The Making of International Status

Book Proposal

Marina Duque*

Rationale and Scope

With great power rivalry on the rise again, many worry that struggles for status among states could lead to war. Questions of status lie at the root of international order: as Gilpin notes, governance in international politics is partly a function of the hierarchy of prestige, which determines which states will exert authority in the system.[1] It is no surprise that states care deeply about status. In fact, relations between the U.S. on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other, have reached a low point because of disagreements about status. Acting out of a perception that it does not receive the respect it deserves from other countries, Russia has adopted increasingly confrontational policies toward Western countries. And when President Biden pledged to convene a global summit for democracy during his first year in office, Chinese and Russian leaders reacted with skepticism, suggesting that the U.S. should address problems at home before lecturing other countries.[2] Such disagreements can be dangerous. As a growing scholarly consensus indicates, status-dissatisfied states are more prone to conflict. And historically, most hegemonic transitions have been violent: unable to reach an agreement about their relative status, established and emerging powers often resort to arms.

But whether states are satisfied or not with their status, a fundamental question remains: how do states achieve status? Existing research treats status as an actor motivation, showing that the search for status motivates state behavior and may even cause wars. Yet, we still understand little about the sources of status. Scholars traditionally assume that status is a function of the qualities of states, especially their military and economic capabilities—such that the richer or militarily stronger a country is, the higher its standing should be. Though intuitive, this assumption contradicts key empirical patterns. As Figure 1 shows based on commonly used measures, we observe a consistent mismatch between a state's material capabilities and its status. Material capabilities cannot explain much of the variance in the recognition a state receives: While states like Egypt and Italy punch above their material weight, states like North Korea and Taiwan punch below their weight. Theories of status that begin and end with state attributes thus leave important questions unanswered:

1. Why is there a mismatch between states' material capabilities and their status?
2. Why do certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition?
3. What is the relationship between actor attributes and status? That is, how are state attributes converted (or not) into status?
4. If status is not a direct function of states' qualities, how do states ultimately achieve status?

* Assistant Professor of Political Science, Florida State University, marina.duque@fsu.edu.

[1] Gilpin, Robert. 1981. *War and Change in World Politics.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33-34.

[2] *The New York Times*, "As Biden Plans Global Democracy Summit, Skeptics Say: Heal Thyself First," 31 January 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/31/us/politics/biden-democracy-summit.

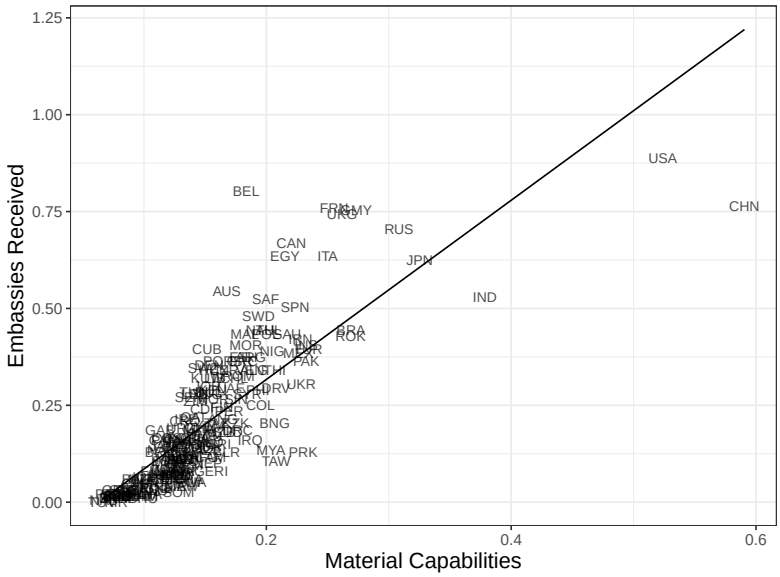

Figure 1. Material Capabilities vs. Embassies Received (2005)
Note: Material capabilities measured by the CINC Score (log-transformed), and embassies received measured as the in-degree centrality in the network of embassies, normalized between 0 and 1.

Argument

Drawing on an interdisciplinary body of research, I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than directly on their qualities. To understand how international hierarchies of status are made, I trace their roots back to key transformations that magnified global inequality in the nineteenth century, a foundational period for the contemporary international order. As Europeans made a turn to imperialism, they increasingly relied on a self-proclaimed standard of civilization that distinguished between "civilized" Europeans entitled to sovereignty on the one hand, and "uncivilized" non-Europeans unable to govern themselves on the other hand. Status distinctions have thus served to legitimate and stabilize inequality, drawing a boundary between those states deemed competent—and therefore deserving of privileges—and the rest. Once established, moreover, status distinctions have reinforced inequality via cumulative advantage mechanisms: the higher standing a state enjoys, the more it attracts additional recognition. It is no coincidence that, to this day, status evaluations rely on governance ideals associated with the West.

My theory offers new answers to the fundamental questions about status that existing studies insufficiently address. First, I argue that states' material capabilities and their status often mismatch because status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than on the things that they have. This explains some puzzling cases we observe in Figure 1. At the margins of the international system, North Korea does not attain major-power status despite having acquired nuclear weapons. Similarly, Taiwan receives less recognition than its material capabilities would warrant because it is the object of an isolation campaign conducted by China. But while states at the margins of the international system struggle to gain recognition, states at the system's core enjoy considerable advantage in maintaining their status. Italy, for example, receives much recognition even though its time as a major power passed long ago. Likewise, Egypt gets recognition from its relations with

other states: as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement and a state at the crossroads between the Middle East and Africa, Egypt receives more recognition than its capabilities would warrant.

Second, my theory explains how state attributes are converted into status. Because status is not directly observable, actors gauge status by evaluating whether a given state fits prevailing conceptions of state competence. Status evaluations are based on a way of life—a gestalt or ensemble of traits—rather than on separate attributes like nuclear weapons. And crucially, this gestalt involves not only material resources but also fundamental values associated with the West, such as liberal democracy. Third, I argue that state attributes become relevant for status recognition during critical junctures like major wars, when the model of statehood put forward by the winning state(s) becomes the standard that will be used to evaluate state competence thereafter. In the recent era, the predominant model of statehood involves not only the ability to fend for oneself under anarchy, but also a Western standard of civilization. While conventional wisdom treats status achievement as a meritocracy, suggesting that the best strategy to achieve status involves acquiring certain attributes, I show that status depends on structural conditions beyond the control of any single state.

Contribution

My book makes four distinctive contributions to existing scholarship. First, it addresses a new and noteworthy question: how do countries achieve status? While existing studies show that status motivates state behavior, we still understand little about the sources of international status. Scholars traditionally assume that status is a function of state attributes like economic or military capabilities, but do not put this assumption to the test. So how can we know if decision-makers value the same attributes scholars consider important for status recognition—or if state attributes determine status to begin with? Rather than assume the determinants of status a priori by ranking states based on certain attributes, I examine how states achieve status in the international system.

Second, my book adopts a consistently relational approach: it uses a relational empirical strategy in the service of a relational theory of status. First, I develop a theoretical framework that highlights the social nature of status. Conceptualizing status as inequality based on social esteem, I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement. In line with my theoretical framework, I use social network analysis tools uniquely suited to study status. These tools enable me to show that the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status achievement in the international system. As such, I detect patterns of social recognition that previous studies mention but do not examine empirically. By distinguishing status both analytically and empirical from material capabilities, my book aims to move status from its current condition as residual category in IR to its rightful place as a concept central to the study of international politics.

Third, the book adopts a distinctively interdisciplinary approach, integrating strands of research that rarely come into dialogue. Existing research on status relies on some idiosyncratic assumptions commonly adopted in IR. Crucially, the assumption that status results from the qualities of states contrasts with research in the social sciences more broadly, which understands status as fundamentally social. My book overcomes this limitation by building off research on status in the social

sciences, especially in sociology and social psychology.[3] At the same time, I contextualize status in the international realm by integrating interdisciplinary insights with research on international order and international law, which examines key transformations during the nineteenth century.[4] As such, the book brings IR research on status in line with research in the social sciences more broadly.

Fourth, the book offers three general lessons for research on international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions. To begin, the book demonstrates that international hierarchies of status are far from meritocratic systems. By assuming that status is a function of states' qualities, existing studies suggest that the best strategy to achieve status involves acquiring attributes. By contrast, my book demonstrates that established powers enjoy a cumulative advantage in status attainment, which derives from their social position rather than directly from their attributes. For emerging powers, this implies that moving up the status ladder is not simply a matter of acquiring attributes, as it ultimately involves reshaping predominant conceptions of state competence.

In addition, the book demonstrates that the role of status in international politics is broader, and more complex, than commonly assumed. Existing studies tend to equate status-seeking behavior with aggressive behavior. But while status may exacerbate conflict, it can also promote global governance. Since fundamental values like democracy shape recognition, there are structural incentives for states to adopt international norms. This carries with it important implications. Among them: status-seeking behavior may also be cooperative behavior—that is, status may contribute to the maintenance of international order. And while mainstream approaches posit that great powers maintain international order using military or institutional instruments, my book demonstrates that great powers also lead by example, setting standards that other states adopt. As such, hegemony requires upholding existing standards not only internationally, but also domestically.

Finally, the book offers insight into why disagreements about status can lead to hegemonic wars. Previous work argues that war can result when states receive less recognition than their capabilities would warrant, but fall short of explaining why this happens. Why do the established powers treat some rising powers as legitimate and others as revisionist? My book suggests that disagreements about status emerge when the established and emerging powers have conflicting conceptions of state competence. To assess whether hegemonic transitions will be violent, we should therefore compare the models of statehood put forward by either side. If the hegemonic transition from Britain to the U.S. was peaceful, since both countries had similar conceptions, a potential transition from the U.S. to China is more likely to spell conflict—as China increasingly questions the liberal democratic foundations of the contemporary international order.

[3] I draw, for example, on Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality* (University of California Press, 1998), which examines categorical inequalities within domestic societies.

[4] I draw, for example, on Barry Buzan and George Lawson's *The Global Transformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); John M. Hobson's *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Edward Keene's *Beyond the Anarchical Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Jennifer Pitts' *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2005), which analyze crucial economic and cultural developments in the nineteenth century.

Chapter Summaries

The book includes ten chapters. **Chapter 1 (Introduction)** presents the question that motivates the book: How do countries achieve status? First, I summarize existing research, which assumes that status is a function of states' qualities, and highlight facts that sit uneasily with this assumption. I then explain why understanding the sources of status is especially urgent today, when the future of international order is up for grabs. Next, I present a summary of my argument, which builds off interdisciplinary research. The chapter ends with a presentation of the plan of the book.

Chapter 2 (What Is International Status?) defines status as a concept at the intersection of identity and power. Drawing on the concept formation methodology in the tradition of Giovanni Sartori, I define status as a concept with two necessary dimensions. First, status requires recognition: for an actor to achieve a particular status, others need to recognize it. Second, status involves hierarchy: depending on a group's level of social esteem, its members acquire certain privileges. Compared to existing definitions, my conceptualization offers important advantages: (1) it emphasizes the fundamentally social nature of status; (2) it differentiates status from terms like material capabilities or hierarchy; and (3) it integrates research traditions that rarely come into dialogue: the mainstream literature on status and conflict, which usually treats status as a means to an end; and the literature on recognition, which usually treats status as an end in itself.

Chapter 3 (A Network Theory of Status) develops a theoretical framework that captures the fundamentally social nature of status. I argue that status depends on states' positions in a social arrangement, rather than on their qualities. To explain how states achieve status, I theorize the underlying relational effects that drive status recognition among states. I argue that the structure of state relations itself shapes the conditions for status attainment in the international system. Because status distinctions involve social closure (or the establishment of a boundary between a group and outsiders), a state's existing relations influence its ability to achieve status. Moreover, status reinforces inequality, independently of material conditions, because it involves cumulative advantage: the higher standing a state enjoys, the more it tends to attract additional recognition. Finally, the relevance of a given state attribute for status recognition is socially defined: an attribute becomes relevant for recognition because of its symbolic value—which depends on the social context, and especially on who the great powers are and how they behave.

Chapter 4 (Why Embassies?) operationalizes the concept of status developed in Chapter 2, linking it to observations intended to capture the main ideas from the concept. Because status is a quality that cannot be directly observed, I use embassy exchange data as a proxy measure of status. Under international law, embassy exchange is a longstanding practice that signifies recognition among sovereign states and that creates social inequalities among states. Given my concept of status, a valid measure of status should be relational, behavioral, and multidimensional; moreover, it should cover all states over a significant period and reduce measurement bias. Compared to other potential measures of status—those based on states' attributes, individuals' perceptions of the status of states, or states' positions in formal institutions—embassy exchange data offer the most advantages given my goals in this project. While these data meet all of my operationalization criteria, alternative measures present limitations based on two or more of the criteria. Finally, I dispel common misconceptions about embassy exchange data and their use as a measure of status.

Chapter 5 (Measurement Validation) validates my proposed measure of status by examining the relation between my concept of status and the network of embassies. Integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence, I conduct two types of validation: content and discriminant validation. Drawing from international law, network analysis, and cases involving countries like China and Israel, I show that the network of embassies adequately captures both recognition and hierarchy, the two necessary dimensions of my concept of status. Next, I demonstrate that states' positions in the network closely match scholars' qualitative assessments of status. At the same time, material capabilities cannot account for much of the variation in states' positions in the network, in line with the analytical distinction I draw between status and material resources.

Chapter 6 (Why Social Network Analysis?) presents the empirical strategy I use to investigate the sources of international status in Chapters 7 through 9. While previous studies examine status at the state level, I use the network of embassies as my unit of analysis—treating the network structure itself as an object of substantive interest. First, I derive observable implications from my theory for embassy exchange. Next, I explain that, because of its ability to infer social structure by examining the patterns of relations among actors, social network analysis is uniquely suited to investigate the observable implications of my theory, which involve relational patterns. This approach enables me to uncover underlying network dynamics in embassy exchange that are not observable using conventional methods. The chapter ends with a presentation of the empirical analysis plan.

Chapter 7 (A Network Model of Diplomatic Status) examines the implications of my argument for the formation of diplomatic ties. Leveraging inferential network analysis, which enables me to test hypotheses involving relational patterns, I assess why states send embassies to certain destinations and not others. I show that my relational model performs much better than conventional explanations in theorizing the underlying dynamics of the diplomatic network. To begin, status is self-reinforcing: the more a state receives recognition, the more it attracts additional recognition. Moreover, a state's existing relations affect its ability to achieve status: states prove more likely to recognize states that recognize them in return or that share diplomatic partners with them. Finally, against expectations from the conventional approach, it is attribute similarity, rather than the possession of attributes per se, that drives recognition: states recognize those states similar to them, rather than the states with the largest amount of certain attributes.

Chapter 8 (The Core-Periphery Structure of Diplomatic Relations) examines the implications of my argument at the structural level of the diplomatic network. I show that the network is highly centralized, both in its structure and in its use of status symbols. First, the network has a core-periphery structure—whereby states can be divided into a well-connected core, comprised mostly of Western or Western-aligned states, and a sparsely-connected periphery. States in the core are very likely to exchange embassies among themselves but less likely to send embassies to the periphery. By contrast, states in the periphery are more likely to send embassies to states in the core than to other states in the periphery. As such, the core's size and composition remain stable over time, even as the number of states in the system increases. Second, I demonstrate that core membership depends on a gestalt or ensemble of traits that includes not only material capabilities but also fundamental values like liberal democracy. Predominant conceptions of state competence thus involve not only the ability to fend for oneself under anarchy, but also a Western standard of civilization.

Chapter 9 (Democracy, Nuclear Weapons, and Diplomatic Status) takes a long-run perspective to examine why certain state attributes become relevant for status recognition. I show that the rela-

tionship between status and two state attributes typically associated with status—nuclear weapons and democracy—depends on changing structural conditions, and especially on who the great powers are and how they behave. Acting as standard-setters and gatekeepers, the great powers of an era shape predominant conceptions of state competence. First, I assess whether the acquisition of nuclear weapons increases the number of embassies a state receives using the synthetic control method. I show that, since the nuclear powers colluded to stigmatize the bomb in the 1960s and 1970s, nuclear weapons do not improve the owner's standing; neither do they serve as a basis for social closure in the international system. Next, I examine the effect of joint democracy on embassy exchange using time-varying effect models. I show that, since 1900, democratic states are more likely to recognize one another—but only during periods of democratic hegemony.

Chapter 10 (Conclusion) offers three general lessons based on this study for research on international hierarchies, international order, and power transitions.

Intended Readership

As the first sustained, book-length effort to address the question of how states achieve status, my book will appeal to a wide audience. The market is ripe for a book that engages this question. Several books published in the past five years indicate that status-dissatisfied states are more prone to conflict.[5] In addition, Lilach Gilady's *The Price of Prestige* (University of Chicago Press, 2018) argues that the search for status motivates behaviors that provide little strategic utility to states, such as acquiring aircraft carriers or developing space programs.

But even though we are hitting a critical mass of work on status in IR, this research program is not mature yet. While existing books treat status as an actor motivation, we still lack even a basic understanding of fundamental questions related to status. My book will be the first to investigate the sources of international status. It will stand out for its distinctive contribution: it proposes a new theoretical framework that highlights the social nature of status and uses social network analysis tools uniquely suited to study status. Moreover, the book places status at the intersection of research areas that have drawn increasing interest in recent years—such as international hierarchies, power transitions, relational approaches, and network analysis—but that are rarely linked to status. Because it engages research in each of these areas, my book will draw a broad audience.

Because of the book's distinctive features, I anticipate that it will appear in both graduate and undergraduate syllabi on several topics. As the most comprehensive analysis of diplomatic exchange conducted so far, the book will interest students of diplomacy and foreign policy. Because of its extensive use of network analysis (and accessible language), the book will appeal to students interested

[5] Jonathan Renshon's *Fighting for Status* (Princeton University Press, 2017) claims that states are more likely to fight when they receive less recognition than their level of material resources would warrant. Steven Ward's *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) posits that hegemonic wars occur when the established powers resist change, empowering domestic factions in the rising power who favor an aggressive response. Michelle Murray's *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2018) argues that power transitions are peaceful when the established powers treat a rising power as legitimate but conflictual when they treat it as revisionist. Joslyn Barnhart's *The Consequences of Humiliation* (Cornell University Press, 2020) contends that war may result from humiliation: those states that suffered a recent military defeat are more prone to conflict.

in social network analysis. Given its careful conceptualization and operationalization of status, the book will be attractive to students of qualitative methods. Since the book offers new theoretical insights about status and international order, it will interest students of international relations theory. And because it offers new lessons for research on great power rivalries and hegemonic wars, the book will also be attractive to students of international security.

The reception of my work suggests that the book will be well read, both in the U.S. and abroad. An article from the manuscript, published at *International Studies Quarterly* in 2018, received two awards: the 2019 Political Ties Award by APSA's Political Networks Section, for the best article on political networks; and the 2019 DPLST Article Award by ISA's Diplomatic Studies Section, for the best article on diplomacy. This article has received 143 citations in Google Scholar—in publications from North America, Europe, Brazil, China, and India—and has more than 2,000 downloads. *Dimensions* rates the article as "extremely highly cited," with 63 times more citations than the average publication in the field. In addition, I have given invited talks about the book not only in the U.S., but also in Canada and Brazil.

To increase the book's visibility, I plan to (1) publish a shorter version of the book's argument in a broad-readership publication, such as *Foreign Affairs*; (2) divulge the book's publication in social media, using figures that represent the main results; (3) submit the book for consideration by the relevant award committees;[6] (4) send copies of the book to the relevant venues that publish book reviews,[7] as well as to influential scholars and practitioners, both in the U.S. and abroad; and (5) organize book roundtables during the annual meetings of the ISA and APSA.

Schedule and Length

The complete manuscript has about 250 printed pages or 100,000 words, including the bibliography, and 25 figures. It includes material published at *International Studies Quarterly*. While the book builds on my Ph.D. dissertation, it mostly includes new material not found in the dissertation. Half of the chapters (1, 3, 4, 9, and 10) are entirely new, while the remaining chapters (2, 5–8) include a significantly expanded and deepened analysis, covering a longer historical period.

I held a successful book workshop for the manuscript in 2018. Professors Deborah Larson (University of California, Los Angeles), Nuno Monteiro (Yale University), Vincent Pouliot (McGill University), Jelena Subotic (George State University), Anne Clunan (Naval Postgraduate School), and Alexander Montgomery (Reed College) participated in the workshop. Based on their feedback, I substantially revised the manuscript to (1) add more narrative and qualitative evidence, making the book more appealing to a broader audience; (2) render the theory applicable to a broader historical period, going back to the early nineteenth century; and (3) accordingly, expand the empirical analysis to cover a longer historical period.

[6] Examples include ISA's DPLST Book Award, Theory Section Book Award, International Political Sociology Book Award, and Annual Best Book Award; APSA's Political Networks Section Best Book Award, Giovanni Sartori Book Award, Theodore J. Lowi First Book Award, and Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award; the British International Studies Association's Susan Strange Best Book Prize, and the Georgetown University Lepgold Book Prize.

[7] Examples include *Perspectives in Politics*, *World Politics*, *International Studies Review*, and *ISSF/H-Diplo*. I recently reviewed a book for *Perspectives in Politics*, and the book's author kindly offered to review my book in return.

Author Information

I am an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Florida State University. Before joining FSU, I held postdoctoral fellowships at the Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance (Princeton University) and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (Harvard Kennedy School); and was the Managing Editor of *Security Studies*. I earned my Ph.D. in Political Science from The Ohio State University.

Before entering academia, I worked as a career diplomat in Brazil. In this position, I experienced firsthand the search for international status: like other emerging powers, Brazil then strove to be recognized as an equal by the great powers. But while a growing scholarly consensus indicates that the search for status motivates foreign policy and may even cause wars, we still understand little about how countries achieve status or how status motivates political behavior. My research engages these crucial debates by drawing from an interdisciplinary body of work.