

# Reputation and Status as Motives for War

Allan Dafoe,<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Renshon,<sup>2</sup> and Paul Huth<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut 06520; email: allan.dafoe@yale.edu

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin 53706; email: renshon@wisc.edu

<sup>3</sup>Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742; email: phuth@umd.edu

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honor, resolve, deterrence, prestige, audience costs, beliefs, inference

## Abstract

Justifications for war often invoke reputational or social aspirations: the need to protect national honor, status, reputation for resolve, credibility, and respect. Studies of these motives struggle with a variety of challenges: their primary empirical manifestation consists of beliefs, agents have incentives to misrepresent these beliefs, their logic is context specific, and they meld intrinsic and instrumental motives. To help overcome these challenges, this review offers a general conceptual framework that integrates their strategic, cultural, and psychological logics. We summarize important findings and open questions, including (*a*) whether leaders care about their reputations and status, (*b*) how to address the tension between instrumental and intrinsic motives, (*c*) how observers draw inferences, (*d*) to whom and across what contextual breadth these inferences apply, and (*e*) how these relate to domestic audience costs. Many important, tractable questions remain for future studies to answer.

*Thucydides found that people go to war out of “honor, fear, and interest.” . . . If we take honor to mean fame, glory, renown, or splendor, it may appear applicable only to an earlier time. If, however, we understand its significance as deference, esteem, just due, regard, respect, or prestige we will find it an important motive of nations in the modern world as well.*

(Kagan 1995, p. 8)

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**Reputation:** a belief about a trait or behavioral tendency of an actor, based on that actor’s past behavior; usually widely held

**Status:** an attribute of an individual or social role often related to rank

**Standing:** position in a deference hierarchy

**Reputation for resolve:** a reputation for not backing down in a certain class of disputes

**Prestige:** a belief that one has a reputation for a positive trait

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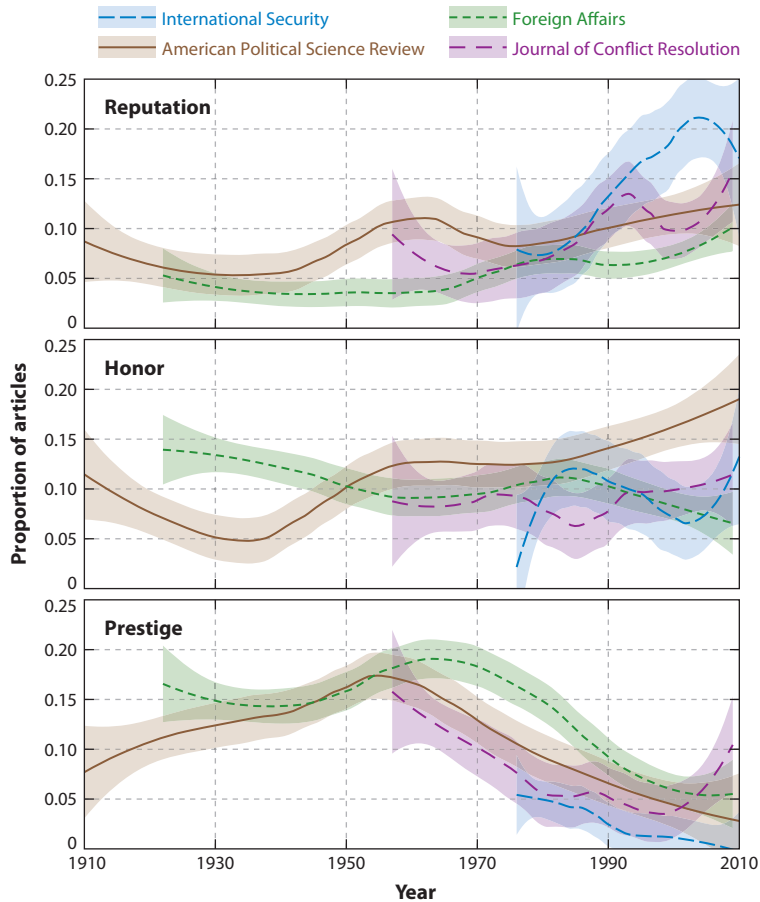
## INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of reputation and status has long been regarded as a prominent motive for war. Thucydides characterized “honor”—understood as encompassing reputation, glory, and standing—as one of the three motives that led Athens to hold onto her empire. In particular, concern for reputation for resolve was a crucial motive driving the Spartan and Athenian escalation that led to the Peloponnesian War. Glory figured prominently in Machiavelli’s republican theory and his advice to princes. Hobbes, echoing Thucydides, wrote that glory is one of three “principal causes of quarrel” and that conflict was endemic to the human condition precisely *because* social recognition was desired by all men.

The modern study of reputation and status took form in the context of the Cold War, motivated by the high stakes of a better understanding of deterrence (Schelling 1960, Russett 1963, Singer & Small 1966, George & Smoke 1974, Snyder & Diesing 1977, Jervis 1979, Mearsheimer 1983, Huth 1988, Jervis et al. 1989, Powell 1990). A large body of contemporary work—spanning constructivist, realist, and rationalist approaches, formal and informal theory, statistical and qualitative evidence, experimental (field, survey, and laboratory) and observational designs—continues to investigate reputation and status. However, studying these concepts in a scientific manner faces a number of challenges intrinsic to the study of beliefs and motives more generally. Beliefs and motives are not directly observable, are subject to psychological and strategic biases in their expression, and are theoretically complex and context specific; furthermore, their behavioral implications are subject to substantial selection effects. Perhaps as a result, a coherent conceptual framework for these phenomena has remained elusive. Despite centuries of study, many important questions remain unanswered. Much scholarship has focused on the broad question of whether reputation and status matter, but we recommend scholars also investigate the nuanced and productive questions related to when, how, and why they matter. In particular, this review discusses (a) how to conceptualize phenomena related to reputation and status, (b) how to theoretically make sense of their strategic, cultural, and/or psychological logics, (c) when and why leaders care about reputation and status, (d) how observers draw inferences, (e) to whom inferences are attributed, (f) how they are built, are destroyed, and decay, and (g) how they are understood and valued by domestic audiences.

**Figure 1** offers a graphical overview of the study of status and reputation in international relations. We plotted the number of articles that contain certain keyword combinations—“reputation AND war,” “prestige AND war,” “(honor OR honour) AND war”—as a proportion of articles that contain “war” in the text. **Figure 1** gives a sense of how this proportion has changed over time and across four important journals with different methodological and policy orientations. These topics have been of interest since the beginning of modern political science, span methodological and theoretical approaches, and remain prominent today.

This article reviews the study of reputation and status as motives for war. Our goal is to draw out some central questions, summarize the state of knowledge about these questions, offer a conceptual framework, and highlight productive areas for future research. The next section defines key concepts. In particular, “reputation” refers to any belief about a trait or behavioral



**Figure 1**

An estimate of the interest in reputation and status in the study of international relations in four prominent journals: *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *American Political Science Review*, and *Foreign Affairs*. Plot is a smoothed estimate of the proportion of articles referencing “war” that also reference one of the following keywords: “reputation,” “honor OR honour,” or “prestige.” “Status” is not included as a keyword because this term is too often used in other, unrelated contexts (e.g., “status quo”). Interest in these topics has been prevalent throughout the twentieth century. In recent decades, interest in “reputation” and possibly also “honor” seems to be increasing; interest in (or terminological preference for) “prestige” has declined. We do not identify any notable persistent differences across journals. 95% confidence intervals provide an assessment of whether the observed proportions could have come from the same underlying distribution. Data and R code are available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/22179>.

tendency of an actor based on past actions, although this review focuses on a specific species of reputation: reputation for resolve. “Status” refers to attributes of an individual or social roles, especially those attributes related to position in a deference hierarchy. We also offer a parsimonious rationalist conceptual foundation, a discussion of the insights from psychological approaches, and a proposal for the productive unification of these. A third section highlights some of the most important findings related to status and reputation, as well as open questions for future research.

**Social role:**

a commonly held set of expectations about an actor’s rights, responsibilities, and relationship with others

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**Signaling reputation:** a reputation for doing what one says one is going to do

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## CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

The study of reputation and status has been handicapped by semantic confusion. This confusion is at least partly a result of varying understandings of these terms throughout history and in different cultural contexts, complicating the use of historical quotations as evidence. We address this semantic confusion by offering a set of definitions that we think captures the most important meaning of each of these terms, while clarifying their limits and distinguishing them from their related terms.

Political actors hold beliefs about the characteristics and behavioral tendencies of other actors. These beliefs may concern material factors such as the material capability of the military of a state, domestic political factors such as the strength of the ruling domestic coalition, and other factors such as the psychology of the leader.

When others hold beliefs about persistent characteristics or behavioral tendencies of an actor, based on the past actions of the actor, we say that the actor has a “reputation” for those characteristics or behaviors. A state can have reputations for many different traits, such as military capability, a public that tolerates the costs of war, or loyal generals. At the same time, it may have reputations for many behavioral tendencies—such as resolve (Huth 1997, Walter 2009), fulfilling its threats (Sartori 2005) and commitments (“signaling reputation,” Jervis 2002, p. 305), risk acceptance, hostility (Crescenzi 2013), ruthless retaliation, sensitivity to insults, ambition, or greed. In addition to coercive reputations, states and leaders can have reputations for cooperative behaviors, such as complying with treaties (Simmons 2010), repaying debt (Tomz 2007b), nonrevisionist ambitions, or being a reliable ally (Miller 2012). Because different observers can have different beliefs about any particular characteristic of a state, a state can have multiple reputations in reference to the same trait; unless otherwise specified, however, to say that a state has a particular reputation implies that most observers hold the relevant belief about the state.

The above beliefs could all be first-order beliefs, which are beliefs one actor holds about another actor’s characteristics or behavioral tendencies. First-order beliefs do not require agreement among a group of actors, nor do they even require knowledge that an actor holds a particular belief; they are simply an observer’s beliefs about an actor. Second-order beliefs are beliefs that a group of observers holds some belief. For example, O’Neill (1999, p. 193; see also 2006) defines “prestige” as a second-order belief: “prestige means that everyone thinks that everyone thinks” that an actor has some good quality. A related concept is that of “face,” which can be defined as beliefs about the extent to which others will show deference to the individual (see O’Neill 1999, p. 140). Face is a belief about others’ behavior toward an actor.

First- and second-order beliefs need not agree. Two observers could both think that a state is weak, although they each think that the other thinks that it is strong. In practice, however, different orders of beliefs tend to cohere. Beyond second-order beliefs, higher-order beliefs are beliefs about beliefs about beliefs. When first-, second-, and higher-order beliefs about some proposition agree, we say there are “common beliefs” about the proposition. If the belief is true and all relevant levels of belief agree, we say there is “common knowledge” about the fact. Common beliefs about reputation or status give rise to what Searle (1995) refers to as social facts.

States often hold “social roles,” such as being dominant within a group, having moral authority within a group, being the leader of a coalition, or being the defender of a group of people.<sup>1</sup> “Status” is an attribute of an individual or social role that refers to position vis-à-vis a comparison group; status informs patterns of deference and expectations of behavior, rights,

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<sup>1</sup>The term identity is often used to refer to social roles, although “identity” emphasizes how one or multiple actors see themselves, whereas “social role” emphasizes how an actor or group is seen and treated by others (for more on identity, see Abdelal et al. 2006).

and responsibilities. Status categories may be dichotomous (e.g., membership in a group) or rank based (e.g., position in a hierarchy). A change in an actor's status implies a change in at least one other actor's status, either because of a change in rank or because of a (perhaps slight) change in the meaning of membership in a group. In large groups, the addition of a new member might only marginally affect the status of other members, in which case one might say that status approximates a "club good" (Lake 2011, p. 338). Status is often also an interval attribute, rather than just ordinal, in that there may be different-sized gaps between ranks. For example, IR scholars typically think about hegemony as a system in which the difference in status between the first- and second-highest status states is much greater than in other systems (as well as greater than the difference between other ranks in the same system).

Holding a particular status position implies that others recognize my status, that others believe that others will recognize my status, and so forth. To have "high standing" in a deference hierarchy means that my inferiors (those with lower standing than me) will defer to my interests, that others believe that my inferiors will defer, and so forth. It is in this positional sense that we can speak of status as a unidimensional metric and say, for example, that an action increased the United States' status or that the United States has high status. To show "respect" is to behave in a manner consistent with another state's status position (Wolf 2011). When these conditions obtain, we say that the state receives "recognition" of its status (Honneth 1996, Lindemann 2010). States that crave a particular status seek recognition of their status, as well as associated reputations. Conflict often arises when a state's expectation of what its status and reputation should be diverges from that implied by others' behavior. The term status is also occasionally used to refer to social roles and identities that are not directly related to deference hierarchies, such as having the status of "defender of the Slavic people."

"Reputation" is an umbrella term that refers to any belief about a trait or behavioral tendency of an actor, based on that agent's past behavior. Similarly, "status" can refer to many different kinds of attributes. For this reason, when using these terms it is often helpful to specify the species of reputation or status: reputation *for what* trait or behavior, in the eyes of whom (naming the observers or reference group), and for whom (naming the target of the reputational inference)? "Status" can be further clarified by specifying status *as what*; for example, status *as* the second most powerful state, *as* a great power, or *as* the defender of the Slavic people.

These terms are also often used as shorthand for two specific concepts. "Reputation" is often employed to refer to a reputation for resolve in the eyes of potential opponents. A reputation for resolve is a reputation for being unlikely to back down in a certain class of disputes.<sup>2</sup> "Status" is most often employed in IR to refer to an actor's standing in a global deference hierarchy arising from power, resolve, and wealth, and consequently what rights, respect, and patterns of deference that actor can expect.<sup>3</sup> Even though this double usage—as general and specific terms—can cause confusion, we believe that it is productive. In the study of the motives of war, reputation for resolve is one of the most important kinds of reputation, and standing is one of the most important kinds of status. Scholars who want to be precise should employ the appropriate modifier: reputation for X, status as Y.

Reputation and status are closely related in two ways. First, reputation is often crucial for status. The loss or acquisition of certain reputations can lose or gain an actor a particular status. For

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<sup>2</sup>The class of disputes to which a reputation for resolve applies depends on social expectations about when reputation for resolve is at stake ("when reputation is engaged") and the similarity of the determinants of resolve across disputes. Related definitions are provided by Morrow (1985), Powell (1990), Fearon (1994b), Mercer (1996), and Huth (1997).

<sup>3</sup>Of course, other status hierarchies based on different attributes (e.g., moral standing) or consisting of different members (e.g., only communist states) are possible.

example, a reputation for resolve is often regarded as necessary for a state with high standing. Second, status influences reputation as a source of information and by setting expectations of behavior. Gaining a desirable status will color how others talk about and perceive one's past actions. Furthermore, status shapes others' expectations about how one should behave, and expectations shape reputational inferences. For example, there are generally fewer expectations about the conditions under which a low-status state should demonstrate resolve, as compared to a high-status state.

Although "status" is often used interchangeably with "reputation" and "prestige," we argue that it is more productive to employ them as analytically distinct concepts. One feature distinguishing them seems to be the degree to which they are in the power of the actor or community. Reputation and prestige are more often regarded as being somewhat in the control of the actor: actors can seize, acquire, and invest in their reputation and prestige. Status, on the other hand, is more often regarded as a function of the community: it is granted or accorded by others.<sup>4</sup> This distinction is consistent with our framework, since it is often easier to change first-order beliefs than to change patterns of interactions and higher-order beliefs. We conjecture that in IR, reputation and prestige will be likely to comove with status in weakly institutionalized settings but can be more divergent in highly institutionalized settings. In weakly institutionalized settings, a gain in reputation and prestige often translates into a gain in status: coveted social roles and high standing are more likely to go to actors with greater prestige. However, in highly institutionalized settings, it is possible for social roles to be largely independent of the reputations of actors. For example, status as a member of the UN Security Council is highly institutionalized and unresponsive to short-term changes in reputation and prestige.

Reputation and status have additional commonalities. For example, the logic of status and many kinds of reputation depend on social context and cultural norms. In addition, many kinds of reputation and all kinds of status depend critically on the extent to which a behavior is publicly observed (Pinker et al. 2008; Heffetz & Frank 2011, p. 20). A first-order humiliation (a humiliation that is observed, but others do not know whether others observed it) is generally much less damaging than an event that also involves second- and higher-order humiliations (O'Neill 1999, pp. 152–54).

To conclude this section, we offer some final definitions. "Credibility" is the extent to which an actor's statements or implicit commitments are believed; credibility often refers to the extent to which others believe an actor will carry out an explicit or implicit threat. "Deterrence" and "compellence" refer to the use of (often implicit) threats to encourage another to behave in a certain way; deterrence works toward preserving the status quo and compellence works toward changing it. "Honor" is a particularly complicated concept. According to O'Neill (1999, 2003), personal honor refers to whether an individual possesses some positive characteristics, and social honor refers to a group's beliefs about an individual's personal honor. Although the set of traits associated with honor varies across cultures, it generally includes willingness to use force in defense and retaliation for transgressions, the upholding of commitments, and concern for being perceived as honorable.

## **The Strategic Role of Reputation and Status**

Having clarified the conceptual underpinnings of reputation and status in world politics, we now consider the strategic role of each in conflictual situations. Conflict is often a contest of expectations: if country A could convince country B that A intends to stand firm, then B would back

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<sup>4</sup>We thank Barry O'Neill for this distinction between prestige and status.

down.<sup>5</sup> Because reputation and status can make others think one is more likely to stand firm in a certain class of disputes, reputation and status can help their possessor win contests of expectations. As such, countries can have strategic incentives to acquire certain reputations and status.

A central proposition of theories of deterrence is that an actor can deter others by building and maintaining a reputation for resolve (e.g., Jervis 1976, ch. 3; Powell 1990, ch. 3). Reputation can also make compelling threats more credible (Schelling 1966), although compelling threats in general tend to be rare and less successful (Downes & Sechser 2012). Other kinds of reputations can help a state win a contest of expectations by favorably altering the expected costs of conflict, such as a reputation for being a reliable ally (Morrow 2000, p. 71; Miller 2012), for military capability, for cost tolerance (Cochran 2012), and for coveting the issue in dispute. Similarly, reputations can shift payoffs in a direction that makes concession less attractive for oneself and more attractive for one's opponent; examples include a reputation for restraint in victory (Ikenberry 2000, p. 98), for self-punishment in failure, for mercy toward those who readily surrender, and for ruthlessness toward those who resist.

Status, understood as rank, is also central to contests of expectations. Status carries with it sets of expectations about deference, dominance, and subordination (Lake 2011), and provides a useful heuristic for actors to understand their relations with others. Status hierarchies are sometimes the outcome of contests of expectations, in which case high-status actors are those about whom it is common knowledge that they will stand firm against lower-status actors (also see Myerson 2008). Conflict can therefore arise when status hierarchies are unclear, such as when there are multiple dimensions on which actors may be ranked, or when an actor challenges the hierarchy (Wohlforth 2009). To improve status, an actor needs to shift the expectations of others, which may require a focal and dramatic event such as a military victory over a higher-status actor. Divergent expectations, based on contesting claims to dominance in the international hierarchy, are central to both hegemonic war (Gilpin 1983) and power transition (Organski & Kugler 1980, Lemke & Reed 1996) theory.

### **Commitment, Signaling Reputation, and Bundled Expectations**

Status and especially reputation provide a means to construct commitments. It is often advantageous for states to be able to commit themselves to a course of action, such as to repaying debt or to standing by an ally. Actors can harness reputation to construct self-enforcing commitments through three routes. First, an actor can construct a reputation through obstinate behavior. If a state repeatedly behaves in some manner, for example, fighting hard against every challenge to its colonies, then the state will eventually get a reputation for behaving in that manner. If the reputation is sufficiently valuable and will be damaged by a failure to uphold it, then the state will have incentives to maintain its commitment; if others perceive these incentives, then others will perceive the state's commitment to be credible. For a review of the (formal) strategic logic of reputation, see Mailath & Samuelson (2006). This self-enforcing property of reputation has deep consequences: any reputation that (a) yields expected future benefits that sufficiently exceed the current costs of upholding it and (b) will be harmed by failing to uphold it, can be made credible in anarchy.

The second route involves harnessing a special kind of meta-reputation: signaling reputation (Jervis 1989).<sup>6</sup> A signaling reputation is a reputation for doing what you say you are going to

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<sup>5</sup>This contest of expectations can also be fought at higher levels of belief: if A can convince B that A expects B to back down, then B will infer that A intends to stand firm, and thus B will back down. And so forth at higher levels of belief.

<sup>6</sup>This concept is found elsewhere, e.g., Schelling's (1966) "reputation for action," Sartori's (2005) "reputation for honesty," and some interpretations of "reputation for resolve."



do: for fulfilling explicit promises and threats; for issuing sincere signals. A signaling reputation is powerful because it enables the possessor to construct new commitments through a simple statement. Further, unlike most reputations, which tend to be sets of expectations related to crude patterns of behavior, a signaling reputation permits the construction of subtle and possibly counterintuitive behavioral commitments, such as committing to treat one's enemies better when they surrender early, or to repay debt according to an arbitrary schedule. The ability to construct flexible commitments is essential for strategic influence: one can shape another's incentives by creating contingent commitments to reward desired behaviors (contingent promises) and punish undesired behaviors (threats) (Oye 1993, ch. 3). Threats have the virtue of being free when they succeed, although since threats often don't succeed, contingent promises are often more effective for persuasion. The complexity of signaling reputations is limited by the symbolic vocabulary available to the actors and the strength of their signaling reputations.

Finally, certain kinds of reputations and social roles involve bundles of behavioral expectations. The failure of an actor to maintain one such expectation can affect the actor's reputation or social role, thereby influencing expectations about other behaviors. For example, in many cultures a person can lose honor through a variety of routes—cowardice, dishonesty, perfidy, disobedience—and others' beliefs about the person will change on all dimensions (O'Neill 1999, p. 244). Honor thus uses the bundled value of reputations for resolve, honesty, and proper conduct to enforce each dimension of behavior.

In summary, whenever it is possible for an actor to “stake” its reputation or status on some behavior, the actor can leverage this to incentivize commitments. Reputation and status can thus be strategically put at stake, leveraging future payoffs as collateral to incentivize a commitment in the present (for more on the strategic role of reputation, see Dafoe 2014).

## The Psychology of Reputation and Status

In addition to having a strategic logic as outlined above, reputation and status are undoubtedly cultural and psychological phenomena. Because the entity that is seeking and drawing reputational and social inferences is the human mind, embedded within a particular culture, the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology contribute to understanding the nature of these phenomena.

First, an understanding of theory and empirical results from psychology and related fields provides strong “microfoundations” for IR scholars. This may be especially useful in the case of status and reputation where, as noted, drawing inferences in the domain of international politics can be difficult. Research in economics, psychology, and the biological sciences provides a strong *prima facie* case that actors value and pursue reputation and status, often even at the expense of other critical goals (Frank 1985, Huberman et al. 2004, Josephs et al. 2006). Although the specific domain of those (mostly experimental) studies differs from most IR research, the broader questions that they address (How do reputations form? How does status impact decision making?) are of great relevance.

Research in other fields also provides fertile material for the generation of new hypotheses. Kertzer (2013), for example, uses social psychological research on time horizons and self-control to generate and test hypotheses about when actors' resolve will be high or low. In another example, Frank's (1985) observation that “status is local” may generalize to international politics. States may make “targeted” comparisons to specific reference groups rather than simply compare themselves with the population of states as a whole. These reference groups might be formed by common history, shared culture, strategic interests, religion, etc. This theoretical framework is intuitively plausible—consider whether China is more likely to compare itself to Russia and the United States,



its “peer group,” or to Belize or Yemen—and has some preliminary support in the empirical record (Renshon 2013a,c, Thompson 2014).

Biases and heuristics in the interpretation of the social world are also relevant for how we understand status and reputation (on the latter, see Mercer 1996). Motivated biases, for example, may lead actors to make flattering or advantageous social comparisons or even “opt out” of particular hierarchies in which they are lower-ranked in order to form new status hierarchies in which they are more competitive. Some recent work (e.g., Larson & Shevchenko 2010, Clunan 2014) addresses these issues by drawing from social identity theory. This is extremely valuable insofar as it focuses our attention on the importance of social comparison, although it has proven difficult to systematically explain “which of many possible identity-maintenance strategies [states] will choose” (Wohlforth 2009, p. 36).

Careful attention to how these concepts are measured and tested in other fields may suggest innovative ways of doing so in IR. Focusing on the material trade-offs involved in the pursuit of “status goods” (e.g., Sivanathan & Pettit 2010) may be a productive route for IR scholars wishing to quantify relative concerns for status. Closer familiarity with experimental studies will also help IR scholars appreciate the difficulty in measuring and examining ideational variables like status and reputations. Despite the ability to measure virtually anything—even genetic and hormonal data—and to randomize the assignment of a treatment in the controlled setting of a lab experiment, the effects of concern for status and reputation are still notoriously difficult to “pin down” (Heffetz & Frank 2011, p. 18).

There are risks to drawing from psychology and other fields. Naive generalizations of hypotheses from other fields may lead to an excess of undertheorized conjectures for which crucial theoretical and methodological issues have not been resolved (even in the fields from which they are drawn). For examples, consider the explosion of research on and subsequent backlash against prospect theory and risk aversion. Scholars were tempted to use prospect theory to explain foreign policy decision making without first constructing working theories to explain how (and under what circumstances) different reference points are adopted by leaders (McDermott 2004). In the case of risk aversion, scholars have tended to underestimate the theoretical ambiguity involved in using the concept for domains, such as crisis bargaining, that lack an interval metric of value such as dollars (O’Neill 2002). More generally, studies of “normal” adults or college students may not generalize to the foreign policy domain for a variety of reasons, including the fact that organizational structures shape behavior, the nonrandom selection of people to political office, and vast differences in stakes (Mintz et al. 2006, Renshon 2013b). We suggest that the most useful works will be those that don’t simply borrow psychological concepts to explain political phenomena but take seriously the interaction between psychological processes and political factors such as power and structure.

## **Reconciling Cognitive and Strategic Approaches**

A theme of scholarly debate is whether inferences about reputation and status are rational. Many scholars employ a rationalist foundation, although they vary in their assumptions about the relevant actor (state, leader, organization) and the specific logic of the particular reputation or status. Other scholars prefer to begin from models of inference based on psychological, cultural, or other frameworks. These different approaches are then often posed in competition with each other.

We argue that although it is productive to draw from both of these traditions, viewing them as competing alternatives is largely unproductive for the simple reason that the competing models of inference are insufficiently specified to yield divergent testable implications. Below, we show how rationalist models are in fact consistent with most of what is presented as evidence against rationalist inference, such as historical and cultural richness, individual variation, and

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**Bayesian inference in social equilibria:**

a model of inference applying probability theory (Bayes' rule) to games involving multiple equilibria, emphasizing the role of history, culture, and psychology in equilibrium selection

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theory-laden interpretation of evidence. We recommend a specific model of inference that, in our view, provides a plausible and powerful foundation for thinking about reputation and status while also having sufficient flexibility to account for most of the features invoked by critics of rationalist inference. To this foundation many psychological, cultural, and organizational complications could be appended. This foundation can be called “Bayesian inference in social equilibria” (elaborated by Dafoe 2014), which is simply the inferential procedure of an actor that (a) adopts probability theory as its model of plausibility (Bayesian inference) and (b) exists in a strategic setting with multiple equilibria (social equilibria). This model of inference is the same as that employed in standard game theoretic models that have multiple equilibria, although we tend to emphasize more the roles of history, culture, and psychology in equilibrium selection, and we encourage revision of the models of plausibility and utility with more realistic, but still parsimonious, models once sufficient evidence accumulates in favor of them.

Bayesian inference is a useful foundation for modeling how agents change their beliefs. Bayesian inference is simply the use of probability theory to model the plausibility of beliefs, most well known for using “Bayes' rule” to model the updating of beliefs from new information. Bayesian inference is the unique consistent model for reasoning about plausibility that corresponds with common sense (Jaynes 2003, p. 3).<sup>7</sup> To the extent that political actors desire to draw consistent sensible inferences, they should seek to approximate Bayesian inference. In addition, Bayesian inference serves as a good approximation for how humans actually learn about causal relationships (Holyoak & Cheng 2010).

Many insights emerging from psychological and cultural approaches are also implications of Bayesian inference. Consider a recent example from Jonathan Mercer, who has offered political science some of the most explicit and serious psychological models of reputational inference. Mercer (2013, p. 226; see also 2010, p. 8) argues that “whereas rationalists imagine that people use evidence to revise their beliefs, political psychologists have long noted that people also assimilate evidence to fit their beliefs.” However, in Bayesian inference, evidence is also interpreted through the lens of one's beliefs; the same piece of evidence could be read as evidence for or against a hypothesis depending on the observer's beliefs about other features of the world (for an example, see Jaynes 2003, pp. 98–107; also see Smith & Stam 2004, Fey & Ramsay 2006). Other examples of psychological and cultural insights that are consistent with Bayesian inference include the confirmatory attribution pattern (Mercer 1996, p. 55), the central role of expectations and surprise in inference (Snyder 1961; Mercer 1996, p. 46; Huth 1997; Tomz 2007b), and, as discussed below, the fact that the logic of reputation and status depend on social norms (Morrow 2014) and cultural context.

An actor's expectations—beliefs about the probabilities of another's behavior given the other's reputation or status—depend on cultural norms and the current beliefs of the community. For example, deference by state A to state B is expected if A has lower status than B, but deference would be surprising and would therefore have a greater effect on reputation and status if A had higher status than B. Similarly, the logic of reputation for resolve depends crucially on others' understanding of when resolve is at stake. If no one perceives the US security commitment to Japan to include defending Japan's claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, then failing to do so will cause little harm to the United States' reputation. If, however, others—be it China, Japan, or even countries in Europe or Latin America—perceive such a commitment, then failing to act would harm the United States' reputation for resolve and other associated reputations. Formally, we can

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<sup>7</sup>Technically, “correspondence with common sense” requires the weak condition that information that increases the plausibility of *A* and does not change the plausibility of *B|A* weakly increases the plausibility of *AB* and decreases the plausibility of not *A* (Jaynes 2003, p. 14). This leads to the weak syllogism of inductive reasoning that if *A* being true implies that *B* is more plausible, then if *B* is true *A* becomes more plausible (Jaynes 2003, p. 31).

represent the international community's expectations about how particular reputations and status "work" as a specific equilibrium of a game with multiple equilibria (see Morrow 2014), and we can represent the current reputations and social roles of actors by the state of the game. We call these "social equilibria" to emphasize that the pattern of expectations and strategies depends on social convention, culture, and history.

We share the skepticism of some scholars about the assumption that policy elites are capable of perfectly rational inference. Against this skepticism, however, we echo the concern of Jervis that although it is not hard to find examples of all kinds of perceptual errors, it is not obvious which of these are systematic. The challenge is to identify those errors that are "most frequent" or "more common than [their] opposite," and to identify their "antecedent conditions" (Jervis 1976, p. 7). Research in behavioral economics has identified features of inference and decision making that appear to systematically deviate from "rational" models, such as time-inconsistent preferences, nonlinear probability weighting, reference-dependent utility, and concern for fairness. Rather than use these findings to justify disregarding standard models, behavioral economists integrate them with standard models of inference and decision making to construct models that are more descriptively accurate, but still parsimonious, formal, and rationalist in most respects (Kahneman & Tversky 1984). We think political science scholarship would do well to follow the example of behavioral economists in striving to explicitly specify the different kinds of deviations from rational inference, to systematically empirically evaluate those models, and to formally integrate these insights into general models of inference.

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED AND OPEN QUESTIONS

### Leaders Care about Status and Reputation

If there is one feature of reputation and status on which scholars agree, it is that leaders, policy elites, and national populations are often concerned, even obsessed, with their status and reputation. Leaders and publics worry about their own as well as their state's credibility, about the defense of national honor, and about the country's status. Tang (2005) refers to the obsession of policy elites as the "cult of reputation." Kagan (1995) finds considerations of honor prominent in the outbreak of many wars. Lebow argues that many wars are fought from considerations of honor (2008) and in pursuit of standing or revenge (2010). O'Neill (1999, 2006) emphasizes the importance of symbolism, honor, and prestige. Even scholars who doubt whether reputational inferences are drawn in international relations do not doubt that many leaders are very concerned about their own reputations and status (Snyder & Diesing 1977, McMahon 1991, Hopf 1994, Mercer 1996, Jervis 2002, Press 2005). It is easy to compile a list of "smoking-gun" quotations from leaders and policy-making elites that directly implicate reputation and status in national security decision making (for examples, see Jervis 1976, Jervis & Snyder 1991, Markey 2000, Press 2005). In fact, the importance of reputation and status is so self-evident to leaders that threats against those interests are often used to compel and deter other states.

Concern for reputation and status, however, need not be constant, and there is much to be gained in leveraging this variation in order to empirically evaluate its effects. Lebow (2008) explains variation in the conflict behavior of countries across centuries as arising from variation in the cultural importance of values such as honor and standing ("spirit"). Walter (2009) theorizes and finds persuasive evidence that governments have greater incentives to establish a reputation for resisting demands of domestic separatists when facing many potential separatists who would claim valuable land. Sechser (2013, p. 2) theorizes that concern for reputation for resolve will be greater when states face a challenger they are likely to face again in the future, specifically

states that are “(1) geographically close, (2) militarily powerful, or (3) have a demonstrated history of aggression.” Sechser finds statistical evidence that states with these indicators of heightened concern for reputation are more likely to resist compelling threats.

Dafoe & Caughey (2013) deduce from a formal model four behavioral predictions for leaders who care more about reputation for resolve: these leaders will be more likely to use force in militarized disputes, they will experience longer and more fatal disputes, and they will be more likely to win their disputes. Dafoe & Caughey find statistical evidence consistent with these predictions by comparing Southern US presidents—who originate from a “culture of honor”—with non-Southern presidents. Similarly, Dafoe (2012) theorizes that leaders should care more about their reputations early in their tenure, when their reputations are less well formed and they have longer time horizons (see also Wolford 2007); Dafoe compares the conflict behavior of leaders early versus later in their time-in-office and finds evidence consistent with this theory.

Scholars are also beginning to study variation in concern for status. Renshon (2013c) suggests that status concerns are heightened when a state’s standing falls below its reference point, which in turn is set by its expectations generated by observing the status-to-power “exchange rate” among its peers. [This is in contrast to the earlier “status inconsistency” literature, which, owing to the methods employed, tacitly assumed a 1:1 ratio of status to power (see, e.g., Wallace 1971).] Other avenues of research might draw on the considerable gender-related (Huberman et al. 2004) or age-related (Sellers et al. 2007) variation in status-seeking behavior, or divergences between a leader’s personal status and that of the state.

Studying variation in concern for reputation and status has offered a productive research path. The many structural sources of variation provide opportunities to test theoretical predictions in different empirical domains. Some of these structural sources are relatively unconfounded, compared to typical IR research designs that study more endogenous processes.

### **Why Do Leaders Care? Instrumental versus Intrinsic Motives**

Scholars agree that leaders tend to be very concerned about the reputation and status of themselves and their state. However, opinions diverge about why this is the case. Many works, building on constructivist, psychological, and sociological frameworks, argue that this obsession is driven by noninstrumental motives, such as the positive feelings associated with the possession of high status. The evidence offered usually consists of showing how these motives are culturally or socially shaped, vary between individuals, involve psychological mechanisms, or lead to decisions contrary to instrumental rationality in laboratory settings. An equally large literature, building on rationalist and realist frameworks, theorizes that leaders and states are motivated by the instrumental value of reputation and status, such as the material benefits derived from greater deference from others. These works typically either assume instrumental motives or harness historical quotations and evidence describing the instrumental logic. We believe the debate about whether concern for reputation and status is instrumental or intrinsic is largely futile, as these motives are deeply intertwined.

To show that a motive is not instrumental, it is not sufficient to show that the motive is culturally or socially shaped, that it varies by individual, that it takes place through psychological or social mechanisms, that it can lead to harmful outcomes, or even that actors have foregone material benefits such as money or security. Culturally or socially shaped motives may be adapted to serve instrumental ends. Variation in these motives across individuals or countries, who otherwise face the same strategic circumstances, is evidence that instrumental considerations do not *uniquely* determine policy. However, this variation is still consistent with the pursuit of reputation and status being instrumental, with variation in the appraisal of their value in different contexts.

All state behavior takes place through psychological, organizational, and social mechanisms; what is at issue is the extent to which these mechanisms lead behavior to deviate from the ideal instrumental policy. Even evidence that these motives have led to clearly harmful outcomes, such as befell Russia for mobilizing in what became World War I, is not sufficient to show that the motive was not instrumental/rational; instrumental rationality must be evaluated on the basis of the information and choice set available to the decision makers at the time of the decision, not on the outcome that was (stochastically) realized.

The nature of status and reputation makes instrumental and intrinsic motives especially hard to disentangle. The pursuit of reputation and status involves intertemporal trade-offs—short-term costs for long-term gains—and “tying one’s hands” (such as committing to carry out a threatened act that one would rather not do). Thus, reputation and status fundamentally involve subjugating one set of instrumental values for another (short- for long-term interests; ex post freedom for ex ante credibility). The most effective threats are those that are automatic. Cultural values, familial and personal honor, emotions and psychology can all serve as ex ante rational mechanisms to commit to carrying out irrational threats. Even a suicidal attack, such as if the United States had initiated nuclear war against the Soviet Union for an attack on Europe, would not be evidence against ex ante instrumental rationality. This is true even if we see clear evidence that the decision was made in the context of extreme emotions, psychological biases, and so forth. Seemingly irrational psychological and social processes may be the very mechanisms by which strategic commitments are constructed (Frank 1988, Nisbett & Cohen 1996, Bowles & Gintis 2011).

### **Do States Fight for Status?**

Research on status in IR has often focused on whether and how status might be linked to international conflict. Some scholars examined the idea that conflict arose from “status inconsistency” (Galtung 1964): the difference between status that was attributed by the international community (ascribed status) and status that was actually “deserved” (achieved status). Findings in this tradition were, however, inconsistent (East 1972, Wallace 1973, Ray 1974, Midlarsky 1975). Recent efforts have resurrected this theory using more subtle theories and research designs. Volgy et al. (2014), for example, find evidence that status “overachievers” (states with more status than they deserve) may be significantly less likely than underachievers to intervene in ongoing international conflicts (see also Maoz 2010, Renshon 2013c). One challenge not yet addressed in this literature, however, is providing evidence to substantiate the claim that status expectations are, in fact, based on material capabilities. This claim, though intuitively plausible for earlier eras, may be overly simplistic or misleading in contemporary world politics.

Other studies build on the conjecture that prestige tends to lag behind a state’s actual power and capabilities. War may result if the declining hegemon is unwilling or unable to revise the status hierarchy to accommodate the challenger (Organski & Kugler 1980, Gilpin 1983). Following in a similar tradition of system-level IR theory, Wohlforth (2009; see also Onea 2013) proposes that multipolar systems should lead to more ambiguity in the international hierarchy, and thus more “status conflict,” while Lebow (2010) offers a theory of motivation for war centered prominently on “standing” and “revenge.” Recently, research linking status and states’ grand strategies has gained prominence (Kang 2010, Larson & Shevchenko 2010, Schweller & Pu 2011, Lake 2013). Future research would benefit from greater integration of the contributions of the different approaches to the study of status. For example, dissatisfaction over relative status is a key theoretical concept in the power transition literature, but attempts to measure relative status have taken place almost exclusively in the status inconsistency research program, despite the obvious synergy between the two.

Improvements in measurement will also aid inferences regarding status and conflict. Given the perceptual nature of status, any systematic measure must necessarily rely on proxies (in contrast, careful qualitative work may be relied on in small-*n* designs when enough data are available on leaders' beliefs and actions). Early work relied on tallying the number and rank of diplomatic representatives sent from one country to another, but idiosyncrasies in the data have prevented scholars from utilizing critical data on the level of diplomatic representation (e.g., distinguishing between the exchange of ambassadors and an interest section) for the full time span covered (Singer & Small 1966, Bayer 2006). This would seem relatively easy to fix, though perhaps time consuming; a larger question is whether the number of diplomats sent to a given state accurately captures the country's international status, and how this aspect may be disentangled from other factors that are causally related to the number of diplomats sent and received.

Recent efforts using network methods (e.g., Hafner-Burton & Montgomery 2006, Maoz et al. 2007) have contributed in two ways. First, in their investigations of the sources of diplomatic representation, Neumayer (2008) and Kinne (2014) provide some assurance that diplomatic rank is not simply determined by raw material capabilities or other easily measurable factors (it does not seem to be, in other words, simply a noisy measure of wealth/might, although there is a great deal of measurement error in those measures as well). Second, other scholars, such as Renshon (2013c) and Maoz (2010), demonstrate the advantages of network methods in taking into account the importance of the sending state. All diplomats are not equal: if such a thing as a status hierarchy does indeed exist (and there is evidence that it does), then the status of the sender matters. A diplomat from the United Kingdom was a greater indicator of status in 1817 than one from Sweden. These improvements notwithstanding, over-reliance on the diplomatic dataset might also pose hazards. One task for future research is to provide evidence of divergent validity through use of an alternative measure of status or hierarchy.

### **Do Observers Draw Inferences about Reputation and Status?**

We thus have persuasive evidence from many sources that states, leaders, and publics care about their reputation and status. Scholars do not agree, however, about whether observers do, in fact, draw reputational inferences. Several important works on reputation have failed to find evidence that policy elites' beliefs are influenced by others' crisis behavior. Hopf (1994) examines how Soviet policy elites responded to American behavior in various crises and does not find evidence that US military behavior influenced Soviet inferences about US credibility. Similarly, Mercer (1996, p. 212) contrasts a version of deterrence theory with his theory based on the confirmatory attribution pattern and finds evidence that "people do not consistently use past behavior to predict similar behavior in the future." Most recently, Press (2005) examines a set of crises in which "past actions" theory—Press's null theory of reputation—predicts that leaders should have used prior crisis behavior to inform their assessment of the credibility of a leader's threats. Press reports finding almost no evidence that past actions informed observers' inferences, whereas perceptions of "interest" and "power" played a substantial role in assessments of credibility. In summary, three prominent scholars examining primary historical documents do not find clear evidence that policy elites used others' past actions to draw reputational inferences and inform their assessments of credibility.

Yet, this evidence stands in stark contrast with the confident theoretical beliefs of many IR scholars about the importance of reputation, as well as with the beliefs of publics, elites, and leaders. As summarized by Jervis et al. (1989, p. 14), statesmen "often use the recent behavior of others as important sources of information." In fact, evidence of reputational inferences would seem to be present any time an observer appends an adjective (e.g., "unreliable," "weak," etc.)



to a description of a leader because of that leader's past behavior. We also know that reputation and status are prevalent in many aspects of human societies and among most social animals (see Grosenick et al. 2007, Whitfield 2011).

This tension signals a productive puzzle for future scholars to explore. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that “decision makers wrongly believe [that] they obtain reputations” (Mercer 2013, p. 221) and that “those countries that have fought wars to build a reputation for resolve have wasted” money and lives (Press 2005, p. 1). There are a number of methodological and theoretical reasons why one should interpret the above studies with caution.

First, all these studies involve a similar method: evaluating the beliefs of policy elites during or after crises using historical documents. Any bias or flaw associated with this method could influence all of their results (for a broader discussion of potential problems, see Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo 2013). Consider first the bias induced by unspoken assumptions. Information that is already known by all participants would not be informative to discuss, and thus should be underrepresented in policy discussions and the documents that emerge from them. As highlighted by Larson (1988), common knowledge and shared beliefs and experiences are rarely stated outright. The reputation and status of a state are likely to be commonly known at the beginning of the crisis, and thus should be underrepresented relative to their importance (Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo 2013, pp. 8–9).

Second, selection bias is especially severe in the study of reputation and status. If we are interested in the adverse effects on one's reputation (or on one's domestic political support) from backing down, and leaders care about reputation (or domestic support), we can expect the observed effects to be biased toward zero (Schultz 2001a, 2012). Furthermore, we should be cautious about drawing inferences from any study that looks only at crises, conflicts, or wars. Such a design is conditioning on a crucial post-treatment factor—the occurrence of some level of conflict—and thus the meaning of any observed pattern is confounded by selection effects (Fearon 1994a, 2002). The problems caused by nonignorable missing data are not easily overcome, and these problems will be more severe the more influence that decision makers have over the behavior of their states.

### **Whose Status and Reputation?**

Huth (1997, p. 78) poses the question: “about whom is the [observer] drawing reputational inferences?” When a country backs down in a conflict, about whom is the reputational and social inference drawn: the leader, the party, the government, the nation? Much scholarship theorizes about reputation and status as properties of the state, referring, for example, to the credibility of the United States. However, some recent work has opened the question of whether reputation and status could be leader specific. Guisinger & Smith (2002), McGillivray & Smith (2008), and others demonstrate the existence and benefits of leader-specific reputations. Such a reputation should facilitate credible commitments and cooperation by aligning the leader's incentives with the nation's, by limiting the length of mutually harmful interactions after failed threats and failed cooperation, and by providing the state with a lever (the removal of its leader) for resetting the credibility of its promises and threats. Leader-specific reputations could also generate incentives that promote conflict, such as providing observers with incentives to probe the resolve of new leaders (Wolford 2007) and providing leaders with incentives to behave especially resolutely early in their tenure (Dafoe 2012). The move toward disaggregating state decision making in IR and the availability of new leader datasets mean that the study of leader-specific reputations will be an increasingly fruitful direction of inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Croco (2011), for example, found that publics punish leaders who are culpable for starting unsuccessful wars more than those who are not culpable for the wars.



We offer a theory of “influence-specific reputations” (Dafoe 2012, p. 8; Renshon et al. 2013) that synthesizes theories of country-specific and leader-specific reputations, as well as other kinds of reputations. We conjecture that reputations should be more specific to a particular entity as that entity is more influential in the behavioral domain relevant to the reputation. The logic behind this theory is that inferences about behavior (reputations) are most useful and efficient when they map onto the most influential actors. We therefore predict that reputations will be more leader specific whenever leaders are more influential: in presidential versus parliamentary democracies, in foreign policy versus domestic economic issue areas, in authoritarian versus democratic systems, and in personalist versus party-based authoritarian regimes. Our theory of influence-specific reputations accounts for why the leader-specific findings summarized above are strongest in autocracies, as well as the broader historical movement away from notions of reputation and status as traits of the monarch to traits of the state that parallels the growing domestic and constitutional constraints on monarchs.

### **Breadth and Persistence**

There are many open questions about how particular reputations and social roles work. A class of particularly interesting questions concerns the breadth and persistence of status and reputations. Theorists of reputation generally agree that past behavior is regarded as more predictive of future behavior to the extent that the contexts are similar (Guzman 2008, p. 103). However, the breadth of reputation—that is, the rate at which the informativeness of behavior diminishes with distance along some dimension of context—remains unclear. Dimensions of context include geographic region, similarity of the state or leader, issue area, time period, and stakes (Press 2005, p. 19).

Downs & Jones (2002), employing a rationalist understanding of reputation, argue that reputational inferences will be broader (*a*) in domains where there is greater correlation in the unobserved shocks that lead an actor to deviate from their reputation; (*b*) when an action deviates most from the observed interests of the actor; and (*c*) in domains where relevant observations are scarce, such as in crisis bargaining.

Other questions relate to the volatility and persistence of reputation and status. At what rate do they decay? Do they persist absent evidence to the contrary, or do they need to be periodically maintained through costly acts? Do reputation and status collapse after a single deviant action or do others’ beliefs only gradually shift after each deviant action? Can reputation and status be rebuilt, and if so, how difficult is this?

Rationalist explanations would look to the social nature of the determinants of the relevant behavior, the available information about these determinants (Debs & Weiss 2013), and the social equilibrium. Psychological work on the causes of belief stability and change suggest that beliefs about status and reputation are likely to lag behind events until a large enough shock causes them to shift, at which point they are overadjusted in the direction of new information (Shleifer 2000, p. 113). This would help to account for some perceived anomalies, such as the overattribution of status to China and the persistence of beliefs about the high status of countries that are in fact on the decline (Deng 2011).

### **Audience Costs and the Logic of Reputation**

Fearon (1994a) launched a large literature when he articulated the concept of “domestic audience costs”: punishment by domestic political groups for international “loss of credibility, face, or honor” (p. 581). Such domestic punishment could provide leaders with a bargaining advantage, since leaders would be able to endogenously create commitments through public statements, troop

deployments, or other symbolic expressions. Survey experiments reveal that public opinion seems to follow the logic of audience costs (Tomz 2007a), and experimental findings have supported specific predictions such as that more specific threats induce stronger audience costs (Trager & Vavreck 2011; see also Davies & Johns 2013). A large literature has examined whether domestic audience costs provide a bargaining advantage to democracies (e.g., Smith 1998) or to some kinds of authoritarian regimes (Weeks 2008). Much of this literature examines behavior in militarized interstate disputes or crises to evaluate audience cost mechanisms.

Several important papers have criticized the theory of and empirical support for domestic audience costs. Downes & Sechser (2012, pp. 457–58) ask whether “coercive threats issued by democracies are more successful than those issued by nondemocracies.” Downes & Sechser examine the prominent datasets of Militarized Interstate Disputes and International Crisis Behavior that have been used to test this view (e.g., Schultz 2001b). They find that <17% of disputes in either dataset actually contain coercive threats, and that the common bargaining interpretations given to the codings of “initiation” and “reciprocation” are unlikely to correspond with the intended concepts of threat and resistance to threat. Snyder & Borghard (2011) and Trachtenberg (2012) examine the role of domestic punishment following threats using sets of case studies.<sup>9</sup> Snyder & Borghard (2011) find that leaders rarely issue clear threats because they regard them as imprudent, and domestic audiences seem to care little about a leader’s consistency between words and deeds relative to concerns about policy substance and their concern for “their country’s reputation for resolve and national honor” (p. 437). Similarly, Trachtenberg (2012, p. 3) finds that audience costs do “not play a major role” in any of the crises he examines.

Dafoe (2014) argues that these competing perspectives can be reconciled by returning to Fearon’s (1994a) conceptualization of domestic audience costs as motivated by concern for national honor and broader forms of international reputation, rather than just consistency with explicit threats. Audience costs should arise when leaders back down after explicit threats, as well as when they back down after any action that engages the nation’s or leader’s “credibility, face, or honor” Fearon (1994a, p. 581). This conceptualization is consistent with the empirical evidence that explicit threats, per se, are rare and that publics do not seem especially concerned with consistency with threats relative to “reputation for resolve and national honor” (Snyder & Borghard 2011, p. 437). It is also consistent with the idea that audience costs are theoretically important and can explain variation in conflict behavior. And it is consistent with Tomz’s (2007a, p. 835) finding that public disapproval of the president backing down after making a threat is motivated by concern with the “reputation and credibility of the country.”

This conceptualization implies that interstate militarized disputes and crises remain relevant to theories of audience costs, even though most disputes and crises do not involve explicit threats. For example, Dafoe (2012) and Dafoe & Caughey (2013) use militarized interstate disputes to study concern for reputation for resolve (operationally very similar to audience costs). Instead of assuming that reputation for resolve is only engaged after an explicit threat, they adopt weaker assumptions mapping the bargaining model to real world data. They assume that “the militarization of a dispute (threat, display, or use of force) is sufficient to engage the reputations of the participants” (Dafoe 2012, p. 7; Dafoe & Caughey 2013, p. 10). So long as reputation is engaged in most disputes, behavior within disputes can inform theories of reputation and audience costs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Interpreting the case study evidence is complicated by the same attenuating selection effects noted in the section “Do Observers Draw Inferences about Reputation and Status?” (see Schultz 2001a, 2012).

<sup>10</sup>Of course, there may still be some militarized disputes, such as fishing disputes (Weeks & Cohen 2007), that do not engage reputation.

This conceptualization of audience costs as motivated by concern for reputation reveals some important open questions. What is the logic of reputation, as understood by publics and elites? What kinds of actions and events engage (and disengage) reputation? How do these effects cumulate? Do the importance and logic of reputation vary across cultures and circumstances? A better understanding of these questions will allow us to refine our datasets so that they more explicitly code when and how much reputation is engaged, and is essential for understanding its role in conflict.

### Importance of Theory

Two problems related to theory have plagued past research on status and reputation as motives for conflict. The first is that theory is often underspecified, so it is too vague. The second is that the null theory may be misspecified relative to the beliefs of other scholars, so the inferences drawn are not those that scholars holding different beliefs would draw.

The “status inconsistency” research program mentioned above provides an example of theory underspecification. This work tested the basic relationship between status inconsistency and war, but it was largely based on a small strain of research on what was termed the “frustration-aggression” hypothesis (Berkowitz 1978), as interpreted through the work of Galtung (1964). IR studies that used this as their theoretical foundation did not typically contain any theory that explained why we should expect individual-level results linking inconsistency to “violent” or “dysfunctional” behavior to translate directly to world politics. This is to some extent true of even the most methodologically sophisticated work (see discussion in Maoz 2010, p. 225).

To take the most prominent proposition tested in this literature, positing that states act out of “frustration” is a thin mechanism and presupposes an irrationality that obscures other, more robust explanations. For example, because states can expect to profit from holding more rather than less status, and because status is positional, violence may be one way of achieving higher status, rather than a last resort after having failed to do so. Although we have noted the advantages of building upon psychological research on status and reputation, the “frustration” example illustrates the drawbacks that are risked if theories are imported into IR too hastily or without sufficient theoretical development.

The work of Mercer (1996) and Press (2005) demonstrates how a null theory may be misspecified relative to the theories of other scholars, which can lead to divergent interpretations of empirics. Mercer (1996, p. 43) tests a null model of deterrence theory in which assessments of resolve vary deterministically and dichotomously based solely on behavior in the last crisis. This model generates strong, testable predictions. However, few theorists would argue that an actor will be perceived as resolved if and only if the actor stood firm in the last crisis. Rather, reputational inferences are often probabilistic, continuous, and conditional on context, such that perceived resolve is increasing in the more relevant crises in which an actor stood firm, and relevance could be a complex function of time, beliefs about the interdependence of commitments, conditions of the conflict, and other factors.

In a similar vein, Press (2005) tests a null model of reputation—“past actions theory”—in which a leader’s credibility should be high if the leader stood firm in the last crisis and low if he backed down. Press’s alternative theory of “current calculus” predicts that assessments of credibility will be based on current interests and power. However, there are other plausible models of reputation that are not captured by this dichotomy. Consider the theory of signaling reputation, in which reputation operates as a commitment device: when a leader has a reputation for fulfilling commitments, the leader’s threats will be perceived as credible; when the leader does not have such a reputation, assessments of credibility will be based on interests and power. This theory of signaling reputation is observationally equivalent to current calculus theory on the empirical

domain investigated by Press (cases in which leaders backed down). Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo (2013) raise another concern: reputation may operate through the shaping of beliefs about an actor's interests. This reputational mechanism, however, is subsumed under current calculus theory.

Theory development faces a tension. On the one hand, theories that are parsimonious and clearly stated are more amenable to empirical evaluation. On the other hand, overly parsimonious or narrow theories may not correspond to the beliefs of other scholars or to reality; inference based on these theories may be misleading or irrelevant. Weaker (more probabilistic) and more flexible theory may be relevant to a broader set of scholars and more realistic but is harder to evaluate. Our advice is that scholars continue to articulate theories as parsimonious as they can justify, while qualifying their inferences with respect to a broader set of theories, including more probabilistic and complex theories. We believe greater attention to theory will help clarify and overcome many of the current debates and impasses in the study of reputation and status.

## CONCLUSION

The study of reputation and status as motives for war has engaged much scholarship within IR. Nevertheless, there is much progress yet to be made. In particular, we note that status, compared to reputation, seems to be understudied. One avenue for future work may be to carefully build from the extensive psychological literature on status. For example, recent work on status suggests that *how* actors arrive at a status rank (e.g., by rising or falling) moderates the effect of that rank on behavior and on others' perceptions (Pettit et al. 2013). This framework seems likely to provide insights complementary to more traditional IR research programs on power transitions and the foreign policy behavior of rising and declining powers.

There also remain many major gaps in the study of reputation. This article has reviewed some especially promising open questions, including (a) how best to integrate strategic, cultural, and psychological theories and insights, (b) what accounts for variation in concern for reputation, (c) what structural, cultural, and individual characteristics account for the different ways in which reputational inferences are drawn, (d) how domestic audiences understand reputation and how this understanding shapes international relations, (e) when reputational inferences are more specific to leaders or governments (or other units), and more generally (f) the conditions shaping the breadth of reputations, including when they generalize across time, geographic region, and issue area.

There are many opportunities for valuable research to be done on reputation, status, and war. Given that improved theory will need to be more nuanced and contingent, it is likely that it will become more difficult to design compelling large-N cross-national studies. Future scholars will benefit from greater precision in the use of concepts; from the explicit articulation of general, but also nuanced and contingent, testable theories; from the application of modern empirical methods, including design-based inference and survey, lab, and field experimental work; from a continuing investment in innovative qualitative research designs; and from careful readings of history, applications of formal theory, and conversations with neighboring fields.

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