Novel Perspectives on Status in Global Politics

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Edited by Miriam Prys-Hansen, Ali Bilgic, and Clemens Hoffmann

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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 LGBTQI 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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Status Threat, Campaign Rhetoric, and US Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Candidates for office frequently warn that the United States is falling behind its rivals. How does this rhetoric affect voters' perceptions of their commitment to action and, in turn, potential foreign policy outcomes? The study of status in international politics has blossomed over the past decade, including a recent turn to the origins and consequences of domestic concerns over national status and decline. I contribute to this research, arguing that candidates frequently employ status-threatening rhetoric on the campaign trail due to its emotional and identity-threatening appeal, but this rhetoric in turn significantly increases the public's expectation of action. As a result, status-threatening campaign rhetoric allows candidates to define issues as arenas for status competition but simultaneously increases pressure on leaders to follow through once in office with policies they can justify as status-saving. I support this theory with two survey experiments and a case study examining how Kennedy attached space exploration to status in the 1960 campaign, increasing domestic pressure to act once in office.

Keywords

campaign rhetoric; decline; foreign policy; public opinion; status threat

1. Introduction

Americans are concerned about the United States' standing in the world. Fifty-three percent predict that China will overtake the United States as the world's main superpower in the next 30 years and 60% believe the United States will become less important in the world by 2050 (K. Parker et al., 2019). More Americans have said that the United States' position in the world has grown weaker than stronger over the past year in every American National Election Studies survey since 2002.

Candidates for office have long seized on the American public's worries over declining global status to criticize their opponents and bolster support for themselves and their policies. Donald Trump frequently pinned American decline on immigration, trade, international organizations, and a bureaucratic "deep state." But Trump is hardly the first American candidate for president to invoke status threat in his run for office; from John F. Kennedy's claims of gaps in missiles, education, and technology to Joe Biden's likening of China outspending the United States on infrastructure to falling behind in the "race for the 21st century," status-threatening rhetoric has gone hand-in-hand with American hegemony. Status-threatening rhetoric features prominently in campaigns in particular, with candidates ominously warning of national decline to paint their opponents as weak, unpatriotic, or apathetic in the face of American decline.

A wealth of recent scholarship has argued that status concerns, at the leader level, explain important outcomes in international politics like conflict initiation and escalation. Answering the call to examine the role of the domestic populace in the status literature (Dafoe et al., 2014), scholars have argued that revisionist leaders invoke status to gain a rhetorical advantage over their more moderate opponents in the public's eyes (Ward, 2017) and that the public punishes presidents for incidents that reduce national status (Powers & Renshon, 2023). While these scholars explored the advantages leaders gain from employing status rhetoric in office or how they get punished for status-altering events, I instead investigate the effects of status rhetoric on the campaign trail on the public's perception of commitment to action—as campaigns offer candidates a platform and significant media exposure to define their images and voice their arguments on the direction of the country.

I use *status-threatening rhetoric* to refer to rhetoric warning that one's country is occupying too low a rung or is on the verge of falling to a lower rung in global standing. I focus on how American candidates for office talk about national status and how that rhetoric affects public perceptions of their commitment to action. Because of the subjective nature of status, candidates might employ status-threatening rhetoric regardless of the presence or absence of various objective indicators of decline. Ralston (2022), for example, found that declinist rhetoric in the UK parliament spiked not when Britain's share of great-power GDP per capita was falling quickly, but instead when it was stagnant. As Miller (2016) argued, a rising power cannot solely be identified by its capabilities, but scholars must also examine domestic beliefs to investigate how leaders and members of a state perceive and discuss their own status and ambitions. This article's focus is therefore on the effects of status-threatening rhetoric on the campaign trail. References to falling behind, declining, losing prestige or standing, or faltering at the hands of rivals are common features of status-threatening rhetoric.

2. Argument

I argue that candidates for political office often opportunistically seize on the public's worries over perceived national decline through status-threatening rhetoric to criticize opposition and mobilize voters. Status-threatening rhetoric invokes negative emotions and helps leaders differentiate themselves from their predecessors and political opposition, enabling them to portray themselves as the candidate best suited to reverse the status decline. Campaigns offer candidates a platform to comment on the country's status and select which issues to tie to status competition. By playing on the public's fears over decline, I argue that leaders significantly increase the pressure on themselves from the public to follow through with action once in office, facing more domestic pressure than if they instead used a non-status message.

2.1. Why Do Candidates Use Status-Threatening Rhetoric?

Negative emotional appeals, like those inducing fear or anxiety, are effective at altering preferences and bringing people to action. Messages provoking negative reactions are especially effective because they elicit a strong psychophysiological response, causing them to not only affect the direction and strength of attitudes but also be well-remembered (Bradley et al., 2007). This finding has led scholars to write about the public's "negativity bias," or tendency to seek out and give more attention to negative stimuli (Johnston & Madson, 2022).

Status-threatening rhetoric is not only effective because of the emotions it evokes leading it to be more memorable but also because it primes a part of Americans' national identity. Perceived threats to American primacy constitute threats to a part of many Americans' identities, threatening the positive self-esteem they derive from their nationality. Candidates regularly try to make people believe that that part of their identity is under attack, with this warning of existential threat constituting a highly persuasive message (Klar, 2013). In the Supplementary File, I present survey data illustrating this connection between status and national identity.

The American exceptionalism and status literature offers support for the linkage between national identity and status. Restad (2014) encouraged scholars to understand American exceptionalism as an identity, extending beyond simple patriotism by centering concerns over the country's wellbeing in relative, rather than absolute, terms. Not only is it, to some extent, human nature to internalize social status within one's identity (Frank, 1985), but Americans are also highly competitive and often view threats to the United States' global standing as deeply emotional and existential threats to their need for self-esteem and positive identification, leading Fettweis (2018, p. 172) to argue that "Americans cling to their fears, making them a central part of the national identity."

Candidates also have an electoral incentive to frighten the public, in turn portraying their opposition as apathetic or incompetent in the face of decline. Although not specifically in reference to status, Richard Nixon once remarked that "People respond more to fear than love. They don't teach you that in Sunday school, but it's true." Bill Clinton once half-joked "Gosh, I miss the Cold War....I envy Kennedy having an enemy. The question now is how to persuade people they should do things when they are not immediately threatened" (both quoted in White, 2016). While incumbent candidates have the advantage of voters viewing them as more experienced (Druckman et al., 2020), status-threatening rhetoric can offer challengers a powerful emotional appeal to spin that experience as a negative, pinning national decline on the actions of the incumbent and their party.

2.2. How Does Status-Threatening Campaign Rhetoric Affect Leaders Once in Office?

Public-facing rhetoric has the power to define what constitutes the national interest and label different actors or issue areas as threats (Goddard & Krebs, 2015). Rhetoric regarding status during a campaign, in turn, can legitimate different issue areas as arenas for status competition between the United States and its competitors. The emotional attachment to national status makes status-threatening rhetoric a powerful message, but the criteria for what defines high status in international politics are socially defined, leaving candidates on the campaign trail significant power to mobilize Americans through status-threatening rhetoric on an issue area of their choosing.

By raising the salience of status threats for short-term political gain, candidates stake their image to action on the issue, raising the costs of not following through with action to combat said decline. Candidates who warn of status decline in a campaign but fail to follow through by making a splash of their own once in office risk being seen by the public as weak, unpatriotic, or incompetent, riling the public up with a powerful message only to let them down with their lack of action. Beyond just pursuing popular policies, leaders seek to craft an image of themselves as strong defenders of American security and status while casting their political opponents as "polite & orderly caretakers of America's decline," to use one recent example (Rubio, 2020). Candidates place a strong emphasis on cultivating a favorable image of themselves, whether that be as strong, status-saving, or any other image they seek to craft for political gain and their future legacy (Druckman et al., 2004). The public's preferences for certain images of candidates can even override their preferences on specific issues (Friedman, 2023).

As a result, I argue that status-threatening rhetoric has the power to create a strong emotional connection among the public between an issue area and status decline. In tying an issue area to status, because of this rhetoric's strong emotional and identity-threatening appeal, the candidate simultaneously sends a strong signal of their commitment to action.

3. Study 1: Status-Threatening Rhetoric and Heightened Perceptions of Action

I first conducted a pre-registered survey experiment in June/July 2023 to test whether status-threatening rhetoric increases public perceptions that a candidate will follow through once in office relative to non-status campaign rhetoric. I used Forthright Access to gather a sample of 2,283 American adults. Participants read a hypothetical scenario about a future presidential election in the United States and were randomly assigned to read about a candidate who emphasized in their campaign rhetoric needing to improve the United States military or technological innovation. In addition to random assignment to the military or technology treatment, respondents were randomly assigned to either read about a candidate who tied the issue to American decline or a control group, where the candidate voiced support for improving the military/technological innovation but made no reference to national decline. In neither condition did the candidate promise to take action, but they instead both remarked that they support working to improve American innovation in technology or military power.

Respondents were then asked to rate how likely they thought the candidate was to advocate for increased spending on the issue, successfully pass spending increases, and whether the rhetoric constituted a promise to increase spending in that area. Although the candidate in both the treatment and control groups did not promise any action, perceptions of rhetoric as promissory are important as promises imply a significantly stronger commitment to an issue than a non-promissory statement. Voters are highly skeptical of candidates pandering but they see promises as strong signals of commitment to following through (Bonilla, 2021).

3.1. Hypotheses

My primary hypothesis is that status-threatening rhetoric leads to increased perceptions of commitment to action. Specifically, those receiving the status treatment will be more likely than those in the control condition to believe that the candidate will advocate for and successfully increase spending on the issue at hand. They will also be more likely than those in the control condition to interpret the candidate's rhetoric as a promise.

3.2. Results

Figure 1 displays the effects of the status threat treatment, relative to the control, on the likelihood that the candidate will advocate for increased spending on technological innovation/the military, successfully pass spending increases in the respective areas, and whether the candidate's rhetoric constituted a promise.

Assignment to the treatment condition, where the candidate tied an issue to status decline, for those in the technology condition, led to an increase from 53.5% in the control group to 56.1% in perceptions that the leader would successfully increase spending on technological innovation ($p < 0.10$) and an increase from 42.5% in the control group to 48.6% seeing the candidate's rhetoric as a promise ($p < 0.05$). Assignment to the treatment condition for those who read about the military led to an increase from 66.1% in the control group to 69.3% in the percent chance that the candidate would advocate for increased military spending ($p < 0.05$), an increase from 57.3% to 59.6% in perceptions that the candidate would successfully increase spending ($p < 0.10$), and an increase from 49.2% to 57.3% in perceptions of the candidate's rhetoric being promissory ($p < 0.01$). Although some effect sizes are modest, the significant findings consistent with the pre-registered hypothesis reveal that status-threatening rhetoric increases public expectation of action (see Druckman, 2022, p. 63).
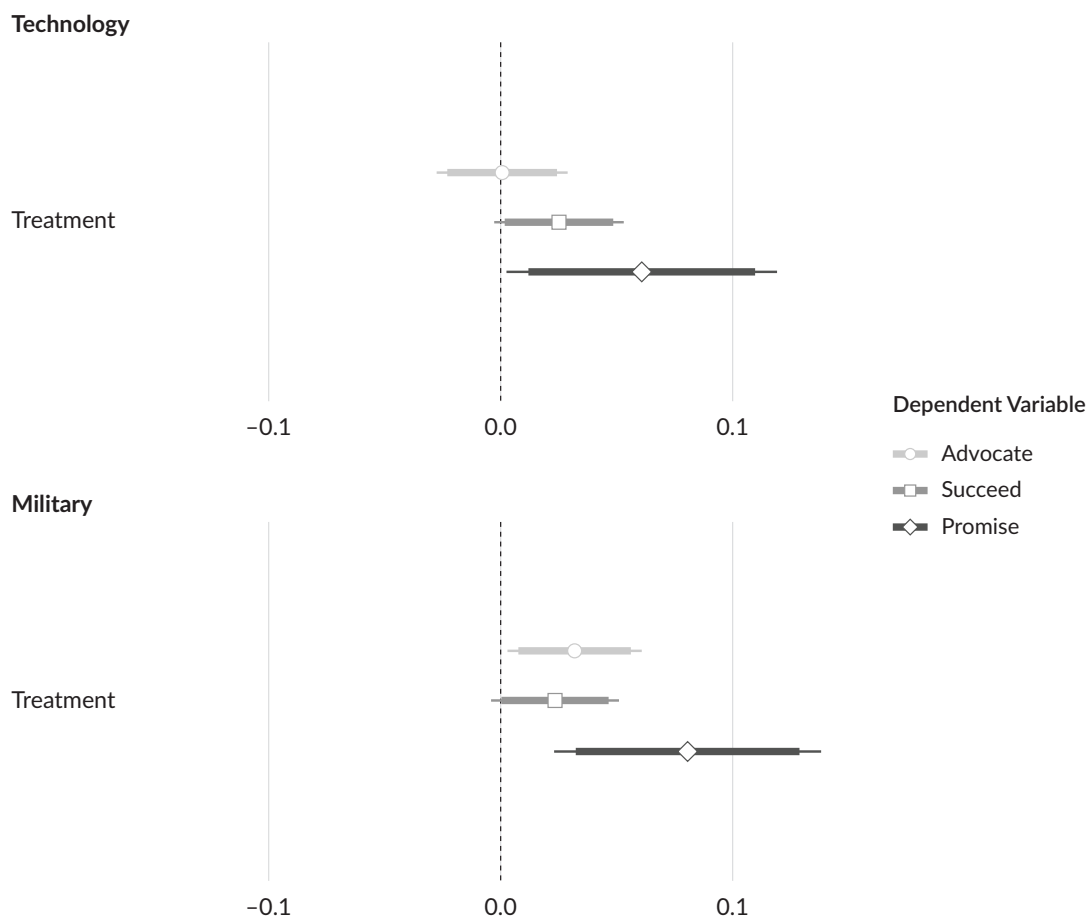
Figure 1. Treatment effects for Study 1. Note: Thinner error bars show 95% confidence intervals and thicker bars show 90% confidence intervals.

I also constructed a structural topic model using open-ended responses that asked respondents to explain why they did or did not expect the leader to follow through to analyze the most common reasons stated for the treatment and control group. While respondents in both the treatment and control group were equally likely to answer with a straightforward "because they said so," those in the treatment group were significantly less likely to reference failed promises or lying politicians than those in the control group, suggesting that respondents perceived the status threat treatment as more authentic than the control. Full results from the open-ended analyses can be found in the Supplementary File. Both the closed and open-ended data therefore suggest that tying an issue to status decline suggests a strong commitment to the public, similar to that of a promise.

4. Study 2: Can Excuses Get Leaders Out of Following Through on Status-Threatening Rhetoric?

Having shown that status-threatening rhetoric increases perceptions that a leader will follow through with action, I then followed Bonilla's (2021) blueprint and tested whether common excuses leaders use for inaction can mitigate the effects of not following through on the leader's image. To test this, I conducted a pre-registered survey experiment in September 2023 on a sample of 933 respondents from CloudResearch Connect.

I used the same status threat treatment text as in Study 1 for the technological innovation condition and examined three categories of excuses: pivoting to cooperation, diverting the status threat to another issue, and partisan attacks.

Pivoting to cooperation refers to backtracking on previous status-threatening rhetoric, instead saying that the issue the leader previously identified as a source of national decline should not be seen as an arena for global competition. For example, after realizing the value of pursuing cooperation in space with the Soviets, Johnson (1965) publicly confessed:

> It was really a mistake to regard space exploration as a contest which can be tallied on any box score. Judgments can be made only by considering all the objects of the two national programs, and they will vary and they will differ.

Diverting is where leaders attempt to pivot from the area they originally campaigned on to a new issue. Here, I test the transferability of status-threatening rhetoric between issues; specifically, if leaders can campaign on status threat in a particular area that they believe will be most effective for short-term political gain but then try to use the same status-threatening rhetoric to advocate for a different set of policies. Can they avoid the negative consequences of not following through on their initial rhetoric?

Finally, the partisan attack excuse is taken from Bonilla's (2021) set of excuses that leaders employ when they do not follow through on campaign promises. Leaders often try to seize on partisan animosity to deflect from their inaction, blaming the other party for obstructing a bill or designing poor legislation.

After randomly being assigned to read about a leader who followed through on their status-threatening rhetoric or did not follow through and used no excuse, pivoted to cooperation, pivoted to education or military spending, or used a partisan attack, respondents evaluated the leader on numerous traits and their legacy and electability.

4.1. Hypothesis

Although excuses for not following through might slightly mitigate the political damage of not following through on status-threatening rhetoric, I hypothesize that following through with action will result in significantly more positive evaluations of the leader than not following through and making an excuse. Additionally, there is also an exploratory component to this experiment, evaluating how various categories of excuses fare against one another for mitigating the damage leaders face for exacerbating the public's worries over a decline in a particular area and then failing to follow through with action.

4.2. Results

I find strong support for this hypothesis; several excuses do slightly mitigate the political fallout of not following through on status-threatening rhetoric, but respondents consistently rated leaders who followed through on their status-threatening rhetoric substantially better than those who did not follow through but offered an excuse. Figure 2 shows that leaders can find limited success in reducing the damage to their
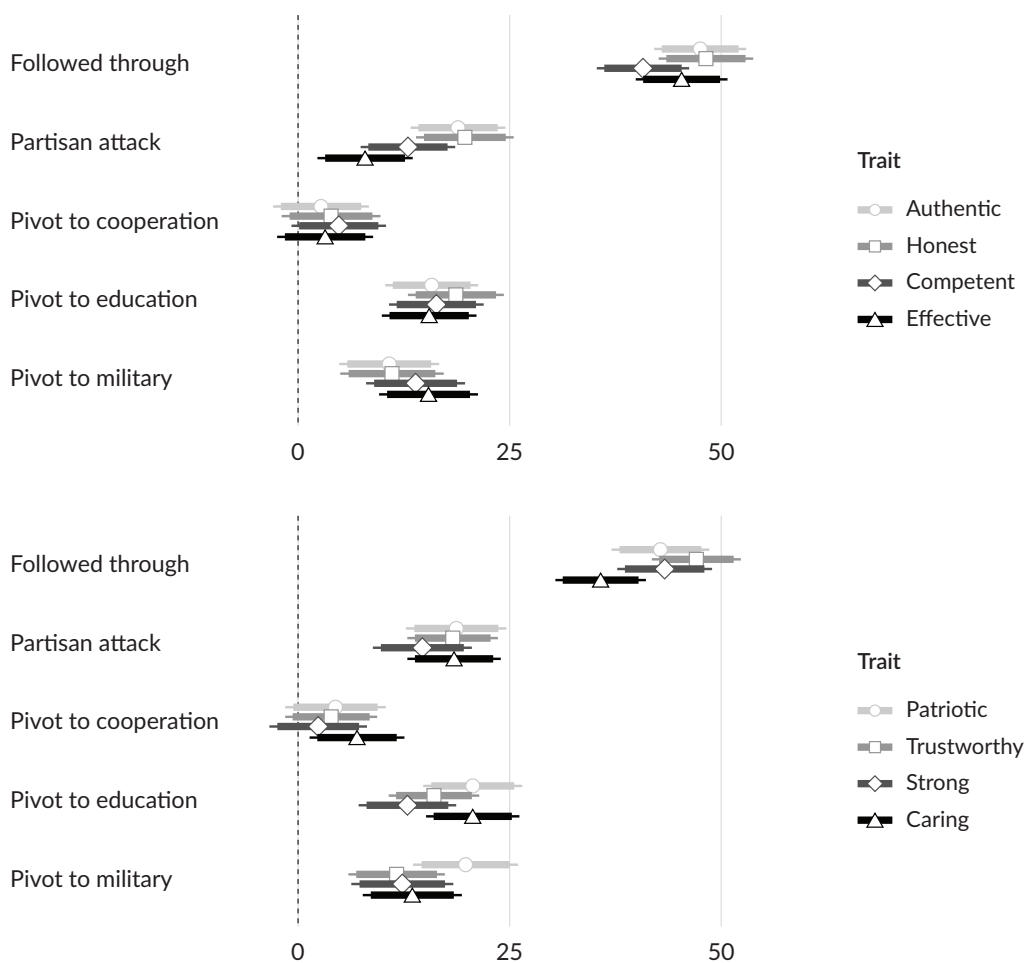
Figure 2. Experimental treatment effects on 0 to 100 ratings of how *well* (100) or *poorly* (0) various traits describe the leader. The reference group is leaders who did not follow through once in office and offered no excuse as to why. Note: Thinner error bars show 95% confidence intervals and thicker bars show 90% confidence intervals.

image by blaming the other party or pivoting the area really in need of funding to prevent American decline to another issue, although they still face a significant penalty for not following through on their status-threatening rhetoric.

Pivoting to cooperation, notably, did not lead to better results than making no excuse at all. Leaders who remark that they should not have regarded technological innovation as a competition between countries but should instead look to cooperate to achieve better results do not fare any better than leaders who make no excuse at all. Leaders who followed through, for example, were seen as 41 points stronger on a 0 to 100 scale than leaders who did not follow through but tried to pivot to a more cooperative stance.

These findings held for all other dependent variables, which included overall favorability of the leader, perceptions of the leader's re-electability, perceptions of the leader's future legacy, and views of the leader as genuine or as a liar. Results for additional dependent variables are available in the Supplementary File.

5. Study 3: Status Threat, Campaign Rhetoric, and Project Apollo

Having shown experimental evidence of status-threatening rhetoric increasing domestic expectations of action and that readily available excuses do not easily let leaders off the hook for inaction, I now turn to a case study to demonstrate how candidates tie issue areas to status on the campaign trail and how that messaging increases public pressure on them to act. By John F. Kennedy's (1962) own private admission, he was "not that interested in space" and repeatedly expressed concerns about the high costs of space exploration. Why then, did Kennedy spearhead Project Apollo, which at its peak, accounted for nearly 7% of federal discretionary spending? While Kennedy had several motives for investing in the Apollo program, including signaling high American status and system legitimacy to a foreign audience and being a devout Cold Warrior himself, I argue that he also faced significant pressure from his domestic audience because of the strength of his prior status-threatening campaign rhetoric that ingrained space exploration as an arena for status competition.

From my argument, I expect to see Kennedy repeatedly tie space exploration to status loss in messages to the domestic public and then later feel pressured into action by this rhetoric. On the former, I should see Kennedy employ status-threatening rhetoric, warning of the United States falling behind in his public-facing rhetoric, not just as one-off remarks but as a consistent part of his campaign strategy, revealed through campaign speeches and party strategy documents. On the latter part, consistent with the experiments, I expect to see Kennedy face significant public scrutiny should he attempt to walk back his status-threatening rhetoric and not take significant action. Because presidents are unlikely to admit that domestic politics played a role in their foreign policy decision-making, as it would appear that they put their own political interests above the national interests (Chavez, 2018, p. 147), I rely on primary sources, as well as analyses from journalists with close access to Kennedy and space historians who have analyzed the factors pushing Kennedy to invest in space exploration.

5.1. Priming and Amplifying Status Threat: Manufacturing the Sputnik Threat and the 1960 Campaign

It was never inevitable that the American public would view space exploration as a defining battle for status between Cold War superpowers. Eisenhower was skeptical that space spectaculars would yield any lasting

international or domestic psychological boost (Logsdon, 1970, p. 16) and reportedly reacted positively to the news of the successful Soviet satellite launch, Sputnik, in October 1957, as he cared little for space spectaculars but had looked forward to a Soviet satellite setting a precedent for freedom of the skies for reconnaissance satellites (Lay, Jr., 1955).

Such a reaction was even shared by the American public in the immediate aftermath of Sputnik. Mead and Metraux (1957, quoted in Launius, 2010, p. 258) found that in the days immediately following Sputnik, just 13% of Americans believed the United States had fallen behind dangerously, with 82% saying the United States was either still at least even with the Soviets in science or was behind but would catch up. An "exceptionally small number" of Americans thought that the successful Sputnik launch was a surprise. A July 1959 RAND report conducted for NASA summarized Lubell's post-Sputnik polling and corroborated Mead and Metraux's findings, reporting "little evidence of public hysteria," that Americans did not initially view the Soviet success as threatening, and that Sputnik made them optimistic about future American successes in space (Goldsen, 1959, p. 6). Lubell (1957) later reported that he found it "especially striking" that the public initially echoed Eisenhower's rhetoric in their own views after Sputnik (quoted in Michael, 1960, p. 582).

However, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and other Democratic elites seized the opportunity to criticize the Eisenhower administration. Because of the deeply emotional and identity-threatening appeal of status-threatening rhetoric, Kennedy's messaging rattled many Americans. Rather than merely a preference for the United States to be ahead of the Soviet Union in science and technology, it was a need for many, posing a threat to the positive self-esteem they derived from calling themselves an American should the United States lose. Hardesty and Eisman (2007, p. 81) described how deeply this status threat disturbed American society, describing the fall of 1957 as "a season for renewed debate over national character and priorities." They continued, "many saw US culture as hedonistic, materialistic," while Russians seemed "highly disciplined, dedicated to science, intent on dominating the world." The worry of falling behind the Soviets caused many to re-evaluate their senses of self and country.

Kennedy continued his status-threatening rhetoric in the realm of space exploration into the 1960 campaign, running a coordinated campaign to incite fear and anxiety among the American public about the United States' declining status and crafting an image of himself as a young, strong, and patriotic leader who would return the United States to its rightful top place in the world. Kennedy and his advisors recognized that space exploration was an area where Kennedy could spin his youth as a positive and attack Eisenhower and Nixon on the grounds that "they have stood still in a world of rapid change" (Dymsza, 1960, p. 5a). A fact sheet of Democratic talking points during the campaign wrote that Kennedy's future legacy would be that "with a single-minded sense of purpose himself he gave his nation a renewed sense of purpose and faith in its future" and that Kennedy "helped to create a new determination in America to take the lead again in mankind's drive for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (JFK Library, 1960) Kennedy also featured this rhetoric prominently in each of the four televised debates with Nixon, remarking in the first: "I don't want historians, ten years from now, to say, these were the years when the tide ran out for the United States" (The Commission on Presidential Debates, 1960).

Kennedy repeatedly referenced a Gallup poll showing that citizens in nine of 10 countries surveyed thought the Soviet Union would overtake the United States militarily and scientifically by 1970. Kennedy referenced this same Gallup poll in 13 speeches across 11 states and in three of the four televised debates with Nixon,

all in a 51-day span between September and October 1960. Kennedy's constant mentions of this survey on the campaign trail reveal the extent to which he believed that Americans were concerned about losing primacy to the Soviets. Just 10 days before the 1960 election, two classified surveys of foreign public opinion prepared for the executive branch were leaked to the press showing that the United States' prestige throughout the world had declined at the hands of the Soviet Union during the Eisenhower presidency (Logsdon, 1970, p. 65). By constantly citing these polls to a clearly domestic audience—not in major international addresses but instead in states including Maine, Michigan, Idaho, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Illinois, and Indiana, and leaks to the press—it is apparent that although the contents of the surveys showed that an *international* audience saw the Soviet Union as likely to overtake the United States, Kennedy was warning of status decline to persuade his *domestic* audience.

5.2. Kennedy's Attempts to Tone Down Status-Threatening Rhetoric and Pivot to Cooperation in Office

Despite Kennedy's insistent warnings to the public that the United States was falling behind the Soviet Union in science and technology while the Eisenhower administration sat idly by, Kennedy quickly shifted his rhetoric upon taking office. In his inaugural speech, Kennedy (1961a) advocated for cooperation with the Soviet Union in science, rather than competition, declaring: "Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce." In his first State of the Union address, Kennedy (1961b) stated that "both nations would help themselves as well as other nations by removing these endeavors from the bitter and wasteful competition of the Cold War."

However, on April 12, 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to journey into outer space. This came as no surprise to Kennedy or those in his administration, as they had known a Soviet manned flight to space was imminent (Sidey, 1964, p. 111). Kennedy (1961c), as a result, responded with a statement acknowledging the Soviet success but tried to display a sense of calmness to the American people. Kennedy congratulated Khrushchev and said that: "we expect to hope to make progress in this area this year ourselves." Kennedy's answers to questions in this regard were stoic and direct: "As I said in my State of the Union," Kennedy (1961d) responded to a reporter, "the news will be worse before it is better, and it will be some time before we catch up."

Hugh Sidey (1964, p. 114), a journalist with close access to Kennedy, wrote about Americans' disdain for Kennedy's calm reaction:

> For those who remembered the flaming days of John Kennedy's campaign for the presidency, the impatience with which he treated the question of our role in space, his answer was disturbing and the pervading calm with which the current Moscow news was accepted in the White House, while the rest of the world marveled, seemed hardly in the spirit of the New Frontier.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* both ran several columns chastising Kennedy, with writers including Schwartz (1961) criticizing Kennedy for betraying the image of a "young, active, and vigorous leader of a strong and advancing nation" that he had presented on the campaign trail. Another *New York Times* column from Baldwin (1961) attacked Kennedy for lacking the urgency and vision required to compete with the Soviet Union, a criticism similar to those Kennedy directed at Eisenhower and Nixon during the campaign.

Rep. James Fulton, during a Committee on Science and Astronautics hearing on April 13, pressed Kennedy administration officials on the urgency of the space program, voicing "the desire of the American people that we move from second into first position in the exploration of space" (U.S. House of Representatives, 1961). Rep. Alphonzo Bell Jr. similarly stated that "the people of the United States are demanding that this country pass Russia and become No. 1 in space" (U.S. Congress, 1961, p. 8838). One space administrator, who Logsdon (1970, p. 158) later identified as NASA Deputy Administrator Hugh Dryden, remarked that if Kennedy failed to issue a stronger response, he "could lose the 1964 election over this" (Sidey, 1964, p. 118).

Toning down the rhetoric in favor of a more cooperative or less expensive policy proved politically infeasible in the face of domestic pressure. To Kennedy, Sidey (1964, p. 99) reported: "watching and guiding national opinion was part of his job." Sidey explained that Kennedy obsessed over media coverage of him, writing: "every word, every phrase was absorbed, tested for its friendliness, dissected and analyzed with scientific precision, to detect the degree of approval or disapproval. Even at moments of crisis he would not ignore words about himself."

Frequent status-threatening rhetoric in the realm of science and technology in the 1960 election did not *force* Kennedy to pursue a manned mission to the moon, but his persistent seizing on worries of status decline took inaction off the table. Kennedy therefore looked anywhere he could, within the realm of science and technology policy, where he could make a splash. Kennedy's science advisor, Jerome Wiesner (1961), said that Kennedy pressed him for *something* visible in the way of science policy, whether that be a manned lunar mission or "something that is just as dramatic and convincing as space" (quoted in Logsdon, 1970, p. 111). Needing clear action to uphold the image he was attempting to cultivate, Logsdon (1970, p. 158) concluded: "from the standpoint of presidential politics, the pressures on Kennedy to take some fairly drastic action in response to the Gagarin flight were strong."

5.3. Kennedy's Post-Gagarin Reversal and the Theatrics of Status Politics

On April 14, 1961, Sidey was unusually invited to sit in on a meeting of key officials to discuss the public perception that the United States was losing the space race. With Sidey observing and taking notes for his story, Kennedy begged those in the room to identify any area in space where the United States could achieve a victory over the Soviet Union. Kennedy questioned his advisors: "Is there any place where we can catch them? What can we do? Can we go around the moon before them?" Kennedy pleaded: "If somebody can just tell me how to catch up. Let's find somebody—anybody. I don't care if it's the janitor over there, if he knows how" (Sidey, 1964, pp. 122–123). Sidey described a frantic picture of Kennedy in the meeting, slumped and teetering in his chair, running his hands through his hair, tapping his teeth with his fingernails, and fidgeting with the rubber sole of his shoes while demanding answers from his advisors. Space historian Day (2005) summarized this meeting and the unusual presence of a journalist at it, writing: "Clearly Kennedy and Sorensen had an agenda—to get Sidey to portray the President as concerned about the Gagarin flight, engaged in the issue, and searching for an appropriate response."

Ultimately, Kennedy announced in May his intention to land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth before the end of the decade. Kennedy subsequently reignited his status-threatening campaign rhetoric, tying space exploration to status and promising to work, with the sacrifice of the American people, to get the United States back in the race.

However, theatrics to journalists, a shift in rhetoric, and a bold announcement were not enough to ease Americans' anxieties about falling behind the Soviet Union. In a 1962 poll, a plurality of Americans reported that the US's prestige was lower than it was when Kennedy took office, with only 17% stating that Kennedy was fulfilling his campaign pledge to increase the US's prestige. The same poll revealed that despite 79% responding that Kennedy was doing a good job strengthening national defense, just 44% felt Kennedy was doing a good job winning the Cold War with Russia, and only 3% believed he was doing a very good job (Opinion Research Corporation, 1962). The public continued to hold Kennedy to a high standard of demonstrating concrete achievements in space, and this public pressure was important for getting Kennedy and Congress to support such an expensive program.

Space historians similarly agree that Kennedy felt domestic pressure to act in space. Wiesner had cautioned Kennedy against using hyperbole when discussing manned spaceflight, as Wiesner, like Kennedy, personally rejected the idea that manned spaceflight ought to be the administration's highest priority scientific endeavor. Despite Wiesner's warnings, Launius (2004, p. 2) wrote that Kennedy "recognized the tremendous public support arising from this program and wanted to ensure that it reflected favorably upon his administration." Although Kennedy was concerned with the program's high costs, Logsdon (1970, p. 105) argued, he saw inaction as politically unfeasible, believing "the international and domestic penalties of doing so were unacceptable." This domestic infeasibility, I argue, was not foreordained, but was instead the product of Kennedy legitimating space exploration as an arena for status competition in the 1960 campaign, increasing the public's expectation of significant action.

To appease the public's need for action to revive American status, Kennedy had to show tangible results. Kennedy did this primarily through massive increases to the space budget and broadcasting these increases and any achievements made in space to the domestic public. Kennedy (1961e) ramped back up the status-threatening rhetoric, stating after a trip to Europe that Khrushchev "believes the world will move his way without resort to force" and "stressed his intention to outdo us in industrial production, to out-trade us, to prove to the world the superiority of his system over ours." However, Kennedy remarked his belief that "time will prove it wrong." Kennedy held press conferences and ceremonies for American astronauts and continued his status-threatening rhetoric at rallies, resuming his remarks that policies of the 1950s set the United States back, but he was working to fix that.

When Kennedy once again floated the idea of cooperating with the Soviets in space in 1963 after being confronted with the program's steep and rising costs, the idea was unable to gain any traction. Kennedy helped lead the charge to tie space exploration to status threat in the 1960 campaign, tying action in space to his image, which years later made inaction or pivots to more cooperative policies politically impracticable.

One potential counterargument is that Kennedy was concerned over American status, but to an international audience, not a domestic one. Making this argument, Musgrave and Nexon (2018) cited public opinion data showing that the Apollo program was not initially popular domestically, suggesting therefore that domestic public pressure played a limited role in Kennedy's decision-making. Indeed, survey evidence validates this view; multiple polls found that the American public was skeptical of an expensive space program. A June 1961 Gallup poll, for example, found that more Americans opposed than favored a 7-to-9-billion-dollar plan proposed to Congress to send a man to the moon. The same poll, however, revealed the persuasive power of framing space policy as a competition with the Soviet Union, with 72% responding that it was important for

the United States to be ahead of Russia in space exploration and 51% saying it was very important (Gallup Organization, 1961). Like Kennedy, the American public was concerned with the steep costs of the space program, but falling behind the Soviets in space was simply not an option for them.

In the midst of the space race, Van Dyke (1964) argued that pride—at the levels of the public, the media, the executive branch, and Congress—more than security, economic gains, scientific benefits, or signaling prestige to the rest of the world, was motivating the US space program. However, it was never foreordained that the American public would view space exploration as a competition between global rivals. Rather, it was campaign rhetoric that helped make it so.

6. Discussion

These three studies reveal two different perspectives on the effect that emotionally powerful status-threatening rhetoric has on perceptions of follow through and the barriers leaders face to inaction. Study 1 shows that the powerful appeal of status-threatening rhetoric leads to heightened expectations of action once in office. Study 2 shows that common excuses can only slightly mitigate the reputational damages of inaction, finding particularly that leaders who campaign on status-threatening rhetoric and then pivot to a more cooperative tone once in office fare no better than leaders who do not follow through and make no excuse at all.

The case study of Kennedy and Project Apollo shows this mechanism from the perspective of the leader, revealing that elected officials are aware of the costs of not taking action to revive US status in an issue area where they had previously invoked status-threatening rhetoric, whether they intentionally or unintentionally constrained themselves into such a position. Kennedy routinely warned of the Soviets outcompeting and overtaking the United States in the realm of science and technology, legitimating space exploration as an arena for status competition and raising the public's expectation that he would follow through with status-saving action. When Kennedy softened his competitive rhetoric in response to a major Soviet accomplishment, he quickly felt domestic pressure to fight harder against the status decline he warned about so fervently in the campaign.

Further research is needed to investigate for which issue areas status-threatening rhetoric is more or less effective and the types of policies associated with status threat, but the status literature offers several possibilities. First, status-threatening rhetoric might increase the public's appetite for reactionary or norm-breaking policies (C. S. Parker & Lavine, 2024) or preference for "strong" candidates willing to break or bend the rules (Ionescu et al., 2024). This coheres with arguments in the status literature at the leader-level, which posit that status uncertainty or dissatisfaction leads to more aggressive and risk-acceptant behavior (Renshon, 2017; Volgy et al., 2014). As such, just like how status-concerned leaders might turn to aggressive policies, the public might also pressure leaders who campaign heavily on status-threatening rhetoric into more belligerent actions.

However, it is also possible that the types of action candidates pressure themselves into from status-threatening rhetoric might be costly or risk-acceptant but not belligerent. The Kennedy case study provides an example of this. Not only did the Apollo program consume a large part of the federal budget, but Kennedy also risked significant embarrassment if a test failed, the program fell too far behind schedule, or an

astronaut died. Status-threatening rhetoric might therefore also pressure leaders into some sort of significant action, potentially in the way of expensive policies, or conspicuous consumption (Gilady, 2018), in areas like science, infrastructure, or elsewhere, rather than aggressiveness.

Further research should also investigate the variation in which candidates and leaders employ status-threatening rhetoric. Does status-threatening rhetoric appear more frequently when the United States is in periods of relative material decline or does Ralston's (2022) finding that declinist rhetoric is not correlated with objective measures of decline in the UK extend to the United States? I have also suggested that candidates challenging the incumbent party are more likely to employ status-threatening rhetoric, but further research is needed to explore the types of candidates most likely to employ this messaging.

7. Conclusion

Leaders, scholars, and citizens alike would be wise to understand the connection between rhetoric and policy outcomes, noting the increased commitment that status-threatening rhetoric holds leaders to and the potential costs to their image should they be perceived as inactive in the face of decline. When American politicians campaign on status-threatening rhetoric, inciting fear and anxiety over the United States falling behind, they pull on the strings of a core part of many Americans' national identity. To warn of national decline is to threaten many citizens' senses of self, given the extent to which status has become ingrained in American national identity. But although doing so might yield benefits at the polls, it also increases the public's expectation that the leader will follow through with action that they can justify to the public as helpful to reverse the ominous trend of decline. Rather than empty campaign rhetoric, leaders' reliance on status-threatening rhetoric therefore has the power to alter the set of politically viable foreign policies, making it an important topic of study for political psychologists and international relations scholars alike.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
The data is available upon request from the author.

Supplementary Material
Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Norm Compliance and International Status: National Human Rights Institutions in Domestic and Global Politics

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Abstract

Traditional literature associates status-seeking with aggressive behaviour based on state attributes such as military and economic capacities. This article argues that both material and ideational attributes help to confer status. It demonstrates that fundamental values, such as the rule of law and human rights, act as structural incentives for states to adopt prevailing international norms. It does so by analysing the creation of independent national institutions for the protection and promotion of human rights (also known as national human rights institutions [NHRIs]) in line with the Paris Principles adopted by the UN General Assembly. The article reaffirms the power of club membership in international relations, as governments choose to establish NHRIs despite the fact that these institutions serve to expose their human rights deficiencies and wrongdoings. It warns, however, that some governments might attempt to influence how NHRIs exercise their stratified rights as members of the global NHRI club (the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions) by pressuring them to align their views of the state's human rights record in international forums with those of the government. The article sheds additional light on the importance of domestic political dynamics in status-seeking and status-keeping, which is an overlooked subject in the status literature. Finally, the article raises concerns about the pledge to create NHRIs in all UN member states by 2030, as expressed by Sustainable Development Goal 16, citing a genuine risk of individual NHRIs being captured by their governments in the current climate of democratic backsliding. In light of this, the article deepens our understanding of the interplay between global aspirations, status-seeking, and the integrity of human rights institutions.

Keywords

domestic politics; global politics; human rights; national human rights institutions; norm compliance; status; sustainable development goals

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1. Introduction

A central contention in political science is that states strongly desire international status and prestige (Carnegie & Dolan, 2021; Dafoe et al., 2014), whereas literature on international (human rights) law compliance focuses on reputation (Brewster, 2009; Risse et al., 2013). Many scholars view the international system as a hierarchy of states seeking loftier positions (Carnegie & Dolan, 2021, p. 496) and show that this goal frequently leads to inter-state conflict (Renshon, 2016). Others, however, argue that status-seeking does not have to be at the expense of some other actors' position or lead to conflict. Consider Norway, which has achieved impressive status relative to its size without resorting to conflict, geopolitical competition, or revisionism, demonstrating that the "power of ideas" can be more effective than coercion when improved status is the objective. This article adopts the view that status can include conflict and cooperative behaviour. It focuses on the latter, as the less-examined aspect of the story.

The article applies status to answer the question of why states create national human rights institutions (NHRIs), whose purpose is to hold the government accountable for human rights. It demonstrates the relevance of the rule of law and human rights incentives for status-seeking by showing that states have embraced the notion of independent NHRIs due to international peer pressure, despite the possibility of NHRIs shaming and continuously criticising them in the main global and regional human rights forums. The article views status as primarily a club good, emphasising how over 120 countries in the world created NHRIs, with 90 of them fully accredited through a peer-review process conducted by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), under the auspices of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Becoming a member of the global NHRI club has proven to be extremely attractive to the states, irrespective of their human rights record. The power of "cognitive and social peer pressure" (Goodman & Jinks, 2013) coupled with exclusive rights associated with club membership has motivated states across the world to undertake complex processes of changing their national institutional human rights infrastructure to comply with the soft law incentives of the Paris Principles on NHRIs, adopted through the 1993 Resolution of the UN General Assembly. In light of this, the article explores cases when status-seeking entails complex changes in the domestic institutional landscape. To maintain their status over time, states must consistently prove they fulfil club membership requirements; in other words, they must prove their consistent compliance and not just their commitment. In the present case, it means (a) laying down the normative preconditions for the work of an NHRI and (b) creating an inducive environment for an efficient and effective NHRI, both (a) and (b) to be judged by an international body (GANHRI). The article argues that there is a built-in tension between the desire for (international) status and the counter-intuitive strengthening of the NHRI, which should serve as a critical voice against government practices. Many governments thus try to silence NHRIs domestically while hoping to preserve their international status. By looking at this interplay between domestic and international political and legal dynamics, the article seeks to contribute to the literature by illuminating how domestic political dynamics affect states' status-seeking (Götz, 2021, p. 240), which has not been systematically explored in the status literature, including the most comprehensive outputs, such as Larson and Shevchenko (2019), Murray (2019), and Renshon (2017).

The study also seeks to address how a state's status motivation might undermine the international human rights norm. Establishing NHRIs has been recognised by world leaders and critical UN entities as the highest priority in the Agenda for Sustainable Development, which pledges to create NHRIs in all UN member states

by 2030. The article argues that this global aspiration has created two tensions. The first affects the exclusivity of club membership as an essential factor in the status equation. If everyone joins the club, is there a club at all? The second tension is between status-seeking and the integrity of the NHRI accreditation process, as it may inspire a calculated creation of NHRIs as hidden agents of the government instead of independent critical voices.

The following section of the article situates the study within the context of the status literature. The subsequent section adds human rights to the picture, before elaborating on the notion of NHRIs and their global diffusion. The central parts of the article dive into the nature of the global NHRI club and how joining it brings status to its member states. The article then discusses how global aspirations to establish NHRIs in all countries create tensions between status, norm compliance, and integrity. Finally, it concludes with an overview of the results.

2. Status

This article adopts a relational approach to status, conceptualising it as a compelling claim to social esteem in terms of privileges (Weber, 1978, p. 305). Such an approach acknowledges the traditional focus of the status literature on state attributes (Emirbayer, 1997; Jackson & Nexon, 1999) but adds systematic social processes—specifically, relational processes—to the equation. A relational approach argues that status depends on recognition since "it concerns identification processes in which an actor receives admission into a club once they are considered to follow the rules of membership" (Duque, 2018, p. 578). However, possessing specific attributes does not automatically imply membership on its own; it must be coupled with social recognition. Stated differently, "recognition or attributes are necessary but insufficient conditions for status; only together they are sufficient conditions for status" (Duque, 2018, p. 581). For this reason, it is crucial to observe state practices (Pouliot, 2014, pp. 192–200), namely granting recognition, attaching esteem to attributes, and assigning privileges to clubs (Duque, 2018, p. 582).

Realist literature considers state attributes in terms of their military and economic capacities (Gilpin, 1981), and it associates status-seeking with aggressive behaviour. However, today, "most scholars argue that status is related to, though not comprised entirely of, these traditional power metrics" (Ferry & O'Brien-Udry, 2024, p. 5). Recent research demonstrates that both material and ideational attributes help to confer status. Fundamental values, such as democracy and human rights, are at least equally important for status, acting as structural incentives for states to adopt prevailing international norms (Duque, 2018, p. 589). This means that status-seeking behaviour can be cooperative as well as adversarial. Status is not necessarily a zero-sum game, in which a change in one actor's status necessarily leads to a change in "at least one other actor's status" (Dafoe et al., 2014, p. 375; see also Barnhart, 2017). By focusing on the "social and peer referent" qualities of status, Ferry and O'Brien-Udry (2024, p. 2) demonstrated that this is not always the case, as "actions that change the measurement of individual status do not automatically translate to relative status changes." In other words, "status implications may reverberate to outside states or they might not" (Ferry & O'Brien-Udry, 2024, p. 2).

For status to be attractive, it must provide certain advantages to those seeking it. The status literature conveys this through the metaphor of a club membership. Status matters because others lack it; thus "absolute values do not matter as much as comparisons to salient reference groups" (Renshon, 2016, p. 520). "Where status is

conceptualized as identity-based or as granted through membership in high-status organisations, states may be more satisfied sharing the same status value as others so long as there is an advantage over non-members," argue Ferry and O'Brien-Udry (2024, p. 5; see also Larson & Shevchenko, 2019; Murray, 2019). This advantage is usually understood as having "different rights and responsibilities than low-status [states]" (MacDonald & Parent, 2021, p. 363). Ward (2020) notes that these privileges are restricted to actors with high enough standing "stratified rights."

Ward (2020, p. 6) also notes that "rights are intimately linked to ideas about the positions of actors in a hierarchy—to status or standing." He also adds:

> This is true even within discourses of "universal" or "human" rights: A demand for equal legal rights (say, for all citizens in a state) amounts to a demand for the recognition of equal standing in the eyes of the government—which is to say, for a particular kind of vertical relation between actors (one in which there is no super or subordination). (Ward, 2020, p. 6)

In the following sections, the article explores how having independent state institutions mandated to protect and promote human rights reflects the state's overall status in global politics.

3. Human Rights, Status, and NHRIs

One of the most exciting developments in the post-World War II period has been the universalization, codification, and diffusion of human rights. Many have questioned why states in anarchy comply with international human rights law. Rationalists see international law as a commitment vehicle and connect it with beliefs about reputation for future compliance (e.g., Morrow, 2014). Indeed, as Brewster (2009) says:

> References to reputation as a cause of compliance are found widely in the international law literature—from scholars who are optimistic about compliance with international law to those who are skeptical, from those who study human rights to those who study military and trade agreements, everyone acknowledges the potential importance of reputation. (p. 236)

Constructivists start with the normative belief that agreements should be complied with, which then translates into an incentive to comply with treaties (and other agreements) and avoid developing a reputation as a noncompliant state (Simmons, 2010). This argument works most fluently with international human rights treaties, as states should "theoretically pay a high reputation cost for noncompliance with international treaties because when states sign a treaty or make a legal commitment, they do so in plain sight for all to see" (M. D. Kim, 2019, pp. 217–218). In these cases, both the domestic public and the international community observe these legal commitments, leaving a paper trail that reduces the opportunity for deniability (M. D. Kim, 2019, pp. 217–218). The existing literature characterises treaties as "the most solemn pledge a state can make" and a "maximal pledge of reputation" (Guzman, 2008, p. 59; Simmons & Hopkins, 2005). Yet, the road from ratification to implementation, or from commitment to compliance, is usually a rocky one. Compliance is evident through sustained behaviour and domestic practices that conform to international human rights norms (Risse et al., 2013). These occur through different mechanisms and depend on various factors related to different types of states, regimes, and the degree of vulnerability of states and other such rule targets to external and domestic pressures (Risse & Ropp, 2013, pp. 16–22).

While these arguments aim to explain why states comply with ratified treaties, they do not explain why the states ratify them in the first place. Some assume that governments "anticipate their ability and willingness to comply" (Simmons, 2009, p. 12), leading them to "participate in negotiations, sign drafts, and expend political capital on ratification in most cases because they support the treaty goals and generally want to implement them" (Simmons, 2009, p. 12). When a strong value commitment is absent, the single strongest motive for ratification, according to Simmons, is "the preference that nearly all governments have to avoid the social and political pressures of remaining aloof from a multilateral agreement to which most of their peers have already committed themselves" (2009, p. 13). Others posit that states ratify to signal political concessions to domestic opposition groups (Vreeland, 2008, pp. 65–70), to remain in power (Hollyer & Rosendorff, 2011, pp. 275–277), or to "become good international citizens" (Hathaway, 2007, p. 597). Von Staden and Ullmann (2022, p. 1485) advanced the argument that "accepting optional oversight mechanisms is one way in which states can nourish their reputation as sincere committers to international norms and their monitoring by independent expert bodies." Although this argument originally referred to individual communications procedures of UN human rights treaties, it perfectly applies to the focus of this article—establishing Paris Principles-compliant NHRIs.

Parallel to the development of international human rights law was the development of an idea to establish independent state institutions to observe human rights at the national level. Although the first idea was presented in the UN fora as early as 1946, it took some time to evolve into what is today known as NHRIs. NHRIs are independent state-funded constitutional or statutory bodies with a broad mandate to protect and promote human rights at the national level, with a presence in more than 120 countries today. Independence implies that NHRIs must be free from the influence of any external entity, including the legislature that usually appoints NHRI mandate-holders, but also from other government branches, as well as any other public or private entity. They are either established by a constitutional or legislative text and are funded from the state budget. They must operate at the national level, meaning that sub-national (regional, local, etc.) human rights institutions do not reach the threshold. The same applies to specialised institutions, such as data or information commissioners, equality bodies, and similar. NHRIs must have the broadest possible mandate to protect and promote human rights. These institutions come in different organisational forms, most commonly as ombuds institutions and human rights commissions, and to a much lesser degree, human rights institutes. Initially, they emerged in relatively mature democratic states in Western Europe; later, NHRIs were introduced into newly emerging nations, particularly those of the former British Commonwealth, as well as new democracies in Latin America and post-communist Europe. Africa and Asia also followed this trend.

Simmons (2009, p. 5) asserts that "human rights practices are never the result of a single force or factor." The same can be said for the establishment of NHRIs. Cardenas (2012, p. 33) identifies two primary reasons for the state's decision to establish NHRIs: strategic calculations (via enforcement or inducement) and normative commitment (via socialisation and learning). These are not necessarily mutually exclusive accounts of compliance, since states may be subject to concurrent and multiple sources of compliance. Because NHRIs are studied in different disciplines (political sciences, international relations, international law, human rights law, and socio-legal studies), their establishment has various explanations. For instance, in public administration literature, the typical explanation for the successive adoption of different accountability bodies, including NHRIs, lies in the increasing size and complexity of the modern state, which now delivers a vast and complex array of services and requirements for its citizens (Ménard, 2005). Dolan and Bennett (2019, p. 372) argue that "the expansion of administrative power in the twentieth century

considerably enhanced the exercise of discretion by state agents with the attendant potential to unfairly disadvantage some members of society or inappropriately confer advantage on others." NHRIs, particularly ombuds institutions, were then seen as a means of redressing the imbalance of power between the state and the individual, promoting fairness in government and public accountability (Reif, 2020; Rowat, 1973). In other words, the "thickening of government" (Light, 1995) has been matched by a "thickening" of accountability mechanisms, such as NHRIs. These explanations focus on internal reasons that led to the establishment of NHRIs.

However, the literature also recognises powerful externally driven reasons, as well as the combination of the two. Cardenas (2003) argues that NHRIs have become a salient feature of the global scene because they tap into a cross-section of more basic state interests. She explicitly identifies three such interests. First, they appeal to states that are undergoing regime change and seeking to create democratic institutions (transitional states). Second, they appeal to states that violate international human rights norms but want to portray themselves as committed to these norms, perhaps going so far as to assert a leadership role, which explains the ombuds diffusion to less democratic states. Third, they motivate states with long-standing and relatively good human rights records that still face claims of discrimination at home or pressures from abroad to join the NHRI bandwagon (late bloomers).

Scholars of international organisations observed that, in some regions, establishing accountability mechanisms, such as NHRIs, has also been a requirement for membership in international and supranational organisations. The European Union's membership conditionality has been an effective coercive tool for establishing NHRIs in Baltic states (Cardenas, 2014) and Central and Eastern Europe (Carver, 2011; Lacatus, 2019, 2024). The domestic processes of building accountability institutions have also been informed and influenced by transnational actors and ideas (D. Kim, 2013, p. 535), with the UN, regional organisations, and international human rights NGOs creating strong incentives for the creation of NHRIs by mediating the human rights discourses and mobilising internationally (Glušac, 2023, p. 6). These transnational actors and networks considerably increased in the early post-Cold War years, which coincided with the global expansion of NHRIs, with over two-thirds of these organisations being created after 1989 (Cardenas, 2009, p. 30). The post-Cold War period also saw an intensified discussion on the implications of human rights internalisation for Westphalian sovereignty (Shawki & Cox, 2009). Some developments, such as humanitarian interventions or acceptance of the monitoring powers of international human rights mechanisms (e.g., treaty bodies, special rapporteurs), pose challenges (although to varying degrees) to external sovereignty. On the other hand, establishing NHRIs as state bodies has contributed more to changes in the so-called internal sovereignty, or internal state structures (Cardenas, 2009). In its most successful form, NHRIs are evidence of what Schedler et al. (1999) call a "self-restraining" state. Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that transnational developments have greatly influenced such self-restraining. The key event in the history of NHRIs—the adoption of the Paris Principles—testifies to this.

A game-changer in the history of NHRIs was the adoption of the Paris Principles. These principles came out of an NHRI workshop held in Paris in 1991 over three days. The workshop gathered 50 representatives from around 35 countries, including around 20 human rights institutions operating on a national level (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1992, paras. 5–6), as well as NGOs, UN agencies, regional human rights bodies, and a small number of governments (only diplomats accredited in France). The objectives of the workshop were modest: "to encourage existing National Institutions to step up their action" and to enhance

cooperation among them (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1990, para. 4). Few expected a specific outcome document to result from the workshop, and thus many governments chose not to participate (Linos & Pegram, 2016b, p. 598). The course of the workshop made no indications of this either. Meeting minutes (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1992) and interviews with the participants (Linos & Pegram, 2016b) suggest that the first two days of the meeting were devoted to the workings of existing NHRIs. Then, on the final day, the Paris Principles draft prepared by the working group suddenly appeared and was unanimously adopted in plenary without prior debate. The Principles resulted from intensive deliberations among NHRIs and not among UN member state delegations (Linos & Pegram, 2016a, p. 1113). They were drafted by a working group consisting of four NHRIs (Australia, France, Mexico, and the Philippines) without the usual formal diplomatic process that entails support and drafting expertise, resulting in some omissions. Some were technical (e.g., "quasi-jurisdictional" instead of "quasi-judicial"), while others were more substantial, such as the complete neglect of human rights ombuds institutions as an already existing model of NHRIs and a strong preference for human rights commissions since all the main drafters were representing this particular institutional model. Despite these omissions, the UN Commission on Human Rights endorsed the Principles a year later, and in December 1993 the UN General Assembly adopted the Paris Principles as part of Resolution 48/134 titled National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. The Resolution was passed without a vote (as with many other UN General Assembly resolutions) and without modification. Observers speculate that many delegations were unaware of what they were endorsing (Linos & Pegram, 2016b, p. 598).

After being formally endorsed by the UN General Assembly, the Paris Principles took on a life of their own. Despite being legally non-binding, the Principles gained considerable political weight, becoming the main international reference for the basic principles and characteristics of an NHRI, with both the UN and individual NHRIs using them as a guide (Glušac, 2023). The Paris Principles set forth a number of conditions that an institution must fulfil in order to be recognised and accredited as an NHRI, including establishment under a constitutional or legislative text, a broad mandate to promote and protect human rights, formal and functional independence, pluralism (representing all aspects of society), adequate resources and financial autonomy, freedom to address any human rights issue arising, annual reporting on the national human rights situation, and cooperation with national and international actors, including civil society (UN General Assembly, 1993; see also de Beco & Murray, 2014). Over time, regional organisations also recognised the Paris Principles as a key standard in this field.

NHRIs first introduced voluntary accreditation in 2000, which later developed into periodic obligatory re-accreditation in 2008. The accreditation is granted against the criteria set in the Paris Principles and conducted by the Subcommittee on Accreditation (SCA) of GANHRI, whose accreditation system is recognised and facilitated by the UN (specifically, OHCHR). NHRIs can be accredited with A or B statuses. The former is proof of full compliance with the Paris Principles, while the latter indicates partial compliance (for more, see Langtry & Roberts Lyer, 2021). A-status NHRIs are re-assessed every five years. As of June 2024, a total of 90 institutions worldwide fulfil the Paris Principles and are thus accredited as A-status NHRIs, while 28 hold B status (GANHRI, n.d.-a). Out of 90 A-status NHRIs, 27 are in Africa, 15 in North and South America, 18 in Asia, and 30 in Europe. To be able to conduct accreditations in a consistent and procedurally fair manner, SCA has adopted the General Observations on the Paris Principles, which serves as its authoritative interpretation. SCA consists of four members of GANHRI, one from each of the four regional networks of NHRIs (Europe, America, Asia-Pacific, and Africa). In other words, it is a full-fledged

peer-review process. The accreditation process is a "*differentia specifica* of NHRIs, given that it constitutes a unique peer-review process, as opposed to, for instance, NGO accreditation by the Economic and Social Council" (Glušac, 2022, p. 288).

Undoubtedly, the global proliferation of NHRIs can be primarily attributed to UN efforts. As argued by Cardenas (2003, p. 35), "the UN has succeeded in diffusing the NHRI concept by framing it broadly and on multiple levels as a democratic institution, a sign of commitment to international norms, and the emblem of membership in a liberal community of states." Furthermore, "OHCHR has been pushing for a privileged status of NHRIs in the UN since its own very establishment in the mid-1990s, which has coincided with a recognition of the Paris Principles in the UN system" (Glušac, 2022, p. 287). Another key contributor was GANHRI (see D. Kim, 2013; Lacatus, 2019; Linos & Pegram, 2016b), together with its four regional networks. These NHRI networks represent the extension of the post-Cold War organisational form into the human rights arena (Slaughter, 2004). Looking at the role of GANHRI (Shawki, 2009), it indeed exerts all three categories of impact as a trans-governmental network: helping to bring about convergence on international rules and standards, enhancing compliance with international regulations, and enhancing and deepening international cooperation (Slaughter, 2004, p. 24). Through its main activities set in the Strategic Plan (GANHRI, 2023), GANHRI contributes to various mechanisms of diffusion that Slaughter (2004) outlines as regulatory export, technical assistance and training, the interpretation and dissemination of information to promote best practices, capacity building, and socialisation. The same applies to regional NHRI networks, which follow GANHRI's footprint and "constitute a significant factor in the formation of NHRIs" (Goodman & Pegram, 2012, p. 11).

Through the decisions of the UN Human Rights Council, OHCRH and GANHRI have secured the whole plethora of participatory rights in the UN fora for those holding A status. The strategic anchoring of NHRIs in the UN system has been greatly facilitated by the transformation of the UN Commission on Human Rights into the UN Human Rights Council in 2006 (Glušac, 2022, p. 287). With relevant resolutions of the UN General Assembly (2006, 2011) and the UN Human Rights Council (2007), the Paris Principles-compliant NHRIs have been granted full independent participatory rights in the Council's work, but also a possibility to actively engage with the complaints procedure, special procedure mandate-holders, and the Universal Periodic Review (Glušac, 2022, pp. 287–288). All human rights treaty bodies have established close cooperation with NHRIs, encouraging them to take an active part in their work—before, during, and after states' report review—and by formalising their participation through committees' rules of procedure, and/or general comments (Glušac, 2022, pp. 287–288). NHRIs have also been given an instrumental role in the Universal Periodic Review (UN General Assembly, 2006; UN Human Rights Council, 2007), the only political peer-review human rights mechanism. Finally, in 2015, the General Assembly's resolution adopted in its Third Committee (UN General Assembly, 2015, paras. 13–16) granted NHRIs full participatory rights in New York-based UN bodies (the Commission on the Status of Women, the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development).

4. Inclusive Club With Exclusive Rights

Status-seeking entails two requirements. First, a state must acquire the markers of the status to which it aspires (Ward, 2020, p. 2). In the case of NHRIs, these include enabling legislation and the practice of an NHRI

that is consistent with the Paris Principles requirements (for a detailed examination of the requirements, see Langtry & Roberts Lyer, 2021; de Beco & Murray, 2015). Second, the status seeker must be recognised as a club member (Ward, 2020, p. 2). In the latter case, this means being a voting member of GANHRI, which implies A-status accreditation.

Some clubs seek to have an exclusive membership. This often applies to clubs in the areas of security (e.g., The Five Eyes, an anglosphere intelligence alliance; see Williams, 2023) and economics (e.g., G7/8; see Rathbun et al., 2022), but also humanitarian issues (as described in Barnett, 2021). Exclusivity in this context means that club membership does not depend solely on fulfilling specific "statutory" requirements but may be conditioned by various other known and unknown reasons. Contrary to that, inclusive clubs are willing to accept new members as long as they fulfil transparent criteria. However, these criteria (requirements) may be high due to the stratified rights that come with the membership.

The NHRI club is inclusive, considering it regularly accepts new members if they meet the requirements (i.e., the Paris Principles). The stratified rights—or privileges restricted to actors with a club membership—in this case refer to having A-status accreditation. These rights consist of a normative advantage for one actor that is protected through the imposition of a constraint or duty on other actors (Sumner, 1987, pp. 18–33). In the case of NHRIs, the UN serves as a guarantor of NHRIs' stratified rights, which translates as an independent voice and participation in the UN human rights mechanisms. The stratified rights extend beyond that, as having a club membership card also opens doors to regional organisations. The European Union, Council of Europe, Organization of American States, and African Union all recognise the specific position and status of A-status NHRIs in their proceedings. Not having an A-status NHRI is widely viewed as an indicator of the state's status-inconsistent behaviour, damaging its reputation, since it gives the impression that they are not "in good standing." Scholars of human rights compliance term this "social vulnerability," referring to "a particular actor's desire to be an accepted member of a social group or a particular community" (Risse & Ropp, 2013, p. 20). Social pressure works, argue Risse and Ropp (2013, p. 21), because actors care about their standing in a social group, and "the more the relevant community cares about human rights, the more the state is vulnerable to external (and internal) pressures to comply with these norms."

Much evidence suggests the salience of reputational arguments that emphasise character, status, and consistency when determining whether to establish an NHRI. Perhaps surprisingly, this applies to countries that have traditionally been viewed to champion human rights, such as Scandinavian states, or those that have placed human rights high on their foreign policy agendas, such as the US, but also those seen as human rights violators. For instance, reputational factors were key in Norway's decision to establish a Paris Principle-compliant NHRI. This was necessary "to keep its status as a global good Samaritan" (Brysk, 2009) and maintain its international credibility (Government of Norway, 1999, pp. 3–4). Similar reasons motivated Sweden and Italy to initiate lengthy national discussions in order to make their well-known ombuds network more compliant with GANHRI's requirements (Glušac, 2022). Most recently, various local stakeholders have pressured the US government to follow this path (Davis, 2024) by using the same reputational discourse. Indeed, status considerations influence a country's international behaviour, but in the case of NHRIs, the groundwork must be done through domestic political and legal processes. National dynamics play a great role in status-seeking and status-keeping in the rule of law and human rights. This reaffirms the non-monolithic nature of the state, which is highly relevant for both status-seeking and norm compliance.

The government, representing the state, seeks the status, yet it must do it through an independent state body (i.e., an NHRI), as accreditation is requested by the candidate institution, not the government. The government demonstrates the commitment by adopting relevant legislation and providing a conducive environment for the work of an NHRI. However, it is up to the NHRI to demonstrate to the SCA that it fulfils its mandate in practice, proving compliance with the Paris Principles. A successful accreditation serves as a quality stamp to an NHRI while also bringing status to the state.

Initiating complex domestic institutional changes can be performed more easily if it relates to the country's international standing (Götz, 2021, p. 240). The case of Norway provides a good illustration of the status-seeking nature of their resolution to establish an institution that can fulfil the Paris Principles. As soon as their NHRI received A status, it pushed for the materialisation of its status through a strong campaign for election to the governing bodies of European and global NHRI networks. They succeeded in their aim, becoming members of the governing boards of both the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions and GANHRI.

Empirical evidence shows that an NHRI does not have to be from a country perceived as a human rights champion to reach high-level positions in a global NHRI club, nor does a country's high or low level of realised human rights serve as an immediate indicator of the existence of an NHRI. In other words, the presence of an A-status NHRI does not imply that the country in question is a human rights champion. The accreditation procedure scrutinises the institution rather than the country itself. This makes it possible for countries ranked as electoral or closed autocracies (V-Dem Institute, 2024, p. 17), such as Morocco, Rwanda, or Qatar, to have A-status NHRIs. In fact, NHRIs from these three countries are also represented in the highest GANHRI governing body—the Bureau; the chairperson of the Qatar NHRI is the GANHRI chairperson, while the chairperson of the Moroccan NHRI serves as the GANHRI secretary (GANHRI, n.d.-b). That being said, it should be noted that the SCA's recent decisions to downgrade NHRIs from Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan, and Hungary from A to B status, suspend some others (e.g., Nigerien NHRI), or completely remove NHRIs from Russia and Myanmar from their club membership demonstrate the strong link between the state of human rights in those countries and the ability of their NHRIs to comply with the Paris Principles. If domestic political dynamics result in serious human rights and rule of law violations, it is highly unlikely that the government would, at the same time, invest efforts to build a strong and independent NHRI that will be vocal against government malpractices.

Where an NHRI already exists, the deterioration of human rights standards in the state may affect status-keeping. Democratic backsliding and overall human rights deterioration can also affect the NHRI, either through attempts to silence an NHRI and other forms of direct and indirect government pressures, or by the government capturing the NHRI. In such scenarios, the SCA analyses how the NHRI has positioned itself in relation to the severe human rights violations in the country. When the NHRI remains vocal and critical of government malpractices, despite being a target of attacks itself, the SCA is likely to acknowledge this and, if necessary, postpone regular accreditation (known as "deferral"). GANHRI and regional NHRI networks regularly support threatened NHRIs through different mechanisms, including public statements, sending their missions to the country in question, etc. (for more on this, see Glušac, 2020). The SCA does not assess the level of human rights enjoyment in a particular country, but rather the practices of the NHRI, or specifically, how it responds to severe cases of rule of law and human rights deterioration. If the SCA receives credible information on the malpractice of a certain NHRI, it can either address it during regular

re-accreditation or initiate a special review (under the GANHRI Statute) of an NHRI (see Langtry & Roberts Lyer, 2021, pp. 311–334). The latter is used when there is a sense of urgency and severe allegations of violations of the applicable standards (the Paris Principles). The SCA uses this procedure to protect the reputation of the NHRI club. For this reason, the A status is not permanent. The regular five-year cycle of A-status re-accreditation for NHRIs serves to protect the integrity of the process and to ensure that only those fully compliant with the Paris Principles maintain the A-status label. Existing research has proven time after time that many factors influence the overall performance of NHRIs. The institutional strength of NHRIs varies over time, particularly with changes in top management. Even those operating in Western Europe experience times of internal crisis and poor results (see more in Lacatus, 2024). Regular accreditation serves as a constant reminder to comply and not only commit. It relates to both the state and the NHRI. If the state limits the mandate of NHRI or cuts its budget significantly (which often happens in practice; see Langtry & Roberts Lyer, 2021, pp. 173–196), this points to a lack of state compliance. If the NHRI opts to side with the government, remains silent on significant human rights developments, and stops being a critical voice, it fails to comply. In the case of NHRIs, global aspirations affect national dynamics.

5. Tensions Between Status, Norm Compliance, and Integrity

Governments that establish full-fledged NHRIs subject themselves to comprehensive independent scrutiny that may also damage their reputation by determining human rights violations. Yet, the very establishment of an NHRI stakes the strongest claim to a reputation of sincere commitment to human rights oversight. For a sincere committer, "the marginal expected benefits of doing so should matter less than the principled willingness to be scrutinised by an independent monitoring body when alleged victims see fit to lodge a complaint" (von Staden & Ullmann, 2022, p. 1485). By establishing NHRIs, states add another layer of human rights oversight, in addition to international treaty monitoring mechanisms and international courts. In this sense, "over-commitment to human rights oversight mechanisms and the voluntary acceptance of redundancy as well as potential inefficiency and fragmentation can thus be understood to serve a status- and reputation-reinforcing function" (von Staden & Ullmann, 2022, p. 1485), as depicted in the case of Norway.

Being a sincere committer means the state is prepared for the institutional criticism of the NHRI as an instrument that serves to enhance its work. Indeed, criticism towards the government constitutes the very fibre of NHRIs. Considering this, establishing an NHRI in a country not committed to the rule of law may seem counter-intuitive, as it can create a strong voice against the government. Yet, as shown above, this does happen. Adopting new legislation and establishing an NHRI allows non-sincere committers to achieve two goals at once: formally demonstrate their commitment to human rights and achieve the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, world leaders have pledged to establish A-status NHRIs in all UN member states by 2030. This is the formal indicator of the realisation of SDG 16a, related to effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. This indicator also confirms the importance of the global NHRI club. At the same time, it puts pressure on the club gatekeepers, i.e., the integrity of assessing club membership applications. Furthermore, it may lead to the creation of "artificial" NHRIs with the sole purpose of acquiring the status.

It is now clear that this SDG-16 indicator will not be achieved by 2030. In 2015, when the 2030 Agenda was adopted, the OHCHR stated that to reach this indicator by 2030, member states must establish 10 new

A-status NHRIs per year (Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2019. p. 9). According to this plan, in 2024, there should already be 137 A-status NHRIs. However, as of July 2024, there are only 90 (GANHRI, n.d.-a). Looking ahead, starting with the current 90, 18 new A-status NHRIs should be added every year until 2030 to reach the global indicator. This is impossible to achieve. Considering the pace of progress since 2015, "it is highly unlikely that the Member States would suddenly start adopting complex laws such as those establishing NHRIs at such a speed to allow for this indicator to be reached" (Glušac, 2023, p. 49). Domestic negotiations for establishing an NHRI usually take years, particularly in developed countries like Norway or Sweden, because they affect the national human rights architecture (Glušac, 2022). This process can be quicker in countries with authoritarian governments, which can push for urgent law adoption more easily and without long parliamentary debates. Even in those cases, if an A-status accreditation is sought, the entire NHRI endeavour takes time to move from paper to reality. Hasty applications are most often deferred by the SCA for 12 or 18 months (based on recent SCA practice) to allow for assessing how the institution operates in practice.

There is another organisational reason why this indicator will likely not be achieved: The SCA holds only two sessions per year. At each session, besides assessing new applications, it also conducts re-accreditations (as each A-status NHRI is reassessed every five years) and often performs deferrals (postponed re-accreditations), accreditations alterations, and special reviews. An analysis of SCA reports from sessions held between 2020 and 2024 (available at GANHRI, 2024) reveals that only nine new NHRIs were accredited during this time period (with 66 NHRIs re-accredited), compared to the goal of 18 new institutions every year until 2030. This shows that the 2030 goal is far out of reach. Furthermore, the current agenda of the SCA sessions can already be regarded as overly ambitious, even without an influx of new accreditations, given the volume of documents associated with each case (Glušac, 2023, p. 50).

In light of this, one could ask why this SDG-16 indicator was adopted in the first place. OHCHR underlined that this indicator "is a tribute to the sound work which so many NHRIs are doing" (GANHRI, 2017, p. 33). Although this is certainly true, and these NHRIs deserve praise, the "so many NHRIs" part warrants attention. This suggests that not all NHRIs are performing well, yet the goal is to establish them in every country. Not only is this too ambitious, but also potentially counterproductive. An NHRI club is inclusive, but in order to preserve the integrity of the unique peer-review accreditation process, encouraging the broadest possible membership should not be the aim. Instead, the goal should be to elevate the ladder, scrutinise the work of NHRIs more closely, and prove that being an "A" institution indeed reflects the status and, with that, brings well-deserved stratified rights.

NHRIs that truly use their stratified rights and are vocal against their governments' human rights malpractices are exposed to various pressures, including attempts to capture them. In such situations, the survival of the NHRI depends on the mandate-holders' political skills and ability to deter the attack and attract international support. When NHRIs turn to their international peers, their governments may receive negative attention and harm their reputation. To prevent this, such regimes may seek to instrumentalise NHRIs. They might then appoint their agents as NHRI heads and immediately submit accreditation applications, putting pressure on the SCA. The OHCHR, which is in charge of reporting on the realisation of this indicator of SDG-16, also has an interest in increasing the number of A-status NHRIs. It can extend pressure on the SCA, acting as its secretariat. It is thus vital that the SCA exercises full integrity and uses the regular (five-year) cycles of re-accreditation of A-status NHRIs to keep the bar high, making sure that the commitment to having an NHRI is always matched by full compliance with the Paris Principles.

6. Conclusion

States desire a high status and are willing to invest in it. These investments can take a material form, with the road to status being paved through political, military, or economic wars. They can also be ideational in the sense that one's gain does not immediately translate into another's loss. This article supported the latter view, arguing that status is relational, but not necessarily construed as a zero-sum game. It reiterated that status-seeking behaviour may indeed be cooperative behaviour. It demonstrated this by using the example of establishing NHRIs compliant with the Paris Principles, adopted by the UN General Assembly. In this way, it contributed to the discussions on democracy and human rights as important status attributes, acting as structural incentives for states to adopt prevailing international norms. The article demonstrated the power of club membership in international relations, even when states may expose their deficiencies and wrongdoings through membership, since established NHRIs can report on the government's human rights violations to the international public. Being recognised as a country that deliberately establishes independent state entities that serve to scrutinise its behaviour has proven to be a rather surprisingly powerful motivation, owing to the esteem that comes with the status. This is true even when the stratified rights and privileges attached to club membership are not enjoyed by the governments that establish NHRIs but rather by the NHRIs themselves.

Some governments, however, attempt to influence how NHRIs exercise these stratified rights, by pressuring them to align their views and representation of the state's human rights record in international forums with those of the government. Considering this, the present article sought to shed more light on the role of domestic political dynamics in status-seeking, which has been a relatively neglected topic in the status literature. Furthermore, these considerations extended our understanding of the interplay between global aspirations, status-seeking, and the integrity of global institutions. World leaders have pledged to establish Paris Principles-compliant NHRIs in all member states by 2030. As demonstrated, this will be impossible to achieve. Although the author wholeheartedly supports the realisation of the 2030 Agenda, in the case of this particular SDG 16 indicator, underachievement might, in fact, be desirable. The global trend of democratic backsliding puts individual NHRIs at genuine risk of capture by the executive branch. This affects NHRIs both domestically and internationally. Further, if such a development is not identified and addressed in a timely manner, it may have long-term consequences for the integrity of the global NHRI club; GANHRI may become increasingly populated by government pawns rather than independent and critical NHRIs. As a result, the global and regional human rights forums would listen to government megaphones instead of independent human rights voices. An NHRI club must remain inclusive in terms of the clear membership criteria, but exclusive in terms of the rigorous application of these criteria.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

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Cogitatio

ARTICLE

Nepal's Status-Seeking Endeavors: Between Normative Convergence and Geopolitical Interests

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Abstract

Due to limited material and geopolitical factors, the agency of small states is limited in international politics. As such, these states may seek to mitigate such weaknesses through status-seeking, adopting peculiar foreign policy approaches or international commitments to signal to more powerful actors about specific political or normative affinities. In this article, the conceptual framework of social identity theory, specifically social mobility, is used to assess Nepal's foreign policy choices. It is argued that Nepal pursues the identity management strategy of social mobility in the form of normative conformance with more powerful actors to reinforce its status in the international community but not necessarily to rise up in the hierarchy of states. Social mobility through normative conformance not only allows Nepal to elevate its status with higher-status groups like the EU, the UN, and the US (which are the country's primary development partners), but it also reinforces Nepal's interest in maintaining (and if possible, expanding) its agency as a sovereign state which is constrained due to its geopolitical location in between much larger neighbors, India and China. Nepal's normative convergence efforts are broadly categorized into two specific types of commitments: (a) multilateralism, and (b) normative congruence with development partners. Both of these normative conformance approaches seek to emulate the values and practices of the higher-status group—the US, the UN, and the EU.

Keywords

China; European Union; India; Nepal; small states; status

1. Introduction

Small states are particularly vulnerable in the international system given their limited capabilities to affect change. Interestingly, small states may have limits to their capabilities in shaping the system of which they

are a part, but the very system also accords security in the form of international norms such as sovereignty and non-interference (Maass, 2017, p. 220). Nevertheless, the agency of small states is limited given their limited material capabilities which could be further constrained by geopolitical factors. So, how do such states navigate a system wherein their agency is constrained? The notion of "status-seeking" is used as a means to "punch above their weight" by small states which allows them to expand their agency while also pursuing their national interests. Numerous case studies have been assessed within the context of this conceptual framework. In this article, I use the case study of Nepal and assess its status-seeking efforts. I argue that Nepal's extensive normative commitments in intergovernmental frameworks are tied to its commitments to multilateralism and affirmation of its state sovereignty. As a small state located between India and China, I argue that Nepal partakes in status-seeking in international politics by promoting its identity as an independent state capable of exercising its agency (through the pursuit of an independent foreign policy). Furthermore, such commitments also ensure normative convergence with Nepal's close development partners, including the EU and its constituent member states.

2. Theoretical Discussion and Framework

2.1. Small States and Status-Seeking in International Relations

As the academic interest in the study of small states has grown, so has the interest in the approaches they take in international relations. However, status-seeking must be contextualized within the broader conversations on status within the discipline of international relations. Renshon (2017, pp. 33–37) puts forth the idea that status in international politics is essentially a state's standing relative to others wherein positionality is critical; the addition of members also lessens the value of a particular status. This notion of status is tied to the rationalist-instrumental perspective which emphasizes relative power and positionality in international hierarchy. Status enables states to acquire more agency in the conduct of their foreign policies and pursuit of national interests. However, not all agree with this notion of status. Offering a broader concept, Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth emphasize status as a state's standing based on globally valued attributes (Larson et al., 2014). Constructivist scholars have also extensively written on the topic of status in international politics. For example, Murray (2019) offers an approach focused on recognized identity claims wherein a country's status is assessed through self-identification with a particular status. These national status aspirations are also tied into ontological security considerations of that state allowing it to form a coherent set of interests and act on them through their foreign policymaking mechanisms. Schulz (2019) discusses status as estimations of honor and esteem, casting it as being inherently social. Nevertheless, the literature on status-seeking emphasizes the importance of status in international politics, especially for states that are higher up in the hierarchy of states. As such, extensive emphasis is dedicated to the power that is linked to status.

However, the status-seeking of small states is a peculiar phenomenon. As such states are limited in agency and have varying levels of tangible capabilities, their status-seeking approaches may differ from those deployed by more powerful actors in the international system. Small states' status-seeking does not tie into power calculations in the same manner it does for more powerful states. Neumann and de Carvalho (2015) made this distinction for small states' status-seeking through three approaches: small states seek and achieve status through making themselves useful to greater powers; second, small states seek to be

noticed by greater powers in matters of international peace and security; and third, small states seek "to be acknowledged as a good power"—having both moral authority and being a reliable partner to a great power.

Scholars have also used case studies to assess small states' status-seeking. Baxter et al. (2018) argue that small states acquire status by acting as mediators in international conflicts, demonstrating their relevance and importance in the international system. Park and Jakstaite-Confortola (2021) analyze the case of Lithuania to illustrate that the country, despite its material weakness, used social creativity strategies (based on the social identity theory [SIT]) to be recognized as a net contributor to the problems faced by the EU. Lithuania utilized enhanced engagements in regional issues pertaining to Ukraine and Georgia as well as active involvement as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe chair to "punch above its weight" through extensive diplomatic engagements. Chong (2010) studies the cases of the Vatican City and Singapore wherein their state strategies are discussed within the context of "soft power." Singapore promotes itself as a model of good governance to foster a reputation as a successful and stable state to be emulated; on the other hand, Vatican City promotes the notion of good governance emphasizing religious morality and ethics (Chong, 2010, p. 402). Chong argues that these two states promote the notion of good governance as a soft power; while his research does not directly discuss status-seeking, it is evident that these pursuits of soft power are tied to elevating Singapore and Vatican City's status in the international system and expanding their influence and goodwill with other states. Theys and Rietig (2020, pp. 1621–1622) study the case of Bhutan and argue that the country was able to successfully center happiness as a part of development and influence the international discourses surrounding it. They do not necessarily place the argument within the context of status, but it is obvious that the Global Happiness Index pioneered by Bhutan put it on the world map and elevated its status as a "mover and shaker" in global development discourses, allowing it to "punch above its weight."

In a different take regarding status in international relations, Ennis (2018, p. 575) explores the cases of Qatar and the UAE within the context of what the author refers to as "entrepreneurial power," which she defined as the extent to which states, regardless of size or position in regional and global hierarchies, "benefit from a collection of conventional and non-conventional sources of power, and galvanize aid power to pursue status, secure legitimacy, and influence outcomes in regional and global affairs" (Ennis, 2018, p. 575). Thus, the emphasis is on the two countries' efforts to translate their economic wealth to status-building at home and abroad. This approach offers alternative understandings on how states pursue different forms of power and outcomes (Ennis, 2018, p. 595). Mohammadzadeh (2017) uses the case of Qatar as well to pinpoint that the country has used its economic prowess to pursue an activist and energetic foreign policy by refusing to assimilate into the security orbit of the region's powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

2.2. SIT and Normative Conformance

The literature on status-seeking by small states remains underexplored (Aguas & Pampinella, 2022, p. 2). There is a particular dearth of such studies on small non-Western states. Thus, the case of Nepal adds to this body of literature. The conceptual framework for this article rests on SIT. Larson and Shevchenko (2019b, p. 32) argue that the international status of a state depends on ranking on prized attributes, such as military power, economic development, cultural achievements, diplomatic skill, and technological innovation. SIT entails that states may seek three approaches when it comes to their status. First is social mobility wherein states may adopt the political and economic norms of dominant powers to be admitted to more prestigious institutions

or clubs (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 71). When lower-status states perceive that they cannot "break into" the higher-status states' groups, they may turn to the second approach—competition against the dominant states. Third, states may seek to pursue social creativity by promoting new norms or development models that include unique policies that make them stand out (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). States employ "identity management strategies" based on their perceptions of their place in international status orders defined by collective beliefs about what is valued in society (Larson et al., 2014; Renshon, 2017).

There are critiques of utilizing SIT in international relations. For example, Ward (2017, pp. 825–826) claims that Larson and Shevchenko (2010) do not adequately offer distinctions between social mobility and social competition. He contends that impermeable group boundaries in groups do not play a role in SIT due to the denial of individuals to join a higher-status group (Ward, 2017, pp. 822–823). Larson and Shevchenko (2019a, p. 1190) offer their rebuttals by arguing that within social competition, there is an intrinsic characteristic of zero-sum game and no acquisition of consensually valued attributes, as pointed out by Ward (2017). For the second point, they argue that according to SIT, impermeable boundaries between states/groups in different statuses lead to more in-group identification (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019a, p. 1190). Overall, SIT's development within the discipline of international relations is characterized by a lively academic discourse on its scope within it. Nevertheless, SIT does offer a valuable analytical approach to explain the behavior of small states, especially when it comes to the pursuit of status.

SIT, as discussed by Larson and Shevchenko (2010), offers a flexible approach to analyzing status-seeking approaches of small states. They posit that status does not have to be understood as a zero-sum game; status can be evaluated based on multiple traits and they need not be in competition with each other (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 69). As small states are constrained already, they may seek non-conflictual or non-competitive approaches to status-seeking. The social mobility approach of SIT highlights that states in a lower-status group may conform to the norms of a higher-status group to be admitted to more prestigious institutions or clubs (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 71). Overall, this approach utilizes norms conformation, including emulating the values and practices of established powers, to garner higher status with dominant states through their acceptance. The study of social mobility allows in-depth analysis of a variety of approaches taken up by small states, which are materially constrained. Normative conformation is a cost-effective and unconfrontational approach to gaining status in the international system, which includes foreign policy orientations bound to be attractive for small states.

The conceptual framework of SIT, specifically social mobility, is used in this article to assess Nepal's foreign policy choices. It is argued that Nepal pursues social mobility as a form of identity management strategy. Specifically, Nepal's foreign policy choices reflect normative conformance with more powerful actors to reinforce its status in the international community. Social mobility through normative conformance allows Nepal to elevate its status with higher-status groups which are also the country's close development partners. Such higher-status groups include actors such as the EU, the UN, and the US. Concurrently, normative conformance reinforces Nepal's interest in maintaining and, possibly, expanding its agency as a small sovereign state between much larger neighbors, India and China. Nepal's normative convergence efforts are categorized into two specific types of commitments: (a) multilateralism, and (b) normative congruence with development partners. Nepal's normative conformance efforts seek to emulate the values and practices of the higher-status group, namely the US, the UN, and the EU.

3. Seeking Status: Nepal's Normative Convergence Efforts

Nepal is a small landlocked state surrounded by India and China, whose relations are fraught with contentions over territory and other security aspirations in Asia. As such, Nepal's foreign affairs have been historically defined by its efforts to navigate the tense relations between its neighbors. It is also materially constrained as it is still categorized as a "least developed country" by the UN and has economic issues stemming from a lack of foreign direct investment and a brain drain of skilled workforce. Nevertheless, Nepal's foreign policy showcases peculiar approaches that are focused on specific normative commitments internationally. Thus, Nepal pursues status-seeking measures to ensure normative conformance with its close development partners and emphasizes the importance of its sovereignty and agency given its precarious geopolitical location. To streamline the argument of this article, these status-seeking measures are categorized into two subsections: "Nepal's Multilateralism: Pursuit of Status Internationally" and "Nepal and Its International Norm Commitments: Pursuit of Normative Congruence."

3.1. Nepal's Multilateralism: Pursuit of Status Internationally

Nepal's modern efforts in multilateralism can be tied back to its admission to the UN in 1955. As a small state, the country had relentlessly pursued admission to the UN to affirm its sovereign status at a time when regional politics were marred with turbulence. As illustrated by the gradual incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China and Sikkim into India, there is no doubt that Nepali foreign policymakers were keen on ensuring international affirmation of its existence as a sovereign entity.

The internationalization efforts of Nepal's diplomatic status were further spearheaded by King Mahendra who ascended to the throne on March 13, 1955. Before King Mahendra's absolute reign, which began when he dismissed Nepal's democratically elected government in 1960, India played an extensively important role in Nepal including heavily influencing its foreign policy. However, King Mahendra spearheaded a foreign policy rooted in reducing Nepal's reliance on India and putting the country "on the global map." When King Mahendra ascended to the throne as king of Nepal, the country had diplomatic ties with five states; by the time of his death in 1972, that number had risen to 33 (Rose & Dial, 1969, p. 96). In 1961, King Mahendra also agreed to the construction of a highway linking Nepal and China for the first time; named the Araniko Highway, the 104-kilometer highway would link Nepal's capital Kathmandu with the town of Kodari on China's border (Adhikari, 2012). The same year, Nepal joined the Non-Aligned Movement reaffirming non-commitment to either the US or USSR in the Cold War (Khanal, 2019, p. 99). Overall, King Mahendra fostered a very active diplomatic approach by establishing diplomatic ties with numerous powers such as France and West Germany, while also pursuing an active agenda in the UN (Chand, 2023; Rose, 1971, p. 284). In fact, King Mahendra had once proclaimed that "the only alternative to the United Nations is a stronger United Nations" (Acharya, 2021, p. 210). This emphasis on the importance of the UN highlights Nepal's commitments to multilateralism—a norm conformation in line with the growing importance of multilateralism in international politics and as a means of emulating the values and practices of the great powers to ensure normative conformation. The higher-status group in this case was the UN itself and the great powers of the time, a majority of which were also members of the UN. Extending diplomatic ties to a wide range of states, commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement, and active membership in the UN are norms associated with multilateralism. The Non-Aligned Movement did not represent the norms of the dominant groups (the US- and USSR-led blocs), but, as SIT posits, status can be

evaluated based on multiple traits and they need not be in competition with each other (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 69).

King Mahendra's son, King Birendra, ascended to the throne on January 31, 1972, following his father's death. Similar to his father's efforts at asserting Nepal's agency internationally, King Birendra sought to do the same but through a different strategy. At his coronation, he declared that "we need peace for our security, we need peace for our independence, and we need peace for our development" (Anand, 1977, p. 6). He stated that Nepal should be declared a "Zone of Peace" (ZoP) which connects back to the social creativity approach discussed within SIT wherein states may seek to pursue social creativity by promoting new norms or development models which include unique policies that make them stand out. The ZoP pursued the idea that Nepal could not host any foreign bases, and no foreign military could operate within the country; the proposal would affirm Nepal's neutrality as it would not join any alliances (Scholz, 1977, p. 203). The ZoP was an attempt by King Birendra to use a peculiar affirmation of identity for Nepal which also centered on the country as the birthplace of the Buddha, and, as such, sought to stand out globally through a unique concept for a state. By 1986, 70 countries including the US, the UK, France, and China had endorsed the proposal with the notable exception of India (Baral, 1986, p. 1213). There was speculation that the ZoP would undermine the "special relationship" between Nepal and India which was affirmed by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which also stated that Nepal had to consult India if the former wanted to purchase weapons from third parties and import them using transit routes through India. Overall, the ZoP as a form of social creativity under SIT failed to bear fruit and Nepal returned to multilateral efforts to pursue its goal of international status. As noted in both Kings Birendra and Mahendra's reigns, the notion of "independence" was emphasized and is closely linked to the foreign policy approaches the monarchs pursued.

To further bolster its normative conformance, Nepal's efforts in committing to multilateralism are enshrined in its official foreign policy. The ministry of foreign affairs of the government of Nepal explicitly states that the fundamental objective of the country's foreign policy "is to enhance the dignity of the nation by safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and promoting [the] economic wellbeing and prosperity of Nepal" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Foreign policy principles include mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, respect for mutual equality, and most importantly, abiding faith in the Charter of the UN. In fact, Article 51 of the Constitution of Nepal of 2015 states that Nepal is to uphold the following:

> To conduct an independent foreign policy based on the Charter of the United Nations, non-alignment, principles of Panchasheel, international law and the norms of world peace, taking into consideration of [sic] the overall interest of the nation, while remaining active in safeguarding the sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and national interest of Nepal. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023)

Overall, the emphasis on Nepal's agency is clear given its status as a small state, but its explicit mention of the UN Charter is telling and emphasizes the importance of multilateralism in pursuit of Nepal's foreign policy goals. The Constitution's explicit mention of the UN Charter places importance on the values of the organization—a higher-status actor—for Nepal and it emulates the values of the UN such as multilateralism, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. While Nepal is already a member of the UN (since 1955), this explicit normative commitment reinforces its membership and legitimacy to the UN and its members, which strongly ties back to its interest in status maintenance. Furthermore, values such as multilateralism, sovereignty,

and territorial integrity are precarious for smaller states, and highlighting them sheds light on their continued importance.

Furthermore, the mention of the UN Charter in the Nepali constitution is no accident. Multilateralism offers Nepal the opportunity to maintain its status as an independent actor with its own agency in international politics (Chand, 2022). To affirm its role as a state with its own agency, Nepal has sought active participation in a wide variety of international organizations. Its involvement with the UN is obvious as the UN Charter is explicitly mentioned in its official foreign policy stance and its constitution. However, Nepal has also sought to elevate its status within the UN as a net provider to multilateral efforts through participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Since joining the UN in 1955, the country has participated in 44 UN missions across the world in which over 144,969 military personnel were involved (Nepali Army, 2024). As of July 2024, Nepal is currently contributing 6,119 soldiers in 13 missions, making it the largest contributor of troops and police personnel to UN peacekeeping in the world (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2024). Upholding UN values and practices by volunteering troops for UN missions further cements Nepal's normative commitments. It affirms Nepal's extensive participation in a space dominated by bigger powers and strengthens its legitimacy and status amongst them.

Nepal is also very forthcoming when it comes to participation in international organizations. Currently, around 26 UN agencies are active in Nepal (United Nations, 2024). Additionally, Nepal is also a part of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. It has also partaken in regional international organizations including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, and newer institutions such as the Belt and Road Forum and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank established by China. Currently, the country has diplomatic ties with 178 states. Overall, Nepal has maintained a very active participation in international organizations, both at the global and regional levels. These pursuits allow Nepal to promote its status as an active player in multilateralism, specifically through its participation in various international and regional organizations as well as its commitments to international peace through its active participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Such efforts promote Nepal as a supporter of international peace, multilateralism, and cooperation despite being a small state constrained by material capabilities. These efforts also allow Nepal to pursue a peculiar foreign policy that is not constrained by its geopolitical context as a small state between larger powers. Multilateralism affirms its autonomy and agency as its status is tied to its international participation and not to its geopolitical location. Concurrently, it allows Nepal to maintain legitimacy by ascribing to the UN's values and practices an identity management strategy that affirms Nepal's normative conformance.

3.2. Nepal and Its International Norm Commitments: Pursuit of Normative Congruence

Apart from multilateralism, Nepal has also sought to forge closer normative ties with its international partners. Despite the fact that India and China are Nepal's largest economic partners, Nepal has attempted to internationalize its status through normative conformance with extra-regional actors such as the EU and the UN. Nepal was the first country in South Asia to abolish the death penalty through its 1990 constitution, largely in congruence with the UN's international efforts on the matter (Amnesty International, 1991). The UN system as a whole "opposes the use of the death penalty in all circumstances" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). As such, Nepal has sought to normatively align with the UN on this matter. In fact, it is also the only country in South Asia to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, standing out as an exception in the region (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989).

Nepal has also aligned closely with the UN and the EU on norms related to human rights. Currently, Nepal has ratified 13 out of the 18 major international treaties tied to human rights, which is the highest of any country in South Asia (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024). Additionally, Nepal was also the first country in the region to decriminalize same-sex activities in 2007. In 2010, the Election Commission of Nepal began issuing voter registration forms with "other" as a gender category; passport forms followed suit (Knight, 2017). Subsequently, in 2015, Nepal's new constitution explicitly protected LGBTQI people, making it the 10th country in the world to do so. Nepal is also time and again the only country from South Asia to support resolutions or declarations tied to LGBTQI rights in the UN. This included its support in the 2008 statement in the UN General Assembly which condemned human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity ("UN: General Assembly statement," 2008), and the 2011 Joint Statement on Ending Acts of Violence and Related Human Rights Violations Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity at the Human Rights Council ("Over 80 nations support statement," 2011). Since November 2023, several same-sex marriages have been conducted in Nepal but the status of such marriages as a definite state policy is unclear (Knight, 2023). Not all these efforts in the realm of LGBTQI rights can be cast as efforts by Nepali policymakers to conform to UN and EU norms in this issue area; domestic rights groups have been very active in pushing the Nepali government to expand rights to sexual and gender minorities. Nevertheless, such policies also offer Nepal a chance to conform to values and practices that are considered important for the UN and the EU.

Coincidentally, these norms at the UN that Nepal has largely been supportive of are also those that the EU and its member states champion internationally. As per Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union, the organization's principles include democracy, rule of law, universality and indivisibility of human rights, and fundamental freedoms including the respect of the UN Charter of 1945 and international law (European Parliament, 2024). Thus, there is normative convergence on certain aspects of the Treaty on European Union and the Nepali constitution of 2015, including commitments to the UN Charter. The government of Nepal and the EU have forged close ties, specifically since Nepal's transition to a representative democracy in 2008. In the 14th Joint Commission between the EU and Nepal in 2023, the two parties "reiterated their support for a rules-based international order with the UN at its core, as well as their commitment to safeguard the principles of the UN Charter" (European Union External Action, 2023). The two sides also agreed to collaborate on promoting and protecting human rights and "to constructively engage in the Human Rights Council on the matters of common interest." The ministry of foreign affairs of Nepal considers the EU a "valuable development partner of Nepal since 1973" and "relations have remained friendly, cordial and cooperative based on mutual understanding, support and cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, humanitarian and development issues" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). The Delegation of the European Union in Nepal states that "The EU and Nepal share a deep commitment to multilateralism, rules based international order, and climate action" (Delegation of the European Union to Nepal, 2021). Thus, the EU and Nepal have normative convergence in their overall principles towards each other as well as international commitments, particularly within the context of the UN.

This normative convergence can be assessed as an identity management technique to emulate values and practices of the EU, which is a major development partner to Nepal. The EU committed €209 million for its

Multiannual Indicative Programme for development cooperation (2021–2024; European Union External Action, 2023). Nepal also has access to the EU common market through the preferential trading regime which allows tariff-free access for Nepali exports (Delegation of the European Union to Nepal, 2021). This preferential trading regime has led to the EU accounting for 9.4% of Nepal's exports in 2019. Overall, the EU is a major development and trade partner of Nepal, which further makes normative convergence an important aspect of bilateral relations. Such norms conformance also allow Nepal to gain access to material concessions from the EU. The EU's role as a normative power makes the social mobility approach to status a fruitful option to gain admission as a normatively congruent partner while also garnering material benefits for Nepal.

Overall, Nepal has sought to internationalize its norm commitments, particularly in the field of human rights given the low economic costs of doing so. As a developing state with limited material capabilities, such norm commitments allow Nepal to promote its status as a champion of multilateralism and global norms that are promoted by major international institutions like the UN and EU. Normative convergence with such actors allows Nepal to have an international status as a small state that stands out as an exception in its particular region (in this case, South Asia) and elevates its status internationally. It is also strategically important for Nepal's interests as such normative conformance has also worked to foster close ties with the EU, which is a major development partner. Normative convergence with such global actors also affirms Nepal's foreign policy as being independent of its neighboring states; it emphasizes Nepal's status as an exception in the region, as showcased by the number of human rights treaties it has signed and its positions on matters of LGBTQI rights. Recently, Nepal also voted with the majority of the world's states to condemn Russia for its aggression in Ukraine, affirming its commitment to sovereignty and not following the decisions taken by its neighbors India and China; this is specifically pertinent given its small-state status (Pandey, 2022).

4. Discussion and Conclusion: Employing the Conceptual Framework

As discussed earlier, the article utilizes SIT, particularly social mobility as an identity management strategy to assess Nepal's foreign policy choices. The framework is focused on the notion that states pursue normative conformance with dominant powers or more prestigious institutions to gain access to elite clubs; while Nepal's actions are not largely focused on gaining access to such elite clubs, its normative commitments have been focused on emulating values and practices of dominant actors (in this article's case, the EU and the UN). While social mobility as an identity management strategy allows the country to be presented favorably to its important development partners, it also offers Nepal the chance to reinforce its agency as a sovereign state. Its legitimacy offers it the chance to maintain autonomy and agency, and perhaps, promote its role as an independent player in international politics.

As illustrated in the sections on multilateralism and normative convergence, Nepal's case showcases that the country uses these two identity management strategies to promote its status internationally. These identity management strategies highlight Nepal's role as a multilateral player by partaking in international institutions and espousing their values. This enables Nepal to maintain an international presence and, through peacekeeping missions, be a valuable contributor to international peace as it is the largest contributor of troops to such endeavors. These are inexpensive approaches for a materially limited small state like Nepal and allow the country to "punch above its weight." Furthermore, multilateralism and emphasis on international rules and norms also allow Nepal to maintain its agency as a small state given its precarious

context as a landlocked state between two large contending states. Normative conformance complements Nepal's multilateral commitments, allowing Nepal to reinforce its international commitments while also opening up avenues to foster close ties with development partners such as the EU and the UN, which are tied to material gains for Nepal in the form of development aid.

Overall, multilateralism and normative convergence offer Nepal opportunities to maintain an international status. Maintenance of its status as an active player in international politics is affirmed through these efforts. Thus, adopting the norms of dominant players such as the UN and the EU allows Nepal to appear as a normatively convergent player to these actors, which is specifically important as participation in expansive human rights treaties/conventions affirms that Nepal is usually an exception in the region. Its willingness to adopt international human rights norms including LGBTQI protections is largely exceptional in South Asia, further elevating its status within international institutions. Such status affirms Nepal's willingness to chart a foreign policy that is not tied to regional norms but rather international ones and that it is capable of charting its own political trajectory. This could be discussed as an attempt at maintaining its agency in foreign policy specifically given its material limitations. While affirming its status as an independent state with agency through multilateralism and normative convergence, Nepal is also signaling to its major development partners that its norms are aligned with theirs—gaining access to the "club" of dominant actors. This is pertinent given that Nepal receives extensive development aid from the EU and the UN. Furthermore, it also allows Nepal to not be limited to its neighbors when it comes to development aid. Partnerships with extra-regional actors such as the EU and international players like the UN maintain its status outside of the region and may open avenues for closer relationships with other actors. Such efforts point to Nepal's aspirations to maintain its agency in a precarious geopolitical context through normative stances that not only affirm its peculiarity in the region but also may help it pursue foreign policy goals with extra-regional players to prevent overreliance on neighboring states.

The case of Nepal illustrates that it partakes in the "identity management strategies" of SIT to pursue greater agency and autonomy. Status-seeking is a tool that puts Nepal on the international map and in good terms with its development partners, namely the EU. The pursuit of status as a concept tied to social standing in international relations can also be utilized to reap material benefits, as Nepal has sought to do through normative convergence and commitments to multilateralism to forge closer ties with its major development partners. Thus, Nepal's case showcases that its identity management strategy through social mobility works to cast itself as a legitimate member of the UN and a normative partner of the EU. Concurrently, such a strategy also serves Nepal's interests in maintaining its agency in a precarious geopolitical landscape. Closer normative conformance with dominant groups may offer legitimacy and greater visibility for a small state like Nepal, which may aid in overcoming other shortcomings that define small states including limited material capabilities.

While Nepal's normative conformance has largely been positive in its relations with the UN and the EU, its material realities have to be considered. The country is still heavily dependent on trade and foreign direct investment from its neighbors, India and China. Given its landlocked status, Nepal is heavily reliant on its neighbors for direct physical networks with other states. India and China do continue to play very crucial roles in Nepal and it would not be an exaggeration to state that they dominate the discourses surrounding the country's foreign policy. Nevertheless, Nepal's extra-regional ties and its emphasis on international norms offer a nuanced perspective on its foreign policy. Small states have to navigate their smallness by addressing

their limited capabilities, but SIT offers a perspective beyond material analyses and highlights the importance of social identities in the process of foreign policymaking.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

Status-Seeking Through Disaster Relief: India and China's Response to Turkey–Syria Earthquakes

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Abstract

Disaster relief cooperation has emerged as an active area of status-seeking by major powers. In recent decades, India and China have increasingly leveraged their disaster management capabilities to project their power globally. Disaster relief cooperation can be viewed through the lenses of the logics of both appropriateness and consequences. As "non-Western" powers, they have conventionally been known to contest disaster relief norms perceived by them as Western. Simultaneously, they have varied status-seeking approaches, guided by distinct geopolitical equations and involving different actors. Against this background, the article analyses the patterns and drivers of India and China's status-seeking behaviour through disaster relief cooperation using the frameworks of the logics of appropriateness and consequences, in the case of the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes. It delineates the actors and capabilities involved in their overseas disaster relief activities as well as their implications. It also investigates the strategic and normative imperatives, and geopolitical considerations of their disaster relief cooperation. The article argues that the status-seeking behaviour of India and China through disaster relief cooperation with Turkey and Syria is guided by an interplay between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences, based on their motivations, capacities, and distinct contexts of the recipient countries.

Keywords

China; disaster relief cooperation; India; logic of appropriateness; logic of consequences; status-seeking; Turkey–Syria earthquakes

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1. Introduction

The rise of India and China as major providers of disaster relief globally has implications for their status aspirations. The two countries enhanced their disaster relief capabilities domestically in response to their growing disaster vulnerabilities. They are also increasingly leveraging them externally. Whether it is the multistakeholder, global Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure launched by India in 2019 or China's 2021 initiative of the Belt and Road International Cooperation Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management, the focus on providing assistance to disaster-prone and affected countries, especially in the Global South, has assumed significance in the current geopolitical environment (Belt and Road Initiative Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management, 2023; Upadhyay, 2021). For emerging, non-Western powers, status-seeking through disaster relief cooperation provides an opportunity to be recognized as providers of global goods as well as reliable and responsible contributors to their governance. Herein, besides their adherence to international principles of disaster relief and participation in governance frameworks such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, they also engage in other minilateral and bilateral efforts targeted at disaster relief, risk reduction, and preparedness.

For emerging non-Western powers such as India and China, status-seeking is consistent with their aspiration to change the status quo in the international order. For instance, Mukherjee (2022) argues that emerging powers such as India and China aspire for not only the benefits of cooperation, but also demand recognition, ownership, and equality of status in the international order. Hence, even though they may initially agree with the existing rules/norms of cooperation despite material constraints and compromises, they challenge them later if these rules/norms are contrarian to their status-seeking aspirations and domestic sensitivities. For example, for India, demand for UN reforms and permanent membership in the UN Security Council are part of its status-seeking strategies (Kaura & Singh, 2021). Instead of depending solely on material power, they use ideological, historical, and social aspects to influence international politics, like in the case of India's foreign policy (Basrur & de Estrada, 2017).

In this context, the article investigates India and China's status-seeking behaviours as non-Western powers. It contextualizes them within the framework of the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences to decipher the motivations of state behaviour as influenced by either rules/norms or interests/means–ends calculations, respectively, in international relations (Checkel, 1998). This article questions this traditional dichotomous approach and instead argues that it is an interplay between the two logics that guides state behaviour, which can be seen in the case of India and China's status-seeking behaviour through disaster relief cooperation. It applies the two logics to analyze the two countries' response after the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes.

Emerging powers in the context of this article imply countries that have a growing influence in international affairs and global governance, and challenge Western dominance (Stephen, 2017). Besides being non-Western, India and China continue to be categorized as countries of the Global South based on economic and development indicators, which influences their power projection and status in the international order. According to the World Bank classification, China is an upper-middle-income country, and India is a lower-middle-income country. This differentiates them from countries of the Global North and/or West that are high-income countries with higher per capita GDP. In terms of membership in multilateral/minilateral groupings too, the two countries are part of G77, BRICS, and others, that are

considered non-Western (Stephen, 2017). While both countries have large militaries, in terms of military strength and global military presence, they are still well behind other powers such as the US. Similarly, while they are increasingly building global alliances and partnerships based on trade, technology, and other such issues, their global reach is still limited in security domains such as in the case of military alliances (Bekkevold, 2023). Hence, despite the contention that a country like China has already emerged as a great power, one could argue that it is still an emerging "global" power.

The 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes are worthy of investigation for two reasons. First, it was one of the deadliest disasters of all time. On 6 February 2023, at 04:17 local time, an earthquake of magnitude 7.8 occurred in southern Turkey, followed by another one of magnitude 7.5 at 13:30 in the Kahramanmaras region—both of which affected central and southern parts of Turkey and northern and western parts of Syria. It resulted in over 59,000 deaths and affected approximately 18 million people, with economic loss reaching $34.2 billion in Turkey and $5.1 billion in Syria (Wilks, 2024). The international community mobilized a massive humanitarian response, with over 100 countries and international organizations providing assistance in different forms, including India and China. Second, this case provides two distinct contexts of international disaster response, namely peaceful and conflict situations. Turkey has fairly strong disaster relief capacity and plays an important role in regional politics and security. In addition to humanitarian consideration, providing relief to Turkey can be viewed through a strategic lens. On the contrary, the context in Syria is much more complex from operational and normative perspectives. The local disaster response system has been severely debilitated by years of conflict, and international aid has faced difficulties arising from the sanctions and security concerns. An examination of how India and China responded in the two contexts adds to our understanding of the two countries' approaches to disaster relief and strategies to seek and enact the desired status.

Specifically, this article addresses two questions. First, how did India and China enhance their global status through the international disaster response after the Turkey–Syria earthquakes? Second, how do we explain the two countries' relief efforts through the logics of consequences and appropriateness? The remainder of this article first unpacks various dimensions of status, and how and why states leverage disaster relief cooperation for status. Thereafter, the article provides an overview of non-Western powers' status-seeking behaviour in terms of disaster relief cooperation, by exploring their adoption of internationally agreed principles of disaster relief on some occasions and interest-driven contestation of perceived Western norms on the other. The article then illustrates the case of India and China's response to the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes to argue that non-Western powers adopt a combined approach based on appropriateness and consequences to establish their status as major or great powers in the international order.

2. Status-Seeking and Disaster Relief: An Interplay Between the Logics of Appropriateness and Consequences

Status in international politics refers to the collective belief of other states about a given state's standing in the international hierarchy or membership of a social group (such as great power group), which is based on assessments of the country's possession of valued attributes, such as wealth, military capabilities, diplomatic clout, and cultural attractiveness (Krickovic & Zhang, 2020, p. 223; Larson et al., 2014, p. 7; Renshon, 2017, p. 4). States are believed to always aspire to enhance their status as high status brings instrumental gains (such as autonomy in decision-making and greater or even decisive influence on international security,

economic, and political issues) as well as social and psychological benefits (such as international respect and national pride; Duque, 2018, p. 577; Götz, 2021, p. 230; Larson et al., 2014, pp. 18–19). War-fighting used to be a principal means of status-seeking, but its usefulness has declined in the post-World War II era since the use or threat of use of violence in international politics has become increasingly unpopular and illegitimate. A case in point is the perception that Russia's international status has slipped notably after launching its war against Ukraine in 2022 (Šćepanović, 2024). By contrast, deploying military for peaceful purposes such as peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) has gained more weight in status generation (Duque, 2018).

Status-seeking through disaster relief can be explained from two perspectives, namely a logic of consequences and a logic of appropriateness (as described in Table 1). The logic of consequences means that actors make choices based on cost–benefit calculations (March & Olsen, 1998, p. 949). In disaster relief, this logic is particularly relevant in decisions on the scale of assistance and extent of cooperation. In contemporary international politics, moral authority is an essential basis of status; and humanitarian action provides a useful avenue to generate moral authority and status (Wohlforth et al., 2018, p. 532). Therefore, it is a common practice for countries to offer emergency aid to those affected by disasters, but the associated costs and benefits are an important factor in shaping the decision on how much aid is offered, in addition to the actual humanitarian needs. For instance, commercial considerations weigh considerably in aid allocation (Macdonald & Hoddinott, 2004). The Korean government favoured close economic partners and traditional recipients of Korean aid in delivering emergency aid during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2023).

Strategic interests provide a strong motive for aid provision and disaster-related cooperation. The Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the US), which is perceived as a grouping fostered to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, formalized its HADR guidelines in 2022, with potential strategic benefits of cooperation and coordination in the region (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2022). Similarly, as Kelman et al. (2018) observe, while assessing the effectiveness of disaster diplomacy between two or more countries that may share adversarial relations, disaster diplomacy succeeds in catalysing, aiding, and sustaining (over a longer period) diplomatic initiatives (and not in creating them) only if there are pre-existing conditions like cultural or trade relations, which has implications for status-seeking. Hence, one may question the effectiveness of disaster diplomacy between two or more countries that may share adversarial relations. For example, in the case of the 2005 earthquake in India and Pakistan, a short-term thaw in relations associated with disaster relief did not lead to long-term normalization of bilateral relations (Kelman et al., 2018). In addition, gaining practical knowledge and experience is another driving factor for HADR operations (Yates & Bergin, 2011). Intangible benefits and costs also matter, such as benign image and reputational damage. A failure to provide humanitarian aid in a meaningful and effective way can cause backlash, particularly for major powers, as seen in the case of China's response to 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (Gong, 2021a). Similarly, the US was criticised by humanitarian groups for not providing aid efficiently in the Gaza Strip ("US airdrops food," 2024).

The logic of appropriateness maintains that actions should be rule-based. Applying this logic to the discussion, we argue status-seekers should follow the "appropriate behavioural norms" and rules to gain the recognition of "the relevant others" in the humanitarian system (Murray, 2019, p. 42). From the lens of appropriateness, there are two strategies for states to enhance their status. First, the appropriateness of action is mainly defined

by three dimensions—international norms, humanitarian law and principles, and commonly accepted practices. For instance, underpinned by the norms of sovereignty and non-interference, provision of aid should be invited by the government of the disaster-affected country. Any assistance without consent is viewed as illegitimate, regardless of the humanitarian motivations. This position is particularly emphasized by many Asian countries in their disaster relief cooperation (Bellamy & Beeson, 2010). In addition to compliance with norms, humanitarian practices that are appropriate to the international, regional, and national contexts are considered conducive to generating status. For instance, military involvement in disaster relief is sensitive in some contexts, particularly fragile and conflict-ridden ones, but it is a common practice in the Asia-Pacific region (Simm, 2019).

In the existing humanitarian system, a conventional approach to enhance status is to behave appropriately according to the existing norms and as per the expectations of the international humanitarian community. Modern humanitarianism practised by most donors and humanitarian organizations now, which is based on "the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those in immediate danger of harm" (Barnett, 2005, p. 724), has its roots in Christianity and the Enlightenment. It took shape in the 19th century and was driven by the industrial revolution and modern science (Parmelee, 1915). The three largest donors in 2022 were the US, Germany, and the EU, which together accounted for 64 percent of the total international humanitarian donations from the public sector (Development Initiatives, 2023, p. 14). In addition, international humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Médecins Sans Frontières (also known as Doctors Without Borders) are leading actors in the humanitarian system. Together, they have a strong influence on the definition of appropriateness in the humanitarian space and recognition of others' humanitarian role.

The second way for states to enhance their status is to challenge the existing understanding of appropriateness and redefine it. Humanitarian challenges are evolving, and so are the principles and practices of humanitarianism. For instance, the classical, Dunantist humanitarianism emphasizes the short-term nature of humanitarian aid, which is to alleviate immediate suffering. The approach underpinned by this version of humanitarianism is led by the UN agencies and international NGOs. However, as many humanitarian situations have become protracted, the view of humanitarian aid as short-cycle has been problematized (Hilhorst, 2018). Moreover, a localization of humanitarian action in recent years places greater emphasis on the roles of the country and communities, in contrast to the previous paradigm in which donor countries and international humanitarian organizations have greater influence in humanitarian action. These new trends provide opportunities for status-seekers to contest existing rules, articulate alternatives, and eventually redefine appropriateness in the humanitarian space. Take the evolution of the responsibility to protect (R2P) as an example, which premises sovereignty on the state's fulfilment of protection for citizens. Despite some reservations, instead of complete rejection, China actively participated in the UN debates on R2P to ensure that the norm will evolve in a way that "respects traditional sovereignty," which resonates with the normative preference of many developing countries (Fung, 2022, pp. 7–8). Similarly, India has also adopted a cautious approach towards the Western conceptualization of R2P by embracing a position that is less supportive of intervention, and more accepting of state sovereignty and non-interference (Choedon, 2017). As such, China and India may present themselves as representing voices of the Global South on this issue.

Table 1. A comparison between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences.

Logics	Logic of Appropriateness	Logic of Consequences
Key elements	"Political action is 'obligatory action' and as being rule- and identity-based" (Sending, 2002, p. 447). The key elements are "(1) situation, (2) identity or role, and (3) rules" (Sending, 2002, p. 447).	"'Analysis-based' action, which normally comprises deliberate consideration of alternatives, assessment of their outcomes and preference-driven choices." (Schulz, 2018, p. 914)
Key questions	"What kind of situation is this? Who am I? How appropriate are different actions for me in this situation? Do what is most appropriate" (Goldmann, 2004, p. 40).	"What are the decision options? What are my preferences? What are the consequences of the alternatives for my preferences? Choose the decision option that has the best consequences" (Dewulf et al., 2020, p. 2).
Basis of decision-making	"The political community is based on a shared history, a valued way of life, a shared definition of the common good, and a shared interpretation and common understanding embodied in rules for appropriate behaviour. The rules provide criteria for what is worth striving for, and for what is accounted as good reasons for action" (Sending, 2002, p. 448).	"Decisions are taken based on the anticipation of the future effects of current actions, and that alternative decision options are evaluated in terms of their expected consequences" (Dewulf et al., 2020, p. 2).
Focus of action	"Behaviors (beliefs as well as actions) are intentional but not willful. They involve fulfilling the obligations of a role in a situation, and so of trying to determine the imperatives of holding a position. Actions stem from a conception of necessity, rather than preference...a sane person is one who is 'in touch with identity' in the sense of maintaining consistency between behavior and a conception of self in a social role" (Sending, 2002, p. 447).	"Conceives of action as instrumental: What motivates action is the desire to achieve a goal, typically defined based on the actor's self-interest. According to an instrumental logic, actors make decisions based on means–end calculations in pursuit of a goal. To select among the alternatives for action, actors apply a decision rule, such as goal maximization or satisficing" (Duque, 2024, p. 3).
Disaster relief context	A state participates in disaster relief to uphold international humanitarian norms and to be perceived as responsible.	Sometimes referred to as "disaster diplomacy" (Gong, 2021a)—A state provides disaster aid to enhance national interests, i.e., strengthening alliances, enhancing influence in a region, improving international standing, or boosting economic ties.
Key actors in disaster relief	International organizations, NGOs, and multilateral agreements/mechanisms.	Guided by government and strategic interests, often involving military or state institutions.

Sources: Capie (2015); Dewulf et al. (2020); Mamuji (2014); March and Olsen (1998).

3. Status-Seeking and Emerging (Non-Western) Powers on Disaster Relief Cooperation

Emerging (non-Western) powers such as India and China are conscious of the hierarchy within the international system that is shaped by material, normative, and social factors. India and China aim to ascend the hierarchy through their contributions to global governance, including HADR efforts. Intergovernmental

forums such as the G20 help cement these hierarchies by recognizing the leadership roles of non-Western states such as India and China in solving global crises such as climate change, pandemics, and other types of disasters (Zarakol, 2017). G20 resolutions depict how the involvement of major powers such as the US, EU, China, and India enhances the legitimacy of international organizations in dealing with humanitarian issues through consensus-driven decision-making, inclusivity, and responsiveness to crises (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). However, through contestation guided by India, China, and other countries of the Global South, diverse experiences are brought into dialogue on issues relating to global governance, helping to address the legitimacy gaps that arise from one-size-fits-all governance models (Wiener, 2014). India and China specifically advocate for attention to developmental concerns, equity, and sovereignty in humanitarian and disaster relief governance (Weiss & Thakur, 2010, pp. 308–340). Recent G20 declarations and meetings (especially under India's 2023 presidency) emphasize sustainable development, needs-based support to developing countries, and diplomacy and dialogue in the context of humanitarian assistance, with references to heightened food and energy insecurity caused by the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 crisis, and even the Turkey–Syria earthquakes, among other developments (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2023a, 2023b).

On disaster relief cooperation, Salmons (2019) contends that "recognizable patterns of status-seeking behaviour" can be observed in the HADR operations carried out by non-Western powers such as China in the Asia-Pacific region—that are also linked with order-building in the region. In India's case, its response in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to provide assistance to other tsunami-affected countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is seen as a demonstration of its competency in HADR capabilities, activities, and projection/acceptance as a regional and/or global power, and even a security provider in the IOR (Dany, 2020; Gong & Jayaram, 2023). Additionally, India's HADR activities boost its quest for permanent membership in the UN Security Council (Upadhyay, 2018).

Furthermore, even while converging on many disaster management principles, India and China have had certain divergences with Western donors and institutions over the implicit political nature of foreign aid in some cases (Meier & Murthy, 2011). For example, in the case of 2008 Cyclone Nargis, the Myanmar military government rejected international aid from Western donors amidst calls for the invocation of R2P (and potential intervention) by some key Western actors, while China and India were provided access, and they became the largest contributors to disaster relief (Junk, 2016). This example offers an apt demonstration of how India and China have positioned themselves on key concerns of the Global South with respect to the West's policies on issues of global governance.

Similarly, China and India reluctantly endorsed the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (this includes disaster aid/relief). They have not engaged meaningfully with other frameworks on aid effectiveness such as the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (Brown, 2020). They have considered them as dominated by the principles endorsed by Western donors (mainly the OECD) while under-recognizing the efforts of emerging donors such as themselves. They also found them misaligned with patterns and expectations of South–South cooperation. Emerging powers such as India, China, and Brazil have been in favour of transforming donor–recipient relationships into development cooperation models (Abdel-Malek, 2015; Brown, 2020). More importantly, they have traditionally viewed international organizations such as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs as supply-driven, West-dominated, disregardful of the needs and sensitivities of the recipient countries, and largely exclusive of emerging disaster relief providers such as India and China (Singh, 2023).

4. India's Response Towards Its "Extended Neighbourhood" as a *Vishwamitra*

India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been guided by the ideals of *Vishwamitra* (a friend of the world) and a leader of the Global South. India has consistently emphasized its emergence as a first responder in HADR "in keeping with its cultural beliefs of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—the whole world is one family" ("The emergence of Vishwa Mitra Bharat," 2024), consistent with the logic of appropriateness. India's fundamental motivations are linked with its positioning as a bridging power striving for a "common ground" by remaining "relatively objective and unbiased," in the words of India's Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar (Peri, 2024).

In the case of the Turkey–Syria earthquakes, India's appropriate response can be perceived as an attempt to build bridges (especially with Turkey) at a time of crisis. Within hours of the earthquake, the Government of India launched Operation *Dost* (friend), rendering it a first responder. This also reflects India's identification of West Asia as its "extended neighbourhood," under its "Think West" policy (Chinoy & Kumar Pradhan, 2024), with the region being critical for India's status-seeking strategy, guided by both norms and strategic interests (Alhasan, 2022).

Turkey's anti-India stance on the Kashmir issue, alleged funding of "anti-India activities" by "Turkish outfits backed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government" (Gupta, 2020), and explicitly pro-Pakistan statements, especially in the UN sessions, have antagonized India (Taneja, 2023). However, soft power tools such as disaster relief and aid have wider consequentialist implications for status (Kumar, 2020). In fact, Turkey also sent assistance to India during the Covid-19 crisis (Erdoğan & Boztepe, 2021). Hence, one could argue that India's disaster relief support to Turkey was conditioned more by the logic of appropriateness, and less by the costs and benefits of action.

India's external HADR efforts have been largely guided by state agencies and the military forces, which fits the logic of consequences. India has consolidated its disaster management policies and institutions over time. It established the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in 2005 and the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) in 2006, a specialized disaster response force constituted under the 2005 Disaster Management Act (NDRF, n.d.). Similarly, the Integrated Defence Staff constituted officially in 2001 has also been pivotal in "disaster and crisis management…as a part of the National Crisis Management Group, and coordination of efforts of the three services as required" as well as organizing multi-national HADR exercises (Dua, 2019, pp. 61–62).

India's display of its material (especially military) capabilities falls well within the logic of consequences (Haidar, 2023a). The first phase of India's Operation *Dost* involved the rapid deployment of two search and rescue teams of the NDRF, consisting of 101 personnel, on February 7. This was one of the few times that the NDRF units were deployed abroad, with some of the other prominent ones being in the 2011 triple disaster in Japan and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal (NDRF, 2023). The Indian Air Force (IAF) dispatched four C-17s (C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft) with "relief material, rescue and medical personnel to Turkey" (Peri & Pandey, 2023). The C-17s also transported "a 30-bed field hospital along with a 99-member specialist medical team" of the Indian Army (Peri & Pandey, 2023). At the same time, India sent IAF C-130 transport aircraft with emergency relief supplies and medicines to Damascus, but did not deploy NDRF units (Peri & Pandey, 2023).

India largely adhered to the international norms of disaster relief to engage with Turkey, a country that is not seen as friendly towards it, signifying the logic of appropriateness even while being conscious of the strategic benefits of its action in terms of reputation and image. India delivered emergency relief materials and medical assistance worth INR 7 crores (~$836,000) to Turkey and Syria in the first week after the earthquakes hit (Sharma, 2023). Despite the relatively lesser amount of aid (in terms of financial value) provided by India in comparison to other major powers, including China, India's capacity to be a first responder through the deployment of its human and technical resources beyond the IOR was recognized (Bhattacharyya, 2023). The timeliness, accuracy, and swiftness of their response were acknowledged by some Turkish officials and locals ("Erdogan Govt lauds India," 2023). The Turkish ambassador to India lauded India's efforts: "India was among the first countries to respond when we asked for medical assistance" (Chitre, 2023).

On the other hand, in Syria's case, while international norms mattered, India chose a different path in comparison to the Western donors, contesting what is considered appropriate in this context. There was general criticism of the West's sanctions that impeded aid access and operations. The Bashar al-Assad regime was also accused of weaponizing aid and not distributing it among the disaster-affected victims (Jabbour et al., 2023). With India maintaining diplomatic channels with the al-Assad regime despite Western sanctions, the assistance provided by India to Syria was a reinforcement of its respect for "sovereignty" and "non-interference," implying tacit support to al-Assad. As an acknowledgement of India's aspiration to be recognized as a leader of the Global South, the Syrian ambassador to India commented: "We really appreciate people, Government of India for support, this is the voice of the south we want to see in the future" (Chandok, 2023).

While the logic of appropriateness calls for the integration of non-state stakeholders in disaster relief cooperation, the Indian government traditionally coordinates directly with the recipient country's state authorities. It does not necessarily involve Indian NGOs in its external operations; nor does the government formally engage with NGOs of the affected country (Shanbog & Kevlihan, 2022). However, the HADR guidelines released by the NDMA in October 2024 highlight the need for coordination among various stakeholders, including international non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations as well (NDMA, 2024). It relies upon government entities such as the NDMA, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and Ministry of Home Affairs to plan/coordinate the HADR operations and primarily its military/paramilitary forces to undertake them (Chakradeo, 2020; Nainar, 2024). Operation *Dost* was also no different, fitting the logic of consequences and invoking a model of disaster diplomacy. Yet, some NGOs independently sent relief teams and emergency materials to Turkey and Syria with government approval (Rana, 2023). Importantly, due to the political uncertainties in Syria, the Indian government coordinated with UN agencies to send aid to Syria besides directly sending a part of it to the al-Assad regime. India, based on its normative disposition of appropriateness, followed internationally agreed principles of "humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence" (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2023a), and adopted a neutral stance when coordinating and cooperating with local and international organizations to ensure effective resource utilization.

However, much of disaster diplomacy efforts are often leveraged as a part of an interest-based, consequentialist narrative-building exercise, which could even counteract the goodwill created by them. This was seen in the case of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, wherein the Indian operation was criticized by some

sections of Nepal due to its poor coordination with the local actors (Chakradeo, 2020), Indian media's insensitive coverage, and the government agencies' unnecessary focus on the repetitive relaying of information on India's efforts (perceived as trumpeting) rather than monitoring the operation itself (Haidar, 2023b). Having learnt lessons from this experience, the Indian government adopted a more measured approach in the case of the Turkey–Syria earthquakes, tilting towards the logic of appropriateness. This is further reinforced by the 2024 HADR protocol that provides guidelines for media engagement.

5. China's Response Under Major Country Diplomacy

Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China pursues "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics," which features "taking more responsibilities, exercising more influence and providing more public goods" (Wang, 2019, p. 27). Policy shifts to enact this status include taking more responsibilities and providing more public goods globally, among others (Wang, 2019). This approach conforms to the theory that international status can be achieved through contributing material resources to global governance and/or creating new norms and institutions (Basrur & de Estrada, 2017, pp. 10–12; Larson & Shevchenko, 2014, p. 57). In the Turkey–Syria earthquakes, Beijing adopted different approaches to seek and enact the "major country" status in the two affected countries. In Turkey, China's response reflected the intention to behave appropriately, in terms of the speed, scale, and actors involved. After the earthquakes on February 6, the Ministry of Emergency Management sent a search and rescue team (China Search and Rescue) of 82 members to assist the relief work in Turkey. The team arrived at the disaster zone on February 8, within the first 72 hours after the disaster. In addition, one team from the Hong Kong SAR and 17 non-governmental teams from the Chinese mainland joined the earthquake response (Fan, 2023). Meanwhile, the China International Development Cooperation Agency announced ¥40 million ($5.9 million) worth of relief aid to Turkey and the Red Cross Society of China offered $200,000 in cash aid ("China rushes rescue teams," 2023; "Chinese rescue teams," 2023). In comparison, Australia sent a team of 72 rescue workers and offered $6.9 million to support the aid effort ("Live updates | Aid," 2023). The Japanese government sent 75 rescue workers and provided $6 million through international organizations and $2.5 million through Japanese NGOs ("Live updates | Turkey," 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). China's relief efforts were generally comparable to those of other major donors.

The involvement of Chinese NGOs in the relief work in Turkey was more visible than previously. Hours after the first earthquake, a few organizations turned to standby status. These include the China Foundation for Rural Development, the Amity Foundation, Blue Sky, and the Shenzhen Rescue Volunteers Federation. The Gongyang Rescue Team from Hangzhou was the first one to arrive in Turkey on February 8 (China NGO Center for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2023a). On February 11, the China Social Initiative for International Humanitarian Aid—Turkey and Syria Earthquake 2023 was activated to share information and coordinate action among the NGOs and with the other stakeholders, with headquarters in both Turkey and China (China NGO Center for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2023b). On the same day, the China Association for Disaster Prevention issued a statement suggesting NGOs in the disaster zones to follow the arrangements and instructions of the relevant authorities and not to add burden to the host government and local communities (China Association for Disaster Prevention, 2023).

This was an improvement compared with previous overseas disaster responses. For instance, after the Palu earthquake in Indonesia in 2018, some Chinese NGOs entered the disaster zone without reporting to the

authorities and were eventually deported (Gong, 2021a, p. 96). For a long time, there was a gap between China's overseas humanitarian response and the international humanitarian community. China has relied on the governmental channel to deliver overseas humanitarian aid, but this approach has attracted criticism for a lack of engagement with civil society (Hirono, 2013, p. 203). As per the logic of appropriateness, the increasing involvement of Chinese NGOs in international disaster response points to the trend of China's overseas disaster relief aligning more with international humanitarian practices. It can advance Beijing's interest to be recognized by the international humanitarian community for its assistance.

Interestingly, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was absent, while countries such as India, South Korea, the US, and the UK deployed military assets to assist the relief work in Turkey. This stood in contrast with China's disaster response after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, when the PLA deployed over 1,000 personnel, 10 aircraft, and 190 engineering machines, making it its largest overseas disaster relief operation ever ("PLA's response to Nepal earthquake," 2015). As per the logic of consequences, the decision not to deploy the PLA can be explained by the lukewarm China–Turkey relations, a lack of strong economic incentives, and unfavourable geopolitical dynamics. China and Turkey are not each other's key trading partners (Öniş & Yalikun, 2021, p. 524). Despite improvement in bilateral relations in the past decade, there are limits to rapprochement, such as Turkey's close economic relations with the EU and a lack of common values between the two countries. From a strategic perspective, mutual trust and friendly defence relations with the host country are preconditions for PLA involvement in disaster relief (Gong, 2021a, 2021b). Turkey is a NATO member and NATO's increasing concern over China's growing military power casts a shadow on China–Turkey military cooperation.

Regarding Syria, China's disaster response needs to be analyzed against the background of its overall approach to the decade-long crisis. Beijing has been perceived in the West as Moscow's partner to counter the West in the Syrian conflict and thus criticized for neglecting the humanitarian suffering, although some analyses point out that Beijing's stance is more nuanced than simply opposing the West (Gegout & Suzuki, 2020, p. 390). Hence, countering this critical narrative is an important goal of China's diplomacy towards Syria, including the earthquake response. From a humanitarian perspective, the China International Development Cooperation Agency offered ¥30 million ($4.38 million) to Syria and the Red Cross Society offered $200,000 in cash aid ("China rushes rescue teams," 2023; "Chinese rescue teams," 2023). In addition, the Chinese government expedited food delivery through ongoing aid projects with the UN. In terms of monetary value, there was no significant difference in China's relief aid to Turkey and Syria after the earthquakes, given the fact that Turkey was more severely affected, but Syria's response capacity had been weakened by years of fragility. In terms of personnel, the Red Cross Society of China and NGOs such as Peaceland and Blue Leopard Rescue sent small relief teams to the country.

The case of Syria reveals two interesting points related to aid delivery. First, China's official aid was delivered through governmental channels and the UN, and this stood in contrast to Western donors that refused to engage the Syrian government and partnered with the UN and humanitarian NGOs only. This was a continuation of China's division with the West, with China emphasizing respect for the "sovereignty" and "independence" of Syria and the West delegitimating the Syrian government (Fung, 2018, p. 700). Second, the Chinese government did not send the national search and rescue team. This decision may be attributed to a calculation of political and security costs and benefits, as the perception of China as a partner of the Syrian government might increase the risk of negative perceptions of the Chinese national team.

In addition, China delegitimated some Western actions in Syria in the UN Security Council debates. China referred to the sanctions imposed by the West as "illegal" (UN Security Council, 2023). While some of the sanctions were lifted to assist humanitarian access, China further argued that the temporary easing of the sanctions had a limited impact and called for complete removal (UN Security Council, 2023). Leveraging its role as a permanent member, China lent political support to the Syrian government and continued its opposition to the Western approach to the Syrian situation by questioning its legitimacy and appropriateness.

6. Discussion

India and China's engagement with Turkey and Syria after the earthquakes suggests an interplay between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness. India's Operation *Dost* focused on showcasing its role as a responsible global player by following internationally "appropriate" (accepted) principles of disaster relief. Naming the operation "*Dost*" itself is aligned with the Narendra Modi-led government's vision of presenting India as a *Vishwamitra*, with both *dost* and *mitra* meaning "friend." Where India diverged from Western powers and had a similar position with that of the non-Western powers such as China was on disaster aid to Syria, clearly reinforcing sovereignty as a bedrock of its engagement with other countries. Moreover, India's growing disaster relief capabilities have aided its outreach beyond the immediate (South Asia and IOR) to the extended neighbourhood (West and East Asia). India's military-led HADR has been lauded in the past, such as in the cases of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2018 earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia, thereby complementing its self-depiction as a net security provider not just in the IOR but the broader Indo-Pacific (Gong & Jayaram, 2023). Its similar response in Turkey is a continuation of the benign, but consequence-focussed, use of military power for status-seeking purposes. This is irrespective of the geopolitical context of strained relations with Turkey.

China's disaster response to Turkey and Syria demonstrated both an adoption of international practices and a resistance to trends and developments that it perceives could potentially diminish sovereignty—the underpinning principle of Chinese foreign policy. At an operational level, there were changes in China's disaster response that suggest the intention to behave more appropriately, such as improvement in the scale and speed of relief work and expansion of NGO involvement. However, military involvement is a sensitive issue for Beijing given the current geostrategic dynamics. The decision on military deployment is primarily shaped by strategic calculations. In terms of norms, when there is disagreement or division between China and the West, China tends to delegitimate Western-led initiatives and highlight its solidarity with other developing countries.

For both India and China, the peaceful context in Turkey (yet constrained bilateral relations) and the conflictual dynamics in Syria presented distinct challenges to their disaster relief cooperation with the two countries. India continued to engage with the al-Assad regime, delivering aid directly to it, amid Western sanctions, albeit without any ground presence of the armed or disaster response forces. While contesting the Western approach of not engaging with the Syrian government, it still refrained from deploying the NDRF units in Syria, especially owing to the challenge of coordinating with local actors in politically contested zones, at times controlled by anti-government actors too (Taneja, 2023). With Turkey, a mix of humanitarianism, G20 leadership, projection of India's military and other capabilities in its "extended neighbourhood," and an opportunity to improve bilateral relations in the wake of hostilities over a range of issues, guided India's behaviour. In China's case, contrasting to Western donors that have long viewed the

al-Assad regime as illegitimate, Beijing stuck to the governmental channel for aid delivery and questioned the legitimacy of the Western sanctions on Syria. Similarly, the fairly swift and active aid to Turkey reflected the positive momentum in the bilateral relations as Beijing has been expanding its international reach, including in the Middle East and Eurasia, where Turkey is a major actor. Table 2 provides a comparative overview of key elements of India and China's disaster aid after the Turkey–Syria earthquakes.

Table 2. A comparative overview of India and China's disaster aid after the Turkey–Syria earthquakes of 2023.

	India	China
State and non-state actors	Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defence, NDRF, Integrated Defence Staff, Indian Armed Forces. Sent armed forces and NDRF to Turkey, but not to Syria. Worked with the governments of Turkey and Syria; UN aid channels (especially in Syria).	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Emergency Management, China International Development Cooperation Agency, China Association for Disaster Prevention, Red Cross Society of China, China Foundation for Rural Development, Amity Foundation, Blue Sky, Shenzhen Rescue Volunteers Federation, Gongyang Rescue Team. Sent national search and rescue team to Turkey, but not to Syria. Worked with the governments of Turkey and Syria; UN aid channels (especially in Syria).
Geopolitical considerations and implications	India's strained relations with Turkey. Contest Western approach towards Syria and tacit support to the government. Projection of soft power. Rapprochement with Turkey. Leadership in the Global South. Recognition of capacities.	Outreach in the Middle East and Eurasia. Rapprochement with Turkey and limitations in bilateral relations. Political and practical support for the Syrian government.
Strategic/"consequential" imperatives	*Vishwamitra*. Influence in the "extended neighbourhood" (West Asia). Solidarity with the Global South through South–South cooperation. Display of military capabilities. State-led, demand-driven, context-specific disaster relief.	Major country diplomacy. Global image as a responsible power. Belt and Road Initiative goals. Solidarity with the Global South through South–South cooperation.
Normative/"appropriate" imperatives	*Vishwamitra*. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. South–South cooperation. Principles of sovereignty and non-interference. Emphasis on the state's primary role in relief provision.	Principles of sovereignty and non-interference. Emphasis on the state's primary role in relief provision. Resistance to developments that could diminish the state's role. Alignment with international humanitarian principles through greater NGO involvement.

India and China's status-seeking behaviours indicate a blurring of the line between the logics of appropriateness and consequences. More importantly, "appropriateness" is leveraged as a tool by these powers to strengthen their status as responsible global powers and as consequential to the international order. While the involvement of and with different types of actors (state or non-state) may imply logics based on certain normative assumptions, they also indicate a consequentialist logic in terms of why some actors are involved (and others are not) as well as the expected outcomes.

7. Conclusion

India and China's disaster relief activities in the aftermath of the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes portray an interplay between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness. Both powers support UN General Assembly Resolutions 46/182 and 58/114 (UN, 1991, 2004) which reaffirmed the underpinning principles of coordination in international humanitarian assistance such as respect for sovereignty and humanitarian principles and institutionalized the UN-led international humanitarian system. However, they also contest the existing international norms, where needed. Both powers proclaimed humanitarianism in their response to the earthquakes that fits the logic of appropriateness, yet both had an interest-based agenda of narrative building through their distinct diplomatic initiatives in peace and conflict contexts, exemplified by Turkey and Syria respectively. From the desire to be recognized as responsible and influential powers to friends of all countries and leaders of the Global South, India and China's motivations can be seen through the lens of the logic of consequences.

While India and China's approaches towards disaster relief in the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes were similar on some fronts, they varied when it came to involving their NGOs and militaries in disaster relief activities. The formal exclusion of Indian NGOs based on fears of subversion of the government's agenda is reflective of the logic of consequences, albeit the 2004 HADR Protocol for India's external HADR indicates a shift in policy. Similarly, a display of India's military and specialized disaster response forces was crucial for status-seeking, considering its contribution to India's image as a reliable power with capabilities. In China's case, the logic of consequences provides a perspective to explain the absence of the PLA in this disaster response. The government has begun to recognize the usefulness of NGOs participating in its international disaster response, as state-centricity has long been a source of concern in China's international humanitarian action; and NGO involvement enhances the appropriateness of its response from the perspective of the humanitarian community.

While the question of whether India and China's disaster relief efforts have had a durable impact on their diplomatic relations with Turkey and Syria and contributed to their global status requires further analysis, it is clear that non-Western emerging powers perceive and deploy this tool as a part of their status-seeking strategy. What is also evident is that they have largely set themselves apart from Western donors in their status-seeking behaviour by emphasizing sovereignty and non-interference. Increasingly through multilateral frameworks and bilateral engagements, including forums such as the G20, these powers contest the dominant Western norms and create space for non-Western approaches to disaster relief, focussing more on a needs-based, development-oriented approach to disaster relief and risk reduction.

More broadly, this article provides an analytical framework to explain contestation of orders and norms in terms of issues of global governance, as a part of countries' status-seeking strategies and behaviours. While

the logics of appropriateness and consequences have been used traditionally to unpack choices and actions of actors and institutions in international relations, they could be utilized to explain shifts in perceptions (for instance, of what is considered appropriate) and implications contingent on the nature of the actors being studied (for example, militaries or NGOs). Understanding these dynamics is pivotal to analysing how emerging, non-Western powers perceive their interests and status in the present international order. As much as they are conscious of how others perceive them in relation to their adherence to the dominant norms, they also resort to an interplay between the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences (even by reformulating them based on the contextual conditions), which has wide-ranging implications for future international disaster relief cooperation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

"Bounded States": How (Extreme) Risk Constrains the Aspiration for Status

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Abstract

We introduce the concept of "bounded states" to analyse how aspiration and risk (exposure and vulnerability to threats) shape the politics of status-seeking among states. We do so by examining how vulnerability to domestic and geopolitical threats constrain the aspiration of states for higher status in the international system, using the African Union Agenda 2063 strategic initiative as an illustrative case study. We draw on a review of key policy documents and secondary data analysis to highlight the tension between the collective aspiration for continental transformation and the catastrophic risks posed by climate change and geo-economic competition. We argue that African states, acting as "bounded states," navigate these risks through a constrained version of Pan-Africanism—which we term as bounded Pan-Africanism—balancing their ambitions with the realities of high vulnerability to internal and external threats. In conclusion, this study offers new insights into the complex dynamics of status-seeking for states in a volatile global landscape.

Keywords

African Union Agenda 2063; bounded states; catastrophic risk; climate change; geoeconomics; Pan-Africanism; status-seeking

1. Introduction

Status is a key feature of international politics. In an anarchic system where states are the primary actors, status determines a state's position and survival prospects, especially in the context of international political change. Scholars have long studied how great powers maintain international order and how rising powers challenge it (Gilpin, 1982; Mukherjee, 2022; Paul, 2016; Waltz, 1979). Recently, attention has shifted to the

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role of middle powers and smaller states in influencing, if not shaping, the international order (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Holbraad, 1984; Patience, 2014).

At the core of this analysis is the question of status-seeking, where scholars have explored why and how states position themselves in the international system, and the risks attendant to such positioning. Of primary interest is the risk of a major or catastrophic war due to great power conflicts, as states jostle between maintaining and upending the status quo. Phrases like the "Thucydides trap" (Allison, 2017) and "the tragedy of great power politics" (Mearsheimer, 2001) have become synonymous with such status-seeking. Similarly, scholars emphasise the omnipresent risk of subjugation for smaller states, given their vulnerability and disadvantaged position, and their quest for security (Jackson, 1992; MacDonald, 2014; Murray, 2018; Rodney, 1981; Roman & Simmons, 2002). More capable states, usually middle powers, employ hedging strategies to mitigate the risk of domination by powerful states (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; V. Jackson, 2014; Stiles, 2018).

While the literature and debates on vulnerability, risk, and status-seeking are insightful, they face three key limitations. First, they do not closely associate risk and aspiration or how these aspects shape the politics of status. Aspiration is usually attributed to great powers seeking to dominate the international system, while vulnerability to threats is often confined to failed challenges by rising powers or the fear of challenging the global order borne by small states. This conceptual disconnect between vulnerability, risk, and aspiration in shaping status-seeking is a gap in the literature. Second, the literature focuses on world-making through hegemony, primarily discussing international political change and power transitions, while the role of smaller states in "world-shaping" is relatively under-explored (see Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Browning, 2006; de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Elman, 1995, for exceptions). Third, studies on status-seeking, especially concerning small states, focus on individual states rather than collective efforts by groups of states, limiting the discussion on the politics of collective status-seeking.

Against this backdrop, we address these limitations by demonstrating how risk (exposure and vulnerability to threats) shapes the politics of (collective) status-seeking by states. We show how vulnerability to domestic (state fragility) and geopolitical security (external intervention) threats constrain the aspirations of states, turning them into "bounded states." We argue that status-seeking by states is shaped by the tension between their aspirations for a higher position in the international order and the constraints imposed by internal and external risks. As such, higher-risk situations need more sensitivity, creativity, and complexity in managing status-seeking politics.

To illustrate our argument, we examine how African states have sought to enhance their position in the international system through the aspirational pursuit of continental unity and transformation while simultaneously attempting to overcome state fragility and navigate geopolitics. We focus on the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, an ambitious 50-year strategic initiative for the continent's transformation, as a project to enhance the status of African states (AU, 2015). Pan-Africanism has served as a collective aspiration for an "emergent Africa" (Mangeni & Juma, 2019). However, this aspiration is constrained by the extreme risks posed by inter alia existential politics of climate change (Colgan et al., 2020; Green et al., 2019), geopolitical change, the fragility of the post-colonial state (Mamdani, 1990, 1996, 2003), and intensifying geoeconomic competition (Roberts et al., 2019). We draw on a review of key policy documents and secondary data for the empirical analysis.

Overall, we make three main contributions in this article. First, we introduce the concept of "bounded states" to demonstrate how vulnerability to threats constrain the aspirations for status-seeking by states. Second, we present the empirical case study of status-seeking in Africa, illustrating how states in the continent attempt to navigate the tension between collective aspiration and extreme domestic and geopolitical risks as they strive to enhance their status in the international system. Third, our findings are relevant not only to the academic community but also to policymakers and practitioners operating in a complex geopolitical environment.

In the remainder of the article, we begin by reviewing the literature on status politics, highlighting the limited connection between risk and aspiration. We then introduce the concept of "bounded states" to demonstrate how risk and aspiration shape the politics of status-seeking for states. Following this, we present an illustrative case study of Africa. We conclude with a summary of our discussion and suggest avenues for future research.

2. Power and Status-Seeking

Status has been a key aspect of international politics. IR scholars have long studied how status shapes the behaviour of states in an anarchic system where there is no overarching authority. Central to this analysis is the issue of international political change, with a focus on how the quest—especially by powerful states—to enhance their status in the international political system has led to intense geopolitical and geoeconomic contestations, including wars. This has resulted in an enduring focus on peaceful change as a major challenge not only for IR scholars but also for policymakers tasked with formulating and implementing grand strategy (Carr & Cox, 2016; Gilpin, 1982; Keohane, 1984; Mearsheimer, 2001; Morgenthau, 1948, parts 8–10; Waltz, 1979).

In conferring status to states, scholars have identified four main types of powers and shown how their perceived status shapes their behaviour in the international system. Great powers have sought to maintain the status quo by exercising hegemonic power, expressing, and/or expanding their spheres of influence or interest; or defending the international order they created (Keohane, 1980; Mearsheimer, 2001). Rising powers on the other hand have sought to challenge the status quo, often leading to competition or conflict with great powers (Allison, 2017; Gilpin, 1982; Mearsheimer, 2014). Popular phrases such as the "Thucydides trap" (Allison, 2017) and "the tragedy of great power politics" (Mearsheimer, 2001) capture this dynamic. Middle powers have navigated the international system through several manoeuvres including hedging strategies, avoiding alignment with great powers, and pursuing multi-pronged diplomacy with competing powers (Holbraad, 1984; Patience, 2014). Small states—the focus of this study—have mostly been presented as either marginalised or subjugated in the international system, a designation that diminishes their aspirations of enhancing their status within it (see de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, for an extensive discussion).

Vulnerability to threats has been a major aspect of analyses of power politics and status-seeking. However, the focus has primarily been on conflict (war as a means of international political change; Allison, 2017; Gilpin, 1982) or the subjugation of smaller states by great powers through (neo)imperialism (MacDonald, 2014; Roman & Simmons, 2002). When examining the risks for small states in their quest for higher status, scholars have often portrayed them as risk averse. Moreover, they do not usually connect the aspects of vulnerability, threats, and aspiration to present a more nuanced picture of the politics of status-seeking. Most conspicuously, scholars have largely overlooked the collective aspect of status-seeking by small states.

We seek to overcome these limitations by showing how risk through vulnerability to threats constrain the aspirations of status-seeking, focusing on small states, a task we take up in the next section.
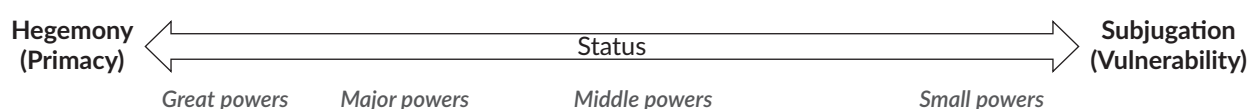
3. Conceptualising "Bounded States"

In this section, we theorise how aspiration and risk shape the politics of status-seeking by small states. We introduce the term "bounded states" to describe states that seek to reconcile the tension between their aspiration for higher status in the international system and their vulnerability to the combined domestic and external threats that constrain this aspiration. Essentially, the aspiration for status-seeking by these states is bounded by risk.

3.1. Defining "Bounded States"

We define "bounded states" as those states that are constrained by some form of vulnerability that may endanger their sense of security or even survival. Since the most important objective of a state is security and/or survival, upon which all other objectives are premised, all states are by definition "bounded states." However, the degree to which states are bounded significantly varies, as some are more vulnerable to threats than others. Drawing on the extensive literature on status-seeking, we argue that the status of a state depends on the balance between its capabilities and vulnerabilities, as illustrated in Figure 1, which presents a typology of status-seeking in international politics.

As such, great powers are relatively less vulnerable while also possessing significantly greater capabilities to both achieve security and shape international affairs. Conversely, small powers have limited capability but are highly vulnerable, especially to the influence of more powerful states. Great powers, therefore, tend to pursue primacy while small powers contend with the risk of subjugation. Middle powers have a nominal balance between capabilities and vulnerabilities. Overall, vulnerability creates a risk of subjugation, while capability creates the aspiration for higher status or dominance through primacy. Capability and vulnerability thus shape the status-seeking strategies of states.

Following this logic, our conception of "bounded states" in the present study concerns small states that are highly exposed and vulnerable to internal and external threats. This conception of risk for "bounded states" is distinct from that prevalent in the literature. Concerning small states, the literature usually focuses on the risks of challenging the status quo, where great powers may respond by exerting their influence or even subjugating the challenging states. Small states may act as surrogates of great powers as a coping strategy (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, pp. 10–11). Risk may also arise from marginalisation, especially by great powers, where small states may be excluded from or play a peripheral role in shaping the international order, or from the lack of capabilities to engage effectively.

Hegemony (Primacy) ⟵————————————— Status —————————————⟶ **Subjugation (Vulnerability)**

Great powers   *Major powers*   *Middle powers*   *Small powers*

Figure 1. A typology of status-seeking by states in the international system.

3.2. Bounded Pan-Africanism: Between Aspiration and Risk

Aspiration arises from a sense of identity. "Status" in this regard means occupying a position in a social hierarchy, while "status-seeking" refers to actions undertaken to maintain or improve one's placement in the hierarchy (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, pp. 4–5). Thus defined, states, either individually or collectively, can aspire to a higher status in the hierarchical international system.

Small states can thus gain, leverage, and exercise influence through intrinsic, derivative, and collective influence mechanisms (Long, 2017). In a derivative sense, therefore, small states can—and where there is sufficient proximity—rely on their relationship with great powers to project their influence beyond their relative position in world politics. Collectively, smaller states can deploy coalition-building techniques of supportive or "like-minded" states, often through regional and/or global institutions. Small states can also tap into the intrinsic power drawn from their assets to project influence beyond their relative status (Long, 2017, p. 201). Through these mechanisms, individually, states such as Singapore, Hungary, and Barbados have adeptly carved out influential positions in the international system (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Guo & Woo, 2016; Kang, 2003, p. 171). Collectively, aspiration can be seen in how African states have attempted to harness Pan-Africanism as a shared philosophical identity for continental integration and leverage collective capabilities (Emerson, 1962; Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024; Nye, 1965).

"Bounded states" are shaped by two types of risks: domestic and external. Domestic risks typically arise internally from a variety of factors that exacerbate state fragility, including weak institutions and governance systems that make it difficult for a state to assert itself internationally (Caverley, 2021). Examples include states facing civil conflicts or threats of secession (Gebreluel, 2014; Griffiths, 2014; Hatherell & Welsh, 2021). External risks often stem from geopolitical factors that potentially undermine a small state's sense of security including coercive militaristic or non-militaristic intervention, where great and middle powers interfere in the internal affairs of small states. Former colonial powers have been shown to deploy sophisticated strategies to maintain influence in their former colonies through an array of instruments of neocolonialism including asymmetrical trade and financial mechanisms (Lemay-Hebert, 2015; Sabaratnam, 2017; Sartre, 2001). Recent studies suggest that middle powers also aim to influence small states, primarily through geoeconomic competition or by forming alliances that align with the activities of greater powers within the target states (Aktürk, 2021; Almezaini & Rickli, 2016). As a result, "bounded states" often use their relative access to intrinsic, derivative, and/or collective influence mechanisms to augment their limited material capabilities alongside their sense of "moral posture." Crucially, "bounded states" can also act collectively as peer groups, either through regional groupings or coalitions with "like-minded states thereby enhancing their collective bargaining capabilities and reducing their vulnerabilities in the international system" (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, pp. 12–13).

We now turn to an illustrative case study to show how vulnerability to threats constraints the collective status-seeking of "bounded states," focusing on African countries. We focus on an extreme category of risk referred to as catastrophic risk, given the unique circumstances of the African continent. A catastrophic risk refers to any threat that could lead to significant population loss or severely disrupt human civilisation (Kemp & Rhodes, 2020, p. 2). We specifically focus on how the catastrophic risk of underdevelopment has manifested in domestic and external dimensions (Rodney, 1981) and how it has shaped the collective aspiration of African states as they have sought to transform the continent from the unfortunate

caricature of the "hopeless continent" (The hopeless continent, 2000) to an "emergent Africa" (Mangeni & Juma, 2019).

We chose Africa as a case study for three key reasons. First, African states engage both individually and collectively through regional and continental institutions, providing a distinct analytical lens for studying the politics of status-seeking. Unlike the EU's supranationalism or the ASEAN model, African collective agency is rooted in the ideology of Pan-Africanism (Mangeni & Juma, 2019). Second, many African states face high vulnerability due to their low-income status, as Africa includes 33 of the 50 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and 6 of the 36 Small Island Developing States. Third, Africa's mix of small and middle powers offers a diverse range of status-seeking strategies, making it ideal for analysing how states navigate the tension between individual and collective agency amidst varying levels of vulnerability and capability. This combination makes Africa a compelling case study to explore how aspiration and vulnerability shape status-seeking in international politics, as shown in Figure 2.
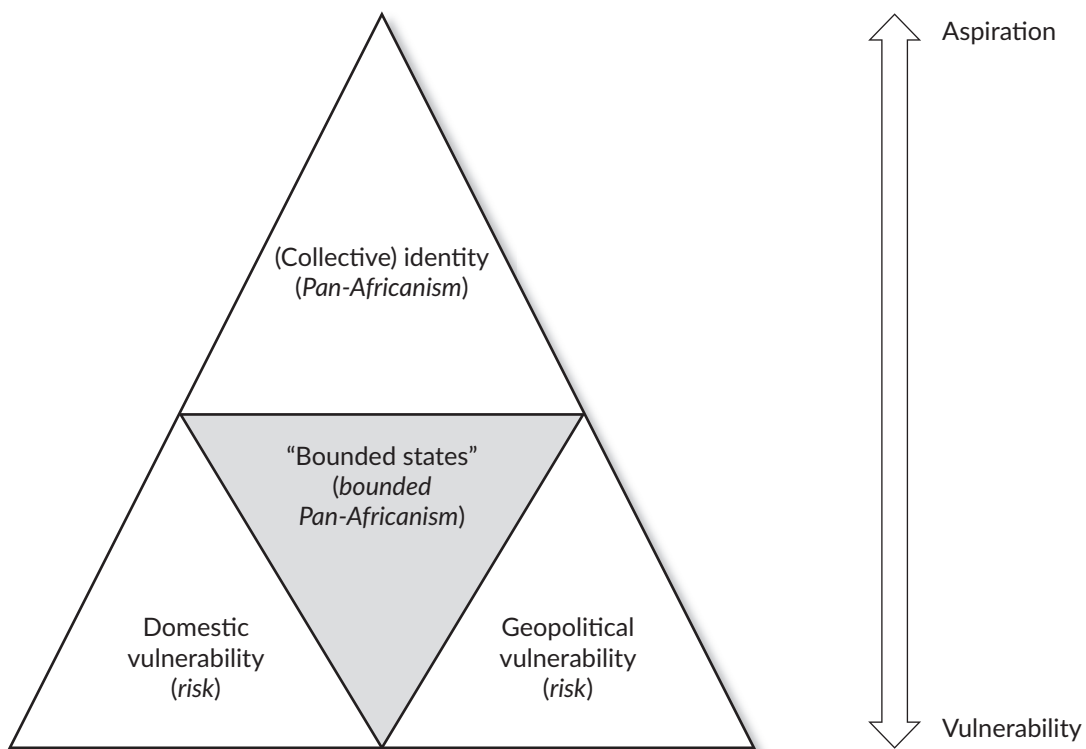
Figure 2. An illustration of "bounded states" and the derivative concept of bounded Pan-Africanism, demonstrating how aspiration and vulnerability to threats shape the politics of status.

Bounded Pan-Africanism also captures the concept of graduation in the status of African states. While most African states are LDCs, some of them have graduated to low-middle-income economies. Seven African countries have successfully transitioned from LDC status to low-middle-income status. Botswana was the first to graduate in December 1994, followed by Cabo Verde in December 2007, and Equatorial Guinea joined the ranks in June 2017. These countries' progress marks significant economic and developmental advancements but also changes their status and strategies for status-seeking, as well as shaping the collective aspiration of continental agency. Some African states, like South Africa, are middle powers as they have greater relative capabilities to engage on the global stage, especially in leveraging the notion of Ubuntu

(da Costa, 2023; Emelianenko, 2023). Our conception of bounded Pan-Africanism accommodates this dynamic, especially the "graduation dilemma" that these states face in relinquishing some of the privileges that come with being LDCs, such as duty and quota-free access to major global markets (Milani et al., 2017). By drawing on Africa's unique circumstances, we seek to highlight the novel contribution to the politics of collective status-seeking under conditions of extreme risk.

4. Pan-Africanism as the Politics of Aspiration

Africa occupies a unique but contradictory status in the world. On the one hand, it is renowned for its abundant resources, ancient civilisations, and status as the cradle of humankind. On the other hand, the continent has endured centuries of strife, including slavery, colonialism, civil conflicts, genocide, and geopolitical intervention and subjugation. Against this contradictory backdrop, the continent has sought to carve out a higher status for itself in the international system. It has harnessed the philosophy of Pan-Africanism as a galvanising force to attempt to overcome vulnerability to domestic and geopolitical threats and to transform the continent into a vibrant and prosperous region (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Nye, 1965).

4.1. Bounded Pan-Africanism

When African states adopted the AU Agenda 2063 strategic initiative in 2013, this milestone received limited coverage in both public and scholarly forums. Ironically, the initiative is an ambitious 50-year framework for the continent's transformation, developed and adopted by African member states (AU, 2015). Yet, it could be one of the most transformative initiatives globally, especially given Africa's rapid demographic changes. We argue that the AU Agenda 2063 initiative can be understood as an aspiration by African countries, as "bounded states," to enhance their global status (Getachew, 2020) by harnessing the ideology of Pan-Africanism (Tella, 2018). This aspiration is, however, constrained by vulnerability to domestic and geopolitical threats, as will be elaborated in Section 4.2. The bounded nature of African states is in this sense also informed by a philosophy that is also constrained by Africa's intra- and extra-continental dynamics.

The AU Agenda 2063 could be thus understood as a *de facto* grand strategy for not only reshaping the socio-economic dynamics of the African continent but also expanding the scope of the continent's influence in global politics (Tella, 2018). Exemplified by its mantra, "The Africa We Want," the AU Agenda 2063 is guided by seven main aspirations: (1) A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; (2) an integrated continent, politically united based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism, and the vision of Africa's Renaissance; (3) an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law; (4) a peaceful and secure Africa; (5) an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics; (6) an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children; and (7) Africa as a strong, united, resilient, and influential global player and partner (AU, 2015, p. 2). These aspirations demonstrate the continent's ambition to enhance its status in global politics by harnessing the collective spirit of Pan-Africanism (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024; Tella, 2018).

The AU Agenda 2063 is an ideal example of collective aspiration as it lays out what could be considered a grand strategy for the continent. By outlining an agenda spanning half a century, and to be implemented in decadal iterations, the AU Agenda 2063 seeks to significantly transform the African continent and make it

more influential in the global arena. Moreover, the AU Agenda 2063 includes 15 flagship projects that would drive this transformation, seeking to triple the continent's GDP by the year 2050, thus creating a vibrant society where the population is expected to double by the year 2050 and quadruple by the end of the century. Crucially, the AU Agenda 2063 is also designed to be flexible to accommodate the diverse national interests across the continent. At the conceptual level, therefore, the AU Agenda 2063 is an example of collective status-seeking through strategic initiative, and it is unique and distinct from grand strategies of single great powers or supranational entities such as the EU (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024). Thus, the AU Agenda 2063 is illustrative of bounded Pan-Africanism, where the aspiration for collective action is constrained by a vulnerability that is manifested through internal and external threats, as detailed in Section 4.2.

Importantly, bounded Pan-Africanism captures the tension, and at times contradiction, between the individual and collective aspirations of African states. On the one hand, African states have drawn on Pan-Africanism as an organising logic for continental cooperation and integration, especially through the establishment of continental institutions such as the Organisation of African Unity in 1963, which was later reconstituted to the AU in 2002, and the AU Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD). More recently, the AU Agenda 2063 is the latest example of collective aspiration through continental integration. However, this pursuit of collective aspiration is at times constrained by divergent national interests and circumstances, given the diversity of states in the continent and their varying capabilities and vulnerability to internal and external threats. We underscore the tension that arises from the collective aspiration and heterogeneous national interests, a reality that has largely escaped conceptual clarity. We thus contend that the concept of "bounded states" in general and bounded Pan-Africanism in particular, captures this creative tension.

4.2. Extreme Risk as a Constraint

Due to historical and contemporary factors, the African continent is highly vulnerable to significant risks. Bold aspirations of the AU Agenda 2063 should, therefore, be understood within a broader context that is fraught with risk. The designers of the initiative were not oblivious to the challenges the continent faces, as indicated in the aspirations. We, however, aim to highlight vulnerability to extreme threats that have not been previously considered in the design and analysis of the AU Agenda 2063. Crucially, we seek to show how African states are creatively addressing these catastrophic risks, an approach that is largely absent in the existing literature.

Given Africa's unique context, we focus on catastrophic risk, a category of extreme risk that could undermine human societies and civilisation (Beard & Hobson, 2024; Beard et al., 2023; Kemp & Rhodes, 2020). Specifically, we examine the pernicious risk of underdevelopment, which has constrained Africa's aspirations for centuries (Amin, 1972; French, 2021; Rodney, 1981). We analyse how the existential politics of climate change and intensifying geoeconomic competition are constraining the aspirations of the AU Agenda 2063. Importantly, we demonstrate how African states have sought to reduce their vulnerability and mitigate these risks. Nevertheless, most African states remain classified as fragile, highlighting their continued susceptibility, as shown in Figure 3.

This fragility makes African states highly vulnerable to both internal (domestic) and external (geopolitical) threats, as shown in the subsequent sections.
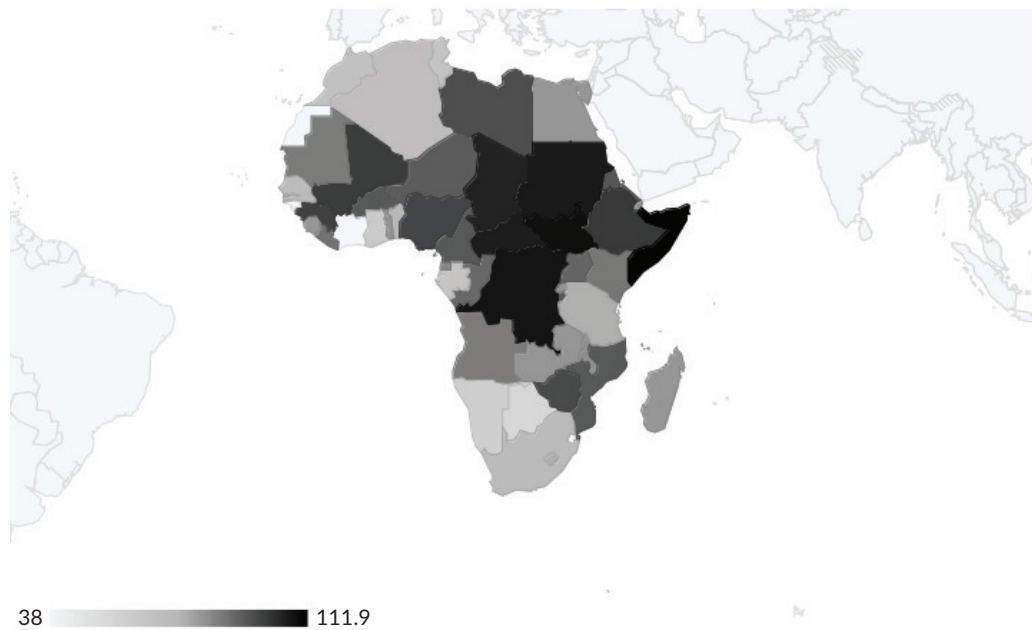
Figure 3. State fragility in Africa. Notes: Darker shades (higher index) represent greater fragility—many African states are fragile; This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).

4.2.1. Existential Politics of Climate Change

Climate change is one of the defining challenges that could upend or even end human civilisation (Kemp et al., 2022). Scientific reports, particularly those by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have conclusively demonstrated Africa's vulnerability to the extreme impacts of climate change. In the Sahel region, for example, the rate of warming is three to four times higher than the global average (IPCC, 2023). Studies have also estimated that extreme climate impacts significantly undermine economic development on the continent, as they not only destroy agriculture-based livelihoods but also cost African governments up to a quarter (25%) of their domestic revenues (Waidelich et al., 2024, p. 595).

But less examined is the risk posed by the existential politics of climate change (Colgan et al., 2020; Green et al., 2019). When countries adopted the Paris Agreement in 2015, they were expected to submit their national climate action plans, formally known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). African countries had been active in the negotiations, but they faced significant challenges in preparing their NDCs. A key challenge was the limited support in the form of means of implementation (MoI)—climate finance, technology transfer, and capacity building. MoI is crucial for African countries due to their high vulnerability and limited capability in addressing climate change. By signing the Paris Agreement, African countries committed to supporting global collective action to address climate change. However, they also faced the risk of unfulfilled pledges for MoI (Mbeva et al., 2023).

In preparing their NDCs, African countries made part or all of their NDCs conditional on international support. This conditional commitment was made despite the assurances of MoI support in the Paris Agreement treaty text (Makomere & Mbeva, 2018). As Figure 4 shows, almost all African states have submitted conditional NDCs, illustrating the tension between their aspiration to join the global collective climate action and the risk of MoI commitments not being fulfilled.
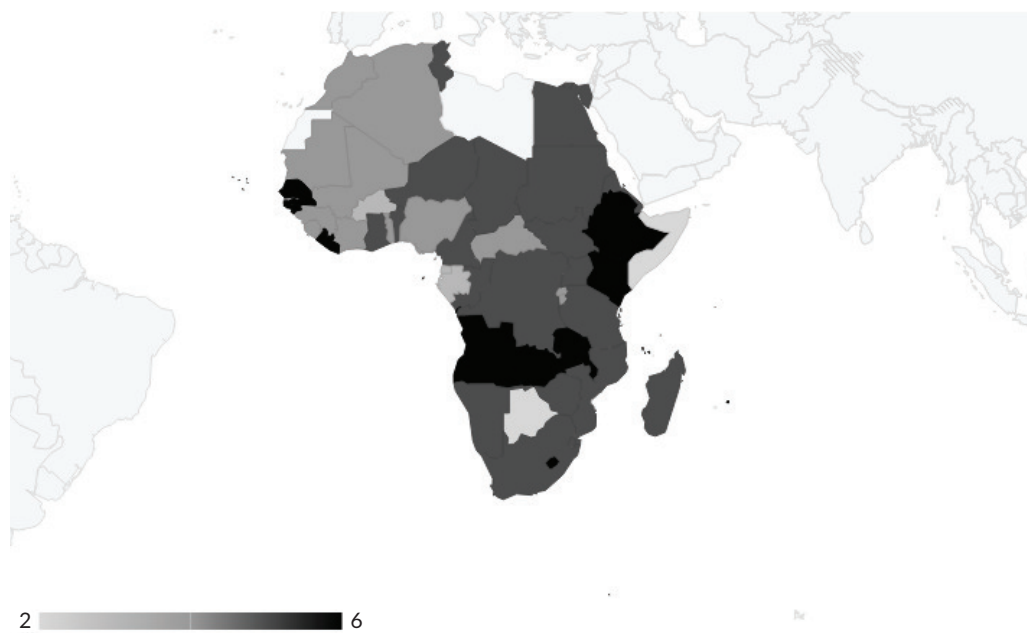
Figure 4. Conditional first-generation NDCs submitted by African countries under the Paris Agreement; Notes: Most African NDCs are conditional; the scale is an index of six MoI elements: mitigation finance, adaptation finance, technology needs, technology transfer, capacity building, and equity/fairness; an NDC that is conditional on all the six elements would have an index of 6, and 0 if it is not conditional; this figure is based on the data from the NDC Explorer by Pauw et al. (2022).

Limited capability to implement NDCs is prevalent across the various country income groups in Africa, but it is especially acute in low-income countries, as shown in Figure 5.
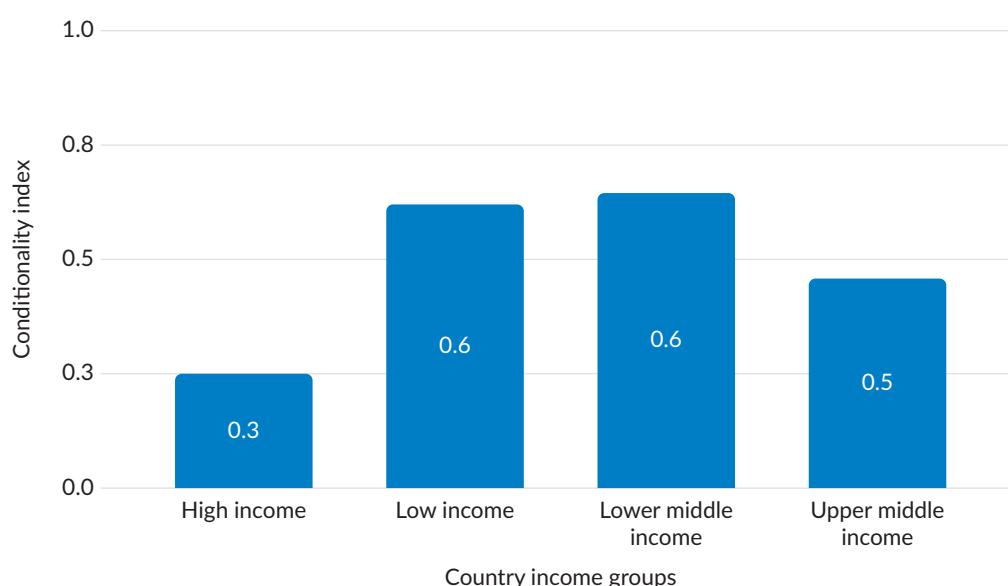
Figure 5. Capability challenges across country income groups in Africa. Notes: Low-income and lower-middle-income country groups have significant capability challenges, as their NDCs include conditional elements on finance, technology transfer, capacity building, and equity/fairness; The index has been normalised to range between 0 and 1, for the six conditional elements of mitigation finance, adaptation finance, technology transfer, and capacity building; This figure is based on the data from the NDC Explorer by Pauw et al. (2022).

Almost all African countries have also pledged net-zero targets, mostly by the year 2050. These targets require balancing greenhouse gas emissions with carbon sinks (Hale et al., 2022, 2024). However, there are concerns about whether net-zero commitments are feasible in Africa, especially without sufficient international support. Additionally, since the implementation of the Paris Agreement relies on the submission of successively more ambitious NDCs—a model referred to as "catalytic cooperation" (Hale, 2020)—there are concerns about the opportunity costs for African countries (Makomere & Mbeva, 2018; Mbeva et al., 2023; Okereke, 2024). Some African states have already expressed "buyer's remorse" after being pressured to commit to deep emission reductions without the requisite support. For example, in its first NDC, Chad committed to reducing its GHG emissions by 70%. Policymakers later revised this infeasible target to a more realistic one of 19.3% (King, 2016).

State fragility is also a key factor shaping Africa's climate politics. African states that are the most fragile tend to have NDCs with the most conditional elements, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Recent debates on addressing the worsening impacts of climate change have taken a demographic turn, focusing on intergenerational implications (see Hale, 2024, for a prominent example). One of the most viral graphics from the latest IPCC Sixth Assessment Report depicted the intergenerational impacts of catastrophic global warming scenarios (IPCC, 2023, p. 7). Africa's population is expected to double by the year 2050 and quadruple by the end of the century (Ritchie & Roser, 2024). This rapid population growth, coupled with Africa contributing the largest share of future generations this century, makes grappling with the intergenerational consequences of climate impacts a major risk for the continent. As Figure 7 shows, African countries with the most significant capability challenges in addressing climate change are also facing the most intense demographic pressures.
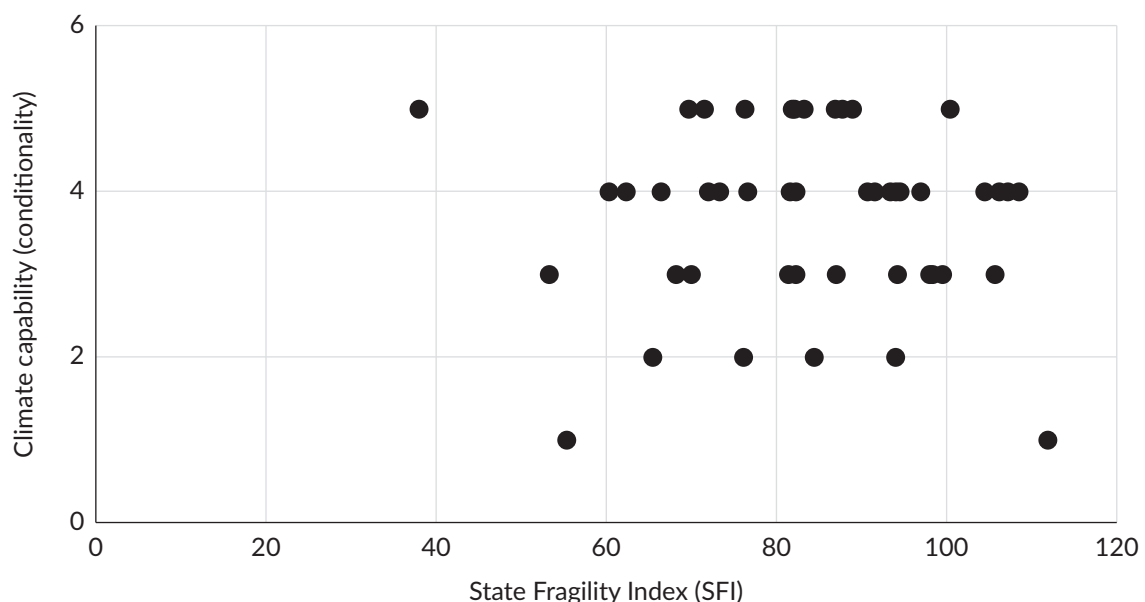
Figure 6. State fragility and the capability of African states to meet their climate targets. Notes: States that are the most fragile also have the most conditional NDCs; This figure is based on the data from the Fragile of States Index (2024).
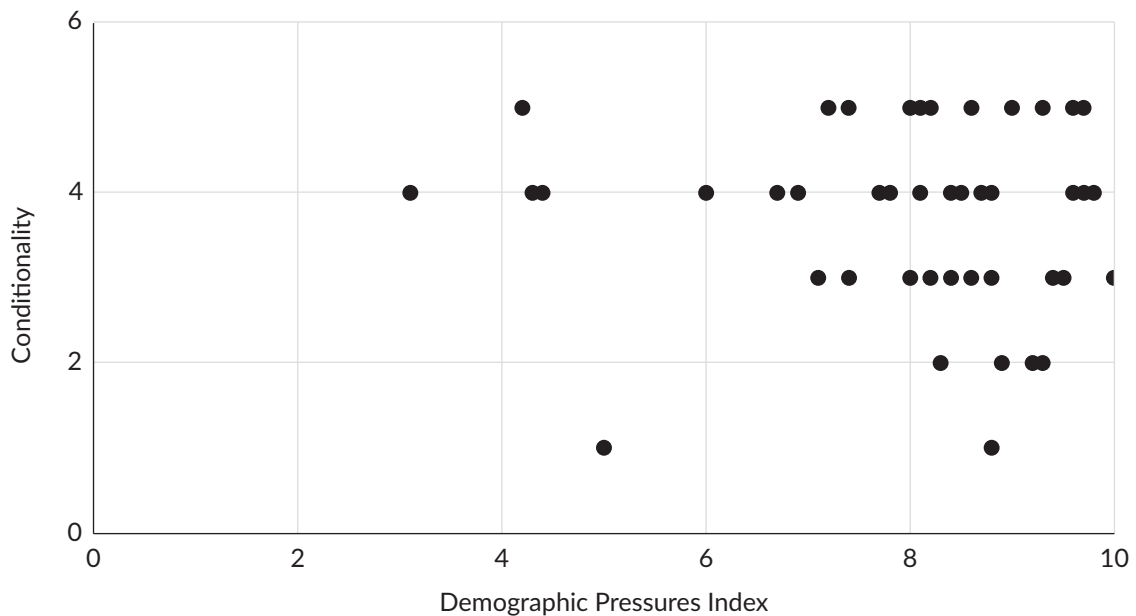
Figure 7. How demographic pressures exacerbate climate capability challenges. Notes: African countries with the most significant capability challenges are also most prone to demographic pressures, thus underscoring the intergenerational risks of catastrophic climate change. This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).

As African states aspire to contribute to global efforts to address climate change, thereby enhancing their status as a "good power," they are also facing the risk of ecological degradation—or even collapse—and underdevelopment. Viewed in the context of the "climate endgame," where African states are highly vulnerable, the unfolding politics of the global just transition—contributing to common global targets while addressing domestic risks—poses a major challenge for African countries (Mbeva et al., 2023). This tension highlights that African states are "bounded states," navigating between aspiration and vulnerability to extreme threats.

4.2.2. Geoeconomic Risk

External intervention in Africa has been a major challenge for the continent for centuries, from the Indian Ocean and Atlantic slave trade enterprises to colonisation and, more recently, neo-colonialism (French, 2021). African states have sought to navigate the risks posed by external interventions while crafting a unified continental strategy of transformation.

Geoeconomics provides an appropriate lens through which to assess African states as "bounded states." African states have long sought to establish a common economic market and geopolitical partnerships as a means of advancing self-determination, particularly given the continent's marginalisation in the global economy (Benabdallah, 2020; Milhorance & Soule-Kohndou, 2017; Soulé, 2020). The adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement marked a significant step towards this aspiration of a common market, culminating from decades of diplomatic initiatives, notably the 1991 Treaty for the Establishment of the African Economic Community, also known as the Abuja Treaty. Remarkably, the African Continental Free Trade Area was adopted against a backdrop of de-globalisation and in record negotiating

time. African Continental Free Trade Area is thus indicative of the collective aspiration for an "emergent Africa" as a geoeconomic power (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024).

However, the aspirations for a continental market are being challenged and even undermined by geoeconomic developments. Established as a stepping stone to the single continental market, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa are facing significant challenges. This is most evident in West Africa, where Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali have withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) due to the latter's support for foreign intervention to overthrow the military juntas in the region (Chafer et al., 2020; Guichaoua, 2020; Mann, 2021; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2024). United by their objective of ejecting France, the former colonial power, and the US from their countries, the military leaders of these three states withdrew from ECOWAS and established the Alliance of Sahel States in 2023, with support from Russia and a collective security pact (Asadu, 2023; Balima & Mazou, 2023; Millar, 2024). This shift from the economic logic of RECs to the geoeconomic logic of the Alliance of Sahel States underscores the constraints on continental integration in Africa. This trend exemplifies institutional status theory, where international institutions play a key mediating role in the politics of status-seeking (Mukherjee, 2022, Chapter 3).

As with many other African states, the three Sahel states are also fragile and thus highly vulnerable to external geopolitical intervention, as Figure 8 demonstrates.

African states that are highly vulnerable to external intervention also face significant challenges in terms of state legitimacy, as Figure 9 shows. Due to its colonial legacy, the postcolonial state in Africa has struggled to meet the growing socio-economic demands of its citizens, thereby undermining its legitimacy. As Mamdani (1990, 1996, 2002, 2003) has shown, the postcolonial state in Africa faces numerous pressures, including

2.3 [gradient scale] 9.5
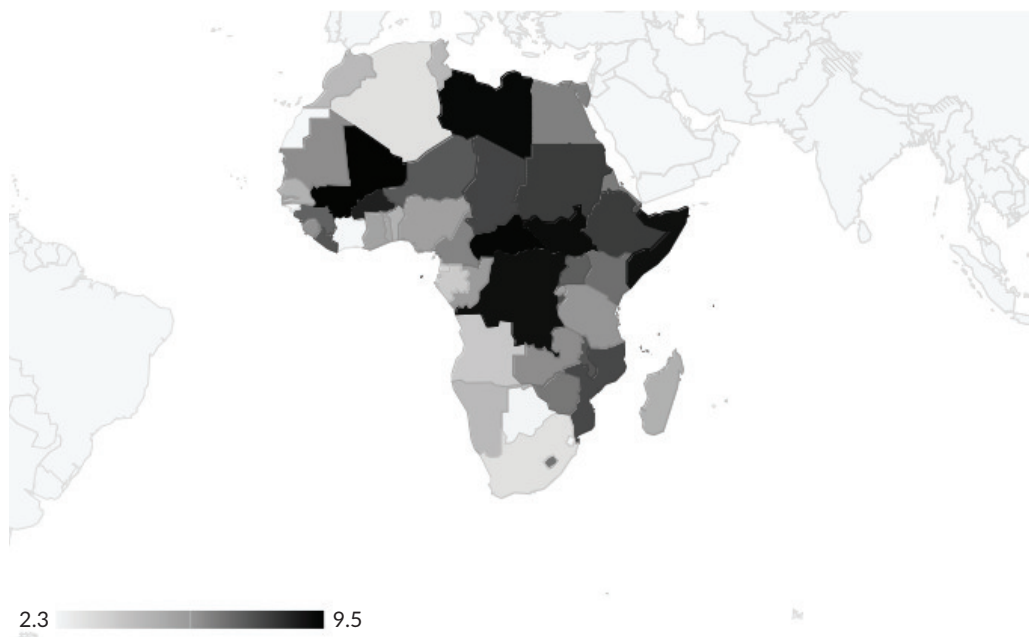
Figure 8. Vulnerability of African states to external (geopolitical) intervention. Notes: Many African states are highly vulnerable to such intervention, thus creating a geopolitical risk. This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).
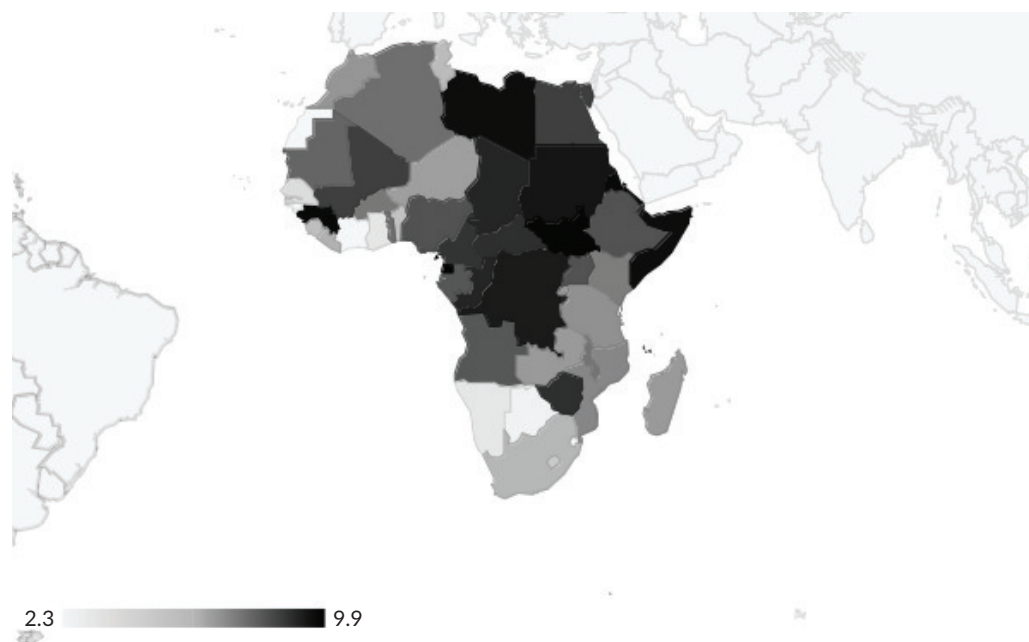
Figure 9. Legitimacy of African states. Notes: Many African states have a crisis of legitimacy, as illustrated by the darker colour shades; This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).

ruptures that have led to extreme political violence, including genocide, due to the politicisation of ethnic groups through the colonial process.

Taken together, the existential politics of climate change and geoeconomic intervention pose significant risks to Africa's aspiration for a higher status in the international system, as outlined in the AU Agenda 2063. African states have, nevertheless, sought to address these risks through institutional innovation. For them, status-seeking involves managing the tension between the collective aspiration for continental transformation through Pan-Africanism and the constraints imposed by domestic and geopolitical risks. Thus, African states must navigate their role as "bounded states," relying on a constrained version of Pan-Africanism that is bound by (high) vulnerability to threats, which we refer to as bounded Pan-Africanism.

In addition to the foregoing case studies, bounded Pan-Africanism is evident in other African status-seeking initiatives. African states now have a seat at the G20, represented by the AU Commission. While this signals a collective aspiration for a larger global role, it highlights challenges, including whether the seat should be used for policy or political purposes, and how to represent the interests of all African member states (Adibe, 2023; Das & Tiwary, 2023). Similarly, the 2023 African Climate Summit, led by Kenya, sparked backlash for potentially undermining Africa's long-standing common climate positions, such as on limited historical responsibility and commitment to the principle of common but differentiated responsibility (Ngam, 2023; Rumble & Gilder, 2023).

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how aspiration and (extreme) risk shape the politics of status-seeking. We have introduced the concept of "bounded states" to demonstrate how risk limits the aspirations of states. Using the AU Agenda 2063 as a case study, we have demonstrated how domestic and geopolitical risks

constrain its pursuit of status goals. Future research could explore how catastrophic and existential risks, such as climate change and advanced AI, shape status-seeking politics, connecting this to discussions on societal collapse and transformation (Scheffer et al., 2023). Another opportunity could be to examine the nexus of vulnerability and collective status-seeking in emerging groups like BRICS and similar blocs in the unfolding multiplex world order (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014), especially given the UN and its member states' recent formal recognition of catastrophic and existential risk as a defining feature of long-term multilateral cooperation (UN, 2024, p. 1, para. 2).

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Data associated with this research is available from the authors upon request.

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China as a "Green Soft Power" and the Belt and Road Initiative: Evidence From Pakistan

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Abstract

By taking a proactive role in international negotiations on climate change and extending the ecological dimension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been strengthening its position as a leader in global environmental governance. This article examines the effects of China's efforts regarding its soft power. Specifically, it argues that prioritising environmental protection in foreign policies can enhance a state's status as a "green soft power." To test this argument, this article examines the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key component of the BRI and a multibillion-dollar, 3,000-km energy, road and railway infrastructure network, accompanied by geostrategic, diplomatic, and economic initiatives promoted as a "game-changer" and a "win-win" situation. More specifically, the article aims to assess this project's influence on China's green soft power "reserves," and it sheds light on the role of the bilateral relationship in shaping China's international status. This article asks the following: What is the impact of the CPEC on China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan and globally, especially given that it encompasses numerous coal-based energy projects? To address this question, it draws on selected academic literature, triangulated with primary sources such as policy documents and semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders in Pakistan.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative; China; climate; environmental leadership; Global South; green soft power; international status; Pakistan; renewable energy

1. Introduction

By taking a proactive role in international negotiations on climate change and extending the ecological dimension of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been strengthening its position as a leader in global

environmental governance. In particular, to bolster environmental cooperation under the BRI and to better mitigate the impacts of this grand infrastructure project on local ecosystems, in 2017, Beijing announced the Green BRI. This designation reflects China's ambitions for the BRI to become climate-neutral, resource-efficient, nature-positive, and protective of biodiversity (Ministry of Environmental Protection et al., 2017). This article argues that prioritising environmental protection in foreign policies can enhance a state's status as a "green soft power," a type of soft power rooted in the environmental and climate aspects of a state's foreign policy and behaviour. China's stance on these issues is an essential component of its assertion of great power status in global politics (Vogler, 2016). The concept of "status" in this article follows Duque's (2018) relational approach, which emphasises that status is contingent on social recognition. Hence, this approach posits that status emerges from the dynamics of state relations rather than from direct attributes such as wealth or military strength. By examining how status specifically arises from cooperation, this study diverges from much of the literature on international status, which often focuses on conflicts under the assumption that the "dynamics associated with status seeking and status attribution have been forwarded as plausible motivations for a variety of state behaviors, particularly interstate conflicts" (Miller et al., 2015).

To illustrate how China's green soft power status emerges through relational dynamics, this article examines the BRI—focusing specifically on its pilot project, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—aims to assess the impact of the CPEC on China's "green soft power reserves," and it highlights the role of the China–Pakistan relationship in shaping China's international status. Announced in 2013, the CPEC is a massive infrastructure project accompanied by geostrategic, diplomatic, and economic initiatives promoted as a "game-changer" and a "win-win" situation. The CPEC has multifaceted impacts on China and Pakistan, their relationship, and regional dynamics (Kuszewska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021). While the messaging of Beijing and Islamabad is almost exclusively about the economic and geopolitical gains being brought by the CPEC, this project also involves various other impacts and risks, including several with relevance to the natural environment and climate. This article focuses on these less-researched implications of the CPEC, and it asks the following: What is the impact of this project on China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan and globally, especially given that it encompasses numerous coal-based energy projects? What are the evidence and barriers for the CPEC to elevate China's status as a green soft power?

To address these questions, this article draws on academic literature triangulated with primary sources such as policy documents and semi-structured anonymised interviews with local stakeholders in Pakistan, including journalists, academics, politicians, public servants, lawyers, and infrastructure constructors working with the Chinese on the CPEC. Furthermore, this study designates these stakeholders as green soft power transmitters and receivers. This research involved 11 individuals and was conducted in May 2024 in Islamabad and Lahore, Pakistan. They are referred to as interviewees and enumerated below.

This article proceeds as follows: First, it reviews the literature on international status and green soft power. Second, it identifies and contextualises this power's resources, instruments, transmitters, and receivers to demonstrate how China's green soft power works under the CPEC. Third, this article seeks to distinguish the evidence and barriers for the CPEC to strengthen China's green soft power status vis-à-vis Pakistan and beyond.

2. What Does It Mean to Be a Green Soft Power?

The term green soft power has appeared in a few academic and media publications, often in the context of the BRI. These publications identify China as a wielder of this form of power, linking it to Beijing's environmentally focused efforts to establish the Green BRI. Mobilising the term green soft power in the Chinese context, publications recognise that Beijing projects itself as a leader in environmental governance and desires to achieve green soft power status. Kerui and Khan (2022, p. 99) argue that by "utilising…green soft power, by advocating for green development and ecological civilisation…[China] provides an alternative to the traditional approach of prioritising development without considering environmental and climate concerns." This article seeks to clarify what it means to be a green soft power by reviewing the modest literature on the concept and connecting it with the more extensively researched concept of international status. Specifically, this study employs Duque's relational approach to demonstrate how China's green soft power status emerges through its interactions with other states.

Recent studies by Rodenbiker (2023) and Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024) attempt to conceptualise green soft power rather than using this term only intuitively or in relation to a particular behaviour. The conceptualisation of the two articles is derived from Nye's (1990, p. 166) definition of soft power, which occurs when "one country gets other countries to want what it wants" without using force and only through the sheer power of attraction. Rodenbiker (2023) highlights the power of attraction, specifically of environmental discourses and practices. He defines green soft power as "expressions constituted in relation to [these] discourses and practices that influence actors to adopt shared values, goals, and positive associations to a given country" (Rodenbiker, 2023, p. 324). Such a definition aligns with how Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024, p. 20) view this power. They argue that green soft power is part of a state's soft power, that it derives from the extent of its "greenness" and by being outwardly pro-environment or motivated by environment-related concerns and that it gives rise to positive perceptions and reputational benefits. This article employs this definition and further contextualises it to fit the case study of China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan.

Duque's relational approach helps to better understand China's rise as a green soft power. Duque (2018) draws on Weber's (1978, p. 305) classic definition of status as "an effective claim to social esteem in terms of privileges." She argues that "status depends on recognition: it concerns identification processes through which an actor gains admission into a club once deemed to follow its membership rules" (Duque, 2018, p. 578). Therefore, status emerges from systematic social processes—specifically, relational processes that cannot be reduced to a state's inherent attributes (Duque, 2018). This approach moves beyond "traditional" perspectives that prioritise these attributes, whether material—such as military, economic, and technological capabilities—or ideational—such as norms that actors follow (Clunan, 2014, p. 274; Miller et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Duque's approach acknowledges that these attributes still play a role in status recognition; however, they "matter because of their symbolic—rather than intrinsic—value" (Duque, 2018, p. 578).

Viewing green soft power status through the lens of the relational approach leads to the following assumptions: (a) recognition is essential for a state to achieve green soft power status, (b) such recognition arises from the state's relations with others, and (c) to attain green soft power status, a state must become a member of a "club" by adhering to environmental and climate-related rules. Each of these points is discussed below regarding China:

1. Recognition is essential for China to become a green soft power. Although the scholarship on this topic primarily examines what China does or should do to expand its green soft power, only a few publications highlight how China's environmental actions are perceived by foreign governments and the public—the intended soft power receivers, as outlined in Nye's original concept. Nedopil (2023a) underscores the importance of international recognition of China's pro-environmental behaviours. He links China's green soft power not only to Beijing's decision to exit overseas coal projects but also to the fact that it announced this move at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021. This announcement and subsequent actions require international attention to strengthen China's green soft power status. Importantly for the sustainability of this status, following this statement, China's BRI-related coal investments decreased from 45% in 2015 to 0% by early 2023. Meanwhile, China's investments in solar, wind, and hydropower energy rose from 33% in 2018 to 77% in 2022 (Nedopil, 2023b). While Nedopil (2023a) highlights the importance of international recognition in general, Rodenbiker (2023) refers to particular receivers. Specifically, he provides two cases of China's green soft power operating through bilateral cooperation on marine spatial planning and community-based mangrove conservation with Thailand and Indonesia, respectively. He concludes that "the capacity of China's environmental exchanges to influence [these] Global South actors to adopt shared values and positive associations toward China are limited. Therefore, China's green soft power...is relatively weak" (Rodenbiker, 2023, p. 344). China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan has been mentioned only briefly by Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024, p. 28). In particular, this publication focuses on green soft power generation by reviewing the limited available bilateral documents on the CPEC and identifying China's intentions to be perceived as a green soft power by its "all-weather friend," as China and Pakistan often refer to each other. However, Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024) do not elaborate on how these behaviours are recognised in Pakistan. Therefore, this article aims to expand on this aspect.

2. China's green soft power status emerges from its relations with others, though attributes matter. In the view of Min and Montero (2019), green soft power occurs when China provides "financial and technical support to its BRI partners by sharing experiences and lessons-learned in clean energy, environment, and climate policies." Accordingly, Harlan and Lu (2022) recognise that the "soft" approach to greening the BRI is emerging. Furthermore, they tie this approach to the "environmentally-focused activities that forge people-to-people connections with host countries [including] training, dialogues, research, and development projects." They highlight the role of "green cooperation" (Harlan & Lu, 2022, p. 476) that, first, "offers a means to position China as an alternative environmental leader—a kind of green soft power—while also facilitating the transfer of Chinese green technology and expertise to the Global South" and, second, "has become a primary venue through which China projects influence over global environmental governance—a kind of green soft power" (Harlan & Lu, 2022, p. 478). These two studies highlight China's technological and economic attributes, which have elevated it to a leadership position in renewable energy. While essential, these attributes alone do not make China a green soft power unless Beijing uses them to engage with other countries—for example, by assisting BRI states in increasing the share of renewable energy in their energy mix, as suggested in key policy documents and guidelines addressing the environmental aspects of this connectivity project (Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2017; Ministry of Environmental Protection et al., 2017). Referring to China's attributes, Rodenbiker (2023) and Nitza-Makowska et al. (2024) question whether this state's poor environmental record can

significantly harm its green soft power status. These studies refer to the "Panda–Dragon" dichotomy (Nedopil, 2023a), that is, the distinction between China's ambitious environmental diplomacy abroad and its poor but improving domestic environmental profile, as indicated by its ranking of 154th in the Environmental Performance Index (EPI; Block et al., 2024). Nevertheless, despite this poor profile, China has managed to gain recognition as one of the leaders in the environmental and climate regime mainly due to its "international environmental cooperation...[which] is conducive to the elevation of China's international image and soft power in the long run" (Gang, 2009, pp. 53–54). This confirms the basic assumption underlying the relational approach to status. That is, status cannot be reduced to a state's attributes.

3. China can join the green soft power "club" because of the distinct nature of environmental and climate cooperation. The assumption that joining a club of states that share similar norms will elevate a country's status is problematic for China due to its ideational attributes—or, more specifically, its lack of those attributes that are typical in liberal democracies. In this context, Duque (2018, p. 578) argues that "states do not necessarily recognize those with the most resources but rather those with similar values and resources." Similarly, Miller et al. (2015, p. 788) hypothesise that "behavior consistent with relatively uncontested norms will be associated with significant additional status attribution from the global community of states." However, as Larson and Shevchenko (2010, p. 84) note in their study on China's status:

> Although China might appear to be following the prescriptions of liberal institutionalism, Beijing does not subscribe to the prevailing Western norms of individualism, human rights, transparency, democracy promotion, or humanitarian intervention. Instead, Beijing adheres to traditional norms of sovereignty and nonintervention in other states' internal affairs.

Thus, despite China's authoritarianism, it still shares some ideational attributes that contribute to its international recognition.

For China's status as a green soft power specifically, scholars raise similar doubts regarding its interactions with other states on environmental and climate issues. For example, Wang-Kaeding (2018) observes that "President Xi has never openly endorsed the norm of 'liberal environmentalism,'" which has underpinned several institutional achievements since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Liberal environmentalism, as defined by Bernstein (2020, p. 146), "describes the normative compromise in global governance that predicates international environmental protection on promoting and maintaining a liberal economic order." Nonetheless, China's authoritarianism fails to significantly hinder its potential to elevate its international status in the environmental and climate cooperation domain. As Chan et al. (2008, p. 292) note: "China can be expected to cooperate more fully with international environmental regimes than with other types of global regimes, as it has come to realize, albeit belatedly, that proper environmental protection is a crucial component of its overall development."

Beijing does not typically challenge international environmental and climate norms outright, as it sometimes does in other arenas. Instead, having joined major frameworks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, China negotiates within the system—for instance, by arguing for differentiated responsibilities between the Global North and the Global South and

championing national sovereignty (Qi & Dauvergne, 2022). Through this stance of "selective compliance" with international norms, China aligns itself with global environmental and climate goals—securing diplomatic advantages and bolstering its green soft power status—whilst retaining tight control over domestic implementation following its authoritarian governance (Li & Shapiro, 2020). However, the strict oversight of civil society organisations curtails the transparency and accountability typically associated with liberal environmental governance, underscoring how China's alignment with global norms does not necessarily translate into liberal democratic practices at home (Ho, 2008; Li & Shapiro, 2020).

Due to the distinct nature of cooperation on environmental and climate issues, this area exemplifies what is termed a "different" or "new" domain in the social creativity strategy of status-seeking. Larson and Shevchenko (2010) argue that, for China, this social creativity strategy involves striving for recognition in a new domain, particularly as a responsible great power. While Larson and Shevchenko (2010) primarily focus on responsibilities in the security and economic realms, the concept of responsible power status can—and arguably should—extend to addressing the pressing climate and environmental challenges we face today (Nitza-Makowska et al., 2024).

Moreover, while the literature on status in international relations emphasises ideational attributes such as norms of individualism, human rights, and democracy, this assumption has limited relevance in the context of this case study, which involves an authoritarian state as a green soft power producer and Pakistan, a hybrid regime, as the receiver of this power.

3. The CPEC and China's Green Soft Power: How Does It Work?

To illustrate how China's green soft power status can emerge through its relations with Pakistan under the CPEC, this article draws on Nye's (2008, p. 107) three-resource model of soft power, which emphasises culture, political values, and foreign policies. Specifically, it identifies China's foreign environmental policy under the CPEC as a key resource of China's green soft power in Pakistan.

To use this resource, China needs environmental diplomacy, which is recognised as the main instrument of green soft power. Environmental diplomacy, i.e., "diplomacy for the environment" (Benedick, 1999), is understood to consist of efforts between two or more states—here, China and Pakistan—to jointly address ecological problems through negotiation and collaboration (Susskind, 1994) or to avoid possible negative impacts of their cooperation on local ecosystems (Nitza-Makowska et al., 2024, p. 20). Examining China's environmental diplomacy as a key instrument for achieving green soft power status aligns with the relational approach, which emphasises the role of interstate relations in the emergence of status. CPEC-related bilateral environmental diplomacy is most critical in affecting how Pakistan's government and public—here, the intended green soft power receivers—perceive China, but Beijing's multilateral environmental diplomacy performed under the BRI is also relevant.

As status depends on recognition, green soft power needs transmitters and receivers. Green soft power transmitters carry China's environmental diplomacy and inform receivers about it. These transmitters include stakeholders operating within Pakistani society, such as relevant ministries, NGOs, think tanks, academia, media, and their equivalents in China or elsewhere, who discuss environmental aspects of the CPEC. Local transmitters, such as Pakistan's media, think tanks, and academia, including the interviewees for

Table 1. China's green soft power in action and the CPEC.

Green soft power resource	Instruments	Key transmitters	Receivers
Environmental foreign policies under the CPEC	Bilateral and BRI-related multilateral environmental diplomacy	Relevant ministries in Pakistan and China and other state institutions—e.g., China's embassy in Islamabad;	Pakistan's government and public
		NGOs and think tanks (Pakistani, Chinese, and others)—e.g., the Pakistan-China Institute (PCI) and China–Pakistan Study Centre Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad (SDPI);	
		Media (Pakistani, Chinese, and others);	
		Academia—e.g., Pakistani and Chinese universities;	
		Centres for collaborative research on the CPEC—e.g., the China Pakistan Management Initiative at Lahore University of Management Sciences and CPEC Integrated Centre for Research at the University of the Punjab in Lahore;	
		International organisations (e.g., relevant UN agencies and programmes) if discussing environmental aspects of the CPEC;	
		Business actors involved in developing the CPEC and messaging about the project.	

this study, can also be receivers of this power when their narratives reflect the public perception of China and the environmental aspects of the CPEC.

Crucially, while this article addresses an authoritarian regime and a hybrid regime—which China and Pakistan, respectively, are recognised as (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024)—the independence of the green soft power transmitters and receivers operating in these states must be considered. In this context, Afzal (2020) observes that "the Chinese and Pakistani governments have together zealously aimed to control and drive the narrative on CPEC, aggressively stamping out criticism." Interviewee 11 in this study confirms this point:

> Positive or constructive criticism [of the CPEC] is a national security matter....You cannot talk against China. This is considered like you're talking against Pakistan....It's really difficult in Pakistan to speak about the project because our national security institutions are very much involved, and they do not appreciate public opinion.

4. Green Changer?

For numerous reasons, the CPEC makes a relevant case for investigating green soft power through China's environmental diplomacy. First, the CPEC is a pilot and the most expensive part of the BRI. Second, it involves

massive energy infrastructure, including facilities running on coal that have profound impacts on the natural environment and climate. Third, the CPEC's rollout aligns with China's soft power push towards its all-weather friend. These reasons are further explained to identify evidence and barriers for China's status as a green soft power to emerge from its environmental diplomacy practised under the CPEC.

4.1. Green Shift in Environmental Diplomacy

The CPEC is an unprecedented investment (amounting to over $60 billion) of one Asian state in the infrastructure of another. This infrastructure involves energy projects and economic zones linked by a 3,000-km network of pipelines, roads, and railways stretching from Baluchistan in Pakistan to Xinjiang in China. While scholarship most often highlights the various economic, geopolitical, and security aspects of the CPEC (Ahmed, 2024; Wolf, 2020), this project also profoundly affects the natural environment and climate. Khan and Chang (2020, p. 388) confirm that the CPEC "brings great expectations to the economy of Pakistan, however, the adverse effects on the environment can never be ignored." Specifically:

> Roads and railroads, thermal, hydro, and nuclear power plants, electricity transmission networks, oil and natural gas pipelines, mining initiatives, and heavy industries are among the infrastructure projects most likely to have a negative environmental impact. Increased air and water pollution, habitat loss and fragmentation, deforestation, higher wildlife mortality, the threat of invasive species, and increased greenhouse gas emissions that undercut global efforts to combat climate change are just a few of the risks connected to these infrastructure projects. (Anwar et al., 2024, p. 7)

Particularly in light of the 2022 floods that killed over 1,730 people in Pakistan and caused economic losses reaching approximately $15.2 billion (World Bank, 2022), scholarship identifies a link between natural disasters in the future and the CPEC. Ali and Askari (2023, p. 653) argue that: "The newly emerged projects of CPEC cause climate change which further creates an alarming situation for glaciers melting. Glaciers are the main source of river water. Heavy floods are direct results of melting glaciers." Therefore, the environmental impacts of the CPEC can outweigh its economic benefits (Kouser et al., 2020; Sultan et al., 2021). The CPEC is viewed as a project that is "detrimental to the natural environment of Pakistan" (Munir & Khayyam, 2020) and "unpredictable" (Khan & Chang, 2020).

When discussing the implications of the CPEC for the natural environment and climate, scholars focus on risks and challenges. In this context, the scholarship centres on the following three themes: (a) energy infrastructure, (b) transport infrastructure, and (c) Pakistan's environmental situation and governance.

Among all infrastructure developments, in the environmental context, most attention is paid to energy projects, specifically coal-fired power plants. Located in Sindh, Punjab, and Baluchistan, these facilities generate nearly three-quarters of all energy under the CPEC (Kouser et al., 2020; Sultan et al., 2021). Despite Pakistan's potential to generate renewable energy (Anwar et al., 2024; Duan et al., 2022) the CPEC involves only a few such projects: "Most of them generate insignificant power, except the Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park in Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan, which has a 1,000 MW power generation capacity" (Rashid et al., 2023, p. 3685). In contrast, the CPEC includes 10 coal-based power plants with a power generation capacity of 8,880 MW (Rashid et al., 2023). Scholars and experts highlight the fact that the ruling Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz dictated a focus on coal energy projects, viewing them as a means to "end the country's

electricity shortages in order to secure a 2018 re-election bid" (Adeney & Boni, 2021, p. 2), and they recognise "Pakistan's quest for the coal's utilisation to meet its energy demand" as "natural and obvious" (Khan & Chang, 2020, p. 389). Indeed, the CPEC can eliminate Pakistan's energy shortage of approximately 5,000–7,000 MW (Kugelman, 2019) specifically "through low-cost energy from Pakistan's abundant indigenous energy resources like coal" (Rashid et al., 2023, p. 3685). However, scholarship also emphasises the urgency of "shifting from coal-based energy projects to renewables and building climate-resilient infrastructure in order to avoid various environmental harms" (Khan & Chang, 2020, p. 387). As Faisal and Askari (2024) observe, such a shift aligns not only with Pakistan's environmental needs but also with China's announcement to exit overseas coal. Moreover, this shift can transform the CPEC into an "environmental corridor having capability to initiate renewable energy trade between Pakistan and China" (Farooq et al., 2023, p. 12386).

Other critical environmental concerns are linked to the transport infrastructure of the CPEC, specifically the upgrading and expansion of the road network in Pakistan. Massive tree cutting "leads to enormous concentration of CO_2 emissions along [these] roads " (Kouser et al., 2020, p. 4661), stretching from Kashgar in China to Gwadar in Pakistan. Moreover, the Karakoram Highway, the world's highest paved road connecting China and Pakistan, which is being upgraded under the CPEC umbrella, is expected to transport 7,000 trucks per day that will release up to 36.5 million tons of CO_2, significantly worsening air quality (Sultan et al., 2021).

CPEC infrastructure is being constructed in a "crucial time when Pakistan is already facing extreme weather patterns and seasonal shifts and suffering from the global warming, and climate change issues as nearly 5,000 of its glaciers are melting, which have potential impacts on agroecology of the State" (Khan & Chang, 2020, p. 395). Indeed, Pakistan's fragile environment and climate situation are a theme often referred to in literature discussing CPEC's impacts on the environment. Pakistan is one of the top 10 countries most endangered by climate change (Ali & Askari, 2023). Despite such climate vulnerability and the profound environmental effects of the CPEC, most studies claim that no transparent and reliable environmental impact assessments were conducted in relation to the CPEC (Shaikh & Sultan, 2023).

Whether and how Beijing assists Pakistan in mitigating the environmental risks of the CPEC can affect China's green soft power vis-à-vis Pakistan and beyond. Although Pakistan's all-weather friendship with China is a distinct type of relationship, the BRI includes numerous states that share some characteristics with Pakistan. Noteworthy, almost half of the 149 BRI states are found in the Global South, and they are typically mid to low-income countries (Nedopil, 2025) with rather poor environmental profiles. Effectively overcoming the environmental challenges posed by the CPEC would demonstrate China's adherence to pro-environmental norms and standards that, as the literature suggests, seem to have been ignored when the CPEC was designed, and it would strengthen China's recognition as a green soft power in Pakistan, and, in particular, in those states that wish to obtain similar assistance.

Nevertheless, the limited transparency surrounding China's inroads into Pakistan hinders research on CPEC-related environmental diplomacy. While media, relevant miniseries, and embassies regularly signal that China and Pakistan have signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on the CPEC, the full texts of most of these agreements are unavailable. Only selected bilateral documents on the project are accessible, including the Long-Term Plan for the CPEC (LTP; 2017–2030; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning,

Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017), a few joint statements and some MoUs. Most of these documents only briefly refer to environmental issues by pointing to (a) the environment as one of many areas of cooperation strengthened under the CPEC and, more specifically, (b) climate change and renewable energy as the main themes of project-related environmental diplomacy.

The LTP, which is a roadmap for CPEC developments, briefly refers to the project's environmental aspects. In particular, the LTP (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 17) assumes that the two states will promote "energy-saving and environmentally friendly processes and equipment" in their industrial cooperation. Additionally, it ensures that while developing the CPEC, the possible effects of climate change will be considered to realise sustainable development (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 12). Signed in 2013, the Common Vision for Deepening China–Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013) points to the environment (including maritime environmental protection) and climate change as areas of cooperation, in addition to trade, energy, agriculture, food security, and other fields. The joint statement of 2022 mentions the term "green corridor" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a) as an umbrella for China–Pakistan environmental cooperation. Issued later in November 2022, another joint statement mentions the floods that killed over 1,730 people in Pakistan and caused economic losses reaching approximately $15.2 billion (World Bank, 2022). China and Pakistan highlight their commitments to improve the situation in the latter: "Appreciating Pakistan's initiative to combat human-induced climate change and China's initiative to promote green cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, the two sides agreed to step up cooperation in such areas as ecosystem restoration and water resource management" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b). The recent joint statement of June 2024 recalls:

> [The] green corridor [as part of an] upgraded version of the CPEC...aligning with Pakistan's 5Es Framework [a roadmap for achieving a $1 trillion economy by 2035] based on Exports, E-Pakistan, Environment, Energy, and Equity & Empowerment to better benefit the two countries and their peoples, working together to build CPEC. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024)

Additionally, the 2024 statement reiterates China's "commitment to continue providing support and assistance to Pakistan and other developing countries in addressing climate change and mitigating the adverse impacts of extreme weather events" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

Local stakeholders within Pakistan's government barely notice the exercise of environmental diplomacy under the CPEC. Importantly for China's green soft power, they refuse to identify any influence of the exercise of this diplomacy on Pakistan's policies and performance, as the state's key policy strategies demonstrate. Initiated in 2014 by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, Pakistan Vision 2025, which is an optimistic long-term strategy designed to position Pakistan among the top 25 global economies by 2025, points to the environment as only one of several areas of cooperation of the CPEC. The 5Es Framework mentioned above links the CPEC with Pakistan's improved economic performance between 2013 and 2018 (Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2014, p. 12). Focusing on climate and environmental issues, the National

Adaptation Plan (Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, 2023) and National Climate Change Policy (Ministry of Climate Change, 2021) refuse to mention China and the CPEC.

The asymmetry between the profound impacts of the CPEC on local ecosystems and the attention paid to these impacts by the actors involved in green soft power generation, transmission, and reception is evident, especially in the early stages of the CPEC. Interviewee 3 rightly observes that "When the CPEC was launched in 2013, the environment was not a topic." Interviewee 5 points to the traffic emissions resulting from the CPEC and says that the infrastructure does not constitute climate resilience. Additionally, this interviewee argues that neglecting the environmental damage brought by the CPEC is "depressing for the society." According to interviewee 5, in Gilgit-Baltistan, where, among others, the Karakorum Highway is being upgraded and hydropower projects are being established under the CPEC, "society is concerned about the environment. We must not compromise on the environment."

The green shift in China's environmental diplomacy towards a green corridor as part of the CPEC was triggered by the 2022 floods mentioned above. Interviewee 2 claims that China's aid to Pakistan, amounting to ¥400 million (China International Development Cooperation Agency, 2022), to mitigate the consequences of this natural disaster was a "good soft power strategy." If followed by cooperation on environmental and climate issues, including practice and technology sharing, the green shift has the potential to influence environmental policies and behaviours in Pakistan, thus elevating China's status as a green soft power in the country. Beyond Pakistan, the green shift in China's environmental diplomacy under the CPEC can strengthen its green soft power in the Global South among developing states along the BRI with an economic and climate situation similar to Pakistan's. Nevertheless, the limited transparency surrounding China's bilateral environmental diplomacy and still low priority given to the environmental aspects of the CPEC suggest barriers for the project to act as an effective resource for China's green soft power.

4.2. "Bad" Coal and the Shift to Renewables

Under the BRI, Pakistan is the largest receiver of investments in energy infrastructure. This infrastructure encompasses most CPEC projects, including its first early harvest phase (2015–2020). In this phase, most investments in the energy sector went to coal power plants. The path of further bilateral energy cooperation may affect China's status as a green soft power by testing its announcement that it is exiting overseas coal on the ground, in Pakistan.

As explained in the Section 4.1, Beijing's investments in Pakistan's energy sector under the CPEC umbrella followed local priorities. Accordingly, the LTP (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 16) emphasises the "utilisation of Pakistan's own coal for power plant and developing technologies for surface coal gasification, expansion and augmentation of coal mining sector." Nevertheless, the LTP (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform & People's Republic of China, National Development and Reform Commission, 2017, p. 16) also mentions the aims of developing hydropower, wind, and solar energy and establishing diversified energy supply channels.

The 2018 joint statement between China and Pakistan recognises the early harvest energy projects, mostly coal-based facilities, as being satisfactory for both sides, and it fails to include the context of renewable energy

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Interestingly, the statement issued in 2022 emphasises Beijing's support for Islamabad in developing renewable energy projects, explicitly mentioning solar projects. This statement also promises to attract Chinese companies to become engaged in renewable energy projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a). The 2023 joint press statement between China and Pakistan states:

> The Chinese side appreciated the efforts of the Pakistani side to vigorously develop Photovoltaic and other renewable energy projects, which are in alignment with the green, low carbon and environmentally friendly development of the energy sector. Both sides encourage Chinese companies to further participate in the development of such projects. (Belt and Road Forum, 2023)

Similarly, the 2023 MoU titled Provision of Goods Under South–South Cooperation for Addressing Climate Change emphasises China's support for Pakistan's "efforts to promote renewable energy" (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in Beijing, 2023).

The "renewable" shift from coal energy projects in bilateral environmental diplomacy under the CPEC is evident. The reasons underlying this shift include Pakistan's poor environmental and climate situation (resulting in natural disasters, such as the 2022 floods), the stage of the CPEC and precisely the fact that the early harvest phase with the coal-related projects has been completed, in addition to China's attempts to green the BRI. Nevertheless, the limited scholarship on the topic and the individuals interviewed in this study suggest that Beijing's energy engagements under the CPEC follow local priorities and policies, not vice versa. For instance, Interviewees 3 and 4 confirm that the CPEC's build-up of energy infrastructure follows local demands. In particular, Interviewee 3 calls the installation of coal-based power plants along with deforestation an "unimagined disaster for the natural environment." Ironically, as highlighted by Interviewee 6, "Islamabad decided on these plants when the world was shutting them down." On the one hand, the association of the CPEC with "bad" coal, as Interviewee 3 coins it, can tarnish China's green soft power in Pakistan and beyond; on the other hand, the renewable shift in Beijing's environmental diplomacy can polish it.

Moreover, the renewable shift in bilateral environmental diplomacy under the BRI can leverage China's status as a green soft power in Pakistan and beyond by appealing to the public's preferences for renewable energy in some BRI countries. A 2019 survey conducted in Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Turkey, and Vietnam reveals that:

> [In] all six countries, citizens have a strong preference for clean energy rather than coal. When asked which type of energy they felt their country should invest in to best support its long-term development, the majority selected renewable energy sources, ranging from 61% in Pakistan to 89% in Vietnam. (Littlecott & Hawkins, 2023)

Local stakeholders within Pakistan's government recognise the CPEC's potential to increase the share of renewables in Pakistan's energy mix and the alignment of this potential with local priorities, but they refuse to identify China's impact in this particular context. Pakistan Vision 2025 mentions the CPEC in the context of Pakistan's aim to "increase in power generation from alternative energy sources" (Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2014). Pakistan's Voluntary National Review of 2019 assumes that all "CPEC

energy projects—centring on coal, solar, wind and hydropower—are helping to bridge critical energy shortages, benefitting industries and businesses" (Government of Pakistan, 2019, p. 43). The Voluntary National Review 2022 mentions CPEC hydropower projects, including the Neelum Jhelum Hydroelectric Power Project, a 102 MW plant at Gulpur Project on River Poonch, two projects in Karot of 720 MW, Azad Pattan, Kohala, and Mahal with 640 MW, 1124 MW, and 590 MW, respectively, and their role in facilitating access to clean energy research and technology in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (Government of Pakistan, 2022, p. 35).

Following local priorities to focus on coal when designing and launching the CPEC, Beijing demonstrated that it had no ambition to act as a green soft power in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the renewable shift in China's environmental diplomacy, even if triggered by the 2022 floods, can improve China's standing as a green soft power in Pakistan and beyond the BRI, especially given the international attention to China's decision to exit overseas coal. Scholarship and the interviewees arguably confirm that China's energy engagements under the CPEC follow local demands, but doubts remain regarding whether Beijing will consider these demands if they do not align with its own priorities. These doubts are strengthened by the uneven nature of the China–Pakistan relationship based on the two countries' highly asymmetrical capabilities and, relatedly, Pakistan's poor position to negotiate. Interviewee 4 argues: "We are not in a position to bargain with a superpower." Interviewees 2 and 6 confirm that Islamabad does not negotiate with Beijing. According to Interviewee 6: "If China offers, we take, we pay in 10 years."

4.3. Greening Soft Power

Under the CPEC, Beijing has bolstered its portfolio of soft power instruments vis-à-vis its all-weather friend to an unprecedented extent. Although China initially ignored the environmental dimension of this bilateral cooperation, since 2022, it has become a rising new domain. Consequently, China's environmental diplomacy has begun to enrich its soft power portfolio. Its instruments include (a) a game-changer narrative, which views the CPEC as a project with the potential to transform Pakistan's state and society, bringing win-win outcomes to the parties involved; (b) the Chinese language, aimed at bridging the communication gap between the two nations under the CPEC and intensifying their mutual interactions; and (c) higher education initiatives, which involve launching Confucius Institutes, hosting Pakistani students in China, providing Pakistan's universities with funds and equipment, establishing centres for collaborative research on the CPEC and related themes, and building international academic networks (Nitza-Makowska, 2022, pp. 4–7). To some degree, the soft power push under the CPEC paves the way for environmental diplomacy to win Pakistani hearts and minds—i.e., to be positively associated with and to influence behaviours and policies on the ground.

Pakistan's poor environmental and climate situation, as reflected by its ranking of 179th out of 180 in the EPI, calls for improvements, not risks and damages. This situation reveals the urgent need for a green transition and thus suggests a window of opportunity for China to contribute and strengthen its status as a green soft power. Interviewee 7 observes that "Pakistan needs a green revolution. If China leads it, we will gain." Nevertheless, doubts remain regarding whether China can transform its game-changer into a green changer. Interviewee 1 rejects the notion that environmental diplomacy and higher education are effective instruments of China's soft power in Pakistan: "The economy is a top priority. Education and ecology are not our case in South Asia." While the priority given to the environmental impacts of the CPEC is still low in relation to its geopolitical and economic implications, the slight shifts in China's environmental diplomacy discussed above,

in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, reveal China's capabilities to act as a green soft power. The public's reception of the CPEC is another barrier to the inclusion of environmental diplomacy among soft power instruments under the CPEC. The lack of public consultations on CPEC projects, including their environmental impacts, acknowledged by all interviewees, suggests limits in winning the hearts and minds of Pakistani society.

4.4. The Green BRI and the Green CPEC

China created an environmental governance architecture to transform the BRI into a climate-neutral and nature-positive Green BRI. In the context of status-seeking, this signals China's aim to join the "green club" of states that respect internationally recognized norms on climate and environmental issues. Green BRI architecture encompasses Chinese domestic governance entities, international governance structures (including new and existing cooperation networks, platforms, and mechanisms), soft laws—e.g., policies and guidelines (Coenen et al., 2020, pp. 3–17)—and it aids Beijing in exercising its multilateral environmental diplomacy along the BRI.

The BRI International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC) is one of the components of this architecture. It is an initiative that brings together various local stakeholders to collaborate on sustainable development policies and practices, and it includes two Pakistani think tanks, the PCI and the SDPI. Mustafa Hyder Sayed, the executive director of the PCI, regularly comments on the BRI green reviews issued by the BRIGC. He emphasises the CPEC's significant role in Pakistan's "green energy transition" (BRI Green Development Coalition, 2023, p. 8) but without providing details. The Alliance of International Science Organizations (ANSO), established to promote and implement cooperation in science, technology, and innovation among BRI countries, includes the Pakistan Academy of Sciences (PAS). The PAS has been involved in ANSO conferences on various environmental themes.

Moreover, in 2022, the SDPI and PCI established the Green CPEC Alliance, which can be viewed as an extension of the Green BRI. The Alliance gathers "members from both countries' governments, investors, and developers, as well as civil society" (SDPI, 2022). The launch of this initiative was motivated by the importance of the CPEC in the context of China's status as a green soft power along the BRI:

> The CPEC is a particularly important case study, as it is considered a role-model for China's overseas engagement. Supporting a successful greening of CPEC would provide an important role model for greening other BRI countries to green their overseas Chinese investments in the BRI. (SDPI, 2022)

China's multilateral environmental diplomacy was effective in influencing selected Pakistani stakeholders to join the Green BRI architecture and in launching initiatives aligned with its priorities on a local scale. Nevertheless, the lack of transparency surrounding the performance of selected elements of the BRI environmental architecture or their inactivity suggests barriers to China's multilateral environmental diplomacy to influence pro-environmental behaviours and policies in BRI states.

5. Conclusion

This article explored China's status as a green soft power through its environmental diplomacy under the BRI, explicitly focusing on the CPEC. Declaring its ambitions to green its grand infrastructure project, Beijing

aims to enhance its status as a leader in environmental governance and to leverage this status to become a green soft power. This case study demonstrated China's transition to strengthen its green soft power status in Pakistan and it shed light on the implications beyond the BRI.

China's environmental diplomacy has experienced a green shift, marked by increased attention to environmental cooperation under the CPEC, and a renewable shift, referring to a change in priorities in China's energy engagements in Pakistan. To a great extent, the two shifts were motivated by the 2022 floods in Pakistan. Importantly for China's green soft power, the shift in energy engagements aligns with the public's preferences for renewable energy in various BRI countries, including Pakistan. Given the massive attention that international audiences have paid to China's announcement that it is exiting overseas coal, this shift, which signals China's aims to align with globally desired norms on the environment and climate, has the potential to enhance China's status as a green soft power beyond the BRI.

Another piece of evidence suggesting that China can elevate its green soft power status through the CPEC is linked to Beijing's soft power push accompanying the project's developments. Environmental diplomacy can enrich China's soft power portfolio and interplay with its other instruments that have already, at least to some extent, paved the way to winning Pakistani hearts and minds. Additionally, China's multilateral environmental diplomacy contributes to China's green soft power status in Pakistan. This diplomacy attracted selected Pakistani stakeholders to join the BRI's environmental governance architecture.

However, significant barriers remain. The early harvest phase of the CPEC focused on coal-based energy projects. While the prioritisation of coal was determined by local demands, the association with "bad" coal tarnishes China's green soft power in Pakistan and beyond, as it perpetuates the recognition of China as a state leaving a heavy carbon footprint overseas. There are additional challenges related to the limited transparency of China's environmental diplomacy.

While local stakeholders within Pakistan's government notice China's potential contribution to the state's green transition in their policies and strategies, they fail to identify China's influence on Pakistan's pro-environmental decisions and behaviours. Additionally, as recognition drives the status, the public's perception of the CPEC's environmental impacts can limit China's green soft power, mainly because of Pakistan's lack of public consultations on this matter.

The evidence and barriers suggest that especially since 2022, China has strengthened its projection of itself as a green soft power in Pakistan. Nevertheless, the recognition of this power, as manifested by the impacts on policies and behaviours in Pakistan, has not yet been identified. The gains or losses brought by green soft power through environmental diplomacy under the CPEC have some but limited potential to affect the related global status of China. Especially in the Global South, developing states along the BRI that to some degree associate themselves with Pakistan can view China's green soft power through its environmental diplomacy exercised under the CPEC.

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Conflict of Interests

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Rational Illusions: Everyday Theories of International Status and the Domestic Politics of Boer War

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Abstract

Existing research has documented that status-seeking abounds in world politics. Yet the status hierarchies to which states respond and compete within are notoriously ambiguous and difficult to empirically ascertain. This ambiguity has begotten considerable disagreement among scholars over the nature of international hierarchies. Making a strength out of this slipperiness, this article posits that international status can be studied via the everyday theories of status that governments and their opponents themselves produce and use to interpret their state's status. Treating these everyday theories as productive of the world they purport to describe, such an approach foregrounds the interpretative agency of domestic groups to develop and maintain "hierarchies of their own making," which need not be recognized internationally to become crucial for policy legitimation domestically. In order to study such everyday theories' systematically, the article develops a new meta-linguistic framework for identifying and mapping their use within domestic politics. Via a case study on the Boer War (1899–1902), the article shows how domestic battles over what international status is can shape domestic politics and policy outcomes.

Keywords

constructivism; discourse analysis; imperialism; status competition; status hierarchies; status seeking

1. Introduction

States do not only strive for wealth and security but international status too. Indeed, a burgeoning body of research has documented that states of all sizes spend considerable time, energy, and even blood and treasure, seeking status recognition on the world stage. From building battleships too big to float, to splashing cash upon global mega-events, a great deal of international politics makes little sense without taking into account a drive

for status. There is a hitch, however. For all scholars' success in identifying instances of status seeking, they lack agreement on the nature of the international hierarchies states are said to compete within (MacDonald & Parent, 2021). To be sure, scholars have coalesced around a common definition: "collective beliefs about rank in a given hierarchy," yet *whose* collective beliefs matter and *how* they rank states remains contentious (Paul et al., 2014, p. 7). The difficulty is twofold: International collective beliefs are unobservable, meanwhile, there are a multitude of plausible ways to assess status in any given policy field or international context (Rumelili & Towns, 2022). Thus, as Gilpin (1981) long ago lamented, states' real status may well be "imponderable" even as it is so widely sought. While status scholars have developed various workarounds to this problem—developing complicated proxies or just taking their best-educated guess—what status is and how to measure it remains the central methodological and theoretical puzzle animating IR's status research agenda (Buarque, 2023).

This article contends we can address this puzzle head-on by making a strength out of status' widely acknowledged slipperiness. Given states, statesmen, and citizens care about and pursue status *despite* its difficulty to assess, I argue we can study international status hierarchies via these actors' ponderings of the imponderable. Indeed, states and citizens must grapple with the same status ambiguity with which status scholars struggle. Rather than generating complicated proxies for unobservable and potentially unknowable international status hierarchies, this article proposes studying the everyday theories of international status (TIS) that governments and citizens produce and use to make sense of their state's position in the world. Crucially, this approach avoids the conventional assumption that states' status seeking is necessarily a response to international collective beliefs about status. Instead, the article contends governments and other domestic actors respond and act upon their TIS, which may have only a tenuous relationship to international collective beliefs but prove no less influential for it.

Expressed at its boldest, this line of reasoning implies that it is possible for states to construct, compete in, and win status competitions of their own making. Citizens can take pride and governments can generate legitimacy from topping a "status" hierarchy without international audiences being party to the hierarchy in question. Put more humbly, it suggests that states have varying degrees of leeway to develop and maintain competitive hierarchical constructions of the world that are not actively shared or recognized by international audiences, yet remain salient and have political effects domestically. As a result, governments can enjoy the benefits of status seeking in terms of legitimacy, without being beholden to international recognition. This has been overlooked, I will argue, because prior works have tended to bracket the domestic audience and thus overstate the degree of inter-subjective agreement about international status and understate the degree of interpretative agency located within domestic discourses. Addressing this blindspot, this article distills the new theoretical framework developed in Beaumont (2024) for investigating how TIS inform and sometimes even structure domestic politics and foreign policy. Hence, in the spirit of this thematic issue, this article aims to provide new directions to IR's blossoming status research agenda.

1.1. State of Art: The Domestic Politics of Ambiguous International Status

Catalyzed in the 2000s but with an impressive pedigree (Larson & Shevchenko, 2003; Wohlforth, 2009), this research agenda has set about substantiating the claim that states often undertake activities to improve their social status in international hierarchies and avoid activities that threaten their position. Here, these collective beliefs regarding international status are theorized as a social structure to which states respond, given their position and/or the nature of the hierarchy (e.g., de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Larson &

Shevchenko, 2003, 2019; Renshon, 2017; see also Zarakol, 2017, p. 12). While scholars diverge on whether states pursue status for the instrumental privileges perceptions of high position in a hierarchy afford or as an intrinsic goal in its own right (e.g., Barnhart, 2016; Paul et al., 2014; Wohlforth, 2009), the usual methodological procedure of both strands involves demonstrating that foreign policies that appear irrational from conventional materialist perspectives become tractable if we assume an interest in international status. Variations on this operation have succeeded in providing compelling and sophisticated explanations for war waging (Renshon, 2017; Ward, 2017a), arms racing (Murray, 2018), as well as humanitarian aid (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014), big science projects (Gilady, 2018), and even Brexiting (Freedman, 2020). In short order, this research agenda has documented how states of all sorts often spend considerable time, energy, and even blood and treasure, seeking status recognition from their peers on the world stage.

The pioneering works within IR's status agenda overwhelmingly strive to deduce status motivations from the absence of compelling "material" alternatives. This procedure works best when identifying egregious instances of status seeking: acquiring aircraft carriers only to leave them rust at the docks, spending billions hosting mega-events (Gilady, 2018), or understanding Norway's expensively expansive foreign policy agenda (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014). Yet, this procedure has an Achilles heel: given motivations of people and states are unobservable and that status research often relies on *the absence* of conventional explanations to make its claims stick (e.g., de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014.p. 5; Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, p. 15; see also Lin, 2024), this approach is vulnerable to lurking alternative non-conventional explanations. This problem is particularly pronounced when parsing status motivations when studying policy outcomes that seem readily explainable by existing theories. To be sure, when no plausible alternatives are available, a standard status approach might suffice for understanding why a country spends billions on hosting mega-events. Yet, in many messier cases—for instance, nuclear arms racing—there are plausible non-status-related motivations why states may be motivated to pursue top positions in a hierarchy.

A second limitation of the leading approaches to studying international status includes the challenge involved in empirically identifying and assessing the international status hierarchy to which states are said to be responding (Buarque, 2023). This is important because early status works require that international status hierarchies are sufficiently well-understood and valued that they prompt states to throw blood and treasure protecting their position or striving to improve it. Yet status is famously slippery. As Wohlforth (2009, p. 38) noted in his seminal article back in 2009, "its expression appears endlessly varied," and those working on it are "more struck by its variability and diversity than by its susceptibility to generalization." While the status discrepancy wing of the agenda has sought to meet this challenge by developing complex—some have suggested convoluted (MacDonald & Parent, 2021)—proxies for measuring general status, even advocates admit this approach presents a crude picture (Duque, 2018; Røren & Beaumont, 2019, pp. 433–434). Those that avoid this measure, however, run into a different issue. As Mercer (2017) has noted, status researchers have tended to assume that actors and observers agree about the nature of international status hierarchies, before taking an educated guess prior to analysis and deducting outcomes that would be consistent with status seeking. Yet recent research suggests that different states and/or the same state in different contexts, may hold different understandings of the rules of the game: what merits recognition and what merits disdain (Freedman, 2016; Røren, 2023, 2024). As MacDonald and Parent's (2021, p. 375) recent review complains, status research lacks agreement around whether "valued attributes refer primarily to the impressive means states possess or to the virtuous ends they pursue," nor "who decides which attributes are prized and how." Notably, by either relying on highly contested proxies or making an a priori assessment, conventional status

research misses the possibility of identifying variance in interpretation or how contestation over what status is, affects how status is sought.

This problem of identifying the nature of the status hierarchy that states respond to becomes even more pronounced when we consider recent developments in status research that highlight the significance of the domestic audience. Critiquing the tendency of early status works to treat states as unitary actors and thereby gloss over the mechanisms through which status motivations among individuals manifested in state behavior (Ward, 2017b), these works provide a much sturdier basis for why governments would expend such resources pursuing status (Beaumont, 2024; Lin & Katada, 2022; Ward, 2017a). Working with a hybrid of instrumental and intrinsic logics, these works argue that if domestic audiences place a value on their state's international status, then a rational government and leader would have incentives to pay attention to the status implications of their policies independent from whether they were personally motivated by status (Clunan, 2009; Powers & Renshon, 2023).

Yet, if status scholars struggle to reach a consensus on what constitutes status in a given context, we might reasonably ask whether the domestic publics can be expected to do so. Indeed, Jonathan Mercer has documented how Britain's victory in the Boer War (1899–1902) generated contradictory assessments of the status implications within domestic politics: some of Britain's political elites considered the successful long-distance projection of power to be a clear boon to Britain's status, others considered the resort to "uncivilized" tactics as diminishing Britain's status. As Powers and Renshon (2023, p. 18) note, even if unfavorable events do tend to generate status concerns and presidential disapproval, "in the real world" such events are discursively mediated (open to "reframing") and different publics will likely vary in how they value and assess the status implications. At a minimum, while there are strong grounds to incorporate domestic publics into analyses of how status informs foreign policy, analysts should be wary before assuming that the status implications of an event are clear, unidirectional, or not open to manipulation by governments or opponents.

Ultimately, status research to date has provided overwhelming evidence that governments and citizens place a value on international status—for varying reasons—and often use considerable resources chasing it. However, at the same time, the literature also suggests that international status hierarchies are ambiguous, and different audiences may interpret international status differently. In other words, the status riddle closely resembles that which afflicted security studies at the turn of the 1990s: the observation that even if security scholars might agree about what objectively constituted a security threat, states' threat perceptions in practice vary enormously. Thus, security scholars' attempts at general theorizing of security policy appeared esoteric and at times only tangential to what states actually act upon. Buzan et al. (1998) seminal intervention in this debate called for security scholars to spend less time speculating on the reality of threats, and instead systematically study how threats become successfully framed as threats within a given community and the political consequences of these processes (securitization processes). Similarly, rather than trying to accurately gauge international status, this article suggests we can study the discursive processes through which a state activity becomes constructed as a status competition and how and with what consequences do interpretations of status change and become contested as the policy proceeds.

1.2. Theorizing Theories of Status

To address the riddle outlined above, this article develops what I call a TIS framework. This approach takes seriously Mercer's (2017) criticism of contemporary IR status scholarship: that the leading status works inadequately address how actors themselves interpret and evaluate their status. To render empirically tractable the riddle outlined, the premise and promise of a TIS approach is simple: Given that by the conventional definition (see Section 1.1), status is unobservable and often ambiguous to both scholars and practitioners, we can study status via the competing theories that governments (and their opponents) use to interpret a given status hierarchy and the status implications of their state's actions.

Joining a small but growing body status scholarship that conceives of status as a discursive phenomenon (e.g., Beaumont & Røren, in press; Bilgic, 2024; Røren, 2023), a TIS approach offers a systematic inductive framework for studying how (re)presentations of international status (de)legitimates practice (Bettiza, 2014; Jackson, 2006). This gestalt switch remains broadly consistent with the core definition of status as collective beliefs about a state's position in a hierarchy. The key difference but also link between a TIS approach and conventional status approaches is that a TIS approach conceptualizes the words actors use to make sense of their status as theories of status rather than as potential evidence of collective beliefs about and/or motivation for status. Hence, it is one step removed from status as it is conventionally defined but remains tightly analytically connected to it. The concept of theorizing here is inspired by Zalewski's (1996, p. 347) famous observation that "theorising is a way of life, a form of life, something we all do, every day, all the time," rather than something only "theorists do." From theorizing how to beat the traffic to theorizing how the use of concentration camps will affect Britain's status in the world, from this perspective, humans are constantly theorizing their life worlds and acting upon those theories (see Beaumont & Glaab, 2023). While thick constructivists provide several plausible alternative ways of conceiving of the unreliable link between "real status" and actors' depictions of status (see Bettiza, 2014)—notably narratives and representations—the concept of theorizing embraces the uncertainty, speculation, and agency involved in assessing status that has hitherto been considered a problem by most prior status research. It is important to note that while theorizing implies agency and creativity, to the extent that theory of status can serve as legitimation for an actor to act, this agency is limited by whether the audience finds it plausible and compelling. Hence, theories of status are discursively bounded and structured similarly to all political communication. This conceptualization begs two important questions: How can we recognize a theory of status and how can these theories affect policy outcomes?

On the latter, TIS are identifiable by its specific grammar: three types of representation that when invoked embody the logic of status competition, and simultaneously define the rules of a hierarchy. First, the basic unit of the grammar of status is representations in which *relative comparisons* with other, ostensibly similar, entities are invoked. Any statement that represents X to be better than Y at Z necessarily invokes a status hierarchy. Given that for something to be better than something else, it requires some principle of comparison by which to evaluate performance (Onuf, 1989; Towns & Rumelili, 2017), it is impossible to make such comparisons without some sort of rule. Thus, any such comparison also establishes the rules of the status hierarchy. The second grammatical unit that invokes a TIS is *competitive positional identity* constructions, for instance, superpower and great power necessarily invoke a hierarchy: it is not just who one is, but the position one is located. For this to embody a theory of status competition, the positional identity must be constituted by relative performance in a changeable quality or attribute otherwise it implies

a fixed hierarchical system (e.g., caste). Although not as explicit as great power discourse, civilization narratives also have a potential competitive aspect, whereby states may strive to meet the standards of civilization but to become the most civilized (see Yanik & Subotić, 2021). The archetypal positional identity that invokes status competition is that of the "leader/laggard." The third grammatical unit is *sports metaphors*: when international relations is constructed as a competitive game it constitutes the value of an activity in relative, relational terms, and constitutes states as rival players with positional identities—winners and losers, laggards and leaders. As such, it also theorizes status hierarchy and instantiates a theory of status.

When any of these grammatical units is invoked, I argue that an actor is in that instant theorizing and instantiating a status hierarchy, defining the rules of the game and thus implying and legitimating how to compete. For instance, when the UK government claimed to be a "leader of nuclear disarmament" during the process of acquiring a new nuclear weapons system in the 2000s, it simultaneously defined the rules and invoked a competitive disarmament hierarchy within which some countries are leading and others are lagging. Although the UK's theorization of the disarmament hierarchy had little international recognition, it nonetheless helped legitimize its new nuclear weapon system to the anti-nuclearists among its domestic supporters (Beaumont, 2021). Indeed, even if a "real" status competition—in which all actors share the same understanding of the rules—is seldom realized, such theories of status competition that do not resonate internationally can still inform political practice as a mode of legitimation.

The grammar of status thus operates as a heuristic for identifying TIS as they manifest in a particular discourse. It thereby enables the systematic exploration of whether and how TIS is featured in the legitimation of a particular policy. The meta-linguistic quality of TIS—which defines TIS by their relations rather than their content, in turn, allows the researcher to identify change in TIS over time. However, the mere existence of TIS' within a policy debate is not proof of its significance: it is up to the researcher to induct whether and how these TIS were significant for understanding political outcomes.

Crucially, a TIS approach does not require the analyst to assess the domestic audience or a government's motivations. While major status works often tie status-seeking to a distinct motivation for status on behalf of the state, leader, or domestic audience, it is not a necessary assumption, and several major works study status dynamics without attempting to infer motivations (Pouliot, 2014; Røren, 2023). Indeed, recalling the core definition of status in the literature—"collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes" (Paul et al., 2014, p. 7)—an actor that wants to prioritize status need not be motivated themselves by status nor know precisely why the domestic audiences value status, to formulate a policy taking this into account. From a TIS perspective, once an actor publicly mobilizes position in a hierarchy as an explicit rationale to prioritize a policy, it becomes a theory of status. Hence, a TIS approach would thus be consistent with audiences that value position in a hierarchy because they believe the position affords instrumental utility (Gilpin, 1981), the intrinsic value they attach to the position (Larson & Shevchenko, 2003), or a mixture of reasons.

Rather than motivating policies, TIS are conceived of as (potential) modes of *legitimation*. Following Goddard and Krebs (2015, p. 9), a TIS approach defines legitimation as "the public claim, rooted in publicly acceptable reasons, that particular policy positions and concrete actions are justified." This approach assumes that the range of reasons available to an actor in a social setting are bound by the shared meanings and normative context of those they are legitimating their actions to. To be sure, if states or people had perfect flexibility to legitimate anything they pleased by whatever means they preferred, studying legitimation would not provide

any analytical purchase upon state actions. Yet, most democratic governments or officials in a bureaucracy do not have such flexibility (Goddard & Krebs, 2015, p. 9). For instance, a general may very well have a powerful motivation to expand their budget, but they will need a legitimate rationale for this dream to become realized. Thus, the boundaries of what is considered (il)legitimate structures the possible outcomes and we can study those outcomes through the processes through which policies become legitimate or illegitimate in given social settings. A TIS approach thus examines whether, how, and to what extent TIS are involved in legitimating or delegitimating particular policies.

Crucially, a TIS approach—along with most frameworks that treat legitimation as the locus of action—does not imply that the social context dictates the outcome from the outset. Instead, actors have the agency to improvise, alter, and combine in imaginative new ways, the intersubjective materials at their disposal to render a policy legitimate (Jackson, 2006, pp. 27–29, 39–41). In the process, individual acts of representation and legitimation contribute to the social resources available to future legitimation efforts. In this way, my TIS approach can accommodate contestation and change in how actors interpret the status implications of a given policy. The job of the analyst becomes to longitudinally trace how and why certain strategies of legitimation—including but not limited to TIS—triumphed over others making certain policies possible while eliminating others from consideration.

A TIS approach is designed to enable researchers to empirically come to terms with status ambiguity and its consequences but sacrifices conventional status theories' grand theoretical aspirations. A TIS approach is necessarily humbler than prior status theories because it refuses to assume a relatively stable shared international hierarchy and instead zooms in upon the interpretative agency located at the domestic level to produce TIS' that are implicated in the legitimation of policies. Thus, a TIS approach generates case-specific explanations, rather than global or general claims. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, switching from trying to directly investigate the consequences of "real" status hierarchies to investigating people's theories about those hierarchies puts status research on a firmer empirical footing. As we saw, studying collective beliefs and motivations in practice has tended to involve developing noisy proxies for collective beliefs and trying to infer unobservable and arguably "unknowable" motivations (Krebs & Lobasz, 2007, p. 411). In contrast, studying TIS involves studying observable phenomena: the justifications employed to legitimate policy outcomes.

Furthermore, this approach enables studying how TIS may change with the process of competing. Rather than assuming a relatively stable understanding of a given status hierarchy, a TIS approach expects that the inherent ambiguity around status may lead to the "rules of the game" being reinterpreted as the competition unfolds. Indeed, even within domestic contexts, actors may lack inter-subjective agreement over the nature of the status competition and thus theorize the need to compete according to different rules: for instance, racing to Mars rather than the moon, competing in submarines rather than battleships. Thus, the TIS framework necessitates paying close attention to how the rules of the game emerged and were contested and how particular criteria for evaluating the competition marginalized alternatives.

The next section provides an empirical illustration—drawn from an in-depth case study (Beaumont, 2024)—that elaborates how the TIS framework can shine a light on three puzzles left by existing status research: (a) how states gain from seeking status even when the international benefits in terms of recognition and deference appear ephemeral and even imaginary; (b) how to identify change in the nature of

the international hierarchies that governments and citizens imagine their states are competing in, and (c) how to study status dynamics without worrying about either inferring motivations or measuring precisely "real" international status. Ultimately, the examples illustrate the value of paying attention to how the rules of status competition are theorized and contested within domestic politics over time, and how those processes can and do inform foreign policies.

2. The Boer War: Rational Illusions and the Domestic Politics of International Status

This section reconsiders the Boer War (1899–1902) case that was used by Jonathon Mercer to draw attention to the shortcomings of the dominant status theories in IR. The Boer War offers a stark illustration of both the human tragedy and economic folly of British imperialism. In a war lasting less than three years, Britain and its colonies sent 400,000 thousand men, spent more than £200 million, and suffered at least 22,000 casualties (Pakenham, 1979). The long-term accounting looks no better. The victory was short-lived: When the liberal government replaced the conservative government responsible for the war in 1905, they soon granted the Afrikaner colonies self-government under the British Crown in 1907. Thus, less than a decade after Britain had sent hundreds of thousands of men to fight in a bloody, costly, and brutal war to assert dominance over their South African colonies, on May 31, 1910, The Union of South Africa was born, led by the same Boer leaders Britain had spent so much blood and treasure fighting. Indeed, the Boer War looks like an open-and-shut case of a status-motivated policy leading a country to economically and strategically irrational policies inimical to the public good. Acquiring an empire was just what "Great Powers" did, and their international status was judged by the size of that empire (Barnhart, 2016, p. 386; Naylor, 2018, pp. 99–100). Hence, a conventional status approach would seem to offer a straightforward and compelling explanation: Britain as the leading imperial power annexed the Transvaal at great cost, to buttress its great power status.

Yet as Mercer (2017) has argued, the conventional status explanation leaves a puzzle in its wake. He shows how despite winning the war and expanding the empire, Britain did not benefit from either increased international recognition or deference. Therefore, Mercer argues that the British proclamations of its greatness following victory betrayed feelings rather than analysis and are better thought of as "psychological illusions" rather than accurate reflections of international status. Lacking recognition and/or additional deference for one's feats, Mercer contends that Britain's status seeking dissolves into "vanity" (Mercer, 2017, p. 168). Explicitly laying down a "provocation" and challenge to status researchers, Mercer uses the case to theorize that Britain is unlikely to be uniquely delusional: given the incentives for states to poo poo their rivals' successes, a great deal of status seeking is likely irrational on its own terms and the quest for status is prone to prove futile. Against this, by tracing how the government, opposition, and press wielded evolving theories of status within Britain's domestic politics as the war proceeded, I provide an alternative explanation that does not require the government to suffer from psychological illusions. In the process, the analysis highlights both the agency of the government to retheorize status for domestic consumption but also the limits upon the government's theorizing.

What follows is a condensed account—drawn from an extended in-depth analysis (Beaumont, 2024)—that illustrates how the TIS were used, changed, and contested in three analytically distinct but empirically linked periods of the war. The analysis is based upon a systematic reading of key parliamentary debates, the reporting during key periods in the war in *The Times*, contemporary literature, and secondary sources (see Beaumont, 2024, pp. 223–226). First, the lead—up to the war and its legitimation from 1898 to 1899. Second, the first

nine months of fighting in which the Boers inflicted several battlefield defeats before British reinforcements arrived and the tide turned. Third, the final 18 months of the war, when the Boers fought using guerrilla tactics and Britain forced thousands into concentration camps. In each episode, the grammar of status heuristic was used to identify salient TIS in circulation in British domestic politics, how the pro-war TIS was used, adapted, and contested, and ultimately explore the role of TIS in the (de)legitimation of the government's actions at each episode.

Although Mercer treats the lack of additional deference shown to Britain after the war as a problem for status theory, a closer reading of the debate that preceded the war suggests that those involved did not enter the war expecting a boost in status or additional deference. Instead, reviewing how TIS were used to legitimate the onset of the war, reveals how the government did not present the war as a means to seek status but in order to preserve Britain's status as a great power and avoid humiliation at the hands of a tiny foe. The government's theory of status is well illustrated by Chamberlain's speech to parliament following the ultimatum. Legitimating the decision to go to war, he argued that "the man on the street":

> Knows perfectly well that we are going to war in defence of principles—the principles upon which this Empire has been founded and upon which alone it can exist. What are those principles? I do not think that anyone—however extreme a view he may take of this particular war, and however much he may condemn and criticise the policy of her Majesty's Government—will dispute what I am going to say. The first principle is this—that *if we are to maintain our position in regard to other nations*, if we are to maintain our existence as a great Power in South Africa, we are bound to show that we are both willing and able to protect British subjects everywhere when they are made to suffer from oppression and injustice (...)That is the first principle. It is a principle which prevails always and everywhere, and in every difference which we may have with another country. (Chamberlain, 1899, emphasis added by the author)

Clearly, for Chamberlain, the moral and material hierarchies were intermingled in legitimation: it was because Britain was a great power and could intervene that it had the moral obligation to do so, lest it forfeit its great power status. Chamberlain's argument encapsulates neatly the dominant line of reasoning by pro-war MPs on the conservative side.

Key to this pro-war TIS was an emphasis on the size-differential and social distance between Britain and the Boers that made backing down to the ultimatum issued by the Boers unthinkable. Akin to Liverpool playing Doncaster at football, the Boers were considered so far beneath the British in terms of status that there was little glory to be gained from defeating them. Crucially, reviewing the entirety of the Commons and Lords debates there is not a single member who legitimates the war in terms of a positive quest for status. As one Irish MP put it in parliament, "it is a war without one single redeeming feature, a Giant against a Dwarf, a war which, no matter what its ending may be, will bring neither credit nor glory nor prestige to this great British Empire" (Davitt, 1899). Hence, at the outset of the war following the Boers' ultimatum to Britain, the Boers were depicted as a "wretched little population" by the prime minister that had to be dealt with lest Britain be seen to be caving into the demands of an inferior (Salisbury, 1899, as cited in Steele, 2000, p. 19). As one MP put it, although "we will succeed [in winning the war]...we do not expect any glory from it" (Stanhope, 1899). The prospects of glory looked even worse when Britain suffered a series of humiliating defeats on the battlefield in the opening months of the war.

Yet nine months later, the British prime minister ended up celebrating victory on the battlefield as a "wonderful achievement" and "established" in the "eyes of foreigners" the "the value of the colonial connexion" (Salisbury, 1900, as cited in Mercer, 2017, p. 154). Similar views were echoed in the British press. Given the asymmetry in opponents, the embarrassing battlefield defeats, and the government's initial prophecy that the war should prove easy, the puzzle is not that international recognition was not forthcoming upon victory, but how Britain could plausibly expect that victory against the Boer would impress international audiences. Indeed, Mercer argues that British assessments of the status implications of the war were based upon pride rather than analysis and, as such, should be treated as psychological illusions.

Yet, a close reading of the British domestic political discourse over the course of the nine-month conventional war suggests an alternative explanation. If we look at the *temporal* development of the British discourse, we can see that these different theories of the status implications were not merely elicited upon victory, as Mercer (2017, p. 154) claims. Indeed, the government and pro-war press *retheorized* the rules of the competition prior to victory, such that it became possible to present the war to the domestic audience as a boon to Britain's status. As the war dragged on, the government began presenting their once lowly opponent as having assembled a "vast military machine," armed "with the most perfect weapons ever used in warfare" (Pretyman, 1900). Others began emphasizing "their value as fighting men," in particular their "tenacity and mobility" (Petty-Fitzmaurice, 1900). Supporters also began emphasizing the logistical challenge of waging war on another continent. For instance, one conservative MP called upon his colleagues in the House of Commons to:

> Remember that this war is being carried on at a distance of 6,000 miles from the base, and is in that respect *unprecedented* in the history of the world. It is not an easy matter to send troops to fight 6,000 miles away and to keep up an adequate commissariat supply. (Cecil, 1900, emphasis added by the author)

While the precise representations differed, all embodied the grammar of status and a relative comparison that implicitly or explicitly conjured a competitive international hierarchy. Importantly, with the scale of the operation and their newly recognized fighting capacities taken into account, it enabled the government to claim that beating the Boer displayed a power projection capacity befitting a great power. This drew upon extant discourses about how being a "world power" required global power projection, but at the same time, this theory of why the war should impress, de-emphasized the relative size of the enemy, which the government had hitherto used as a reason for why the victory should have been straightforward and thus why status could not be gained but only saved.

The British press also contributed to salvaging Britain's status through their habitual reporting of the war through a sports metaphor. In tandem with the press's focus on micro-battlefield dynamics and individual narratives of heroics, the sporting metaphor helped background the asymmetry between the Boers and the British and constitute the war as a competition among equals. The reporting of the battle of Mafeking aptly illustrates how sports metaphors worked to flatten the power difference between Britain and the Boers, and thus constitute the war as a competition Britain could take pride in winning. Indeed, zooming in on the tactical predicament—the Brits were outnumbered—rather than the strategic balance of power, the British general charged with the defense of Mafeking, Robert Baden-Powell, could be presented as a plucky hero: fighting against the odds, displaying British virtues of ingenuity, good humor, and bravery in the face of adversity.

In the midst of the siege, explicitly utilizing a sports metaphor, Colonel Baden-Powell released a dispatch to the press relaying his response to the Boers general who had challenged his men to a cricket match:

> Sir, I beg to thank you for your letter of yesterday....I should like nothing better—after the match in which we are at present engaged is over. But just now we are having our innings and have so far scored 200 days, not out, against the bowling of Cronje, Snijman, Botha...and we are having a very enjoyable game. I remain, yours truly R. S. S. Baden-Powell. (Baden-Powell, 1899, as cited in Ferguson, 2012, p. 277)

The press had a "field day" with the story: "[It] was portrayed back in Britain as the war's most glorious episode. . . . Indeed the press treated the siege as a kind of big imperial game, a seven-month test match between England and the Transvaal" (Ferguson, 2012, p. 195). Mafeking was far from the exception: besides cricket, boxing also featured, and even the government joined in (Donaldson, 2018, p. 23). The practice of using sports metaphors in reporting was so widespread that it even fomented a backlash. For instance, one letter to the *Manchester Guardian* was described as "repellent" depicting "the war in the language of sport when the issue is the making of widows and orphans" (Donaldson, 2018, p. 21).

These few examples illustrate a broader trend: as the war unfolded, the government and the press developed a new theory of the war's status value; one that contradicted their own earlier depiction. In short, generating new criteria by which the war's implications for status could be judged, and reframing the Boers as worthy opponents made it plausible to claim that victory was a "wonderful achievement" that would impress the international onlookers and thereby boost Britain's status. Indeed, although the war was frequently constructed as a status competition, unlike the Olympics, the rules by which comparisons were made and status assigned were contested and revised as the war unfolded. Notably, this re-theorization *pre-dated* the celebrations of victory. Tracing this process thus allows the inversion of Mercer's claim: rather than pride informing analyses of Britain's status, this new theory of status made expressions of pride possible. Indeed, when the domestic audience and the landslide election that followed the conclusion of the conventional war (1899–1900) are taken into account, Mercer's puzzle dissolves. From the government's perspective, despite the huge economic cost and lack of international recognition, the Boer War helped legitimate the government and secure a second term in office at the Khaki Election in October 1900 (which received its nickname because of the salience of the war in the campaign).

Thus, the onset and initial waging of the Boer War illuminates how governments (and domestic actors) may possess a hitherto under-acknowledged agency to re-theorize international status hierarchies for domestic consumption. This in turn provides a plausible explanation for why and how states compete for "status," even when international rewards are ephemeral. Rather than a psychological illusion—as Mercer would have it—that governments will eventually learn to ignore, the illusion of status would be better treated as a sociological construction, one that governments actively seek to protect and maintain. Indeed, the Boer War highlights how contradictory theories about status can exist, persist, and have effects simultaneously. This is neatly illuminated by Mercer's account of the allies' apparently contradictory self-understanding of their role in the war. Mercer (2017, pp. 158—160) shows how the British, New Zealanders, and Canadians all simultaneously contended that the Boer War demonstrated their superior fighting prowess. In other words, akin to the world's many "above average" drivers, multiple countries could simultaneously make the same claim to superior status—in an imagined international hierarchy of fighting prowess—and "win" according to

their own theories of the same competition. Meanwhile, the relative insulation from one another's discourses enabled these interpretations to endure without their logical contradictions needing to be settled.

2.1. The Limits of Status Retheorization

Yet, as victory in the conventional war morphed into a brutal 18th-month-long counter-insurgency campaign, the limits upon the agency of the British government to re-theorize the rules of the game for domestic consumption became apparent. In particular, the government's deployment of concentration camps to detain the women and children of Boer fighters fatally undermined its self-serving theory of the status implications of the war. In the words of one of the liberal MPs who tabled a parliamentary amendment against the use of camps, the tactics employed by Britain besmirched "the reputation and the honour of the whole nation" (Channing, 1902). Hence, it was "the interests of the Government, and also in those higher interests of humanity, and *for the good name of this Empire*, to let everything be done that is possible to bring about a better condition of things" (Channing, 1902, emphasis added by the author). Indeed, seldom did those who spoke against the camps not buttress their critique by raising how the camps would reflect upon Britain's status as a civilized nation. For instance, the leader of the liberal opposition, Campbell-Bannerman, attacked the camps on the same basis: "It is the whole system which they have to carry out that I consider, to use a word which I have already applied to it, barbarous" (Campbell-Bannerman, 1901). Notably, the standards of civilization were invoked by both the government and the opposition to debate the legitimacy of the British's use of concentration camps.

The fact that it was women and children who suffered in the camps prompted particular consternation among the opposition. As Lloyd George emphasized: "We are fighting them, but we are bound to fight them according to the rules of civilized nations, and by every rule of every civilized nation it is recognized that women and children are non-combatants" (Lloyd George, 1901). It was an Irish nationalist MP that expressed the civilizational argument against the camps most sharply, arguing that Britain's "conduct in South Africa in connection with these women and children is conduct which would bring shame to the cheeks of the most savage and most barbarous people in existence"(Redmond, 1901). However, several British MPs also explicitly theorized how the treatment of women and children in the camps would affect Britain's status in the world: For instance, one MP belied a patriotic concern for Britain's standing when he argued that the camps were "a disgrace, and if children die and women fall ill it is upon us that the responsibility lies, and upon the fair fame of this country lies the discredit" (Scott, 1901).

In an audacious, if doomed attempt to legitimate the camps Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, attempted to theorize the size and scale of the camps as a symbol of Britain's status as a civilized nation. Again using relative comparisons to frame their argument, Chamberlain argued that:

> Never in the whole history of the world, so far as we know it, have there been such gigantic efforts made by any nation to minimise the horrors of war(...)taking it as a whole, I repeat what I said at the beginning—no more gigantic task has ever been undertaken by a nation in time of war, no more humane task has ever been so well fulfilled. (Chamberlain, 1902)

However, given the camps were required as the result of the farm-burning strategy, that the government had been forced to admit that inmates of the camps were not free to leave and that it had become known that the

camps were at least partly a strategy of war, the government's attempts to legitimate and even celebrate the camps rang hollow. Indeed, while the government contested several aspects of their critics' narrative, they could not escape the fact that Britain had been responsible for forcing over a hundred thousand women and children into camps and that tens of thousands had died as a direct result of their actions.

Regardless of the government's rhetorical gymnastics, it proved difficult to square the concentration camp policy with the earlier construction of the war as a sporting contest in which Britain prevailed in a fair competition. Ultimately, once Britain's battles with the Boers ceased being undertaken on the battlefields, and because the rules of "the gentleman's war" were clearly being broken, it fatally undermined the ideal of the war as a "fair fight." Similar to how if one castles with a queen, you are no longer playing chess, so it was that once Britain began to use "methods of barbarism," the war became difficult to present as a rule-governed status competition they could take pride in winning. As Williams (2013, p. 494) notes:

> [It] was one thing to celebrate the steadfastness of the defenders of Mafeking, or the battlefield heroism displayed at Paardeberg, but quite another to remain comfortable with the burning of Boer farms and the herding of Boer civilians into squalid and disease-ridden "concentration camps." Public enthusiasm waned, opposition grew more confident, and the newspaper press played its part in articulating a mounting reaction against the war. Few celebrated the actual victory…quite the opposite, the guerrilla war was looked upon with growing disquiet and almost outright shame.

3. Conclusion

Zooming out, a useful way of thinking about the utility of the TIS approach is as a systematic means of identifying how status dynamics depart from the baseline of conventional status research. At its most abstract, conventional status theories depict a process whereby states' status seeking responds to real international collective beliefs in an iterative feedback process: (a) states assess the international status, (b) respond with a status seeking strategy designed to improve their status, (c) assess the results of this process in terms of international recognition, before beginning the process anew. The Boer War case illustrates how this process can be short-circuited by the interpretative agency of governments whose status theories need only appear plausible to domestic (rather than international) audiences to generate pride and legitimacy. Put more theoretically, the ambiguity of international hierarchy and the difficulty of knowing international collective beliefs enables a government leeway to produce and benefit from theories of their states' international status that are not shared internationally but resonate domestically. At the same time, the analysis of the latter stages of the Boer War highlighted how this agency is not infinite—although the government attempted to frame the status implications of the concentration camps in a positive light, the camps broke so egregiously the prevailing norms of civilization, that the government's theory of status failed to rebut the critics' contention that they harmed Britain's standing and undermined any prospect of glory from victory.

In terms of contributing to the "new directions for status research" that this thematic issue aims to elaborate, a TIS framework enables the analyst to illuminate how *rival* discourses of international status circulate, change, become contested, and ultimately inform policy debates. This is important because IR's leading theories of status competition all assume that states already know how to compete for status: they agree upon the rules of the game. In other words, the outcome that is said to indicate status competition is tied to

a specific understanding of the rules of the international status hierarchy (i.e., more arms = more status). While this does not stop these scholars from providing important insights, if the indicator of status competition is tied to the *substantive* notion of the international hierarchy, there is no way of analyzing any disagreement or changes in the rules of the game, or status competitions that do not conform to the analysts a priori assessment of the international hierarchy. As the Boer War case shows, a TIS framework can illuminate both the re-theorization of status by the government and its supporters, some of the consequences of that re-theorization, and also how status theories can be contested from below. Indeed, the British government's theory of status was not only contested by the opposition party but also by civil society groups.

Counter-intuitively, studying TIS instead of "real" status places status research on firmer methodological footing and expands the range of phenomenon status that can plausibly be used to account for. On the one hand, a TIS approach is humbler about the ontological status of international hierarchies: theories of international hierarchies extend their influence only as far as the discourse within which they are manifested. In this sense, my TIS approach parochializes status research but renders status dynamics more empirically tractable. On the other hand, restricting the analyst's gaze to discourse broadens the range of domains that a status lens can plausibly be used to account for because it does not require international inter-state agreements to have effects. A TIS approach only requires that the audience a particular theory of status is aimed at finds it credible and adequate to (de)legitimate a given activity. Crucially, parochializing status research (limiting it to its discursive manifestations), enables empirical investigation of the *spread* of status theories among groups within states, across borders, and potentially to regions. Thus, a TIS approach can allow the analyst to map and attempt to account for the *travel* of TIS' and their effects.

There are a number of critiques that could be raised against the TIS framework. The first is conceptual and almost semantic: *Is it really status that TIS refers to*? I would respond that while TIS does not have any *necessary* relationship to international collective beliefs about rank, neither does the rest of status research. For instance, the status discrepancy research agenda uses the rather convoluted method of ranking countries according to how many embassies they host to generate a proxy for status. While this approach can be justified theoretically, as MacDonald and Parent (2021, p. 10) warn, it is "less plausible" that policymakers use this "baroque" technique themselves for assessing international status. Meanwhile, embassies can be stationed in countries for several reasons that have little to do with status (Mercer, 2017; Røren & Beaumont, 2019). Thus, whatever correlations status discrepancy researchers uncover, it is questionable whether it is really status that is doing the work. Similarly, scholarship that reduces status to club memberships suffer from a related problem: "States join clubs for a variety of reasons, too, only some of which may be tied to status aspirations" (MacDonald & Parent, 2021, p. 8). Ultimately then, even conventional approaches struggle to operationalize status by their own definition. While my TIS approach does not solve all these problems it does provide advantages over conventional approaches: first it restricts inquiries *only* to international hierarchies that are represented and used by actors in international politics, thus overcoming the proxy problem. Additionally, calling them *theories*, the TIS builds in a helpful scientific humility (see Beaumont & de Coning, 2022) about these representations' relationship to real status, which I agree with Gilpin (1981, p. 33), will always remain a significant extent imponderable.

If this is a robust defense, there is also a more conciliatory and constructive means of reconciling TIS with prior status works, especially first-wave research. My TIS approach and first-wave status research can be

understood as analyzing different aspects of the same phenomenon: (a) the study of the effects of social facts and (b) the study of the construction and contestation of social facts. The first approach is analogous to what IR scholars post-Wendt call "thin constructivism"; taking their cue from Durkheim, they recognize that the state, international law, and status are social constructions but suggest that their meaning is sufficiently reified that they can be treated as if they are "things" that have independent effects. This concern with the effects of social facts animates most status scholarship. For instance, when they recognize that a military weapon's status value is a social construction but hold that this symbolic value is *sufficiently* stable and shared that it can produce systematic effects: a similar kind of status seeking among states (e.g., Gilady, 2018). Indeed, one could tell a "big picture" status story related to the Boer War about how *relatively* stable symbolic hierarchies associated with empires and war informed Britain's strategy. This would not necessarily be wrong, but as my case suggested, they would also overlook crucial parts of the story of how status dynamics affected the policy outcomes. In contrast, my approach follows the path trodden by thicker constructivist scholarship, which points out that these social facts' stability are illusions brought about through continuous discursive labor (Hansen, 2006). Hence, the analysis zoomed in and showed how status hierarchies that look like "social facts" from a distance and in retrospect, were more contested and malleable in practice. Only by paying attention to these processes of contestation and re-interpretation could we get a fuller picture of how status concerns informed domestic policy processes.

Ultimately, I would contend that my TIS approach and conventional status frameworks stand in a productive tension with one another that can help further the IR status research agenda. A TIS approach offers a useful empirical check upon the universal theoretical ambitions of early status research. Where this research tends to jump quickly to assuming that status hierarchies are widely shared among states, a TIS approach enables the empirical analysis of where, to what extent, and among whom these status hierarchies are actually shared. In short, a TIS approach's focus on discursive manifestations of status can help *bound* conventional analysis in time and space. While this will certainly humble the more grandiose claims of status scholars, it will also strengthen their empirical basis. In so doing, it aims to kick start a new wave of status research that takes discourse seriously by pioneering the systematic study of TIS within specific social contexts: how and why particular theories of status emerge, solidify, travel, as well as how they become contested and sometimes wither away.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
All the data cited is publicly available in online archives.

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ARTICLE

Learning to Lead at the WHO: Thailand's Global Health Diplomacy at the World Health Assembly

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Abstract

One of the largest delegations at the governing body of the WHO—the World Health Assembly (WHA)—hails from a small country in Southeast Asia. While Thailand's presence through the 1990s was small, its delegation and engagement at annual WHA meetings grew substantially from the early 2000s through the 2010s, coming to rival that of the US. Thailand has tabled important resolutions at the WHA. The country serves on the WHO's Executive Board; officials serve on politically sensitive drafting committees and have played important roles in high-profile resolutions. How and why did Thailand invest in building a presence at the WHO and what dividends have accrued from it? This article explores the development and growth of Thailand's unique approach to global health diplomacy at the WHO, based on nearly 70 interviews with officials from the government, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and academics. The country's growing prominence at the WHA was part of a deliberate investment strategy that required sustained political and economic resources which allowed the country to play credible leadership roles and begin to take a proactive (rather than reactive) approach to set the global health agenda, attaining status through its growing "epistemic power" in the process.

Keywords

development; diplomacy; epistemic power; global health; Global South; hierarchy; international order; international relations; status; world order

1. Introduction

One important marker of the resource disparities between rich and poor nations in global health negotiations has long been the size and capacity of a country's representation at politically significant

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international forums. While US and European countries regularly bring large delegations and significant technical expertise to international global health forums, poor nations have tended to send fewer delegates with less training and experience, owing in part to the financial resources required to send them and a lack of existing technical capacity to draw on. To address this resource gap and the discrepancies in "epistemic power," at times international non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—from the South Center to Knowledge Ecology International to OXFAM and Doctors without Borders—as well as progressive academics and representatives from the secretariat of the WHO, have supported delegations from Low-and-Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). However, to the extent that poorer countries have participated in such meetings, it remains that delegations have often been small and symbolic, frequently reserved for senior officials and diplomats.

As the site for negotiations on agreements that are critical to public health and human life, including the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, amendments to the International Health Regulations, and a pandemic treaty, the WHA—the governing body of the WHO—looms large as a critically important norm-setting forum where glaring resource disparities are often on display during negotiations. How do resource-constrained nations on the global periphery ascend global status hierarchies, underpinned by substantial differences in resource endowments, in technical areas that are critical to public health and human life? How do they grow the size of their global health delegations and achieve reputations for technical acumen on global health issues that countries in the Global North and Global South both look to in global health?

At a time when growing attention is paid to "decolonizing" global health and development, this article explores an important case of positive deviation related to capacity building in international relations, tracing how a small country from Southeast Asia—Thailand—came to have one of the largest and most active delegations at the WHA. In the process, stories of Thailand's health policy successes have been regularly used by the WHO on issues that range from introducing the concept of universal health coverage in the 2010 *World Health Report* (with the search term "Thai" coming up 40 times, and by contrast, Rwanda, Ghana, and Mexico—also with notable universal coverage policies—being referenced just 23, 16, and 16 times respectively) and in pointing to lessons the world can learn from its Covid-19 response (WHO, 2020a) alongside countries at much higher levels of economic development, including the Republic of Korea and New Zealand.

Development scholars have for a long time been concerned with improving humans' *material* conditions, measured through the reduction in poverty, growth of GDP per capita, and movement up global production chains, as captured in the studies of the Asian Tiger economies forty years ago. However, considerably less attention has been paid to important *symbolic* aspects of development that are underpinned by material conditions, or the process that would lead a country to invest so heavily in representation at a forum like the WHA.

2. Capacity Building for Niche Diplomacy by Middle Powers

Diplomacy has been defined as the "core site of global governance and world politics" (Wiseman, 2015, p. 327), involving the "social construction of international political reality," reproducing, and sometimes remolding, "social institutions, rules, and norms" (Ambrosetti, 2012, p. 66). With the international order in mind, Keohane (1969, p. 296) writes that "middle powers" are states "whose leaders consider [they] cannot

act alone effectively, but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution." Canada and Australia are classic examples of middle powers in the Global North, although the term has been extended to include such middle powers in the Global South, such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, South Africa, and Malaysia (see Cooper, 1997; also van der Westhuizen, 1998 on South Africa).

Within the field of diplomatic studies, there has been tension between theoretically driven studies that emphasize the patterned behavior of diplomatic practice and focus on the everyday routines of what diplomats "do" and "say," and those that privilege history and individual diplomats' intimate knowledge, with the former offering greater conceptual contributions and the latter greater empirical ones (Wiseman, 2015). A subset of important work concerned with the practice of governance and diplomacy has explored the dynamics of governance within international organizations, including the International Monetary Fund (Babb & Chorev, 2016; Kentikelenis & Seabrooke, 2017; Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023), the World Trade Organization (Conti, 2010; Hopewell, 2016), the World Bank (Goldman, 2005), the WHO (Chorev, 2012; Irwin & Smith, 2019; Renganathan, 2012), and the UN Security Council (Wiseman, 2015).

A second body of work has examined how middle powers pursue advantage in international relations through "niche diplomacy," which involves "concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having, rather than trying to cover the field" (Evans & Grant, 1991 as cited in Cooper et al., 1993, pp. 25–26). One important aspect of these returns is the accrual of status and recent research has examined the pursuit of status by rising powers (Gómez, 2017; Jagtiani et al., 2022; Mukherjee, 2022). Research on middle powers in areas such as security politics has shown how skillful diplomacy and reputational competence can lead countries to punch above their weight in particular domains of international affairs (Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014).

Although the term "medical diplomacy" dates back to 1978, the use of the term "global health diplomacy" (GHD) did not really become mainstream until after 2000, with the US not announcing the formation of a government global health strategy until 2009 (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2012; see also Fidler, 2008; Kickbusch et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2010). The export of Cuban doctors abroad has frequently been discussed as a longstanding case of bilateral health diplomacy (Feinsilver, 2010; Kirk, 2015). Covid-19 has led to greater attention to the symbolic capital countries have sought to gain through health diplomacy (Feldman et al., 2024; Suzuki & Yang, 2023). And, indeed, the Foreign Policy and Global Health (FPGH) Initiative, launched in 2006 by seven countries—of which Thailand is a part—illustrates "niche diplomacy" prioritizing health as a foreign policy tool that has helped promote the image of Thailand (Pibulsonggram et al., 2007). However, with few exceptions (Elbe et al., 2023; Harris, 2017; Helleiner, 2014; Thaiprayoon & Smith, 2015; Wenham, 2018), research on the specific role that peripheral nations have played in forums of global health governance where diplomacy is practiced has been a less visible focus of the literature.

Work on health diplomacy at the WHO has illuminated the organization's "dual role" as a venue where consensus is reached over contentious issues, as well as the secretariat's role as the primary provider of expertise, interpretation, and technical support in negotiations over global health conventions, codes, guidelines, and standards (Renganathan, 2012). Research has demonstrated how the secretariat has maintained a measure of autonomy, despite pressures from member states and the Executive Board (Chorev, 2012). While in many cases norms are agreed on before the WHA even meets, rituals limit who may take

part in the exercise of power, and both informal settings and closed-door resolution drafting committees can impact the shape, content, and wording of resolutions (Irwin & Smith, 2019).

This article extends the literature by analyzing what a resource-constrained country on the global periphery (Thailand) has done to build the capacity to engage in global health diplomacy at the WHA and the wider implications for middle-income countries. Building on and adapting earlier work (Adler & Bernstein, 2004; Shiffman, 2014; Sondarjee, 2023), our analysis centers on the process by which Thailand expanded its "epistemic power" (which we define as authoritative knowledge based on competing claims to technical skills, structural positions, and normative concerns) and improved its position and status relative to larger economic powers through capacity building at the WHA.

Amid a lack of substantial economic capital, we argue that Thailand's growing ability to set the global health agenda rested not just on homegrown technical knowledge wrought from the country's considerable domestic health policy achievements (in areas such as Universal Health Coverage and tobacco control), but more pointedly, on the deliberate expansion of its delegations' growing size and command of a range of technical issues as well as intimate knowledge of and involvement in rituals at the WHA from which it had previously been excluded. The country's experience institutionalizing a place for itself in the inner sanctum of the governing body of the WHO (through engagement in resolution-making and creation of a large "Thai Village" well known to the Secretariat and other delegations)—as an LMIC from the Global South frequently representing Global South interests through a participatory approach—improved the country's structural position within the global health hierarchy and provided a more powerful normative basis for articulating policy measures aimed at enhancing social justice globally, all the while providing the country with a measure of symbolic capital that granted it recognition, prestige, influence, and status.

In training its focus on the process of capacity building in global health diplomacy, this article takes a sociological approach that thinks about these issues through the lens of nation branding (Bandelj & Wherry, 2011; Farber & Taylor, 2023; Rivera, 2011) and impression management in relation to others (Aronczyk, 2013; Goffman, 1959). Work in this vein points to the need to draw on qualitative approaches and get inside individual cases to understand better how nations on the periphery are connected to global nodes of power—where international reputations are cemented—and the politics and processes by which countries improve their positions in global status hierarchies. This is, however, the first account that examines how a peripheral nation improved its status at the WHA, as well as the first history of Thailand's GHD at the WHA in the English language, extending existing work in Thai (Sursattayawong et al., 2022).

3. Methods

This article is part of a larger project on Thailand's contributions to global health. This account is informed by in-depth interviews with approximately 70 different key informants with intimate knowledge of Thailand's public health policies, including its work at the WHA, attendance at a number of relevant international, national, and regional meetings (including the WHA), archival research in Thailand and Geneva, and existing literature in Thai and English. Informants included Thai policymakers responsible for the policies, bureaucrats, academics, and officials from other relevant national governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations who knew Thai policies. Participant observation was used to corroborate information given by interview respondents, as Bueger (2014, p. 399) suggests it is the most

appropriate method to derive insight from diplomatic practice. The project received human subjects' approval from the Boston University Institutional Review Board and Thailand's Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) Institutional Review Board. To offer this novel contribution of the rise of a peripheral nation at the WHA, data were analyzed alongside existing research to build a chronological narrative of the events. Substantive issues that came up repeatedly in interviews were coded by theme and subsequently featured in the analysis. Our interview protocol is included in the Supplementary File (Appendix A).

4. Developing GHD Capacity at a Time When the Term Did Not Exist

Approaching the turn of the millennium, Thailand's delegation to the WHA numbered just three people (interview, former director, Bureau of International Health [BIH], September 11, 2017), a size not uncommon for resource-constrained developing countries. The delegation attending the Executive Board meetings in 1999 found the experience frustrating, with many English-language documents to go over and insufficient staff to manage the job effectively (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017; interview, professor, Mahidol University Global Health (MUGH), September 6, 2017). Even though the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and MOPH were involved in political representation, the relationship between the two at the WHA could not be described as purposive or strategic. As first-time attendees, those attending likened the experience to being thrown into a pool without instructions on how to swim (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017).

By comparison, US and European delegations brought much more sizable and impressive delegations to the WHA, which they used to draft resolutions and guidance. In particular, the US delegation left an impression on some delegates. They did their "homework" on issues and staked out particular positions (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017). One delegate long involved in Thailand's GHD work recalled:

> We see the example...the US. They come with a full team. They're well prepared. They have a big file...for each agenda....They have studied very thoroughly. The way they negotiate is very smart....We learn of the capacity that they have, and we need to build some capacity to be well prepared like that....They even have [a] legal advisor [on] the team....They know when they have problems...who to call. But for Thai people, they just only have two people, and they have to discuss among themselves, use their own knowledge or experience to fight. It's kind of like street fighting—[a] street fighter, fight[ing] with the world...heavyweight champion. (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017)

Thailand's experience at the WHA was emblematic of its experiences at other international forums (Patcharanarumol, 2006). The former BIH director remarked: "We think that in many international forums developed countries are much stronger than developing countries. We've [seen] many times [that] the resolutions and agreements from these international meetings...only benefit developed countries" and that sometimes they "force developing countries to follow" them (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017). While the delegation at that time had a modest amount of technical knowledge, it was small, and though its normative concerns were rooted in justice, its structural position within the global health hierarchy was relatively weak. Although it was a member state afforded participation in the assembly, it did not play an active or central role in important aspects of the WHA.

The experience left an impression on the new deputy permanent secretary overseeing global health issues (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017), who was in a unique position to change the status quo as the official holding responsibility for that portfolio and one of the highest-ranking officials in the ministry, just below the politically appointed minister and deputy minister. Those involved realized Thai delegates needed more capacity or "otherwise it would be...a suffering experience":

> The ones who represent Thailand or any developing country cannot fight for [policies] for the benefit of developing countries...the balance of power during that time is not equal, so we decided that we have to do something. (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017)

One official who went on to lead the BIH later recounted: "We have limitations on language skills. We cannot fight one-[on]-one. That's why we need an army. We need to fight together...to negotiate with developed countries" (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017).

Even when it was only able to mobilize a handful of people in a delegation, Thailand had already developed a reputation for standing up to great powers, such as the US, as an LMIC on health issues at international forums, fighting against the US government at the General Agreements on Trade and Tariffs, the precursor to the World Trade Organization (Chitanondh, 2000; Supawongse, 2007). Whereas richer Asian nations, such as Japan and the Republic of Korea, had responded to US pressure to open their tobacco markets to US companies by simply doing what the US wanted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Thailand fought against the US government and won important new precedents that benefited all developing countries, including the right to ban tobacco advertising and ability to tax foreign tobacco companies to prevent tobacco use (these measures also provided some level of protection for Thailand's domestic tobacco industry, which now faced international competition).

Thailand's status as an LMIC informed its approach to the WHA. As the former deputy permanent secretary remarked: "Thailand is a developing country, so once you put developing countries priority as the first priority, then you put Thailand as the first priority at the same time" (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017). But even as the country rose the ranks of the socio-economic ladder to become an upper-middle-income-country, the operating principle remained much the same:

> If our principle is to try to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, between developing and developed countries...Thailand is in the middle. This is our position and principle...we try to negotiate to not just benefit Thailand...we always know what is beneficial to developing countries and global health is also benefitting...our country as well. (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017)

Thailand's GHD efforts therefore involved "using [multisectoral] participation to work on global health issues, using diplomacy as a way to push or collaborate on global health, on global issues, on global collaboration" (interview, program manager, International Trade and Health Programme, International Health Policy Program [IHPP], October 4, 2017).

5. Formation of the International Health Scholars Program

To address Thailand's staffing and capacity gap and prepare officials to attend international forums with appropriate knowledge and the capacity to intervene at meetings, in 1998 with the support of funding from the MOPH BIH, the ministry founded the International Health Scholars program within BIH, which served as the program's secretariat (interview, program manager, International Trade and Health Programme, IHPP, October 4, 2017). While a senior official involved in the program had suggested that Thailand needed "to prepare for political things and...request WHO support for technical things" (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views), advocating for the country's interests in global health involved both the political and the technical realms. And the WHO provided support for this capacity-building program (interview, program manager, International Trade and Health Programme, IHPP, October 4, 2017). This support from the WHO for the IHS program, aimed at building development in the short- to medium-term, complemented longer-term WHO funding support for Thai health officials to study Master's and doctoral degrees in health-related technical areas abroad, particularly in Europe.

From the beginning, those founding the program put out calls for applications to a wide range of stakeholders beyond the MOPH who were interested in international health issues (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). The program ultimately included people from universities, other ministries (including foreign affairs), the National Economic and Social Development Board, parastatal health organizations (like the Thai Health Promotion Foundation and the National Health Commission Office), the private sector, civil society, and participants whose work related to issues on the agenda (interview, program manager, International Trade and Health Programme, IHPP, October 4, 2017; interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017).

While the need for multi-stakeholder involvement accounted for some of the rationale for casting a wide net, another reason was that investments in a person's training did not always pay off. The director of BIH recalled: "Sometimes you invest in 10 people, you can only get one or two that [are] interested in global health. But [we have] to invest to get some extraordinary people" (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017).

Once selected, the program put International Health Scholars through a rigorous experiential learning program that relied heavily on the scholars' own initiative. One regular delegate involved in the program explained:

> The process of training is...practical. No teaching, no lecture, but...activities every month. Each month, the [International Health] Scholar has to volunteer to propose the agenda to discuss during that month. They have to prepare document[s], to conduct [the] meeting, [do] brainstorming, whatever agenda that they propose. So it's the IH Scholars who [have] to do the job, and they have the secretary to support the team, to send out invitation letter[s], arrange [the] venue, and coffee breaks, but that's it. The content has to come from the scholar themselves. (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017)

While this part of the capacity-building program took place in Thailand, the even more important part took place at the WHA itself. There, scholars were each responsible for six to seven agendas and were required to intervene on every agenda item on behalf of Thailand as a kind of "on the job training" that was akin to (once again) being thrown into the deep end of a pool (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). In addition to delivering reports on the past day's work at daily briefings of the Thai delegation that began each morning

at 7:30 am (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017, interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views), scholars were also expected to expand their social networks and social capital by collecting 10 business cards per day. A key official involved in training noted that "it [was] quite a struggle for the first few years" and that initially there was:

> No coach, no mentor, so you have to work on your own. [There were] sleepless nights….It's a struggle. I went to the negotiation table myself, no other people…come to help, just myself and the whole room. You have to fight for this. Don't give up. This is the only instruction, whatever you can do by yourself….I cannot say that I'm good at writing intervention[s]. [One of the senior people involved] will always be the one who [corrects it and] get[s] the final say. But I am the second batch and still survive[d]! (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017)

Those involved in the program's first few years read reports and draft resolutions but were pressed to be more critical of them and to "spot room for improvement" in order to "change [and] amend" them (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views). Those who performed well at the WHA were invited back to represent Thailand again the following year and to build Thailand's ranks over the next five years, although a third batch of scholars was never formally recruited through the same channels (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). Dividends from recruiting were not immediate: at the 2004 meeting, there were just two to three international health scholars present at the WHA (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views). Over time, as the program grew and developed, Thai officials recognized the importance of mentoring and took a more systematic approach to it. Three people worked on each agenda together—a novice, a coach, and a mentor—and before delivering an intervention, the novice had to first get clearance from their mentor (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). This approach dramatically expanded both the depth and breadth of Thailand's technical capacity, while altering the country's structural position from passive participant to active role player on issues of normative importance to countries in the Global South.

Senior mentors involved in Thailand's GHD effort had their own opportunities for training. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Thailand began to chair drafting committees at the WHA (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017), which were challenging in that chairs had to find and bring together different interests and craft sensitive language that actors who were sometimes far apart could get behind. Some 10 years on, it had chaired between 10 and 20 of them (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017). Previously excluded from such important roles, the appointment of Thai delegates as drafting committee chairmen by the secretariat was a recognition of both the country's growing technical reputation in health policy, but also of its delegates' growing awareness of ritual WHA rules, procedures, and capacity to manage powerful actors in closed-door settings. This represented another important step up in the country's structural position within the global health community that provided greater opportunities for an LMIC from the Global South that had created a space for itself at the table to advance normative concerns rooted in justice that were aligned with its identity.

While the WHA was the central focus of training efforts, what trainees learned there was intended to be of use in other forums. One senior trainer remarked: "We use[d the] WHA as the forum for us to learn, but they can apply that when they attend other forum as well" (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). Early on, some of the greatest criticism Thailand received for allowing junior people to represent the country came from

senior Thai officials who questioned the value of having such junior people do this but who gradually came to see this made Thailand's interventions stronger (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017).

The program received around 100 applications in its second year from which 30 to 40 were selected into the IHS program, with a total number selected over the two first years numbering under 100 scholars (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). After two years, funding from the BIH ran out (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017), and, in 2001, the program moved from its location in the formal MOPH bureaucracy at BIH to the newly formed autonomous parastatal organization devoted to solving health-related policy problems through research, the IHPP, of which the deputy permanent secretary was the first director (interview, program manager, International Trade and Health Programme, IHPP, October 4, 2017).

The move to IHPP provided the program more flexibility to go about its operations as opposed to the rigid rules and hierarchy of the formal bureaucracy. Another partnership with MUGH that focused on training for the WHA provided another important foundation for sustaining active involvement and training, even when some high-level officials were not active or linked to political parties not invested in or supportive of Thailand's strong presence at the WHO (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13) and when senior personnel with differing priorities changed (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017).

The IHS program formally ended in 2006/2007 after the funding ceased, but the process that began continued with an even wider group of people involved (interview, program manager, International Trade and Health Programme, IHPP, October 4, 2017). More recently, ownership of the program moved back to BIH because "it's supposed to be that way," as one trainer reflected, but trainers "still keep these [other outlets at IHPP and MUGH though they are] less active" but can be activated when necessary (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017).

6. Turning the Training Focus Abroad

In 2009, one of the senior officials from MUGH attended an international meeting where she presented her work on capacity building in global health in Thailand (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). The Rockefeller Foundation's managing director happened to be in attendance and requested that the team submit a proposal to Rockefeller for funding support (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017).

While the IHS program originally focused on building the capacity of Thai delegation officials to engage in GHD, gradually the acumen Thailand gained led those overseeing the program to direct capacity-building efforts at other countries interested in building their own GHD skills, primarily in the region. As a former director of BIH noted:

> During the [past] decade, we observed countries like Japan, China, and Vietnam...learned from Thailand when Thailand allowed young staff to join these international meetings. In the past few years, we observed Japan now has policies to strengthen the global health capacity of its staff, China as well. (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017)

However, "other developing countries have limited resources" (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017), pointing to a need for capacity development elsewhere and an opportunity for Thailand to offer it.

The proposal the Thai team submitted to Rockefeller, which was granted, requested three years of funding for three types of workshops: national workshops, regional workshops, and training of the trainer workshops (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). The relationship with MFA deepened with MFA representatives invited to serve in some sessions and participate in organizing training of the trainers' workshops (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). From that point on, a true curriculum was developed. Thai GHD efforts became much more systematic and began to focus more on the "mass production" of scholars (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017; interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views).

The learning objectives of the program centered on helping participants gain knowledge about global health and global health diplomacy, including soft skills essential for negotiations and participating in international meetings, especially for the WHA; sharing Thailand's experience in driving global health agendas to the global level; and supporting capacity building of officials from developing countries in global health (IHPP et al., 2023; EnLight, 2024). This allowed for both further refinement of technical skills but also improvement in countries' structural position through greater capacity to navigate WHA rules and rituals.

The curriculum includes training on how to draft interventions, role-playing exercises in negotiations, lectures by diplomats, and discussion of geopolitics and health. The country's achievements in universal health coverage are featured as a way in which the country leads by example. Instructors are homegrown and have hands-on experience tabling global health agendas and chairing drafting groups at the WHA. Course materials are drawn from real-world experience that is featured alongside other relevant information, drawn principally from WHO sources, using the WHA as a focal point throughout the course. Post-course evaluations have found participant satisfaction with the course, in part because it is based on real-life experiences and is not too theoretical (EnLight, 2024; IHPP et al., 2023).

Thailand's desire to build the capacity of other countries was by no means a purely selfless endeavor. As one graduate of the IHS program who played an important role in further training observed regarding international proceedings:

> We cannot work alone. When we go to attend this World Health Assembly, we can see that to [take up] some of the very controversial issues, we need to have a team. When you fight with the giant and you are very small, you have to have a team...the more active [that] developing countries are, for us, we think the better the policy will be balanced....We build capacity [for] the benefit of public, not private, not the country, not Thailand, not because we want them to support Thailand on particular issues. But for the benefit of all of us...it is not only the fight for Thailand, but for developing countries in general. (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017)

Having a "team" to fight those battles therefore meant building the capacity of other nations as well. In the context of the Southeast Asia Region, where interactions have not traditionally been confrontational (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13), all countries are "developing countries," and there is no major power (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health,

MOPH, December 4, 2017), that meant teaching other nations how to develop and write agendas on behalf of the whole region, rather than just their own country (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). In improving country capacity regionally, this work enhanced the technical skills, bargaining power, and structural position of all of the countries that Thailand worked with and increased Thailand's stature as a growing leader in the global health community that could be relied on to take forward collective interests in a participatory fashion.

Initially, five-day GHD training workshops involving participants from other countries took place in Thailand and involved participants from China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Nepal, and Indonesia, but over time included three-day workshops that took place in other countries (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). Thailand brought its experience in the field of global health over the past 30 to 40 years (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017). These trainings helped junior and mid-level officials new to the WHA "know the process and [rules] of the meeting…how to react and respond, how to draft [a] resolution…how to negotiate with other countries" (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13). Following the conclusion of Rockefeller funding, Thailand's GHD program transitioned to domestic funding sources, drawing on support from organizations that were friendly to the cause but who stood apart from the state, including the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (an autonomous parastatal) and MUGH (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). Workshops held in other countries pay the Thais for their work and cover hotel and air travel, some using government money and some drawing on WHO support (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). While the training has mainly focused on helping to build capacity in the Southeast Asia Region, this has been in part due to the similar cultural backgrounds and perspectives (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017). However, a trainer long involved with the efforts noted that "we are open for any countries who are interested in building capacity" (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017).

As the size of Thailand's own delegation grew to regularly number 40, 50, and 60 delegates, the cost of sending people grew concomitantly for expensive air tickets and lodging in Geneva, so the departments participating were asked to draw on their own budgets to finance the trips (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017; interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). A Strategic Framework for Global Health Diplomacy was developed in 2011 but was not approved by the cabinet, and a military coup took place in 2014, disrupting the approval process. The coup concentrated power in military hands and led to the creation of a new constitution that aimed to preserve conservative interests and representation in parliament. While these political changes to the country's leadership and core institutions had a significant impact on Thai society, including important domestic policies, the country's civil service continued its work largely as before. A new process of creating a Strategic Framework began in the National Health Assembly in 2015, which ultimately tasked MOPH and MFA with putting one together (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017). The founder of the program drafted the strategy in cooperation with partners, with BIH as the focal point (interview, official, MFA, September 6, 2017).

This framework provided a clearer basis for a strategic approach to working together (interview, former Deputy Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs, January 31, 2018). It was ultimately discussed at the country's National Health Assembly and approved by the Cabinet in 2016, which set up a National Global Health Committee in 2016 (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health,

MOPH, December 4, 2017; interview, official, MFA, September 6, 2017). Although MFA and MOPH had worked together on health issues previously, and Thailand's involvement in the FPGH Initiative—led by Norway—dates back to 2006, 2016 might therefore be considered the year when Thailand's government at the highest levels began to appreciate the value and power of Thailand's reputation in global health and how it might be directed to issues of foreign affairs. Subsequently, the BIH was rebranded as the Division on Global Health in 2017. However, as a practical matter, few outcomes practically resulted from the Strategic Framework, as improved cooperation and coordination between MOPH and MFA actually took place *before* the plan was implemented through the workshops that had already been taking place (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017). In other words, the framework simply put to paper what had already been happening vis-à-vis the close working relationship that had been created. This close relationship could be seen, for example, in a ministerial event chaired by MOPH on the sidelines of the 2017 WHA, which took up the theme of addressing the health of the most vulnerable for an inclusive society set by MFA (2022).

7. Impact

How has Thailand's growing epistemic power been used? As mentioned previously, Thailand has already made its mark in a number of policy areas critical to public health and human life from HIV prevention and tobacco control to universal health coverage and essential medicine. It has likewise provided technical assistance to countries on a range of these and other issues, both through WHO forums and other ones, as well as bilaterally. Thailand's investment in building a strong cadre of representation at the WHA built on its existing brand in public health and helped cement the country's status as a provider of expertise, rather than as a receiver of aid, having made the transition to upper-middle-income country. One official remarked:

> [Thailand was] among the first [Low-and-Middle-Income Countries] to do UHC, so [it's] a luxury toy for the masses…[it] can show the world that [it's] strong enough to be a little donor…[it doesn't] receive any overseas development funding anymore…instead [it] wants to donate…[the MFA] wants to focus on CLMV countries [Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam]. (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views)

As one official from the MFA noted: "We realized we had a lot to share…[and] a lot to learn" (interview, official, MFA, September 6, 2017). MFA was very supportive of Thailand's capacity and development efforts, having seen the work of people in the program at the WHA (interview, professor, MUGH, September 6, 2017). However, they saw the value of it as being not just about capacity development but rather being about something "much wider than just capacity building" (interview, official, MFA, September 6, 2017), as what Thailand contributed at the WHA also created a good image for Thailand—a small developing country with a crucial role in shaping the global health direction. Whereas 25 years ago, only mid-level MFA staffers would join the delegation in Geneva, today the ambassador himself tries to contribute a lot and send a team (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views).

Global health advocacy can also lead to improved health outcomes, with Thailand assisting on particular issues, like rabies, that help people in countries like Myanmar and Nigeria (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views). For some, being passive on issues holds a stigma; being proactive is better (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13). For Thailand, it has taken "time to move from someone

who [is] used to sitting at the table...waiting for people to come...to become someone who reached out to other people, asked for their opinion [and] asked for their support" (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017). Holding a mantle of leadership on critical development issues, by contrast, offered the country important reputational currency and status. The former BIH director remarked that Thailand's work at the global level "can show countries...that when you have [a] strong public health system, you can be resilient to global health trends" (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017). Moreover, it provides an opportunity to "encourage many developing countries...to move forward and achieve universal coverage," while also showing that "Thailand [is] a good example for migrant health development" (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017) as both documented and non-documented migrants are covered by the Migrant Health Insurance Scheme. The benefit package of this scheme includes health screening for communicable diseases and essential medical treatment (Fung, 2024).

In some cases, specific interventions Thailand has made at the WHA have followed some of the landmark health policies it put in place at the national level. From 2006 to 2008, Thailand declared compulsory licensing on a number of essential medicines, including a first and second-line drug for treating HIV/AIDS, cancer drugs, and heart disease medication (Wibulpolprasert et al., 2011). Around the same time, Thailand played two important roles at the global level related to these issues. First, Thailand made important contributions to commission work for the Global Strategy and Action Plan on intellectual property (interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017), benefiting both the country and developing countries with limited expertise on those issues more generally. Second, this work led to a WHA Resolution 60.30 on public health, innovation, and intellectual property in 2007/2008 (interview, former WHO director of public health, innovation, and intellectual property, November 29, 2017), which required the WHO to be available to provide technical assistance for member state requests related to public health and trade. Thailand was subsequently the first country to draw on WHO technical assistance in support of its compulsory licensing policy in the face of US pressure. While the mission report to Thailand formally stated that it "is not intended to make any evaluation or assessment of the use of TRIPS flexibilities in Thailand" (WHO, 2008, p. 2), the report's findings amounted to validation of the country's actions by the international organization responsible for health and was "widely interpreted to confirm the validity of government use licenses and their compliance with the TRIPS Agreement" at a time when international pressure remained significant (Wibulpolprasert et al., 2011).

Thailand also played an important role in shaping the Global Strategy to Reduce Harmful Use of Alcohol (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views). In this case, Thai delegates worked closely with the member states from the WHO Southeast Asia Region in voicing concerns about the impact of free trade agreements on alcohol consumption and the limited budget of the WHO to address the harmful use of alcohol in the Southeast Asia Region (Patcharanarumol et al., 2013). Working in collaboration with partners in the region, Thailand applied pressure by speaking with "a regional One Voice" and drafted the resolution, using evidence that linked WHO budget allocations to the global burden of disease (Patcharanarumol et al., 2013, p. 1093). On behalf of the 11 member states of the region, Thailand proposed to amend the draft resolution, and the WHA accepted Thailand's proposal, and the draft resolution was amended per Thailand's intervention on behalf of the Southeast Asia Region (Patcharanarumol et al., 2013). While the achievement of consensus on a global strategy that takes on such entrenched and powerful corporate interests can be considered a success, national implementation remains a challenge, with insufficient resources, coordination, and interference by the alcohol industry being cited as barriers to action (Jernigan & Trangenstein, 2020).

By some estimates, the country achieved just five percent of what it proposed (in part because the proposals were too extreme and they did not actively lobby for them; interview, advisor to the Office of the Permanent Secretary on Global Health, MOPH, December 4, 2017). However, this impact should be read in light of the absence of any strategy existing before the Thai intervention.

The WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel (Agenda Item 11.5 at WHA63) is one other important example (co-founder, IHPP, December 13, 2017; also see Patcharanarumol et al., 2013). The code aimed to establish voluntary principles for the ethical international recruitment of health workers, provide guidance for countries, and promote cooperation on health worker migration issues, calling for countries to consider the needs of both source and destination countries and the rights of migrant health workers (Patcharanarumol et al., 2013). As the content was particularly contentious, a drafting group was proposed to finalize the code, which would need to be led by a highly competent official who was able to balance the need to compromise with the need to be assertive (Patcharanarumol et al., 2013). The WHO director-general asked Thailand to chair the drafting group, and the drafting group was convened six times over four days, reaching a consensus at 3 am on Thursday, May 20, 2020, after nearly 28 hours of negotiation (Patcharanarumol et al., 2013). Thai training in global health diplomacy made this achievement possible, with the experience itself providing further capacity building for the members of Thailand's team who were involved. A recent review of the code's effectiveness found that the code itself had a wider impact on policy concerning health workforce strengthening at country, regional, and global levels (WHO, 2020b).

The country's involvement in this initiative is built on its long-standing domestic efforts to protect and maintain a strong publicly led universal healthcare system (Harris & Libardi Maia, 2022). In other cases, resolutions put in place at the WHA have been used to protect the country's public health system (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views) and to press for reforms at home. Pointing to the credibility of international actors and showing support from other countries that stand behind the country's policy positions can solve "a lot of internal issues" (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views). In all three of these extended examples (intellectual property initiatives around access to medicine, the global alcohol strategy, and the international health personnel code), having a strong command of the evidence related to the issues, being able to communicate effectively, build consensus, and being able to draw out shared interests and develop trust with stakeholders proved critical to success.

While capacity has certainly developed, it remains that Thailand does not have a systematic process for determining which issues the country will take up, support, or endorse, or any criteria by which it decides; Thais and international partners both play a role in the agenda-setting process (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13). Rather than *always* being proactive, the process takes place somewhat opportunistically. For example, the Global Alcohol Policy Alliance approached Thailand about taking the lead on alcohol-related issues and driving the agenda because they "know that we have the capacity. It's not easy to table an agenda and move a resolution unless you have the capacity and you know the process, you know the mechanisms" (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13, 2017). The growing relationship between MFA and MOPH should however make a more deliberate and proactive agenda possible over time. Thailand's capacity development has enabled the country to be able to go toe-to-toe with other well-established institutions, like the US Center for Disease Control (interview, WHO official, February 12, 2018, personal views).

Central to this process was the forging of relationships with development partners and international NGOs, like the Rockefeller Foundation, the WHO, the South Centre, and the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13). One official long involved in Thailand's efforts says:

> Our strength is the continuity of people who get involved, and they accumulate, the network, that intellectual capacity…[Someone wants] to communicate with [a] WHO department. They want to communicate with member state[s]. It's easy for us. This is [our] social capital. (interview, former inspector general, MOPH, September 13, 2017)

Ultimately, the cost of attending the WHA en masse has involved a lot of expensive airplane tickets and hotels (interview, official, MFA, September 6, 2017). But in some cases, costs are kept down through communal living and cooking arrangements. The eating of Thai food is one hallmark of life at the "Thai Village"—the name given to the place where the large Thai delegation meets at the WHA. After her appointment as director-general of the WHO, one of Margaret Chan's first stops was to the Thai Village to share a celebratory helping of some traditional Thai "som-tam" (spicy papaya salad) with Thai friends and colleagues—a highly visible mark of the way in which Thailand's improved status and position within the WHA has been institutionalized through its efforts.

The symbolic capital, wrought from experience and the country's unique approach to GHD, has set it apart from other countries, particularly those at similar levels of socioeconomic development. One MFA official involved in Thailand's GHD efforts stated:

> Thailand is considered one of the bigger players in global health.…When I took up this portfolio a few years back, I was surprised that when people wanted to push anything through they ran [things by] me first, [asking] "What's Thailand's take on this?" because they wanted just to see what our reaction would be.…When the Europeans wanted to push anything through they give us a call saying, "What do you think of this?.…I think we are unique…we send about 50 delegates to the Health Assembly each year. (interview, official, MFA, September 6, 2017)

Even larger powers, like China, have followed the Thai model, participating in training and growing their WHA delegations to nearly 80 delegates (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017). Japan has likewise become much more active. Thai officials involved in GHD sometimes contrast their own approach, or model, of training in GHD with that of the Geneva Institute in Switzerland, which they see as more theoretical, while the Thai approach is "more practical, [involving] real experience and practice, rather than using theories" (interview, former director, BIH, September 11, 2017). However, these are not the only important axes of comparison between the two programs: the program at the Graduate Institute generally focuses on high-level (as opposed to junior or mid-level) officials as a five-day executive training program, has a high price tag, and has historically featured few instructors from LMICs. This contrast highlights the distinctive normative basis for Thailand's claims to epistemic power, as a country in the Global South with a homegrown GHD training program focused on the Global South that has received funding and recognition from Global North sources, including the WHO and Rockefeller Foundation.

8. Conclusion

Thailand's capacity for GHD has been gradually developed over the past 25 years in response to national and international forces, with support from WHO and development partners. Capacity has been developed and strengthened through a unique approach, using the WHA as a GHD learning platform. This has involved building a large delegation with an interest in advancing the benefit of developing countries; increasing Thailand's involvement at the WHA by contributing to a number of WHA resolutions on key global health agendas; and supporting resolutions that advance national health policy and global health, including intellectual property initiatives around access to medicine, the global alcohol strategy, and the international health personnel code. GHD capacity building in Thailand has led to capacity development in GHD in other LMICs, and Thai GHD has also helped to foster new initiatives that extend beyond the WHA, such as ASEAN+3 UHC Network and new efforts within the region to speak with one voice (ASEAN One Voice) that has led the region to have more clout at international forums, including the WHA.

This case study offers important takeaways for other countries. First, the development of GHD capacity can be achieved as part of a deliberate investment strategy that requires sustained political and economic resources. Second, Thailand's strategy enabled the country to shift from taking a reactive approach to a proactive one that included playing significant leadership roles in setting the global health agenda, reaping public relations rewards from the positive image it built of Thailand as a leader in the realm of health policy. Third, the country's approach led to opportunities for the country to play a credible leadership role as a nation in the Global South responsible for some homegrown policy successes and to expand its network and influence through South-South cooperation, exposing some of the limitations of alternative, more theoretical approaches to learning global health diplomacy. Finally, while valuable, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the data, including the perspectives represented. We offer some important caveats below, as well as suggestions for further research.

While some may count the growth in size and activity of Thailand's delegation and the inclusion of global health in Thailand's foreign policy so centrally as major policy successes, and ones that other countries should follow, some important caveats are worth noting that may limit the replicability of the Thai model. First, Thailand's rise in the region is in part due to the South-East Asia Region's architecture, as a region that contains no major power to block or compete with the country. Second, nearly all WHA resolutions countries fight over are symbolic and non-binding. Third, the WHA voting structure tends to favor developing countries (in contrast to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund where members' financial contributions loom large). Still, it remains that what Thailand has done has been novel and arguably important. However, this is because no other LMIC had really done it before, not because it was structurally impossible.

It is important to note that heightened visibility in public health can draw attention away from domestic issues that governments may wish to make less visible. Symbolic capital has been used for regimes in diplomacy and international relations, and "soft power" is an increasingly important focus of the current government's approach to rule. This suggests that outsiders might evaluate not only the country's heightened visibility in global health on its own but also how that capital is used. Additionally, consistent tracking of the downstream impact of resolutions Thailand has had a hand in developing at the WHA back home in Thailand could be stronger. For all the country's many successes in different public health domains, there are a number of areas where there is room for improvement, including breastfeeding, road safety, tuberculosis control, air quality,

tobacco regulation enforcement, and Covid-19 vaccine rollout (on the latter, see Harris, in press). Even so, Thailand's approach to GHD offers lessons for other resource-constrained nations seeking to ascend global status hierarchies.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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