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Race, Status, and Japanese Revisionism in the Early 1930s

STEVEN WARD

This paper develops and illustrates a novel theoretical explanation for maximal revisionist challenges to the status quo. I argue that some rising great powers become dissatisfied with the normative and constitutive structure of the status quo and therefore incapable of or unwilling to orient themselves toward reassurance, not because of increasing capabilities but rather due to the domestic political effects produced by perceptions of status immobility—the idea that the status quo is unable to accommodate the rising state’s claims to increased status and prestige. I illustrate the argument by showing that Japan’s increasing revisionism after 1931 can in large part be explained by widespread perceptions of status immobility linked to Japanese understandings of the role of race in the maintenance of the Western-dominated status hierarchy.

The debate over the origins of revisionism has not progressed much past its classical realist roots.¹ Even the popular contention that an increase in capabilities leads to increasing revisionism is suspect.² Rising states tend to have long time horizons and can afford to bide their time rather than take large risks. Not only do they usually need stable, peaceful environments in which to develop economic and military strength, they can also generally

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reduce the costs of major war and increase their chances of winning simply by waiting.3

Contemporary debates over grand strategy in China confirm this insight. Since Deng Xiaoping was paramount leader, Chinese foreign policy has mostly been oriented toward reassurance and patience. In 2004, this orientation became even more explicit with the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) official Zheng Bijian’s introduction of the concept of the “peaceful rise”—a descriptor that was replaced only months after its emergence by the term “peaceful development,” apparently in response to concerns that “rise” evoked images of the revisionist rising powers of the first half of the twentieth century.4

While rising states seem to have incentives to bide their time and focus on reassuring other great powers rather than upsetting the status quo, they sometimes do (as China may) adopt grand strategic orientations that reject and challenge the status quo at its most basic levels. This article builds upon the growing literature on status in international relations to develop a theoretical explanation for the adoption of maximally revisionist foreign policies by rising great powers. I argue that some rising great powers become incapable of or unwilling to orient themselves toward reassurance, not because of increasing capabilities but rather due to the domestic political effects produced by perceptions of status immobility—the idea that the status quo is unable to accommodate the rising state’s claims to increased status. Status immobility influences grand strategic shifts in two ways. First, it may produce preferences for systemic revisionism in some individual elites; second, it alters the discursive and political environment within a state in ways that advantage the advocates of revisionism and facilitate their increased influence on policy. I illustrate the argument by showing that Japan’s increasing revisionism after 1931 can in part be explained by widespread perceptions of status immobility linked to Japanese understandings of the role of race in the maintenance of the Western-dominated status hierarchy.

**REVISIONISM**

Maximal or systemic revisionism is a grand strategic orientation that rejects and challenges the international status quo at its most basic levels: the hegemonic leadership of the system and/or the constitutive norms, principles,
and rules that undergird the system’s hierarchic and normative structure. This definition is consistent with the way many classical realists conceived of “revolutionary” revisionism, and it moves beyond the more common conception of revisionism as a commitment to altering any aspect of the status quo (usually the distribution of territory). This conceptual move is necessary for two reasons. First, states committed to altering the status quo at the margins (by gaining territory, access to markets, or increased prestige) and to rejecting and challenging the status quo at a deeper level are likely to behave quite differently and present different sorts of threats to other states. In particular, systemic revisionists are likely to be very difficult to appease, while more limited revisionists may not be.

Second, while a commitment to altering a system’s territorial, economic, or status distribution is not necessarily inconsistent with a broader orientation toward reassurance, a commitment to challenging a system’s leadership or normative structure makes it more difficult to simultaneously pursue a grand strategy of conciliation or accommodation. Consequently, while it is not necessarily puzzling that a rising state would pursue limited revisionism, a shift toward systemic revisionism certainly is. For instance, Wilhelmine Germany’s shift from Weltpolitik (an effort to shift the distribution of power and prestige within the limits of the British-led international order) toward an aggressive form of Kontinentalpolitik (a commitment to achieving European hegemony and supplanting British leadership) is puzzling because (as civilian leaders understood) it invited a countervailing coalition and increased the risk of major war. The same can be said of Japan’s shift away from Shidehara diplomacy (an effort—taking its name from foreign minister Kijurō Shidehara—to increase Japan’s economic and political influence in China while working with the Western great powers), as well as the Weimar Republic’s shift away from Gustav Stresemann’s diplomacy of conciliation (an effort to revise the Versailles system through accommodation with France and Great Britain).

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9 See the discussion below on Japan’s shift away from Shidehara diplomacy. See Jon Jacobson, Locarno Diplomacy: Germany and the West, 1925–1929 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972) on Stresemann’s foreign policy.
Identifying grand strategic shifts toward systemic revisionism is challenging but possible by understanding the key observable distinction between limited and systemic revisionism as an inability or unwillingness to take steps intended to reassure other great powers. Unlike more limited revisionists, systemic revisionists are fundamentally unable or unwilling to take steps intended to signal restraint and commitment to the status quo. While I suggest that systemic revisionism is generally not explicable in rationalist or strategically intelligible terms, this definition leaves space for such an explanation. It might be, for instance, that a state has rationally calculated that it has more to gain by challenging the status quo than not, and consequently simply has no interest in pursuing reassurance. Though I contend that this is not a convincing explanation theoretically or empirically, it is still possible to imagine a rationalist explanation for a failure to pursue reassurance.

More specific indicators that a shift toward systemic revisionism is taking place include an increase in the influence of domestic actors publicly committed to rejecting accommodation to the status quo; a general inability or unwillingness to cooperate with states committed to defending the status quo; and, especially, withdrawal from international institutions. Understanding why rising states sometimes adopt maximally revisionist grand strategic orientations is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. First, although IR scholars have increasingly incorporated state objectives in their models of foreign policy, there are very few convincing explanations for variation in satisfaction with the status quo.

Prominent approaches to explaining revisionism revolve around (1) relative capabilities (including arguments about rising and declining power), (2) domestic interest groups and coalitions, and (3) ideas and ideologies. None of these explanatory approaches is sufficient to account for the adoption of systemic revisionism by rising great powers.

Rising power cannot explain an anti-status quo grand strategy for the reasons discussed above: Rising states should generally prefer to bide their time and lay low rather than run high risks, provoke opposition, and invite major war. Declining power or resource deprivation, on the other hand, fails

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12 The logic is similar to Kim’s “alliance portfolio” operationalization of satisfaction. Woosang Kim, “Power, Alliance, and Major Wars, 1816–1875,” Journal of Conflict Resolution 33, no. 2 (June 1989): 255–73. For withdrawal from international institutions, see Chan, “Can’t Get No Satisfaction?”
to adequately explain the adoption of anti-status quo grand strategic orientations for two reasons. First, there are often less costly, less risky ways of shifting the distribution of resources in a system than launching a maximally revisionist challenge. Second, it is not clear why a state facing opposition to limited efforts to shift the distribution of resources should rationally expect a hegemonic challenge (in which it invites armed opposition from the most powerful states in the system) to succeed.

Theories revolving around domestic interests and the way they combine to produce suboptimally aggressive foreign policies are more convincing but leave important questions unanswered. These theories do not explain how groups interested in expanding and challenging the status quo are able to dominate policymaking in some states but not in others. Jack Snyder argues that overexpansion is the result when groups interested in expansion hijack a cartelized state’s policymaking apparatus and legitimate their preferred policies by deploying rhetorical commonplaces that make expansion seem necessary or natural. However, it is not clear why such rhetoric resonates in some communities but not in others.

Another approach to explaining revisionism involves collective ideas and ideologies. These explanations emphasize either ideological content (some ideas or ideologies may push states toward challenging the status quo) or ideological distance (a state that is ideologically different from the states committed to defending the status quo may be more likely to challenge the status quo). Explanations based on ideological content and distance fail to provide adequate accounts of shifts toward systemic revisionism as well. Jeffrey Legro’s work on exogenous shocks and grand strategic change, for instance, fails to explain where alternative grand strategic ideas come from, why change occurs in one direction (toward rather than away from revisionism, for instance) rather than another, and largely ignores the process by which political actors adhering to different grand strategic ideas promote and/or make use of discursive changes to advance their policy preferences.

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13 See Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* for an example of this sort of argument.
Haas’s work on ideological distance is more convincing but is ultimately inadequate. First, it is heavily cognitive, while ideologies are intersubjective; second, it is difficult to observe subjective beliefs, which makes the argument hard to assess empirically; third, Haas’s story fails to accurately describe the manner in which shifts toward revisionism often come about. While he argues that ideologies and discourses mostly operate by changing leaders’ beliefs, history suggests that they just as frequently do so by changing the political opportunity structure for actors with different preferences (as the case of Taisho/Showa Japan’s strategic shift shows).18

Aside from the theoretical and empirical benefits of providing an account of an unexplained empirical phenomenon, explaining variation in satisfaction with the status quo promises benefits for policymakers tasked with managing multiple power transitions during the next decades. Although the depth of American decline is debatable, it is clear that dealing with rising great powers will be one of the most crucial issues policymakers face during the first half of the twenty-first century. Will China be able to “postpone conflicts with calm assurance” (as Kurt Riezler suggested of Germany in 1913) or will it turn against the status quo?19 Is there anything established great powers (especially the United States) can do to influence the outcome? Understanding variation in satisfaction with the status quo is a critical part of the answer.

THE ARGUMENT: STATUS IMMOBILITY AND SYSTEMIC REVISIONISM

The account developed here begins by assuming that foreign policy can be conceptualized as the product of a variety of domestic factors that influence a state’s ability to respond effectively to structural stimuli. Domestic actors often have varied preferences over foreign policy, and the outcome is in part the result of domestic political contestation. In rising great powers, this contestation often takes the form of a group of moderates who favor patience and reassurance aligned against a group of expansionists who favor harnessing the increasing capabilities of the state to pursue national objectives or particular interests. The question is why one group or the other emerges

18 Regarding my first point, Haas’s argument involves three mechanisms that explain why ideological distance may cause conflict. First, leaders fear the “demonstration effects” of successful competing ideologies; second, ideological differences prevent leaders from identifying with each other, which may enhance threat perceptions; third, ideological differences may introduce misperceptions and communication failures. These mechanisms function within a leader’s head, and the last two are explicitly about the influence of beliefs on cognitive function.

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with its foreign policy program in place. I argue that concerns about international status (which are often prominent in rising great powers due to the tendency for status to adjust more slowly than power) may play a crucial role in contestation over foreign policy in two ways: by altering individual preferences, and by changing the discursive environment in ways that favor the advocates of revisionism.²⁰

Status Inconsistency, Status Immobility, and Systemic Revisionism

Status refers to the position within a publicly acknowledged or collectively understood social hierarchy that an actor occupies.²¹ In simple terms, social status is akin to rank: to hold high social status is to rank high along some dimension of comparison. However, while actors may rank high or low along relatively objective dimensions, such as height or weight, social status refers to position within hierarchical orders that are intersubjective and contingent upon the recognition of relevant others.²²

Prior research has established that individuals and groups value and compete for social status, not only as a means to other material ends, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as an end in itself.²³ IR scholars have argued and shown persuasively that states also care about and compete for international social status because individuals care about being able to draw positive social comparisons between their own and other groups.²⁴ One significant finding from research in both IR and other disciplines is that status inconsistency—a situation in which an individual, group, or state is not recognized by other actors as having achieved the level of status that the individual, group, or state believes it deserves or to which it aspires—can


lead to aggressive behavior.\(^\text{25}\) According to some analyses, competition for status is a major cause of war as states fight to gain prestige.\(^\text{26}\)

However, status inconsistency cannot on its own cause a rising state to adopt a fundamentally anti-status quo orientation in its grand strategy. States can often achieve recognition of enhanced status without rejecting and challenging the leadership or constitutive norms of a system, and without abandoning a commitment to reassurance. As Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko note, one reason that a state might seek to integrate itself more fully within an international or regional institutional framework is to achieve enhanced status.\(^\text{27}\) Japan’s accession to the League of Nations in 1920 is a case in point, as many Japanese leaders believed that membership promised to cement Japan’s great power status and correct decades of status inconsistency. Even when a system’s political culture pushes states to compete for status through military exploits, this does not dictate an unrestrained anti-status quo orientation. In fact, as Richard Ned Lebow notes, whatever the form status competition takes, the act of competing itself has the effect of strengthening the status quo as states implicitly endorse commonly understood status markers.\(^\text{28}\)

While status competition has the effect of strengthening the status quo, the belief that successful status competition is impossible can turn a rising state against the status quo. This belief—which I call status immobility—can arise from one or both of two sources related to the process of status attribution. Status attribution—the process by which states acquire status—depends upon two factors: first, possession of the characteristics that constitute the set of commonly understood markers for a particular status-role; and second, at least tacit recognition by other high status actors. An aspiring great power, for instance, must not only possess the attributes that are commonly understood to be markers of great power status at that particular time in history; the aspiring great power must also be recognized as such by other great powers. More concretely, the aspiring great power must be treated as if it were a great power.\(^\text{29}\)


\(^{26}\) Lebow, *Why Nations Fight*.

\(^{27}\) Larson and Shevchenko, “Status Seekers.”


Perceptions of status immobility arise when elites and the public in a rising state become convinced that the status attribution system (status markers and the recognition of other states) is stacked against them—that successful status competition is impossible. This may either be because some internal characteristic of the rising state (its domestic political system, its ideology, the ethnicity of its citizens) is fundamentally inconsistent with the collectively understood attributes of the status-role to which the state aspires or because other high status actors seem intransigently opposed to granting recognition. Perceptions of status immobility may develop when a policy intended to enhance a rising state’s status fails (or appears to fail), or when a rising state suffers a diplomatic defeat involving an issue that has acquired meaning as a test of the state’s prestige. In either case, the widespread attribution of failure or defeat to the injustice, unfairness, or hypocrisy of some aspect of the status attribution system indicates that perceptions of status immobility are present.

If it is true (as research in sociology, social psychology, and IR suggests) that individuals care about being able to make positive social comparisons and that states are important sources of social comparison, it follows that status immobility presents problems for status aspirant states. If status inconsistency is uncomfortable for individuals (and hence for states), persistent and uncorrectable status inconsistency may have serious consequences for leaders and for policy. States facing this dilemma generally have two options. First, they may adjust expectations downward, effectively giving up their claims to high status. Downward adjustment is likely to be difficult for states, and especially for rising powers. In addition to psychological obstacles to moderating status expectations, Wolf notes that state leaders may fear the domestic consequences of downward adjustment. State institutions can also function in ways that constrain “symbolic flexibility,” preventing leaders from easily adjusting status claims. As a result, downward adjustment is not a likely response to status immobility for rising great powers.

The other and more likely option is to reject and challenge the status quo at its most basic levels, turning to a strategy of systemic revisionism. Sociologists and social psychologists have observed social rejection as an individual response to status immobility in a variety of substantive settings.

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33 Ibid., 47–48.
34 See Sung Pyo Jun and Gordon Armstrong, “Status Inconsistency and Striving for Power in a Church: Is Church a Refuge or a Stepping Stone?” Korea Journal of Population and Development 26,
lead to serious social psychological discomfort. Social interaction under these conditions not only reinforces the dissonance between expected and actual status but also reinforces and legitimizes the social relations that cause dissonance. As a result, actors facing status immobility may be left with no better option than to manage the social and psychological consequences by rejecting certain forms of interaction.\(^{35}\) In an international setting this response may take the form of a commitment to rejecting and challenging the status quo as it is broadly conceived, and an inability or unwillingness to pursue policies oriented toward reassuring the defenders of the status quo.

It is not enough simply to assert that states respond to status immobility as if they were people. In the remainder of this section, I discuss the mechanisms by which status immobility influences foreign policy. I argue that status immobility influences grand strategy in two ways: first, by motivating some actors to develop preferences for rejecting and challenging the status quo; second, by producing rhetorical and political resources that advantage the advocates of systemic revisionist policies at the expense of the advocates of moderation.

### Status Immobility and Individual Revisionist Preferences

First, status immobility may motivate some domestic actors (leaders or interest groups) to oppose any policy oriented toward accommodation or reassurance. To be sure, there are other reasons certain domestic actors may favor an aggressive grand strategic orientation, including legitimate security concerns or parochial interests.\(^{36}\) However, status immobility is better suited than strategic or economic calculations to explain not just an interest in expansion but a fundamental opposition to accommodation with and integration within the broader status quo. While actors interested in limited territorial or economic expansion often find it useful to cooperate with other powerful states in order to achieve their objectives, actors motivated primarily by perceptions of status immobility will not easily support cooperation with the defenders of the status quo because such a course would legitimate a normative and institutional order that threatens these actors’ conception

\(^{35}\) Reinhard Wolf, “Respect and Disrespect in International Politics: The Significance of Status Recognition,” *International Theory* 3, no.1 (March 2011): 105-42, notes that “being denied social confirmation of one’s rights, faculties, or merits ... can threaten an actor’s self esteem,” leading to pressure for action, either to correct the situation or reduce the consequent discomfort.

\(^{36}\) See Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, on domestic interest groups.
of the state’s identity. Actors who believe that the international status quo is fundamentally inconsistent with their state’s status aspirations will find it very difficult to reconcile a policy of reassurance and accommodation with their conception of the state’s proper role in the international system. This distinguishes status immobility from the perception of status inconsistency (which does not imply rejection of the status quo but rather increased status competition), as well as from a concern with expansion for the sake of security or economic advantage (neither of which dictates that conciliation or an orientation toward reassurance is antithetical to the state’s interests).

Status Immobility and Political Contests over Grand Strategy

Regardless of the origins of aggressive preferences, widespread perceptions of status immobility in a rising state also facilitate the increased influence of actors in favor of revisionism. Rhetoric invoking status concerns and especially claims of status immobility confers a number of advantages upon those opposed to reassurance in political contests over the direction of foreign policy in states in which widespread status frustration make such claims sustainable. Three characteristics of the rhetoric of status immobility make it a powerful tool for domestic actors opposed to reassurance.

First, domestic audiences are likely to have relatively little information about the intricacies of strategy and security but may be more in tune with the status implications of interstate interactions. Domestic actors making public arguments based on status and prestige concerns do not have to assume that audiences are capable of understanding the merits of a claim based on technical or confidential information related to military capabilities or economic growth projections. This means that rhetoric emphasizing the injustice of the status quo may resonate with audiences in rising states better than rhetoric relying on technical analysis.

Second, the rhetoric of status immobility (emphasizing injustice, unfairness, or hypocrisy) invokes emotions (especially anger) in a way that many other sorts of rhetoric do not. As Hall notes, invocations of anger “can contribute to constructing particular issues as sensitive and volatile, and thus outside the realm of standard cost-benefit calculations.” This insulates public arguments based on status immobility from counterclaims based on security or economic interest in a way that strongly benefits advocates of revisionism.

Third, arguments based on status issues are by nature “epideictic” or concerned with the state’s identity, while arguments based on cost-benefit

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calculations are “deliberative,” or concerned with the specifics of policy. As Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer K. Lobasz note, deliberative arguments are easier to counter than epideictic arguments. It is easier to rebut a claim that pursuing some policy is the best way to advance a state’s interests than it is to rebut a claim that pursuing some policy is necessary because failure to do so would be inconsistent with the state’s identity. The epideictic nature of the rhetoric of status immobility acts to insulate such arguments from many counterarguments.

These three characteristics mean that in states characterized by public discourses in which status immobility figures prominently, leaders will have a great deal of difficulty legitimating moderate, conciliatory policies. To be sure, in some situations, status concerns may be invoked to support a wide range of policies. However, when perceptions of status immobility are widespread (thereby helping to make sustainable the rhetoric of status immobility—claims about the injustice, unfairness, and hypocrisy of the status quo, and about the futility of conciliation and moderation), these rhetorical characteristics of status concerns should be expected to help elites advocating revisionism silence their moderate counterparts.

Is Status Immobility Epiphenomenal or Endogenous?

The most important objection to the theoretical argument laid out above is that perceptions of status immobility may be epiphenomenal or even endogenous to preferences. It could be that leaders with aggressive preferences simply tend to talk in ways that communicate status immobility but that this talk does not reflect perceptions, and that the causal work is done by preferences that develop via processes unrelated to status concerns. It could also be that status immobility is endogenous to aggressive preferences. Leaders who develop aggressive preferences for reasons unrelated to status concerns may as a result develop beliefs that the status quo cannot accommodate their state’s status claims. Alternatively, it may be that the formation of an elite consensus in favor of revisionism causes widespread perceptions of status immobility. I offer five responses to these objections.

First, there is substantial experimental evidence from psychology and social psychology suggesting that there is a link between relative deprivation or status immobility and aggressive preferences, and that the causal arrow

39 Krebs and Lobasz, “Fixing the Meaning of 9/11.”
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goestheformer to the latter.\textsuperscript{40} While this does not mean that perceptions of status immobility are never endogenous to preferences, it does indicate that they often have an independent causal effect of their own.

Second, not all leaders with aggressive preferences develop perceptions of status immobility, which undermines the claim that perceptions of status immobility are endogenous to aggressive preferences. Otto von Bismarck certainly had aggressive preferences during the 1860s and early 1870s but does not seem to have felt that the European status quo was incapable of accommodating Prussian status claims.\textsuperscript{41} Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, similarly, harbored very aggressive intentions prior to the First World War, but this had to do with shifts in the distribution of capabilities between Germany and Russia, not with perceptions of status immobility.\textsuperscript{42} Both examples suggest that aggressive preferences do not always result in perceptions of status immobility, as one might expect if status immobility were generally endogenous to preferences.

Third, not all elites who seem to perceive status immobility (or at least use the rhetoric of status immobility) have aggressive preferences. This undermines the claim that status immobility is generally endogenous to preferences. If it were, one would not expect perceptions of status immobility to arise in the absence of aggressive preferences. As the empirical discussion below demonstrates, not all Japanese leaders who perceived that status immobility was a problem also preferred to withdraw from the League of Nations. Yōsuke Matsuoka, the head of Japan’s delegation to the League in 1933 and the man who ultimately announced Japanese withdrawal, felt that Japan’s status claims had been consistently and unfairly blocked by Western


\textsuperscript{41} Stacie E. Goddard, “When Right Makes Might: How Prussia Overturned the European Balance of Power,” \textit{International Security} 33, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 110–42 demonstrates that Bismarck publicly supported the European status quo in order to facilitate Prussian expansion during the 1860s. While this rhetoric may have been instrumental, it is significant that Bismarck did not publicly or privately express perceptions of status immobility.

great powers. However, according to Ian Nish, he also “deeply desired a solution in which Japan could achieve its Imperial goals and still remain in the League.” Similarly Japanese statesman Inazō Nitobe, an ardent supporter of the league and opponent of Japanese militarism, understood that Western great powers had consistently refused to recognize Japan’s claims to great power status and warned Western audiences that this could undermine Japan’s commitment to the status quo.

Fourth, alternative explanations for the development of systemic revisionist preferences are hardly on firm ground. Prominent alternatives include approaches involving power maximization and private or organizational interest. None of these alternatives provides a compelling account of the development of a deeply aggressive revisionism oriented toward challenging the foundations of the status quo. Why should a rational individual interested in power maximization in a rising state not understand that adopting a grand strategy oriented toward broadly rejecting the status quo is likely to be extremely costly and risky, and is, as a result, best put off until the dynamics of the power transition have maximized the state’s capabilities advantage? Similarly, why should an individual interested in maximizing private or organizational economic gains through expansion not be satisfied with piecemeal revisions undertaken while maintaining a commitment to the foundations of the status quo and to reassuring existing great powers?

Finally, even if one cannot accept the contention that perceptions of status immobility may play a role in the development of individual preferences for revisionism among some elites, the second mechanism developed above still maintains an independent causal role for status immobility. This is because elite preferences in the area of grand strategy are rarely unanimous (the empirical discussion below demonstrates that they certainly were not in Japan during the early 1930s), which means that explaining the origins of individual preferences only tells part of the story. The more significant part involves explaining the outcomes of political and rhetorical contests over policy. The empirical discussion below not only demonstrates—at least in the Japanese case—that widespread perceptions of status immobility predated an elite consensus in favor of revisionism (undermining the claim that


46 See especially Mearsheimer, Tragedy of Great Power Politics; Snyder, Myths of Empire.
status immobility is endogenous to a leadership’s collective decision to pursue systemic revisionism) but also that status immobility can play a critical role in contests over grand strategy by altering the political and discursive environment within a state in a way that facilitates the increased influence of actors with aggressive preferences.

THE RISE OF REVISIONISM IN TAISHO/SHOWA JAPAN

In March 1933, Japan formally withdrew from the League of Nations. This decision was a watershed in the history of Japanese foreign policy. Before withdrawal from the league, Japanese leaders were committed to pursuing a grand strategy oriented toward expanding in Manchuria without provoking the Western great powers. In the years after it withdrew from the League, Japan negated the Washington and London naval treaties, left the Second London Naval Conference, and concluded an alliance with Nazi Germany. In short, after withdrawing from the league, Japan was unable or unwilling to pursue a grand strategy oriented toward reassurance, even though moderate Japanese leaders favored such a course.

Prominent existing explanations for Japan’s shift away from Shidehara diplomacy toward systemic revisionism after 1931 do not hold up well and raise as many puzzles as they resolve. A number of scholars interpret Japanese behavior largely in realist terms. While there is little doubt that much of Imperial Japan’s expansion throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was motivated by security concerns, the specific claim that security concerns were what caused Japan to go its own way in Manchuria and withdraw from the League of Nations and later from the Washington and London Naval Treaties is unconvincing.

First, there were good security reasons for Japan to seek accommodation with the Western powers throughout this period. Japan never achieved anywhere close to the industrial capacity of the United States or Great Britain and was heavily dependent on the West and Western-controlled territories for resources. Provocation harmed Japan’s security by threatening its supply lines and making the West suspicious of Japanese intentions.

Second, many Japanese leaders understood very clearly just how weak Japan was in relation to the United States and other Western powers, and how foolhardy it would be to take steps that might result in isolation.


Japanese moderates supported naval limitations agreements because they recognized Japan’s industrial disadvantage vis-à-vis the United States and felt that the 5:5:3 building ratio between the United States, Great Britain, and Japan achieved in the Washington Treaty was better than Japan could have done in a naval arms race.\footnote{Sadao Asada, “The Japanese Navy and the United States,” in Pearl Harbor as History: Japanese-American Relations 1931–1941, ed. D. Borg and S. Okamoto (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 227.} Even within the navy itself there was no unanimous organizational interest in unlimited building. Navy minister Tomosaburo Kato, who led Japan’s delegation to the London Naval Conference in 1930, was the most prominent member of the “treaty faction” within the navy.\footnote{Ibid., 227.} Isoroku Yamamoto, future commander of the Pearl Harbor operation and another member of the “treaty faction,” wrote that “anyone who has seen the auto factories in Detroit and the oil fields in Texas knows that Japan lacks the national power for a naval race with America” and that “the 5:5:3 ratio works just fine for us; it is a treaty to restrict the other parties.”\footnote{Ibid., 237.} Finally, withdrawal from the League of Nations—which, as discussed below, was perceived as extremely costly by Japanese moderate leaders and had real negative consequences for their ability to control policy—makes very little sense as a move motivated by perceptions of insecurity.

Jack Snyder proposes a more convincing explanation for Japan’s shift toward revisionism. Snyder argues that the Japanese military had organizational and ideological incentives to pursue expansion and that it was able to do so both because the Japanese state was constructed in such a way that allowed the military to hijack the state’s decision-making apparatus and because expansionist “strategic myths” and legitimating rhetoric resonated strongly within Japanese society.\footnote{Snyder, Myths of Empire, 120–50.} Specifically, “Japan’s pattern of late development allowed the emergence of powerful military cartels,” which were empowered by a constitutional arrangement that gave the army and navy leaders the right of “direct access” to the Emperor, insulating them from parliamentary and cabinet politics under certain conditions.\footnote{Ibid., 135; Yale Candee Maxon, Control of Japanese Foreign Policy: A Study of Civil Military Rivalry 1930–1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 13.} This autonomy made it difficult for civilian leaders to control the military, and the outcome was a situation in which actors with interests in expansion formed logrolled coalitions that resulted in overexpansive policy.\footnote{Snyder, Myths of Empire, 144–48.}

While there is much to recommend this argument, two related puzzles arise from Snyder’s account. First, military autonomy was nothing new in Japan in 1931. The military took unauthorized action in Siberia at the end of the First World War and in 1928 ignited a crisis in Tsinan and later...
TABLE 1 Japanese Understandings of Status Categories and Obstacles

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<td>Autonomy in foreign policy (especially in the near abroad)</td>
<td>Achieved but not recognized by Westerners (due to racial incompatibility)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Fundamentally incompatible</td>
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assassinated Manchurian warlord Chang Tso-Lin. However it was not until 1931 that Japan’s civilian leadership proved incapable of bringing the military back under control without doing irreversible damage to its international position. Snyder proposes that prior to 1931, Japan’s elite civilian leadership had been able to function more or less as if it were unitary. After 1931, “the genro were swamped by the very growth of capitalist pluralism and parliamentary democracy they themselves had set in motion.”55 This allowed the military to circumvent the cabinet by appealing directly to the newly active and politically aware public in order to legitimate its expansionist agenda.

This interpretation leads directly to the second puzzle: why did militant and nationalist rhetoric resonate so strongly with the public? Why did the public ultimately come down on the side of the Kwantung Army and the opponents of a foreign policy oriented toward reassurance? Snyder does not provide an explanation, and it is not enough to say that aggressive rhetoric is always popular. The case of the United States only a few years later appears to contradict this claim.

I offer an account that explains what existing approaches cannot—how Japanese moderates were silenced and overrun in debates over Japanese grand strategy after 1931. I argue that Japan’s shift toward systemic revisionism was in part a response to perceptions of status immobility related to understandings of the importance of race in the Western-dominated status hierarchy. Perceptions of status immobility developed in Japan as a result of diplomatic failures throughout the 1920s and early 1930s that were interpreted as race-based insults. These insults convinced many elites and public opinion leaders that Japan’s claims to equality of status with Western great powers could not be fulfilled within the constraints of a Western-dominated status hierarchy premised upon racial considerations (Table 1 summarizes the way status aspirations and status markers were understood in Japan by

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55 Ibid., 136.
the early 1930s). Widespread perceptions of status immobility by 1933 (particularly intense in the wake of the Lytton Commission Report, which was interpreted as a denial of the right of a great power to intervene within its own sphere of influence) facilitated the increased influence of Japanese revisionists and prevented Japanese moderates from legitimating continued grand strategic reassurance.

Why Japan?

Taisho/Showa Japan is a useful case with which to illustrate the influence of status immobility on foreign policy primarily because existing theories of revisionism claim to be able to explain it as well. As noted above, realists claim that economic and military development along with Western powers' preoccupation with European affairs presented Japan with an opportunity to expand during the 1920s. Japan also constitutes a seemingly easy case for theories that revolve around domestic coalition formation and logrolling. This is because Taisho/Showa Japan was characterized by a strong, relatively autonomous military that was able to “hijack” the state to pursue its organizational and ideological interests. Showing that existing theories do not perform adequately even in a case to which they look for empirical support—and showing that status immobility matters even in a case in which its influence might be expected to be overwhelmed by the presence of variables associated with established explanations—should increase confidence that status immobility may play a role in shifts toward grand strategic revisionism in other cases as well.

One important objection is that the Japanese case is essentially unique: the particular combination of rising capabilities and racial characteristics at odds with prevailing markers of great power identity has not been seen since. While it is true that race is no longer a marker of great power status, throughout history rising great powers have frequently encountered status markers and attribution systems that seemed incompatible with their ambitions and domestic characteristics. Japan during the Ashikaga, Sengoku, and Tokugawa periods could not satisfy its ambition to gain equality with Ming China because the social structure of the Sino-centric order had no place for two “sons of heaven.” Weimar Germany could not regain its place as a European great power because (many Germans believed) the Versailles

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57 See Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, 142.

system was stacked against it. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russian claims to great power status were treated ambiguously by its peers because of doubts about Russia’s domestic institutions and status as a member of European civilization.  

Today, there are potentially impermeable status category boundaries facing Turkey in its struggle for admission to the European Union and China in its struggle for great power status. Neither boundary is racial (the former has to do with civilizational and religious characteristics, the latter with domestic political institutions and conformity with human rights norms), but both have the potential to generate perceptions of status immobility. While racial boundaries may not have the relevance they once did in international politics, other types of boundaries that have similar characteristics are still common. This makes the case of Taisho/Showa Japan’s shift toward systemic revisionism interesting and useful to investigate.

Race and Status in Taisho/Showa Japan

From the opening of Japan to the West in the middle of the nineteenth century through the 1930s, Japanese decision-makers, opinion elites, and the public displayed a deep concern for international status. Nariaki Tokugawa of Mito wrote that the arrival of the Americans and their subsequent behavior was “the greatest disgrace we have suffered since the dawn of our history.” Shozan Sakuma experienced the opening of Japan as an “insult to our national dignity.” Tomomi Iwakura, one of Japan’s first foreign ministers, wrote that Japan had “never before known such shame and disgrace.”

One major objective of Japanese foreign policy throughout the period after the Meiji Restoration was enhancing Japan’s international status and eventually being recognized by Western states as a great power with the same rights and privileges accorded to Western great powers. Beasley notes that many Japanese domestic reforms undertaken following Iwakura’s 1873 fact-finding mission to the West “stemmed from a desire to achieve respectability in Western eyes, this being a step on the road to full equality.”

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60 See Yong Deng, China’s Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
Korekiyo Takahashi, who would later become prime minister, spoke in 1889 of his students’ “duty to advance the status of Japan, bring her to a position of equality with the civilized powers and then carry on to build a foundation from which we shall surpass them all.”65 Four-time prime minister Hirobumi Ito noted that throughout the Meiji era, Japan had sought “to attain among the nations of the world the status of a civilized nation and to become a member of the comity of European and American nations which occupy the position of civilized countries.”66

Japanese leaders and the public measured Japan against other states and took note when Japan was denied recognition of its successes.67 Kokumin no tomo, a popular Japanese magazine, published an article in 1891 about Japan’s rapid technological and economic advancement and concluded that “if one impartially compares our country with European countries, we are above Spain and abreast of Italy.”68 This, however, contributed to dissatisfaction and the consciousness of status inconsistency because Westerners were evidently not working with the same ranking. The same publication wrote two years later that Westerners “regard us as only a step above Fiji or Hawaii .... They do not know that we have the talent to assimilate the virtues of Western civilization and to put them to our own use.”69

While a series of achievements around the turn of the twentieth century seemed to some Japanese to solidify the West’s acceptance of Japan as a great power, these successes masked growing perceptions of status immobility.70 This raises an interesting point about whether or not perceptions of status immobility were accurate. This question is only answerable by determining whether or not Japan could have achieved recognition of equal status from Western powers. At the level of intergovernmental relations this is not inconceivable, considering Japanese gains following World War I. However, given deeply rooted ideas about racial hierarchies in Western society, as well as Western leaders’ accountability to domestic audiences, there would almost certainly have been continued official discrimination (especially related to

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66 Tsunoda et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 678.
immigration) that would have signaled the existence of an ultimate status “ceiling” for Japan.

In any case, perceptions were what mattered. A collective memory of being denied recognition of high status claims throughout its recent history and consciousness of the problem posed by Western understandings of a hierarchy of races—underscored especially by conflict over immigration and events during the Paris Peace Conference—primed many Japanese elites and opinion leaders to expect unfair treatment from the West after World War I. This expectation made Japan’s commitment to the international status quo, which was led and dominated by the West, particularly fragile.

The humiliation of Japan’s first interaction with the West led to two important responses. The first was to emulate the West in an attempt to gain equality. The second, though, was resentment toward the Western great powers along with an understanding that Japan’s unequal treatment was premised, in part, on racial differences. Sohō Tokutomi wrote during the 1890s that even though Japan had made advances since the signing of the unequal treaties, Japan still suffered from “the scorn of the white people.”

Such sentiment became common as Japanese encountered Western theories about racial hierarchies and was a standard interpretation when Japan suffered foreign policy defeats at the hands of Western great powers.

During the First Sino-Japanese War, Kaiser Wilhelm II began referring to the “Yellow Peril,” the rise of a racial threat from Asia in the form of a powerful Japanese state. Naoko Shimazu notes that Japan’s sensitivity to racial difference increased markedly from that point. According to Kikujirō Ishii, Japan’s ambassador to the United States during the Paris Peace Conference, the Western rhetoric of the “Yellow Peril” did “permanent damage” to Japan’s national image. By 1895, there had emerged within Japanese public discourse an understanding that Westerners viewed Asians as racially inferior and even threatening. This influenced and was simultaneously reinforced by the Japanese reaction to the Triple Intervention of 1895. Following the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War and the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, Germany, France, and Russia intervened to demand that Japan return the Liaotung Peninsula to China. Reaction in Japan was fiercely negative and marked by intense antiforeign sentiment and a perception that Japan had been “bullied.” Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Tadasu Hayashi

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74 Ishii, *Gaikō zuiso*, 186.
75 Shimazu, *Japan, Race, and Equality*, 95–96.
dreamed of the day when “Japan will be able to put into their place the powers who seek to meddle in her affairs.”

Also consequential for the development of perceptions of racial inferiority and status immobility in Japan was Western treatment of Japanese immigrants. During and after the 1890s, Japanese immigration to the British dominions (in particular Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) and the United States became a contentious issue for Japanese foreign policy. The evidence suggests that immigration issues were sensitive for Japan primarily due to their status implications, not for economic reasons.

Japanese leaders were happy to restrict immigration voluntarily via a series of agreements with potential host countries. These informal agreements, while substantially limiting Japanese migration to the West, did not provoke resentment among Japanese leaders, and in fact were a relatively favorable means of dealing with immigration issues for the Japanese government.

Instead, it was the racial implications of formal immigration restrictions that grated upon Japan’s understanding of its place in the international status hierarchy. In 1897, in response to debates over immigration restrictions in Australia, ambassador to Great Britain Takaaki Katō wrote to the British prime minister Lord Salisbury (Robert Gascoyne-Cecil) that the Japanese were sensitive to these measures because they treated them “as if the Japanese were on the same level of morality and civilization as Chinese and other less advanced populations of Asia.”

The Japanese responded so negatively to California’s 1913 Alien Land Law that President Woodrow Wilson and his cabinet discussed the prospect of preventive naval measures in the Pacific. After passage, Japan’s ambassador to the United States wrote that the law was “mortifying to the Government and people of Japan, since the racial distinction inferable from those provisions is hurtful to their just national susceptibility.” Two years later, Katō, now foreign minister, wrote that the problem with the California

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78 Shimazu, Japan, Race, and Equality, ch. 3.
79 These included the 1904 Passport Agreement with Australia, the 1908 Lemieux Agreement with Canada, and the 1907 “gentlemen’s agreement” with the United States. See A. T. Yarwood, Asian Migration to Australia: The Background to Exclusion, 1896–1923 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 98–99; Shimazu, Japan, Race, and Equality, 71–76.
80 Shimazu, Japan, Race, and Equality, 71.
81 Takaaki Katō to Lord Salisbury (Robert Gascoyne Cecil), 7 October 1897, quoted in D. C. S. Sissons, “The Immigration Question in Australian Diplomatic Relations with Japan, 1875–1919,” History Section 26/821, Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (Brisbane, 1971), 38.
82 For the 1913 Alien Land Law, see Shimazu, Japan, Race, and Equality, 76. For preventive naval measures, see diary entries for 13 and 16 May 1913, Josephus Daniels, The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913–1921 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963).
Alien Land Law was the “discrimination made against our people in distinction from some other nations ... we thought ourselves ahead of any other Asiatic people and as good as some of the European nations.”

The racial and prestige implications of the immigration question made many Japanese leaders wary of the Paris Peace Conference and the construction of a postwar order on Western terms. President Wilson’s proposed new order “seemed designed to circumscribe Japan’s legitimate national development and perpetuate the nation’s secondary status.” Home minister and later foreign minister Shinpei Gotō wrote in 1916 that “the racial prejudice of the white races is so strong that even when they make an offensive and defensive alliance with a yellow race they cannot divest themselves of the prejudice ... if you probe their feelings you will find that the white races are displeased at the participation of the yellow races.” Legal scholar Saktaro Tachi wrote skeptically before the Paris Peace Conference that “Even in peacetime there are nations which monopolize vast natural resources and deny other peoples a place in the sun. They act to dominate and oppress peoples of different race, language, ideas, and culture.” Foreign minister Kōsai Uchida feared that “the persistence of narrow racial attitudes among nations casts doubt upon the feasibility of the League’s goals and creates the possibility that its establishment will be disadvantageous to the Empire.”

Significantly, twenty-eight-year-old future prime minister Fumimaro Konoe published “Reject the Anglo-American Peace” in the nationalist magazine Nihon oyobi Nihonjin in which he argued that the League of Nations was intended to perpetuate the status quo and keep rising states like Japan down. Konoe linked this danger to racial inequality and drew a parallel between the situation that Wilhelmine Germany had faced in 1914 and the position that Japan might face in the future.

Perceptions of racial inequality were so widespread that Japan’s conference delegation was instructed to push for the inclusion of a racial equality clause in the league charter. Shimazu argues that the racial equality proposal was intended to accomplish two tasks: to silence racial inferiority-based domestic opposition to the League of Nations and to formally eradicate race as

84 quoted in Pyle, Japan Rising, 133.
85 Burkman, Japan and the League of Nations, 4.
86 ibid., 10.
89 Gaikō Chosakai meeting, 13 November 1918, quoted in Burkman, Japan and the League of Nations, 45.
a marker of great power status. Paul Gordon Lauren notes that “Japanese press opinion appeared to be absolutely unanimous in stressing the necessity for their representatives to insist on this matter.” Asahi, Hochi, Nichinichi, and Yorozu ran editorials demanding racial equality and used language indicating the link between the fate of the proposal and Japan’s status. “Discrimination is humiliation and therefore an injustice”; “No other question is so inseparably and materially interwoven with the permanency of the world’s peace as that of unfair and unjust treatment.”

Ultimately, the racial equality proposal failed, in part due to opposition from the Australian delegation as well as from anti-immigration interest groups in the United States. That Japan still joined the League raises a question about the timing of shifts toward systemic revisionism. Integrating more fully within the Western-led order is not what one would expect from a state suffering from status immobility. The only response is to appeal to indeterminacy and contingency. It is difficult to say exactly when perceptions of status immobility should be strong enough or widespread enough to influence policy because this depends so crucially on factors like rhetorical entrepreneurship, the strength of moderate leaders, and crises that might provide opportunities for leaders opposed to moderation.

Still, while it did not result in a shift toward revisionism, the failure of the racial equality proposal had the effect of strengthening already strong perceptions of status immobility in Japan. “Racial equality” became a rhetorical commonplace after the Paris Peace Conference and was popular as a legitimizing trope among nationalist and expansionist groups. Subsequent events, in particular the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924, which established quotas for immigrants from specific countries reinforced the conclusion that Japan could not achieve great power status within the international status quo.

Status Immobility and Japanese Foreign Policy after 1931
On 18 September 1931, members of the Kwantung Army (the Japanese military force stationed in Manchuria) detonated a section of the Japanese-controlled South Manchurian Railway near Mukden. Using the explosion as a pretext, the Kwantung Army proceeded to occupy most of Manchuria, over

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91 Shimazu, Japan, Race, and Equality, chap. 2 and 112–13.
93 For the Hochi editorial, see ibid., 80 (“discrimination”). For the Asahi editorial, see ibid., 80–81 (“No other”).
94 Shimazu, Japan, Race, and Equality, chaps. 5 and 6.
95 Ibid., 178.
the protests of Japan’s central government. During the years following the incident, the advocates of a grand strategy oriented toward reassurance lost control over the levers of policy. The result was a Japanese state increasingly incapable of and uninterested in taking steps to reassure the Western great powers that it had benign intentions.

Status immobility played a key role in Japan’s shift toward revisionism in the years after the Mukden Incident through the two mechanisms developed in the theoretical discussion above. First, resentment toward the West and in particular perceptions of racial inferiority contributed to the development of the ideologies and foreign policy preferences of the ultra-right wing nationalist and militarist groups whose agitation against “weak-kneed diplomacy” (nanjaku gaikō) threatened and undermined the efforts of internationalist leaders to maintain a foreign policy oriented toward reassurance. Second, widespread perceptions of status immobility and the associated expectation that Japan would be treated unjustly by Western great powers facilitated the increasing influence of the advocates of revisionism by making it difficult for moderates to legitimate their preferred course in the wake of the League of Nations’ condemnation of the Mukden Incident. The immediate result was withdrawal from the League and an increase in the influence of the opponents of reassurance.

Status Immobility and Preferences for Revisionism in Japan

One major cause of Japan’s drift toward systemic revisionism was the influence of ultranationalist and militarist groups. These groups affected policy in a number of ways, including rhetorical and political agitation, assassinations and coup attempts, and the execution of plots that embarrassed the government and caused tension between Japan and the West. It is difficult to say with certainty to what extent perceptions of racial inferiority and status immobility influenced the ideologies, objectives, and preferences of these groups, but an examination of some of the history and content of Japanese ultra-nationalism suggests that they did play a role.

First, Richard Storry notes that the number of militant nationalist groups increased between 1919 and 1930, which Shimazu suggests points toward the rejection of the racial equality clause as a key point around which nationalists coalesced. Second, many right wing groups formed after this point

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97 Snyder, Myths of Empire, 133–50.
“asserted that the world was dominated by the Anglo-Saxon nations led by Great Britain.”\textsuperscript{100} The injustice of Western domination based on racial differences—a concept clearly related to status immobility—played a central role in the way most nationalist groups evaluated the status quo and Japan’s role in the world. For instance, right wing groups opposed the London Naval Treaty for two major reasons: first, the treaty was an extension of the Washington Conference system, which was “nothing but a cover-up for eventual Anglo-American domination of the world.”\textsuperscript{101} Second, naval disarmament would hamper Japan’s ability to “unify the nonwhite peoples of Asia and inspire them to resist domination by the white race, whose attitude was symbolized by the United States’ treatment of Japanese immigrants.”\textsuperscript{102} Along similar lines, in late 1933, the Council for a Union of Patriotic Movements was founded in Tokyo, and demanded an end to the “traditional humiliating diplomacy submissive to the dictates of European powers and the United States,” and the inauguration of “a diplomacy of justice and pan-Asian alliance.”\textsuperscript{103} Many prominent Japanese ultranationalist leaders, including Shūmei Ōkawa, Ikki Kita, and Kanji Ishiwara, held similar beliefs about the fundamental injustice of the status quo and the inevitability of an apocalyptic racial conflict in which Japan would liberate the nonwhite world.\textsuperscript{104}

Status Immobility and the Politics of Withdrawal from the League

The second way in which status immobility influenced Japanese foreign policy was by making the political and rhetorical environment in Japan more favorable for advocates of revisionism. This process is most clearly visible in the decision to withdraw from the League of Nations after the League’s condemnation of Japanese actions in the Mukden Incident.

Throughout the crisis, Japan’s moderate central leadership consistently hoped for a solution that would allow them to remain within the League and reestablish control over the military. This is a crucial point because it suggests that preferences for revisionism were not uniform among Japanese leaders and undermines the claim that status immobility is endogenous to an elite consensus in favor of revisionism (since perceptions of status immobility predated Japan’s shift away from moderation). It also suggests that explaining Japan’s shift toward revisionism involves accounting for the outcome of a

\textsuperscript{100} Ito, “The Role of Right-Wing Organizations in Japan,” 488.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 492.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 492.
\textsuperscript{103} Quoted in ibid., 498–99.
\textsuperscript{104} Shimazu, Japan, Race, and Equality, 176; Takehiro Otsuka, Okawa Shumei to kindai Nihon (Tokyo: Bokuktakusha, 1990), 183; Ikki Kita, Nihon kaizo hoan taiko (An Outline Plan for the Reorganization of Japan) (1923); Mark Peattie, Ishiwara Kanji and Japan’s Confrontation with the West (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 141, 81.
political contest over grand strategy—a contest that was stacked against the advocates of moderation as a result of the rise of status immobility.

Prime Minister Reijirō Wakatsuki told the Emperor that the Mukden Incident was “regrettable” and that he had “decided to prevent this incident from spreading.”105 Shidehara sought to extract a guarantee from War Minister Jirō Minami that the Kwantung Army would go no further than it already had. After Minami agreed, Shidehara noted that “We were all relieved.”106 Toru Takemoto suggests that Shidehara, in full knowledge that the Manchurian Incident had been perpetrated not by Chinese nationalists but by Japanese soldiers, agreed to endorse the Kwantung Army’s version of events in order to save face for the military as a quid pro quo for this guarantee.107

In October, Wakatsuki rejected a call to withdraw from the League of Nations, saying that “if Japan does not act with due consideration of her international position, Japan in the end will be isolated, and this will bring an unexpected misfortune upon the nation.”108 In November, as the Kwantung Army (in spite of the war minister’s guarantee) advanced on Chinchow, Shidehara and Prime Minister Wakatsuki, having received news of an increasingly negative reaction on the part of the Western great powers in Geneva, strongly urged Chief of the General Staff Hanzo Kanaya to call off the operation.109 Kanaya, agreeing with Shidehara’s assessment, complied.110

Even after Shidehara and the rest of the Wakatsuki cabinet fell in late 1931, Japan’s central leadership continued to hope for a resolution that would not alienate them from international society. In mid-November 1931, upon hearing of a plot to establish an independent Manchukuo, War Minister Minami warned against such a step because it might “rapidly bring about a situation extremely disadvantageous to our national policy with regard to the powers.”111 Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai, who succeeded Wakatsuki, worried that a “head-on collision with the Nine Power Treaty would be inevitable,” and as a result his “aim [was] to terminate the present crisis as soon as possible.”112

107 Ibid., 127.
112 Letter from Tsuyoshi Inukai to Yūsaku Uehara, 15 February 1932, quoted in Ogata, *Defiance in Manchuria*, 139.
After Manchukuo was proclaimed in March, Inukai refused to grant recognition in the hope of avoiding “world-wide condemnation.” Sadako Ogata suggests that this policy—a serious risk in the face of growing popular support for the Kwantung Army as well as the danger of assassination—was one of the last expressions of “traditional Japanese foreign policy, which considered cooperation with the powers as vital to the execution of an expansionist program on the Asian continent.”

As late as early 1933, Japanese leaders were still struggling to maintain a grand strategy oriented toward reassurance even in the face of daunting obstacles posed by military adventurism. Kumao Harada (genro Saionji Kinmochi’s secretary) reports that in early February, Kinmochi’s opinion was that “withdrawal [from the League] will be disadvantageous to Japan” and that Prime Minister Makoto Saitō agreed. There were, of course, a variety of voices advocating withdrawal by this point, but it is significant that two of the most influential Japanese leaders thought the move was unwise.

Japanese moderate leaders, in short, did not prefer or actively seek withdrawal from the League but rather were unable to avoid it. The reason appears to have been the League’s condemnation, in the form of the Lytton Commission Report, of Japan’s conduct since September 1931, and the report’s effect on and interaction with a Japanese public and discourse predisposed to believe that the West was unwilling to treat Japan as a full-fledged great power. These developments prevented Japanese moderates from sustainably defending a commitment to reassurance.

Even before the Lytton Commission arrived in Japan, there was intense opposition to league demands that Japan withdraw its troops from Manchuria. One paper published an editorial criticizing the League’s behavior as an “attempt to deprive the rising nation of Japan of her natural rights.” Press coverage of the Lytton Commission’s second visit to Tokyo—by which time it was clear that the commission’s report would reject Japan’s claims about the origins of the Mukden Incident—was “generally hostile.” Kaku Mori, chief cabinet secretary under Prime Minister Saitō Makoto, and one of the chief opponents of reassurance, demanded before a crowd of twenty-five thousand at a Seiyukai party convention that Japan cease “fawning at the League of Nations... hesitating before the prestige of a great nation and being startled or dazzled by the name of the sacred covenant of the League or the Kellogg-Briand Anti-War Pact,” which were “nothing more than expediencies

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113 Ogata, *Defiance in Manchuria*, 145.
114 Ibid., 156. Inukai was, as it turned out, assassinated in May 1932.
to help a few influential nations maintain the status quo.” In August, after Japan announced that it would recognize Manchukuo after all, Mori declared “Japan now defiantly rose from her traditional diplomacy characterized by servility.” An editorial published in Asahi in September remarked on the irony of American opposition to Japanese action in Manchuria, since the United States had “set the precedent by its actions in Cuba and Panama.”

While the empirical record on public opinion and public discourse in Japan during this period is imperfect, the evidence does suggest that the Lytton Commission’s rejection of Japan’s actions in Manchuria elicited such a strong response because it resonated with extant understandings of status immobility. Mori’s reference to the League as a mechanism for perpetuating the status quo expresses a belief that existing international social and political structures could not accommodate Japan’s rise. It is important to bear in mind that the most significant empirical value of Mori’s speeches is not that they reflect his true beliefs but that they reflect a discursive environment in which a member of the central government could make such claims publicly. Similarly, the Asahi editorial, which communicates resentment at the hypocrisy of the Western powers—a sentiment clearly related to a perception of status immobility—ran in a widely read mainstream paper.

The public anti-League sentiment limited the moderate leadership’s options in the event that the League adopted the report. Sandra Wilson notes that one important consequence of anti-Western agitation was to cause a sort of outbidding dynamic, in which members of whichever of the two major political parties (Seiyukai and Minseito) was currently out of power could gain popularity by criticizing the other party for not taking strong enough action to “establish an independent foreign policy.” For instance, in March 1932, Minseito, which was the party of the moderate Wakatsuki cabinet that had been in power in 1931, pressed the Seiyukai cabinet to recognize Manchukuo without delay. What emerged from this process was a political and rhetorical space in which there was little room for accommodation of the West.

In February, the League Assembly voted 42–1 to adopt the Lytton Report. The next month, Japan formally withdrew. What mattered most was sensitivity to the status implications of the League’s actions and to public opinion, which was primed to believe that Japan would be treated unfairly and denied the rights and privileges of a Western great power (including the

119 Question of Kaku Mori to Kōsai Uchida, 63rd Session of the Japanese Diet, 25 August 1932, quoted in Ogata, Defiance in Manchuria, 160.
122 Ibid., 88.
right to intervene in smaller states to ensure stability).\textsuperscript{123} These fears seemed to be confirmed by the League’s response to the Manchurian Crisis. The Lytton Commission’s finding that Japan’s actions in Manchuria were not justified by claims of self-defense was interpreted as a condemnation and evidence to many Japanese of the inability of the West to accommodate Japan’s claim to great power status.\textsuperscript{124} Prior to Japan’s withdrawal, Matsuoka told Setsuzo Sawada that “if we do not take steps to leave the League, we shall inevitably invite the ridicule of the outside world.”\textsuperscript{125} Afterward, Matsuoka drew a parallel between Japan and Germany, which “also fights for recognition and its place in the eyes of the world.”\textsuperscript{126} Inazō Nitobe, speaking to an American audience a year prior to Japan’s withdrawal, remarked that in order to prevent Japan from leaving the League, the West must “recognize the justice of our claim which involves our honor and our very existence as a nation.”\textsuperscript{127}

Thomas Burkman notes that the decision to withdraw was “made under tense circumstances of public and press clamor against the League and rumors of assassination plots.”\textsuperscript{128} Nish suggests that the “hostility of the army ... and other right-wing organizations was formidable and commanded much public support” and that the Foreign Ministry “was receiving hundreds of letters daily calling for Japan to pull out” of the League.\textsuperscript{129} Cabinet members felt this pressure, as an account of a February cabinet meeting suggests. Harada notes that there was discussion that “the newspapers were too hasty in advocating withdrawal,” and Finance Minister Korekiyo Takahashi “attacked the army savagely” for not quieting the anti-League press.\textsuperscript{130}

Although Saitō believed that “no matter what the contents [of the report] are, we should remain in the League and contend that Japan’s claims are just,”\textsuperscript{131} once the content of the report that the assembly would vote on reached Japan, Saionji reportedly observed that “withdrawal is inevitable.”\textsuperscript{132} Harada reported to the Minister of Home Affairs that Saionji’s opinion was that “there’s nothing that can be done if the majority is of the opinion that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{123} Attempts to legitimate expansion in Manchuria as a part of the “Asian Monroe Doctrine” suggest that Japanese leaders understood the right to intervene in the “near abroad” as a privilege accorded to great powers. See George Blakeslee, “The Japanese Monroe Doctrine,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 11, no. 4 (July 1933).
\item \textsuperscript{124} Burkman, \textit{Japan and the League of Nations}, 143.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Masakuma, “Manshu jihen to Kokusai Renmei dattai [The Manchurian Incident and the Withdrawal from the League of Nations],” 180, quoted in Nish, \textit{Japan’s Struggle with Internationalism}, 210.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Quoted in Ernst Presseisen, \textit{Germany and Japan: A Study in Totalitarian Diplomacy} (New York: H. Fertig, 1969), 32.
\item \textsuperscript{127} Nitobe, “Japan, the League of Nations, and the Peace Pacts,” 99.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Burkman, \textit{Japan and the League of Nations}, 174.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Nish, \textit{Japan’s Struggle with Internationalism}, 184.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Harada, \textit{The Saionji-Harada Memoirs}, 519.
\item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 521.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 537 and Ogata, \textit{Defiance in Manchuria}, 174.
\end{itemize}
Japan should withdraw from the League. Above all, it is probably quite impossible to suppress the trend of affairs at this time."¹³³ Kyoshi Kiyosawa notes that “the overwhelming majority of the Japanese people were genuinely relieved when the government decided to cast off the restrictions of the League covenant and other international treaties.”¹³⁴ Kameo Ito, in the prominent publication Ie no hikari, complained of the League’s “betrayal” and noted that “the League’s anti-Japanese attitude was consistent from beginning to end. This is only to be expected of the League, which is controlled by whites.”¹³⁵

Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations is significant for two reasons. First, it indicated that Japanese moderates had largely lost the ability to control the advocates of revisionism and pursue reassurance. Given the clear preference of Japanese moderates to remain within the League of Nations and avoid aggravating the Western powers, this is striking.¹³⁶ Second, it facilitated the continued dominance of the advocates of revisionism among Japanese decision makers. For one thing, Japanese leaders could no longer use the threat of the League’s reaction or appeal to its good offices to rein in groups and individuals committed to expansion. This had been at times an effective strategy for Japanese moderates.¹³⁷ Once Japan had withdrawn, there did not appear to be as much to lose from pursuing policies preferred by factions committed to expansion. Hugh Wilson, an American diplomat in Switzerland during the period of Japan’s withdrawal, remarked that “condemnation creates a community of the damned who are forced outside the pale, who have nothing to lose by the violation of all laws and order and international good faith.”¹³⁸ It is striking that less than four years after signing the London Naval Treaty—and one year after withdrawing from the League—Japan gave notice that it planned to cancel the treaty and discontinue negotiations over supplementary naval arms agreements. Significantly, Japanese moderates still appear to have cared about the reaction of the Western great powers; they attempted to cover their departure by seeking to persuade Italy and France to leave the treaty negotiations as well.¹³⁹

Withdrawal also facilitated the dominance of the advocates of revisionism in Japan by fostering a sense of isolation that made it easier to argue

¹³⁶ Nish, Japan’s Struggle with Internationalism, 171, notes that even Matsuoka, the hero of withdrawal, “deeply desired a solution in which Japan could achieve its Imperial goals and still remain in the League.”
¹³⁷ Nish, Japan’s Struggle with Internationalism, 104.
¹³⁸ Hugh Wilson, Diplomat Between Wars (New York: Longmans, Green, 1941), 279–81.
¹³⁹ Nish, Japanese Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 98.
for taking steps that might otherwise have been considered unnecessarily provocative. Sadao Asada notes that “a deepening sense of isolation in the aftermath of Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations” helped to “crystallize a resolution among Japanese naval planners to terminate the ‘unequal’ treaties and demand parity at the forthcoming London parley.”

Stephen Pelz, similarly, cites isolation stemming from withdrawal from the League as one of the factors that allowed the navy’s “fleet faction” to dominate naval policymaking after 1933. Nish notes a parallel process behind Japan’s approach to Germany, culminating in the 1936 Anti-Comintern Pact.

To summarize, status immobility had two broad effects on Japanese foreign policy after 1931. First, it motivated some Japanese nationalist and militarist groups whose agitation threatened and undermined Japan’s moderate political and military leadership throughout the early 1930s. Second, it made Japanese elite and public opinion highly sensitive to the League of Nations’ response to the Manchurian Incident and was the immediate cause of Japan’s withdrawal from the League. Withdrawal from the League indicated the inability of Japanese moderates to pursue a foreign policy of reassurance and facilitated the dominance of the advocates of revisionism, which led Japan down a path toward major conflict with the Western great powers.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND POLICY**

The argument outlined and illustrated above has implications for both IR theory and US foreign policy. First, it represents a significant step toward solving the puzzle of what drives satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the status quo, especially within rising states. Scholars need to look more closely at what factors advantage and disadvantage domestic advocates of varying grand strategic orientations, and particularly at how the institutional character of the status quo and the behavior of its most powerful defenders influence contests over foreign policy. While status immobility appears to be one factor that disadvantages the advocates of conciliation, there may be other political resources that help one side or the other. Second, this article has theorized about how status concerns influence foreign policy in a way that is more attentive to causal mechanisms than previous scholarship has been. Contrary to what much IR scholarship on status suggests, states cannot “care” about status. If status matters, it must influence policy outcomes through

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143 Examples include Larson and Shevchenko, “Status Seekers,” and Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War.”
domestic political processes. Being specific about what these mechanisms are strengthens the foundations of theories about status and allows them to be tested rigorously using qualitative methods.

Third, the analysis of Japan’s shift away from Shidehara diplomacy offers a cautionary tale for the West as it faces a series of rising powers. While race is no longer an integral marker of status, rising powers—especially Turkey and China—face complicated status category boundaries that could foster perceptions of status immobility. Turkey’s effort to accede to the European Union raises questions about whether Turkey can permeate the boundary between European or “Western” and “Islamic” civilization. A failed bid for accession could weaken Turkey’s support for the Western-dominated status quo. For China, the problematic status category boundary is the one demarcating “responsible” great powers. In March 2011, former Mexican foreign minister Jorge Castañeda wrote that China and other rising states “lack the necessary commitments to liberal order” and that they must “accept and contribute to the evolving international legal regime on issues such as human rights, collective defense of democracy, trade, climate change, or nonproliferation” before they are welcomed into the “inner councils of world governance.” The analysis above suggests that these sentiments are dangerous. If China—a state with prominent preexisting narratives about suffering humiliation at the hands of the West—is presented with the dilemma of achieving status enhancement on Western terms at the cost of voicing support for liberal democracy and Western conceptions of human rights, collective understandings of and discourses revolving around status immobility might become dominant, which could facilitate the rise of domestic actors in China interested in confrontation with the West.

144 See the Scientific Council for Government Policy, The European Union, Turkey and Islam (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), esp. chap. 3.
146 Jorge Castañeda, “The Trouble with the BRICs,” Foreign Policy, 14 March 2011.