions and thus creates ambiguous conceptual boundaries between status-seeking strategies.

This is clearly visible in the flattened framework’s distinction between mobility and competition. Larson and Shevchenko’s definition of competition largely matches the social-psychological version: it involves improving status by achieving higher standing along consensually valued dimensions of comparison. But Larson and Shevchenko (2010, 73) specify that social competition also must involve improving a state’s military or economic position. These are arbitrary criteria: in the social-psychological framework, social competition can take any form, so long as it involves the pursuit of consensually valued characteristics. The flattened framework’s restriction of the concept to military and economic competition implies that in world politics, the only meaningful sources of status are military and economic power. This contention clashes with a variety of scholarship establishing the significance of non-military and non-economic characteristics as bases for social stratification in world politics.\(^{11}\)

Moreover, the flattened framework’s own understanding of mobility undermines the idea that the only consensually valued dimensions of comparison in world politics are military and economic power. According to the flattened framework, mobility involves emulating the values, practices, and institutions of the members of

\(^{11}\) For instance, see Neumann (2014), and the literature on standards of civilization (for example Gong 1984 and Towns 2010).
a particular status club to qualify for membership. Joining a status club – like the European Union or “Western civilization” – requires meeting certain non-military and non-economic standards in order to convince existing members that one belongs in the club. But if membership in a status club requires the acquisition of certain non-military and non-economic characteristics, then those characteristics must be consensually valued as status markers by existing members. This means that mobility can be adequately described as the pursuit of consensually valued characteristics – which, of course, is also the definition of competition. All that remains to separate the two is the arbitrary distinction between the pursuit of status markers that are militarily or economically significant and those that are not.

In short, the flattened model’s versions of mobility and competition are two names for the same strategy. Mobility’s definition invokes the language of emulation. The flattened framework associates this language with institutional and cultural reforms, but it describes arms-racing and imperialism just as easily. If overseas territory and a fleet of battleships are pre-requisites for membership in a particular status club (as was true for aspiring great powers during the late 19th century) then acquiring these resources constitutes emulation of the practices and institutions of high status states. Competition’s definition uses the language of improving position along consensually valued dimensions of comparison. The flattened framework associates this with geopolitical conflict, but it describes cultural and institutional reforms just as easily. If democracy or gender equality (for example) are understood
as status markers, then acquiring more of these attributes amounts to competition for standing along a consensually valued dimension of comparison.\footnote{On the treatment of women as a basis for stratification in world politics, see Towns (2009, 2010, 2012). On normative emulation as a form of status competition, see Towns and Rumelili (forthcoming).}

The flattened framework’s versions of mobility and competition describe the same phenomenon: improving status by acquiring characteristics consensually valued as status markers. The flattened model distinguishes them from each other only by imposing the condition that competition involves military and economic resources and practices while mobility does not. This distinction has no roots in the original version of SIT. It is necessary only because the flattened version erases the original distinction between mobility and competition. And it creates real problems. Most importantly, it leads users of the flattened framework to mistakenly claim that the social-psychological dynamics that account for variation between the original versions of mobility and competition also explain variation between peaceful and conflictual modes of status-seeking in world politics.

*Geopolitical Conflict in the “Flattened” SIT Framework*

As they lay out the workings of the flattened SIT framework, users of the model do little to develop the logics or describe the mechanisms that lead from changes in social conditions to strategic choices. Rather, they rely heavily on appeals to the insights of social psychologists to justify their claims (Larson and Shevchenko 2010,
But the theoretical relationship at the heart of the flattened framework – between elite-club impermeability and status-driven conflict – has no foundation in the social-psychological version of SIT.

The flattened model's account of geopolitical conflict centers on a redefined version of the concept of impermeability. In the social-psychological version of SIT, impermeability denotes an obstacle to individual dis-identification and re-identification. The flattened model redefines impermeability as an obstacle that prevents a state from joining an elite status club: used in this context, the term refers to the persistent denial of a state's status claim. The flattened model then reformulates the impermeability hypothesis: the experience of persistent international status denial is supposed to cause states to pursue geopolitically competitive forms of status-seeking (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 72, 75; 2014a, 39, 56-57; Wolf 2014a, 218; Lee 2016, 33).

This version of the impermeability hypothesis is not supported by the theory and empirical results to which it appeals for authority. In the social-psychological version of SIT, impermeability does not denote an obstacle to the improvement of a group's status, and it does not cause inter-group conflict. It merely forces individuals to manage unsatisfactory group status collectively, through either creativity or competition. The social-psychological version of the impermeability hypothesis only influences whether or not human beings can manage status dissatisfaction by abandoning the subordinate identity. It has no bearing on the
form collective status-seeking takes. Experimental findings from the SIT research program support *only this version* of the impermeability hypothesis: they merely show that individuals who cannot leave their own group care more about that group’s status.

This means that the theoretical centerpiece of the flattened framework lacks a firm foundation. Neither SIT’s logic nor its experimental findings provide a warrant to claim a causal relationship between status-club impermeability and competition for military and economic power.

**Assessing the “Flattened” SIT Framework**

The critique developed above is significant apart from any empirical analysis. Conceptual frameworks and theoretical claims should be based on sound foundations, and the flattened translation of SIT is built on shaky ones. Yet its conceptual and theoretical problems do imply that the flattened model should not perform well when tested against evidence. Demonstrating that this is true should help validate the argument developed above and usefully highlight some of the framework’s practical shortcomings. In the remainder of this article, I investigate the empirical validity of the flattened framework’s core claim: that persistent, apparently permanent status denial causes status seekers to abandon peaceful strategies in favor of geopolitical competition.
I rely for evidence on a close examination of two prominent cases of international status-seeking. To allay concerns about generalizability, I analyze cases in which the model should function well. If it fails, then it is reasonable to conclude that the problem lies with the model, rather than with the case selection.\textsuperscript{13}

Suitable cases should have three characteristics. First, they should involve a dissatisfied power seeking membership in an identifiable status club. Second, there should be variation in the perceived permeability of the boundaries of the status club the state seeks to join. Third, these should ideally be cases that developers and users of the flattened framework agree are likely to be explained well by the model.

Two such cases stand out: Wilhelmine Germany in the decades prior to 1914 and Imperial Japan between the Meiji restoration and the outbreak of the Pacific War in the 1930s. Both states were concerned with their respective places in the global status hierarchy, and both faced apparent elite-club impermeability at some point during these time periods.

Both cases have also been invoked for illustrative purposes by users of the flattened framework. Larson and Shevchenko (2010, 72; 2014a, 39) point to the Wilhelmine Germany case as an instance of social competition in both of their prominent articulations of the model. Similarly, Wolf (2014a, 218) has invoked this case to

\textsuperscript{13} See Eckstein (1975) on most likely case analysis.
warn against denying contemporary China’s ambitions, lest Beijing turn to social competition.

Larson and Shevchenko (2003, 90; 2010, 72) have also explicitly invoked the Japanese case as an example of the consequences of elite-club impermeability. Lee (2016, 33) recently echoed this interpretation of post-Meiji Japanese foreign policy, again for purposes of illustration.

The repeated use of these cases to illustrate the central element of the flattened SIT framework suggests that they are considered well-known historical episodes in which the smooth operation of the theoretical apparatus being articulated is self-evident. They should be easy cases for the flattened model. But was Germany’s turn to Weltpolitik actually driven by elite-club impermeability? Did Japan turn to social competition – in the form of imperialism – in response to having been denied great power status? The answer to both of these questions, I argue, is no. The records of both cases lend more support to the social-psychological version of SIT’s account of status-based conflict than to the flattened version’s alternative.

*Weltpolitik and Impermeability in German Foreign Policy*

There is no doubt that under Kaiser Wilhelm II an ambition for higher standing shaped Germany’s approach to the world. The collection of policies known as *Weltpolitik* cannot be understood apart from Berlin’s status concerns. *Weltpolitik* –
“world power” – denotes both the status to which Germany aspired and the means through which it sought that status. The objective was to join Great Britain in the world-power club. To do so, Germany had to convince London to recognize that Berlin deserved that status. In more concrete terms, this meant getting the British to treat Germany as if it had the rights of a world power. Two rights were central, The first was to compensation when other powers made territorial gains abroad. This accounts for German sensitivity to, for instance, the consolidation of French control in Morocco during the early 20th century. The second was to naval equality with Great Britain, concern for which was behind much of the rancor that developed between London and Berlin during their naval race.14

What status-seeking strategies did Berlin employ to achieve world power status? Larson and Shevchenko and other users of the flattened SIT framework treat Weltpolitik as a paradigmatic example of social competition. This is reasonable, regardless of whether one defines the latter in terms of geopolitical competition or the accumulation of consensually valued characteristics. Weltpolitik centered on naval arms-racing and empire-building. Colonies and battleships are geopolitically significant resources, and both were understood by early 20th century Europeans as markers of status in world politics. Thus, to the extent that Berlin’s pursuit of these was motivated by a desire to be recognized as London’s equal, Weltpolitik fits both definitions of social competition. It is worth noting that Weltpolitik also fits the flattened framework’s definition of mobility, which illustrates the conceptual

14 On Weltpolitik, see Geiss (1976, 48-90); Kennedy (1980, 223-50); Mommsen (1995, 80-82); and Rohl (2001, 924-65).
ambiguity at the framework’s core. Battleship construction and imperialism can be understood as emulation of British naval and imperial practices in order to qualify for world power status. Only the arbitrary separation of conflictual from peaceful emulation prevents an observer from coding Weltpolitik as an instance of what the flattened framework understands as mobility.

The more significant issue involves the role of elite-club impermeability in the story of Germany’s pursuit of status before World War I. Assessing the validity of the impermeability hypothesis requires answering two questions: first, what prompted the turn to Weltpolitik? Second, when did perceptions of impermeability emerge, and with what consequences?

*Weltpolitik* originated in the mid-1890s. Before the new Kaiser Wilhelm II dismissed Otto von Bismarck as chancellor in 1890, German foreign policy had eschewed the quest for status markers in favor of a focus on maintaining favorable alliance constellations in Europe (Geiss 1976, 48-49; Mommsen 1995, 80). Bismarck’s departure increased the Kaiser’s influence on foreign policy, and led to the rise of two leaders who shared his concern with Germany’s status: foreign minister Bernhard von Bulow and chief of the naval staff Alfred von Tirpitz. In 1897, Bulow announced the inauguration of *Weltpolitik* by proclaiming in front of the Reichstag that Germany would seek to secure “a place for ourselves in the sun” (Holmes 2004, 27). The policy, according to Mommsen (1995, 81), aimed to demonstrate that “the German Empire really was a world power in its own right and therefore fully
entitled to have its say in international affairs.” In 1898, Germany began a massive naval construction effort that consisted, initially, of a plan to build 19 battleships by 1904. 1898 also inaugurated a flurry of overseas expansion: Berlin negotiated a lease for Kiaochow in China and an agreement to split Portugal’s territory; the Kaiser visited Damascus and laid the groundwork for a project to build a railroad connecting Berlin and Baghdad. The following year, Germany acquired part of Samoa and bought the Caroline and Marianas Islands (Geiss 1976, 89-90).

At this stage, impermeability played no role. It cannot have: prior to 1897 Germany had not sought the status of a world power. Before the initiation of the naval race, relations with the British – eventually the primary obstacle to German status ambitions – had not yet deteriorated to the point of antagonism (see Kennedy 1980, 184-222). Weltpolitik was not a response to being kept out of the world-power club. Rather, it was Germany’s first attempt to join.

The more compelling explanation for Weltpolitik’s initiation involves the dramatic leadership change that rocked Berlin between 1888 – when the pragmatic Kaiser Wilhelm I died – and 1897, which brought to power leaders who valued status more highly than had those of Bismarck’s generation, and who were more optimistic about Germany’s ability to achieve it. This new concern for and optimism about German status may have reflected the rapid growth of German power and wealth, or the emergence of a political and economic crisis that seemed soluble through the
pursuit of Weltpolitik. What it did not reflect was a reaction to elite-club impermeability.15

Yet elite-club impermeability did play some role in this case. Many German leaders and other elites eventually came to believe that world-power status was out of Germany’s reach because of British obstructionism. These beliefs emerged in the decade and a half after Weltpolitik’s inauguration, as a reaction to London’s attempts to negotiate an end to Germany’s battleship-building, as well as British interventions in the Franco-German crises of 1905 and 1911. The Kaiser developed a strong animosity toward London based on the belief that the British were disposed against treating Germany fairly – a manifestation of the notion that Germany faced elite-club impermeability.16 Others came, by 1912, to share that view. Hew Strachan (2001, 56) notes a growing “frustration” at Weltpolitik’s “failure to gain for Germany the status its power warranted.” Paul Kennedy (1980, 447) suggests that one of the 1911 Morocco crisis’ most important consequences was “the identification of Britain as the chief obstacle to German aims.” The leader of the Conservative Party in the Reichstag announced that “the German people now knows that if it wants to spread in the world, if it wants to find its place in the sun to which it is entitled by right and by destiny – now it knows who it is who claims the right to decide whether to allow this or not” (quoted in Fischer 1961, 91). Popular

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15 For an interpretation that places heavy emphasis on the Kaiser and his close advisors, see Rohl (2001, 924-38). On the influence of domestic political concerns on the inauguration of Weltpolitik, see, among others, Mommsen (1995) and Geiss (1976).

16 For an account of the Kaiser’s personal descent into rivalry with England, see Rohl (2014, 749-943).
nationalist author Friedrich von Bernhardi (1914, 157) wrote that British foreign policy had proven “that England has not the slightest intention of coming to a peaceful agreement with Germany, treating Germany as an equal.”

What was the consequence of this realization? It was not, as the flattened SIT framework implies it should have been, intensified social competition. Instead, Berlin abandoned important elements of Weltpolitik. The naval race effectively ended in 1913, when the Kaiser (pressured by advisors concerned about the security implications of Russia’s rise) approved increases in spending on the army for the first time in two decades (Rohl 2014, 913-15). The Reich’s foreign policy turned toward what Volker Berghahn (1973, 131-55) calls Kontinentalpolitik, which aimed more at preparing for a potential European war than at acquiring the colonial and naval markers of world-power status. In important ways, Germany’s response to elite-club impermeability was to give up on the possibility of achieving world-power status through social competition. The objective itself may not have lost importance, but the effort to acquire world-power status by competing for symbolic resources effectively ended in the year before the First World War.

The trajectory of Weltpolitik’s development is contrary to the flattened SIT framework’s expectations. Though the policy fits the definition of social competition, elite-club impermeability played no role in its inauguration. Beliefs about elite-club impermeability became prominent only after Berlin had begun to
pursue world-power status through empire-building and naval-racing, and the rise of impermeability coincided with the end of Weltpolitik.

**Status and Impermeability in Japanese Foreign Policy**

Japanese foreign policy between the Meiji restoration and the 1930s constitutes another paradigmatic example of status-seeking in world politics. Japan sought acceptance as a member of an elite club – the great powers – and oriented its foreign policy toward achieving that objective during the decades leading up to World War II.

This case is even more critical than the German case for the impermeability hypothesis. Users of the flattened framework clearly and explicitly invoke the trajectory of Japanese status-seeking as an illustration of the consequences of elite-club impermeability. The account that Larson and Shevchenko and others give is that Tokyo pursued two distinct status-seeking strategies between Japan’s emergence from isolation in the late 19th century and the beginning of World War II. First, Japan sought to join the great-power club through the emulation of Western institutional and social practices – in other words, through the flattened framework’s conception of social mobility. In the 1930s, Japanese foreign policy shifted toward social competition – in the form of imperial expansion – in response to the realization that Japan would not be allowed into the great-power club (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 72; Lee 2016, 33).
Assessing this interpretation involves answering two questions. First, does it describe the trajectory of Japanese foreign policy accurately? Did Japanese status-seeking really transform from peaceful, emulative social mobility before 1930 to geopolitically conflictual social competition after? Second, what role did elite-club impermeability play in changing the trajectory of Japanese status-seeking?

The emulation of Western institutions and norms undoubtedly constituted an important element of Japanese foreign policy during the decades following the Meiji restoration. This was clearly aimed at boosting Japan’s standing in the eyes of Western great powers. Beginning in the 1870s, Tokyo implemented reforms intended to convince Western powers to reverse the humiliating “unequal” treaties they had imposed after Commodore Perry’s arrival. Tokyo changed its legal and political system, instituted Western dress at the Imperial Court, began hosting Western-style diplomatic balls, and attempted to ban both mixed-gender bathhouses and art that Victorian-era Westerners would find pornographic. According to Beasley (1963, 138-39), these changes were intended to “achieve respectability in Western eyes, this being a step on the road to full equality.”

At the same time, Japan emulated the military practices of the Western powers. Most significantly, Japan's attempt to build an empire in East Asia began not in the 1930s but no later than 1895, when Tokyo went to war with China over dominance.

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17 Towns (2010, 79) notes that one of the political reforms that Japan made in its attempt to become “civilized” was to prohibit the participation of women in politics.
in the Korean peninsula. Ten years later, war with Russia resulted in a Japanese sphere of influence in Manchuria, and five years after that Tokyo formally annexed Korea and Taiwan. By 1910, Japan had already been engaged in an empire-building project for at least a decade and a half.

This early expansion was clearly linked to Japan’s status ambitions. Japanese were humiliated by their treatment at the hands of the Western great powers and responded by seeking to raise Japan’s esteem in the eyes of the West. This meant that they needed to acquire consensually valued characteristics – they had to raise their status by excelling along dimensions of comparison valued by Westerners. Japan started this process in a position of acknowledged inferiority. As writer Yukichi Fukuzawa wrote in 1875, “if we compare the knowledge of the Japanese and Westerners, in letters, in techniques, in commerce, or in industry, from the largest to the smallest matter... there is not one thing in which we excel...In Japan’s present condition there is nothing in which we may take pride vis a vis the West. All that Japan has to be proud of...is its scenery” (quoted in Craig 1968, 120-21).

Joining the great-power club meant becoming and behaving like a great power – acquiring its trappings and engaging in its practices. One of these was imperialism. Fukuzawa, for instance, suggested that Japan could raise its esteem in the eyes of Western powers if it behaved like a Western power by imposing unequal treaties on the less “civilized” states of China and Korea (Narsimhan 1999, 207). Reactions to Japan’s victories in the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War show
that Japanese viewed these as achievements along the road to membership in the great-power club. After the victory over China, Tokutomi Soho wrote: “we are no longer ashamed to stand before the world as Japanese...Before, we did not know ourselves, and the world did not yet know us. But now that we have tested our strength, we know ourselves and we are known by the world. Moreover, we know that we are known by the world!” (quoted in de Bary et al. 2005, 805). In 1910, following the Russo-Japanese War and the annexation of Korea, future diplomat Inazo Nitobe wrote that “Our nation has become more of a Great Power than many European countries...Japan of a month ago and Japan of today are completely different” (quoted in Dudden 1975, 135-36).

Geopolitical competition for status – in the form of imperialism – proceeded simultaneously with and was part of the same policy project as the effort to become more institutionally and culturally Western. Both strands of policy emulated the Western great powers in order to become a member of the club. As Suzuki (2005, 139) puts it, “On the one hand, to gain ‘civilized’ status the Japanese sought cordial relations with the European states by adhering to international law and engaging in European-style diplomacy. On the other hand, the Japanese saw the adoption of coercive policies towards ‘uncivilized’ states as an inherent part of a ‘civilized’ state’s identity, and sought to attain such status in imperialist behavior towards its Asian neighbors.” This nicely illustrates the conceptual ambiguity inherent to the flattened translation of SIT. Banning pornographic art or adopting Western norms about gender and political participation, for instance, counts as mobility because
these are peaceful moves. Going to war over Korea and Manchuria should count as competition because it was not. Yet, in so far as all of these policies were intended to raise Japan’s status, they functioned identically: by making Japan more like a Western great power. They are all as easily described using the language of consensually valued attributes as that of emulation.

Again, the more important question concerns the role of elite-club impermeability: how did the notion that Japan would not be granted membership in the Western great-power club influence Japanese foreign policy? The previous discussion suggests that elite-club impermeability cannot have caused the inauguration of Japanese imperialism. After all, Japanese imperialism began not in the 1930s but in the 1890s. Like Germany’s adoption of Weltpolitik, it was not a response to being unjustly kept out of a club, but part of an initial attempt to join a club that required the performance of geopolitically competitive practices for membership.

Beliefs about the impermeability of the Western great-power club developed among Japanese elites from the 1910s to the early 1930s. These beliefs emerged, in large part, as a result of the notion that the Western powers were racially discriminatory. Fears about racial discrimination were present from the late 19th century, but became politically prominent due to conflicts over immigration in the first decades of the 20th.18 These prompted Japanese leaders to push for the inclusion of a racial equality clause in the League of Nations Covenant. This effort’s failure only

18 See Pyle (2007) on racial discrimination; on immigration conflicts, see Yarwood (1964) and Daniels (1977; 1988).
exacerbated Tokyo’s concerns. The American Alien Immigration Act of 1924 reinforced fears about a racial obstacle to great-power status, but the final straw was the Western response to the Mukden Crisis. The United States and the League of Nations condemned Tokyo’s 1931 invasion of Manchuria on the grounds that it had not been justified by legitimate concerns about the security of Japan’s economic interests. Many Japanese observers interpreted this as confirmation of a discriminatory attitude towards Japan in Western capitals since Western great-powers seemed to customarily intervene in their own spheres of influence without facing international condemnation (Ward 2013).

Thus, proponents of the flattened framework are on solid ground to claim that Japan by the early 1930s appeared to face a condition of elite-club impermeability. But the response was not a turn to imperialism. Again, Japanese imperialism – which was clearly linked to status ambitions – began during the 1890s, and the drive to expand and consolidate control over Manchuria persisted through the 1920s. It is true that Japanese foreign policy grew bolder beginning in 1931, but it is a stretch to interpret this as a renewed turn to geopolitical competition for status. The crisis that led to the invasion of Manchuria was set off by a rogue group of military officers. The Sino-Japanese war of 1937 began because of an incident involving Chinese nationalist and Japanese troops in Peking, and continued because military and civilian leaders in Tokyo felt they could not end it without undermining Japan’s

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20 On responses to the Alien Immigration Act, see Aydin (2007, 142-43); and Hotta (2007, 68).
position on the continent. And the drive into southeast Asia was motivated by
economic and security concerns, not by the notion that these moves would finally
bring Japan acceptance as a great power.\textsuperscript{21}

Elite-club impermeability did have consequences for Japanese foreign policy, but
not the ones predicted by the flattened framework. In fact, Tokyo seems to have
become significantly \textit{less} concerned with securing Western recognition of Japan's
place in the global status hierarchy, and thus significantly less restrained by the
need to play by the rules of the Western order. The clearest response to the
apparent impermeability of the great-power club was Japan's withdrawal from the
set of institutions that constituted the interwar order. In the spring of 1933, for
instance, Japan left the League of Nations. Moderate civilian leaders opposed this
controversial move because they worried it would alienate Japan from the West.
Indeed, Japanese moderates had argued in favor of joining the League at the
beginning of the previous decade in part because they saw membership as a step
toward equality of status along with the Western powers. Leaving the League now,
they argued, would be a setback because it would lead to isolation.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} On the Mukden crisis, see Ogata (1964); on the origins of the 1937 Sino-Japanese
War and Japanese expansion leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, see Barnhart
(1987), especially chapters 4-9; and Copeland (2014), chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{22} See, for instance, foreign minister Shidehara Kijuro’s reaction in Takemoto (1978,
126-127); Prime Minister Reijiro Wakatsuki in Harada (1978, 77), Prime Minister
Inukai Tsuyoshi in Ogata (1964, 121), and \textit{genro} Saionji Kinmochi in Harada (1978,
522).
Japanese militarists disagreed. They believed the Western order was stacked against Japan, and promoted withdrawal from the order for reasons related to Japanese and Asian dignity (Aydin 2007, 113-63; Hotta 2007, 21-63). After 1931, these arguments gained traction. Once the League had condemned Japan for its role in the Mukden Incident, remaining a member would have amounted to participating in the perpetuation of an unjust order. This was a humiliating proposition. The nationalists won the argument, and Japan withdrew from the League. A year later, Japanese militarists made a similar argument about Japanese participation in naval arms treaties with Western powers. They again managed to silence moderates who worried about alienating and threatening Western powers, and Japan announced its intention not to renew the London Naval Treaty. Both moves contributed to an increase in Japanese militarism, but only indirectly, by invalidating arguments in favor of moderation that were based on respecting the rules of international order (Ward 2017, chapter 4).

Is it possible to salvage the flattened framework by interpreting Japan's withdrawal from the Western interwar order as social competition? This would require an unproductive conceptual stretch. Japan's withdrawals from the League and from naval arms treaty negotiations were not aimed at securing recognition of higher status from Washington and European capitals. Moderates opposed both moves because of their potential to alienate the Western powers. The same can be said of the more tangibly provocative moves that they preceded and facilitated (Pelz 1974, chapters 3 and 4). This stands in stark contrast to pre-World War I Japanese
expansion. Building an empire in East Asia between the 1890s and 1920 seemed to mark Japan as a state that deserved the same status and rights as Great Britain, France, Russia, and the United States. Expansion during this period fits Larson and Shevchenko’s definition of social competition reasonably well. Japanese foreign policy during the 1930s does not. It was not aimed at status-seeking. On the contrary, it was more assertive in part because it was less sensitive to the desire for Western recognition of Japan’s place in that hierarchy.

Like the German case, the Japanese case illustrates the serious problems that plague the flattened framework. Like German battleship-building, Japanese imperialism should fit cleanly into the category of social competition. But understanding it as an attempt to emulate the values and practices of existing great powers makes just as much sense. This latter description fits the flattened framework’s definition of mobility and highlights the conceptual ambiguity at the core of the model. This is not merely a function of the ubiquitous problems that face scholars who deploy abstract concepts to understand the real world. It is baked into the framework due to the transformation SIT underwent on its way from social psychology into international relations.

Also like the German case, evidence from the Japanese case undermines the framework’s central theoretical claim: that elite-club impermeability causes states to adopt geopolitically competitive forms of status-seeking. In both cases, geopolitically competitive status-seeking preceded the emergence of elite-club
impermeability, and in neither case did the emergence of elite-club impermeability have the consequences anticipated by the flattened framework.

**SIT and the Study of Status in World Politics**

Scholarship on status in international relations should not discard SIT. Nor should it attempt to redefine the social-psychological concepts at its core or restructure its theoretical framework in ways that seem to make the model easier to apply to an international-relations context. Instead, we should acknowledge the framework’s limitations and look for ways to supplement its analytical foundation in order to conceptualize and explain differences in the ways that states seek status.

The most fundamental limitation is that SIT only contains two distinct strategic logics that are relevant for interstate status politics: first, the acquisition of consensually valued resources and characteristics (competition) and, second, the reinterpretation of some element of the comparative situation (creativity). Within—and beyond—these broader strategic categories we find significant variation. For instance, some forms of status competition—like Germany’s *Flottenpolitik* or Japanese imperialism—are conflictual and some—like Japanese emulation of Western cultural practices, or competition for Olympic medals—are not. The SIT framework cannot adequately capture or explain this difference.
The SIT framework also fails to capture differences between status-driven efforts to improve standing within a particular international order—like pre-World War I Japanese imperialism or German *Weltpolitik*—and efforts to protest or overthrow the order—like post-1931 Japanese foreign policy or Germany's post-1911 turn to *Kontinentapolitik*. The category of creativity also contains significant variation—among efforts to eradicate particular characteristics as markers of status, efforts to promote new characteristics as markers of status, and efforts to change the reference group against which comparisons are made.

The analysis above also raises questions about the place of the strategy of mobility—as defined by social psychologists—in the study of status in international politics. One position holds that mobility *has no relevance* for international relations. The strength and salience of national identity might typically prevent individual disidentification as a feasible response to unsatisfactory state status in large enough numbers to have a significant effect on foreign policy or international political outcomes. In other words, people are usually stuck within their national identity categories. They are thus forced to choose between some manifestation of the logic of competition or creativity as a way of addressing national status dissatisfaction. A second position defends the possibility that mobility can be pursued by states—understood, perhaps, as “individuals.” This position requires identifying some alternative conceptual boundary between mobility and competition. But doing so is fraught with difficulty. Any boundary besides the individualistic versus collective
distinction would be inconsistent with how SIT distinguishes the strategies from one another, and would fundamentally alter the framework's theoretical apparatus.

It may be possible to scale the entire SIT framework up. This would involve treating states as individuals, and treating status categories as social groups. We would then understand the difference between mobility and competition as the distinction between a state leaving one status category—like the middle powers—for another—like the great powers—and a state working for the collective advancement of an entire status category. It remains unclear how this formulation improves markedly on an un-translated version of SIT: the scaled-up conception of mobility is the same as the un-scaled up conception of competition. For example, leaving the middle powers to become a great power involves acquiring consensually valued attributes in order to secure recognition of higher standing. The scaled-up conception of competition involves collective action in order to enhance the status of an entire category of states. While intriguing, this does not describe a phenomenon that commands much interest among analysts of international relations.

The most promising approach is to investigate the distinction between mobility and competition as an individual-level difference in responses to variation in beliefs about national status. This requires a renewed emphasis among analysts of status on the attitudes and behaviors of human beings. Taking this view points toward understanding the primary difference between mobility and competition in the same way that social psychologists do: as the distinction between an individual
responding to unsatisfactory national status by dis-identifying from the state versus working to raise the state’s status. This orientation might then involve exploring the conditions that cause variation in levels of national identification and support for different approaches to foreign policy.

Some promising work already adopts this approach. Building on research by Sambanis and Shayo (2013) that connects SIT to ethnic conflict—and earlier work by Shayo (2009) on attitudes toward economic redistribution—Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth (2015) argue that victory in war increases the status of the state and thus the likelihood that individuals will identify with it more strongly than with sub-state groups. This, in turn, strengthens the state’s extractive capacity. This argument tracks with the social-psychological framework, and the experimental findings, of SIT. It also neatly links a psychological mechanism with a state-level outcome without stretching SIT beyond its limits.

Understanding SIT as a theory about how the social world influences individual attitudes and behaviors—rather than as a psychological theory that can be scaled up to explain world politics—opens up a range of other potentially productive ways to attack questions about status in international relations. For example, SIT also suggests that threats to a group’s status may make individuals more likely to identify with the group. This implies that status threats might produce higher levels of nationalism and support for expensive policies aimed at shoring up the state’s position.
Another possibility is that preferences for different status-seeking strategies vary across *individuals* within states: some may prefer competitive approaches aimed at acquiring consensually valued attributes, while others may prefer creative approaches. The logic of SIT itself offers only limited insight for explaining this sort of variation. It highlights the role of perceived feasibility: individuals who are more optimistic about the state’s ability to acquire the consensually valued attributes necessary for achieving membership in a higher status category should prefer competition, while those more pessimistic should prefer some form of creativity. But we need more work to understand what conditions make individuals more likely to believe that the state with which they identify has access to some manifestation of the strategy of competition, and what conditions make them see competition as infeasible. One part of this story likely involves variation in beliefs about material capabilities and calculations about the probable strategic consequences of competing for status in different ways. These sorts of concerns explain why some German elites objected to the focus on battleship construction in the decades leading up to the First World War.

But variation in perceived social context—beliefs about the nature of status markers, as well as collective understandings about what kinds of actors are eligible to engage in different kinds of status-seeking behavior—also likely matters. For example, some kinds of status markers are less amenable to emulation or acquisition than are others. “Whiteness” was clearly understood by many Japanese
elites as a marker of great-power status during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike battleships, colonies, or Western-style political institutions, “whiteness” seemed like an unobtainable characteristic. This militated against efforts to compete for status by emulating Western powers. It first prompted an effort to eradicate race as a barrier to entry into the great-power club, and later pressure for policies that protested and aimed to overthrow status-quo institutions.

Future research should thus combine the insights of SIT with those from other theoretical traditions in order to develop an account of variation in elite preferences over policy responses—both between and within SIT’s strategic logics—to unsatisfactory national status. Stories about variation in elite or mass responses to status anxiety should then be linked to models of domestic political contestation to produce a richer account of the influence of social identity on foreign policy.23

My analysis also raises doubts about the clearest policy implications that flow from the flattened application of SIT: first, that the status ambitions of rising or reemerging powers produce geopolitically competitive behavior because of persistent status denial and, second, that accommodating their outstanding status claims will prevent—or reverse—this behavior.

These claims implicate the academic literature on appeasement in international relations, as well as policy debates over the proper grand-strategic approach to

23 See Ward (2017, chapter 2) for an attempt to construct such a framework.
status seekers like China and Russia. In particular, the flattened framework appears to provide theoretical and empirical support for arguments that appeasement—or accommodation—provides a viable strategy for preventing conflict with rising or dissatisfied powers. Along similar lines, it lends itself to interpretations of Russo- and Sino-American relations that see recent turns toward belligerence as consequences of Washington’s failure to accommodate Russian and Chinese claims to great-power status.

But the central behavioral claim at the core of the flattened framework—that geopolitically competitive behavior results from persistent status denial—lacks a basis in SIT and much in the way of empirical support. And if persistent status denial is not causally related to geopolitically competitive behavior, then the flattened framework will lead to misdiagnoses of the causes of Russian and Chinese aggression and to inappropriate or counterproductive policy prescriptions. For instance, the social-psychological version of the SIT framework implies that accommodating Chinese and Russian status claims may prove a less effective way of responding to geopolitically competitive behavior than trying to convince Beijing

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24 Debates over the wisdom of appeasing or accommodating rising or dissatisfied powers go back at least as far as Carr (1946) and Morgenthau (1948). For more recent entries, see Leng and Wheeler (1979), DiMuccio (1998), Rock (2000), Ripsman and Levy (2007), Trubowitz and Harris (2015), Nincic (2010; 2011), and Paul (2016).

25 For a recent optimistic treatment of appeasement or accommodation, see Nincic (2011). Larson and Shevchenko (2010) attribute variation in the geopolitically competitive content of Russian and Chinese foreign policy to variation in the degree to which Washington has accommodated Beijing and Moscow, and call for greater American accommodation to minimize future geopolitical competition (93-95).
and Moscow of the futility, or steep costs, of competing for status. This is precisely the opposite of the prescription that flows from the flattened framework.²⁶

This is not to say that accommodation is necessarily a foolish or ineffective approach to rising powers with outstanding status ambitions; persistently denying another state’s status claims may, in fact, prove quite costly. However, a theoretical framework based on SIT cannot tell us what those costs might be, because SIT is silent on the question of what happens when groups face apparently permanent obstacles to the satisfaction of status ambitions.

Indeed, this is one of the most important problems with the emerging dominance of the flattened framework. It offers an attractively simple answer to a very hard question, which, I have argued, gets both the fundamentals of SIT and the sources of geopolitically competitive status-seeking wrong. But the dominance of the flattened framework’s account also obscures attention to other potential consequences of persistent status denial. And these—as the brief analyses of the historical cases in this study suggest—may actually be more complex and more dangerous than the flattened framework lets on.²⁷ We need further attention to this question if we want

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²⁶ But is close to the prescription that flows from Wohlforth’s (2009) very different analysis (also rooted, in part, in SIT).
²⁷ See Ward (2017) for a sustained treatment of the consequences of persistent status denial. Though this work is not typically understood as being explicitly about status, Zarakol (2011, 2014) and Adler-Nissen (2014) have both developed accounts of how states react to stigmatization, which might be interpreted as a form of persistent status denial.
to understand the range of costs and benefits that might flow from accommodating—or denying—Chinese and Russian claims to higher status.
References


