

Editorial: Novel Perspectives on Status in Global Politics

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Abstract

This thematic issue advances debates on status in international relations (IR) by integrating novel empirical research with innovative theoretical perspectives. It moves beyond traditional power-centric views, highlighting the social and relational dimensions of status-seeking as a diplomatic and foreign policy practice. The contributions explore, for instance, how states pursue status through cooperation, adherence to international norms, and strategic identity management. By examining diverse cases, including non-traditional status-seekers, this collection of contributions underscores the multifaceted nature of status-seeking, involving both material and ideational factors, and enriches the literature on status in IR, offering new insights into the complex dynamics of international hierarchy and state behaviour. In this editorial, we highlight the main findings and give an outlook on the overarching contribution to IR research.

Keywords

emerging powers; global politics; international relations; international relations theory; status politics

1. Introduction

The concept of status in international relations (IR) is critical, incorporating a state's position within the global hierarchy based on attributes such as wealth, military capabilities, culture, and diplomatic influence. This issue significantly advances the debates on status and status-seeking by integrating new empirical research with innovative theoretical perspectives. Traditionally, IR literature has concentrated on the status of major powers, often linked to military strength and post-war settlements. However, contemporary discussions have evolved to recognise the social and relational dimensions of status, extending beyond mere power maximisation to include identity and self-perception. This issue explores how states pursue status

through cooperative behaviour, adherence to international norms, and strategic identity management. By examining diverse cases and contexts, the contributions highlight the multifaceted nature of status-seeking, demonstrating that it involves both material and ideational factors not only from the international context but also from the perspective of domestic politics. Highlighting actors that are not conventionally studied as “status-seekers,” this thematic issue underscores that status can emerge from cooperative interactions and normative alignment, rather than solely from conflictual or competitive actions, thereby enriching the literature on status in IR and offering new insights into the complex dynamics of international hierarchy and state behaviour.

2. Status in IR

The concept of status pertains to an individual’s or entity’s position within a social hierarchy (Dafoe et al., 2014). It is highly coveted, as possessing status confers legitimacy, agency, and potentially significant influence. In the realm of IR, status is defined as the collective perceptions regarding a state’s ranking based on valued attributes such as wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, socio-political organisation, and diplomatic influence (Larson et al., 2014, p. 7). Status is inherently social and relational; a state’s efforts to exhibit its status are thus insufficient unless other states acknowledge and recognise this status (Ward, 2020).

IR literature has predominantly concentrated on the role and status of major powers, typically those within the United Nations Security Council. Historically, global order has largely been shaped by power politics and its consequent impact on status. Classical realists considered “prestige” a crucial factor in interstate relations but generally viewed it as a reflection of a state’s military and associated fiscal capabilities, thereby excluding non-material determinants of status from their analyses (Larson et al., 2014, p. 4). Historically, both status anxiety and ambition have been influenced by conflict, with changes often resulting from the outcomes of wars. Various instances of concert diplomacy, such as those in 1814–1815, post-World War I in 1918–1919, and post-World War II in 1945–1949, saw the definition and redefinition of norms, rules, and principles in the aftermath of victory (Ikenberry, 2011). The neorealist tradition, which views status as a means to the end of power maximisation, remains dominant (Pedersen, 2018; Volgy et al., 2014). However, by the 21st century, it has become clear that status politics cannot be merely reduced to the by-products of war and post-war settlements. Instead, the social and relational aspects of status in an increasingly volatile international context are recognised as constitutive of (dis)order.

Status is increasingly seen as integral to a state’s identity and self-perception, not just power maximization. Larson and Shevchenko (2010) argue that states often compare themselves unfavourably with others, leading them to enhance their status through identity management. Unlike (neo)realist approaches, social identity theory highlights status-seeking through cooperation. The articles in this thematic issue address the debates on status in different ways. Contributions include understanding status from cooperative interactions in different issue areas and the role of environmental diplomacy in shaping global perceptions of state power. Glušac (2025) notes, for example, that both material and ideational factors, like the rule of law and human rights, contribute to international status. States establish national human rights institutions (NHRIs) to comply with norms and gain status, despite potential criticism. This creates tensions between status-seeking ambitions and genuine human rights compliance, especially with the sustainable development goals aiming for NHRIs in all UN member states by 2030. The research shows that status-seeking can involve cooperation and adherence to norms, not just competition. Nitza-Makowska

(2025) argues that China's environmental diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative, especially through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, enhances its status as a “green soft power.” The study examines how coal-based and renewable energy projects impact China's international image, emphasizing status through environmental cooperation.

The intrinsic relationship between identity and status has been widely accepted and applied to analyse the status-seeking behaviours of various states, including Norway (Wohlforth et al., 2018), Turkey (Dal & Dipama, 2019), Brazil (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010), Russia, and China (Krickovic & Zhang, 2020). Ward (2020) interprets status claims as elements of identity narratives, suggesting that status should not be viewed as ontologically distinct from identity but rather understood and studied through these narratives, or “status as identity” (Ward, 2020, p. 164). From another perspective, Subotic and Vucetic (2019, p. 734) contend that status performances aim to constitute “the objects they invoke” and reflect “how states imagine themselves to be and what they perceive their role in international society is.” Similarly, Bilgic (2024) posits that status performances are integral to statecraft and should be considered constitutive of all states, not just major powers. Consequently, many of the contributors of this thematic issue study states that have not been conventionally studied as status-seekers in IR from Thailand to Nepal.

An additional crucial insight the status literature offers is that status politics must account for the broader international context in which international hierarchies are formed. Ward (2020) highlights the ideas and discourses underpinning stratification between states in an international hierarchy. These ideas define what is valued within such a hierarchy, leading to the belief that states possessing or expressing these valued attributes hold higher status. Driven by questions of international hierarchy and status, Pouliot (2014, pp. 197–198) identifies status-seeking as a “social game”: “a disposition acquired through playing a game, which leads players to come to value its rules and stakes as the natural order of things,” and consequently, “it is not only agents who invest in a game...[they] are also invested, or taken, by the game.” Along these lines, Chand's (2025) contribution to the thematic issue examines Nepal's status-seeking behaviour through normative conformance with powerful international actors like the UN and the EU. It argues that Nepal adopts multilateralism and aligns with international norms to enhance its status and maintain its agency as a sovereign state, despite the geopolitical constraints in its position between India and China. The study highlights Nepal's efforts in human rights, such as abolishing the death penalty and supporting LGBTIQ rights, to align with global norms and gain international recognition. It also emphasizes Nepal's active participation in international organizations and peacekeeping missions as a strategy to reinforce its status and legitimacy. The research also contributes to the understanding of small states' foreign policy strategies and their pursuit of status through normative alignment.

Domestic political contexts also significantly influence status politics (Bilgic & Pilcher, 2023; Ward, 2017). This issue includes scholars who focus on these domestic dimensions of status. Schulman (2025) examines how status-threatening rhetoric in political campaigns affects public expectations and foreign policy, using survey experiments and John F. Kennedy's space exploration campaign as a case study. The research highlights the importance of understanding the domestic implications of status concerns in international politics. Mbeva and Makomere (2025) introduce the concept of “bounded states” to explain how domestic and geopolitical risks limit small states' status aspirations, using the African Union's Agenda 2063 as a case study, offering insights into the dynamics of status-seeking for small states. Beaumont (2025) presents the “theories of international status” framework, which studies international status through theories produced

by governments and their opponents. A case study of the Boer War shows how these theories shape domestic politics and policy outcomes, offering a new perspective on status studies.

Examining status-seeking in IR should extend beyond military, security, and geopolitics, encompassing economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions. Understanding these dynamics elucidates how states pursue prestige and influence through soft power, economic policies, and environmental leadership, thereby shaping global governance and fostering cooperative international frameworks. This issue also explores unconventional arenas of status-seeking. Jayaram et al. (2025) analyze India and China's disaster relief cooperation during the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquakes, highlighting their strategic use of disaster relief to project power and enhance international status. The article challenges traditional views on appropriateness and consequences in international relations. Harris and Thaiprayoon (2025) examine Thailand's rise in global health diplomacy at the World Health Assembly, showing how strategic investment in a skilled delegation has enhanced Thailand's status and influence. This case study skillfully illustrates how resource-constrained nations can achieve significant influence through capacity building and strategic engagement in a specific policy field.

3. Conclusions

This thematic issue advances the understanding of status in IR by showcasing diverse empirical and theoretical perspectives. It underscores the importance of considering both domestic and international contexts in status politics. The contributions reveal that status-seeking is not solely about power but also involves identity, cooperation, and adherence to norms. By examining cases from various regions and contexts, this issue enriches the discourse on status in IR, offering new insights into the complex dynamics of international hierarchy and state behaviour.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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