

**The London School of Economics and Political Science**

*The Political Logic of Status Competition: Cases from China, 1962-1979*

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## Abstract

Why do state leaders adopt competitive strategies in pursuit of great-power status? Competitive status-seeking acts incur tremendous risks for a state's geopolitical security as it entails challenging a higher-ranked power. To explain why leaders opt for such risky policies, this study underscores the instrumental importance of great-power status for states and that of personal prestige for the leaders. My central assertion is that leaders undertake competitive status-seeking measures in hopes of furthering their interests in both geopolitical and domestic political arenas. Competitive status-seeking strategy is a preferable policy for leaders who rely upon personal prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival at home while regarding great-power status as a route to geopolitical security.

Through an in-depth study of three cases from the 1962-1979 period of China's foreign and security policy, this thesis illustrates how this political logic informed the leadership decision on competitive assertions of status. During this period, China's policy illustrates three varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy—namely, offensive alliance, delegitimation strategy, and display of military power. These strategies respectively display diplomatic, ideological, and military aspects of state power, which serve as central vehicles for leaders to assert great-power status. Invariably they were motivated by leaders' pragmatic concerns for great-power status in geopolitics and personal prestige in domestic elite politics. As demonstrated by the case studies, competitive status-seeking measures provide a critical vehicle for leaders to cope with imperatives of geopolitical competition and domestic political survival simultaneously.

This study seeks to make three original contributions to the literature on status ambitions and international conflict. First, it treats status aspirations as a variable rather than an invariant driver of state policy as often assumed. Second, it claims that leaders may assert great-power status on their nation's behalf with a view to enhancing geopolitical security. In this regard, status and security are treated as complementary rather than antithetical. The final aspect of originality in my argument lies in its integration of rationalist and psychological microfoundations. While my argument highlights the instrumental rationality of state leaders in trying to advance geopolitical security and legitimize their authority in domestic elite politics, it also addresses how leaders inspire emotional reactions from domestic audiences to support their risky policy.

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## Introduction

*When those who are in office behave arrogantly, and seek their personal advantage, people start factional intrigues against each other and against the constitution which permits this to happen.....It is also clear what influence honor exerts and how it may be a cause of faction. People form factions when they suffer dishonor themselves and when they see others honored.*

**Aristotle<sup>1</sup>**

*Actually, the policy of prestige, however exaggerated and absurd its uses may have been at times, is as intrinsic an element of the relations between nations as the desire for prestige is of the relations between individuals.....Its purpose is to impress other nations with the power one's own nation actually possesses, or with the power it believes, or want the other nations to believe, it possesses.*

**Hans Morgenthau<sup>2</sup>**

*While the literature.....convincingly shows that those who manage the affairs of states are likely to place a value on positive status comparisons, we still do not know how strong this preference is.*

**William Wohlforth<sup>3</sup>**

Status is a positional good in world politics as well as our daily life. In theory, one's acquisition of status means a relative loss by others in the field where the actors strive for social preeminence.<sup>4</sup> Status competition tends to be zero-sum. "Social competition [for status] aims to equal or outdo the dominant group in the area on which its claim to superior status rests," Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko note. "In international relations, where status is in large part based on military and economic power, social competition often entails traditional geopolitical rivalry, such as competition over spheres of influence or arms racing."<sup>5</sup> Status competition thus could be a crucial source of international conflict.

In spite of this, social competition does not have to be the dominant strategy for states aspiring to status preeminence vis-à-vis others. As some prominent scholars have noted, status-enhancing strategies do not necessitate competitive acts of displaying state power;

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 183.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985), 86-87.

<sup>3</sup> William Wohlforth, "Status Dilemmas and Interstate Conflict," in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 124.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 72.

rather, leaders can also try to advance national status by emulating the competent practices of status achievers (e.g. social mobility strategy) or by creatively carving out a realm of social activities in which the status aspirant can outperform others (e.g. social creativity strategy).<sup>6</sup> Strategies of social mobility and creativity are conducive to the peaceful change of international order, in that pursuing them entail lower risks of conflict escalation and the means involved tend to facilitate reciprocal accommodation between the status seeker and the conferrer.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, acquiring status by competition is not the only choice for status seekers. Given that competitive strategy represents perhaps the staunchest effort at status seeking, it is theoretically interesting and practically imperative to investigate why it is in policymakers' interest to advance great-power status vis-à-vis other nations at the risk of conflict escalation and even war.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, why do leaders adopt competitive policies in pursuit of great power status—thus undertaking acts to display state power? Such acts could incur tremendous risks for a state's geopolitical security as they entail challenging a higher-ranked power. Importantly though, competitive status-seeking acts may help enhance long-term security for the status-aspiring state. If the very means to great-power status in the security realm—state power—gains favorable recognition by target states and helps elicit their voluntary deference, then those states would respect the state's core claims, thus enhancing its geopolitical autonomy. However, while competitive status-seeking strategy could serve to advance a state's geopolitical security, it is too risky to be a preferable choice for prudent leaders.

Inasmuch as leaders often grapple with tradeoffs between status ambitions and other political objectives, it may not be analytically helpful to consider status aspirations a constant driver of foreign and security policy. They should be treated as a variable. True,

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<sup>6</sup> See Peter Gries, "Identity and Conflict in Sino-American Relations," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* eds. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006); Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy"; "Managing Rising Powers: The Role of Status Concerns," in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy," *International Organization* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2003); Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chaps. 1-2; Benjamin De Carvalho and Iver B. Neumann, eds., *Small State Status Seeking: Norway's Quest for International Standing* (London: Routledge, 2014); Yong Deng, *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Empirically, competitive status-seeking measures may include acquiring overseas territory, instituting expensive arms programs, and strengthening commitment to overseas allies, or initiating military conflict for defending their status claim. For the scholarly investigation into the status motive behind them, see Joslyn Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa," *Security Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016); William Thompson, "Status Conflict, Hierarchies, and Interpretation Dilemmas," in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); William Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009); "Status Dilemmas and Interstate Conflict."; Tudor A. Onea, "Between Dominance and Decline: Status Anxiety and Great Power Rivalry," *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 1 (2014); Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Michelle Murray, "Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition before the First World War," *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (2010); Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

leaders and ordinary citizens alike value social preeminence vis-à-vis the peers with whom they interact frequently and what to compare favorably. Unlike ordinary citizens, however, state leaders arguably need to grapple with multiple, and often conflicting commitments. They at times may not find it politically imperative to uphold great-power status as a national aspiration. Whether leaders are inclined to promote great-power status as a national interest may depend on the political circumstances they face, both at home and abroad. Thanks to the symbolic role of leaders in representing state sovereignty, state leaders can expect to derive personal prestige from their status-seeking activities abroad. As such, promoting great-power status could serve to enhance leaders' domestic authority. The choice on competitive status-seeking policies, therefore, entails leaders reconciling status ambitions, geopolitical security, and domestic political survival. Herein lies the *political* logic of status competition.

*The Political Logic of Status Competition* proposes a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of status aspirations as state preference, and it seeks to explain why and how ambitions for great-power motivate leaders to undertake competitive policies. At its core, my study underscores the instrumental role of personal prestige for state leaders to legitimize (and thus enhance) their power positions at home, and that of great-power status for their quest for geopolitical security. *Its central assertion is that competitive status-seeking strategy is a preferable policy for leaders who rely upon personal prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival at home while regarding great-power status as a route to geopolitical security.* Competitive status-seeking strategy could manifest itself as symbolic acts undertaken by leaders to display state power against the target states. By such acts, leaders seek to assert great-power status for their nation while deriving benefits of personal prestige to enhance the chance for political survival. This argument reveals a political logic behind the seemingly imprudent acts of status assertion. It helps solve a set of puzzles as regards why leaders undertake such acts at the risk of conflict escalations with other states, which could put other political interests in jeopardy.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Why do leaders engage in competition for international status preeminence vis-à-vis states, at the risk of conflict escalation and even war? Why are they willing to promote great-power status as a national aspiration? And what are the implications of competitive status-seeking strategy for national security and leaders' own political fortunes? While various political thinkers from Niccolò Machiavelli to Hans Morgenthau have acknowledged status, prestige, or national glory as desirable goals for leaders and their subjects,<sup>9</sup> they also advised

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<sup>9</sup> See Daniel Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War: Returning to Realism's Roots," *Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (1999).

prudence for leaders in pursuing such objectives. They were never tired of invoking examples in which leaders excessively pursued status and prestige at the expense of their political fortunes. It is therefore puzzling from the standpoint of statecraft as to why leaders have seemingly put their political fortunes and national security at risk in pursuit of such nebulous goals as status and prestige.

Scholars in general tend to assume this issue away by settling for the argument that leaders like ordinary people simply care so dearly about their social preeminence among the peers as to become willing to sacrifice other values. Yet, despite the solid psychological findings in support of this assertion, it does not consider the political implications of status seeking. In asserting that national leaders, like all human beings, tend to become obsessed with enhancing status of the group they identify with, scholars tend to equate the realm of power politics with our ordinary life. They do not tackle the question head on: why are leaders willing to put national security aside, which is also critical to their political fortunes? Crucially, it does not explain why status and prestige are worth pursuing in the realm of politics governed by necessity more than desirability. Common sense can tell that leaders often grapple with multiple commitments, of which national security and domestic political survival matter no less significantly than the psychological satisfaction of gaining status. Remarkably indeed, experimental evidence has shown that the leadership posts by themselves can have a moderating, rather than aggravating, effect on status aspirations of the occupants.<sup>10</sup> Given that competitive status-seeking strategy may incur considerable risks and uncertainties for state leaders, great-power status may not be worth pursuing if it holds out little promise for promoting other political interests.

States appear “assertive” when they employ state power to assert status claims. Status, in theory, is an indivisible good; as such, the status aspirant has to claim or abandon it in its entirety. Accordingly, state leaders asserting great-power status would find it difficult to back down in the face of counter-pressures from an international opponent. Carrying through their status claim, however, may aggravate the tension they have provoked.<sup>11</sup> At worst, international conflict would imperil leaders’ domestic fortunes and eventually undermine their power and prestige. The puzzle here is why leaders hold prestige and status aspirations so dear that they are willing to run the risk of conflict escalations and even war with other states.

To date, status and prestige are taken as ends so fundamental to human beings that

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<sup>10</sup> See Jonathan Renshon, "Losing Face and Sinking Costs: Experimental Evidence on the Judgment of Political and Military Leaders" *International Organization* 69 (Summer 2015).

<sup>11</sup> James Fearon alludes to this scenario as a likely cause for war, whereas other scholars accord it greater importance. See James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *ibid.* 49, no. 3 (1995); Monica Toft, "Issue Indivisibility and Time Horizons as Rational Explanations for War," *Security Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006); Jonathan Kirshner, "Rationalist Explanations for War?," *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (2000).

scholars often neglect to discuss their *varied* relevance to foreign policy making. And yet, the drive for social preeminence is not just an inherent trait of human nature; it also has pragmatic aspects granting the distinguished members access to various prerogatives and privileges. Thus, an alternative perspective focused on the instrumental roles of great-power status and personal prestige for individual leaders may be warranted. This perspective treats status and prestige as intermediate ends toward other objectives. As such, they allow for variation on leaders' concerns for social preeminence both internationally and domestically. As regards international security affairs, this instrumental perspective treats acts of status assertion as a means to geopolitical security. It in turn prompts a different set of questions: why do leaders try to further national security interests via competitive status-seeking acts? When are they inclined to promote great-power status as a national objective? Competitive status-seeking strategy involves symbolic acts of displaying state power, which enables leaders to assert great-power status on the nation's behalf. In the anarchical international system where security anxiety is pervasive and security dilemmas are omnipresent, competitive status-seeking acts arguably incur risks of aggravating tensions between states. Arguably, there are multiple strategies for advancing national security such as balancing, conventional diplomacy, and the prudent conduct of coercive diplomacy. Compared to competitive status-seeking strategy, they entail less confrontational postures, thereby incurring less severe security risks in a short run. Still, they may have distinct incentives to pursue competitive status-seeking strategy, given the instrumental values of prestige for states and themselves.

This study seeks to investigate, both theoretically and empirically, the logic of status competition from the standpoint of statecraft. This entails asking: what is distinctive about status as a national objective? How do concerns for great-power status and personal prestige relate to other imperatives leaders need to grapple with—notably national security and domestic political survival? And given the perceived benefits of great-power status and personal prestige, when do leaders opt to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy toward other states?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MATTER**

Rising powers can either harbor appeasable ambitions or aspire to systemic changes of the international order. A potential determinant of their aspiration is their perceived standing relative to others, which could encourage them either to abide by norms of peaceful change or to overturn the existing order. A sense of status allows leaders to judge if their interlocutors take their honor seriously—and this could inform their resolve to press

claims.<sup>12</sup> When state leaders “perceive a gap between what they think others should think about their state’s standing and what they estimate others actually do think,” according to William Wohlforth, they “seek to rectify it, possibly through assertive action.”<sup>13</sup> In this circumstance, leaders are motivated to assert status claims by pressing their advantage. Doing so helps to impress the observer with the kind of superiority the actor enjoys.

Recent controversies around the so-called “assertiveness” of China’s international behaviors after 2010 serve as a case in point. Scholars and policy analysts are keen on characterizing China as an “assertive” player poised to use its newly acquired coercive capacities to defend its territorial claims in the South and East China seas.<sup>14</sup> The debate revolves around whether China’s ambition is unlimited and will generate disruptive impacts on the international order. Undoubtedly, it reflects substantial concerns for competitive status-seeking acts that Beijing appears to have undertaken. For some scholars, the term “assertiveness” can broadly refer to the level of activity in a state engages, which can be measured by “the state’s willingness to pay the costs.....of following a particular strategy.”<sup>15</sup> “Assertiveness” in this sense suggests a high degree of engagement in international affairs. From this standpoint, scholars have shed favorable light on China becoming a more assertive power.<sup>16</sup> However, those wary of China’s rise tend to emphasize the violent potential of assertive behaviors. While doing so, they stress Chinese tendency to rely on coercive means in pursuit of international ambitions.<sup>17</sup> Both conceptions suggest that an “assertive” China is inclined to demonstrate material and ideational power to strengthen its international claims. And yet, they generate divergent expectations regarding its impact on the international order by positing differing motives behind the perceived

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<sup>12</sup> Honor constitutes a critical source of resolve as demonstrated in human behaviors, and this pattern is applicable to international politics. For the experimental evidence on this, see Joshua Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> William Wohlforth, “Status Dilemmas and Interstate Conflict,” in *Status in World Politics* eds. T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 118.

<sup>14</sup> Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston, “Debating China’s Assertiveness,” *International Security* 38, no. 3 (Winter 2013/14); Thomas J. Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China-Responding to Beijing’s Abrasive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011); Zhou Fangyin, “Between Assertiveness and Self-Restraint: Understanding China’s South China Sea Policy,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016); Aaron Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing’s Assertiveness,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014); Björn Jerdén, “The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 1 (2014); Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?,” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013); Nien-Chung Chang Liao, “The Sources of China’s Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016); Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Why Chinese Assertiveness Is Here to Stay,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014); Michael Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” *China Leadership Monitor* 32, no. 2 (2010); Michael Yahuda, “China’s New Assertiveness in the South China Sea,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston, “Debating China’s Assertiveness,” *International Security* 38, no. 3 (Winter 2013/14); Thomas Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China-Responding to Beijing’s Abrasive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011); Yan Xuetong, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing’s Assertiveness.”; Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Why Chinese Assertiveness Is Here to Stay,” *ibid.*

Chinese assertive acts.

Thanks to the literature on social psychology and the usage of the term “assertive” in social life, we can posit the status motives behind an assertive style of foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> In a nutshell, assertive acts signal one’s readiness to defend his/her claims about a social role in relation to others. In this context, the dispute at hand assumes symbolic implications for relative standing. Status (as well as prestige), by definition, indicates a state actor’s quest for preeminence within a social context composed of intersubjectively shared norms.<sup>19</sup> Inasmuch as status involves public recognition of an actor’s achievements or qualities, it could act as a vehicle for legitimizing a state’s claim for authority over others.<sup>20</sup> In international politics, though, such kind of authority is fluid—and it varies across issues over which states contend for relative gains. The status seeker therefore needs to show its superiority by constant performative acts. Doing so allows the audience to see where the actor’s prestige lies.<sup>21</sup>

Positing status motives behind the seemingly assertive acts is particularly pertinent to the rising powers. Rising powers are arguably prone to demonstrate its newly acquired power for asserting greater roles in international politics.<sup>22</sup> By undertaking symbolic acts as such, a rising power may seek international recognition of their newly acquired power and the proliferating interests abroad. While doing so, it may still observe self-restraint to some extent in order not to provoke an international coalition against them. In spite of this, it may still appear “assertive” to those who can readily see a significant change in its policy and may feel alarmed by this.

German foreign policy at the turn of the twentieth century can serve as an illustrative case. Harold Nicolson, a prominent British diplomat and scholar, noted that the Germans too often engaged in a kind of “sudden diplomacy.” The “theoretical basis [of German diplomacy] is that it demonstrates strength, causes perturbation, and thereby increases opportunity for pressure. Its practical justification is that it provides the negotiator with ‘something in hand.’”<sup>23</sup> These features by no means suggest that German diplomacy at the time aimed single-mindedly at expansion. It was instead an outgrowth of half-hearted measures to demonstrate German power as a symbol of great-power status.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Arthur J. Lange, Patricia Jakubowski, and Thomas V. McGovern, *Responsible Assertive Behavior: Cognitive/Behavioral Procedures for Trainers* (Champaign, Ill.: Research Press, 1976); Sue Hadfield and Gill Hasson, *How to Be Assertive in Any Situation* (London: Pearson, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth, "Status and World Order."

<sup>20</sup> Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2001), xii, 193-94; Rodney Bruce Hall, "Moral Authority as a Power Resource," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997).

<sup>21</sup> Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders*.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Washington D.C.: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, 1988), 79.

<sup>24</sup> See Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 183-91.

it aroused widespread misgivings.

The Chinese and German cases share this crucial similarity: leaders in both countries opted to display state power well before they explored the chance for negotiation.<sup>25</sup> Positing status motives could shed novel light on this behavioral style. Crucially, displaying power signals a resolve to boost national status, and prevailing over the adversary helps enhance one's status in the field where state power performs a symbolic role in asserting status. As such, the practitioners of competitive status-seeking strategy typically undertake to display an aspect of national strength to bolster status claims. Once a rising state manages to establish great-power status based on the display of its strength in a field of international activity, its claims tend to be justified and other powers would find it difficult to challenge it later on. In this way, competitive status-seeking measures could help to advance geopolitical security. As Hans Morgenthau remarked, "the policy of prestige is one of the instrumentalities through which the policies of the status quo and of imperialism try to achieve their ends."<sup>26</sup>

And yet, a rising power that frequently engages in competitive status-seeking strategy may disturb other states, precisely because its very assertions of great-power status—if not frustrated—could boost the geopolitical influences at the expense of other powers. Status assertions, therefore, constitute a litmus test for the resilience of order upheld by one or several status-quo oriented major powers. For an emerging power to successfully integrate into the international community, it is crucial that its status aspiration be fully accommodated—with positive implications for other claims. The display of Chinese power, for instance, allows Beijing's leaders to signal their resolve to safeguard the expanding overseas interests derivative of China's growing international influences. This is instrumental in defining the terms on which China is willing to integrate with the Western-created liberal international order.<sup>27</sup> It is then critical for status-quo powers to define the range of internationally acceptable behaviors while keeping an open eye on the emerging power's demands. For status-quo powers, defending its status can act as a vehicle for defining the range of the acceptable and the terms on which international peaceful change can be achieved. As James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon argue, signaling resolve via the display of American power is necessary to show the U.S. commitment to the principles on which the stability of international order rests.<sup>28</sup>

Predictably, both emerging and the status quo-oriented powers are likely to undertake

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<sup>25</sup> See Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 183-91; Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and Self-Restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea Policy."

<sup>26</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Yongjin Zhang, "China and Liberal Hierarchies in Global International Society: Power and Negotiation for Normative Change," *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).

competitive status-seeking strategy. By displaying state power as a status symbol, competitive status-seeking strategy represents a distinctive way of signaling status claims. It thus deserves particular attention from scholars and policymakers alike. Given, moreover, that competitive status-seeking strategy features symbolic acts of displaying of state power, it has the potential to aggravate geopolitical tensions. It is less likely, after all, for other states to stand by than to react forcefully to the state asserting status claims. Competitive acts may thereby exacerbate international tensions and even trigger crises of war. Given this perilous dynamic, competitive policies for status enhancements are worth being studied as a pattern of state behavior in international politics.

## THE LITERATURE

There is a growing body of literature regarding the importance of status and prestige as leaders' aspiration. In particular, scholars are keen to point out that states suffering frustrations in their status claims are prone to competitive policies. This study questions their assumption that the status aspiration is a constant driver of state international behaviors. Relatedly, it problematizes the assumed links between frustrated status ambitions and conflict-prone behaviors of states. It asks: why leaders value status in the first place? And when do status aspirations assume salience in leaders' foreign policy statecraft?

To date, scholars have managed to distinguish status ambitions from other foreign policy concerns such as power and security, arguing that status aspirations by themselves could motivate state leaders to risk other national values by engaging in international conflict. This is certainly a laudable step in establishing a research agenda on status politics in international relations. However, this approach also suffers from a lack of attention to the nexus between great-power status on the one hand and the imperatives of power politics on the other. Arguably, leaders face tradeoffs of status and power-political ends such as geopolitical security and political survival in elite politics. A neglect of how leaders cope with the tradeoffs among multiple commitments, I argue, would hinder further investigation into the logic of status competition among states.

### *Social Identity Theory and Status Competition among Nations*

Theorists of international relations have drawn upon an influential sociological paradigm known as Social Identity Theory (SIT) to suggest that states not only pursue power and security in the international system; they also seek recognition of their preeminence in a given area of activity.<sup>29</sup> SIT has established that human beings often aspire to favorable

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<sup>29</sup> For pathbreaking works that introduce SIT to IR theorizing, see Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth, "Status and World Order."; Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*; Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War."; Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* 49, no. 2 (1995); Lebow, *A*

comparisons with one another in various realms of social activities.<sup>30</sup> Because one's preeminence means a comparative advantage over others, status tends to be a "relative gain" rather than an absolute one.<sup>31</sup> The criteria by which a community member gains status tend to reflect the intersubjectively shared norms within a community. Status is socially constructed, as it depends on subjective perceptions as opposed to objective measurements. One cannot acquire status without a willingness of other community members to endorse his/her performance. In brief, status is a *relative, perceptual, and social* good for members within a community.

Status ambitions are rooted in the universal drive for self-esteem of human beings. SIT highlights that this drive can be projected to collective levels such as ethnic groups and nation-states. Once an individual identifies a group as the source of their esteem—along with other material benefits, he/she tends to expand their conception of self to the group level, thereby linking personal psychological wellbeing to that group's interactions with others. Perceived denial of self-esteem by others could foster resentment and perception of hostility, which in turn leads to intergroup conflict.<sup>32</sup> This is apt to be a crucial mechanism inducing conflicts between states, as interactions among states are susceptible to exaggeration of hostile intentions.<sup>33</sup>

In drawing upon insights from SIT, however, scholars have glossed over two issues. First, why should leaders promote status as a national aspiration? As Richard Ned Lebow shrewdly points out, it takes complex processes to elevate the status aspiration from the individual to the state level. The state is composed of a multiplicity of individuals and interest groups with disparate aspirations leaders need to take care of.<sup>34</sup> Why leaders concern themselves with status as a national interest thus warrants explanations. Second, why could not leaders undertake other status-enhancing measures than competitive strategy in response to the perceived humiliations? SIT does indeed prescribe multiple strategies for attaining self-esteem. Of course, there is no guarantee that a state can always gain favorable recognition by demonstrating competence in a different domain of international practices;

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*Cultural Theory of International Relations.*

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Michael Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," in *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, ed. Peter Burke (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006); Henri Tajfel, "Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations," *Annual Review of Psychology* 33, no. 1 (1982).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory" *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (1991).

<sup>32</sup> Tajfel, "Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations"; Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict*; Jonathan Mercer, "Feeling Like a State: Social Emotion and Identity," *International Theory* 6, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>33</sup> This is due to the common patterns of cognitive bias and anarchical conditions of international politics Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017); Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/15).

<sup>34</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

nor could they necessarily succeed in emulating the practices of other competent players. Nevertheless, state leaders have every reason to opt for these relatively risk-averse policies over competitive status-seeking strategy. Hence it is theoretically puzzling as to why they at times prefer competitive status-seeking measures over other status-enhancing strategies.

In short, the SIT-informed arguments on the sources of status competition have tended to dismiss the *political* elements in intergroup relations, as they give short shrift to the intervening processes between identity formation and political pragmatism. It is worth emphasizing, as Russell Hardin points out, that with social identifications always come material and social benefits including wealth, job opportunities, and even high offices. They could, in turn, motivate ambitious leaders to exploit the psychological dynamics of identity formation.<sup>35</sup> Hence there is a need to highlight political motives of leaders in organizing the group around an identity.<sup>36</sup>

It is also important to note that leaders often grapple with multiple conflicting commitments. And yet, scholars have selectively focused on competitive policies of materially secured states in order to isolate the effect of status aspirations from power and security. In so doing, though, they are able to make the case for status aspirations as a key driver of foreign policy.<sup>37</sup> But this “selection bias” also leads them to neglect a crucial aspect of status. Crucially, enhanced status promises geopolitical influences. As state power is multidimensional and it is always difficult to calculate how disparate elements of state power can work together on a stable basis, the very aspect of power symbolizing great-power status can translate into actual influences. As Kenneth Waltz famously noted, “states have different combinations of capabilities which are difficult to measure and compare, the more so since the weight to be assigned to different items changes with time... Any ranking at times involves difficulties of comparison and uncertainties about where to draw lines. Historically, despite the difficulties, one finds general agreement about who the great powers of a period are.”<sup>38</sup>

One school expands on the classical realist conception of national prestige as a reputation for power. It views prestige as outcome-based, as it is derivative of a successful employment of power. An alternative viewpoint considers prestige to be process-based. It regards prestige as a function of performative acts. In this view, an actor gains prestige by appealing to the audience’s emotional predispositions. Recognizing the instrumental roles of status and prestige for states and their leaders allows for integration of these conceptions in

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<sup>35</sup> Hardin, *The Logic of Group Conflict*.

<sup>36</sup> See Leonie Huddy, “From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory,” *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War”; Barnhart, “Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa.”

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 131.

study of international relations. Since status and prestige are synonymous in most theoretical discourses, in reviewing the literature I use the two terms interchangeably.

### *Prestige as A Reputation for Power*

Scholars informed by classical realist insights tend to treat power and prestige as the two sides of the same coin. For Morgenthau and Gilpin, prestige could be derived from successful exercises of power. And over time it helps to consolidate a state's power position. "A policy of prestige attains its very triumph when it gives the nation pursuing it such a reputation for power as to enable it to forgo the actual employment of the instrument of power," argued Morgenthau. Two types of such reputation follow – in Morgenthau's term, "reputation for unchallengeable power" and "reputation for self-restraint."<sup>39</sup> Gilpin expands on the former to suggest that prestige is "achieved primarily through the successful use of power, and especially through victory in the war."<sup>40</sup> Significantly, Gilpin elevates prestige up to a systemic level, treating it as equivalent to authority in the international system. Prestige legitimizes the "right to rule" on the part of the hegemonic power.

Gilpin views prestige as deriving from a preponderance of material power. In his words, "prestige refers primarily to the perceptions of other states with respect to a state's capacities and its ability and willingness to exercise its power."<sup>41</sup> And it is based on a great power's "victory in the last hegemonic war and its demonstrated ability to enforce its will on other states."<sup>42</sup> In advancing these arguments, Gilpin regards prestige as outcome-based: it is determined by the outcome of power as opposed to the process in which power is exercised.

Students of deterrence have followed Gilpin in assuming that prestige reflects the credibility of power. To make state power credible, it is desirable for leaders to display an advantageous aspect of the power capabilities at their disposal frequently.<sup>43</sup> Some empirical evidence, though, have come to challenge this line of reasoning. Recent scholarship has revealed that state leaders do not normally form beliefs about the credibility of another state's power capabilities by assessing its past behaviors.<sup>44</sup> But this claim remains a matter of debate, as statistical findings also exist to confirm the deterrent effects of international prestige.<sup>45</sup> Regardless, all participants in the debate have implicitly viewed prestige as the

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<sup>39</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 95-96.

<sup>40</sup> Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008). For the summary of this line of thought, see Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), chap.1; Shiping Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>44</sup> Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*; Daryl Grayson Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2015).

credibility of power. Their dominant focus is on the functional value of prestige in deterring the adversary.

By contrast, John Ikenberry devotes his attention to a second type of reputation of state power—namely, “reputation for self-restraint.” His theoretical concern is with how the winning powers at the end of a major war could signal self-restraint in order to establish a rule-based order. In contrast to Gilpin’s emphasis on prestige as a reputation for superior power, Ikenberry investigates how the hegemonic power through institution building could cultivate a “reputation for self-restraint.” International institutions feature norms, rules, and decision-making procedures designed to restrain the dominant state from abusing its unrivaled power. Building international institutions, in Ikenberry’s view, is essential for the hegemonic power to signal self-restraint—for a benign hegemon is more able to attract the lesser states to join rather than resist its proposed order. In joining the order led by the hegemon with a reputation of restraint, the materially weaker states worry much less about their vulnerability to exploitation by the powerful. Also for this reason, the prestige derived from a reputation of self-restraint would dampen incentives to challenge the hegemon that will suffer relative decline in the future.<sup>46</sup> As such, a reputation for self-restraint is essential to the leading power if it seeks to perpetuate leadership authority in the international system.

Although Ikenberry focuses on a different type of prestige, he does not challenge Gilpin’s view of prestige as outcome-based. While he emphasizes that democratic system and power disparities provide structural incentives and opportunities for a hegemonic state to derive prestige from self-restraints, the strategies pursued by a hegemonic state to acquire prestige is given short shrift in Ikenberry’s narrative. In this way, Ikenberry assumes away the performative aspect of prestige.

#### *Prestige as Norm-based*

International order features normative dynamics.<sup>47</sup> The English School literature notes that the normative issues are of fundamental importance in the construction and perpetuation of international order.<sup>48</sup> Viewed in this light, prestige as an ingredient of international order rests on the normatively acceptable practices—it is based on norms. Likewise, following

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<sup>46</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1998); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2012); Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Erving Goffman, one can think of prestige as a function of competent performances of his/her role in a norm-based society.<sup>49</sup> As such, prestige can be derived from the symbolic acts by which states and other actors alike demonstrate their competence in a realm of social activities.

Put differently, whereas prestige aspirations motivate them to engage in such acts, the success of prestige-seeking acts depends on the shared beliefs among the participants about what constitutes prestige. This fashion of thought resonates with the growing study of the cultural practices of international relations. As the scholars embracing it invoke differing concepts – such as honor, status, and prestige – to make the case that states are motivated by higher aspirations than merely surviving in the anarchical international system, they share the view that the drive for individual and collective eminence in social life is universal to mankind, the ways to achieve that are conditioned by norms and rules embedded in a particular cultural context of the international community.<sup>50</sup> Operating in a culture-laden international society, states need to concern themselves with the shared norms, rules, and practices by which their interests are to be advanced.<sup>51</sup> Prestige, as such, is norm-based.

To be sure, the resilience of international norms cannot be overstated. It is well noted that international norms are competing with one another, and their meanings and legitimacy are subject to contestation. As Stephen Krasner shows, even one of the principles fundamental to the viability of international society – sovereign independence – is inconsistently observed throughout modern international history.<sup>52</sup> As a matter of fact, inequalities among sovereign states have been institutionalized to grant “great powers” privileges to intervene in the domestic arena of “outlaw states.”<sup>53</sup> Great powers have privileges to create norms favoring their interests. Furthermore, states not only tend to follow norms selectively; they also seek to rally international audiences around their favored norms in an effort to counter their rivals’ authority claims.<sup>54</sup> As Vincent Pouliot argues, states often act on their perceived normatively appropriate norms in diplomatic practices

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<sup>49</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>50</sup> Lebow, *Why Nations Fight*; Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War: Returning to Realism's Roots."

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance, Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of international relations* 12, no. 3 (2006); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Martha Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>53</sup> Gerry Thompson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Also see, Edward Keene, "International Hierarchy and the Origins of the Modern Practice of Intervention," *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 5 (2013).

<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society," *International Organization* 68 (Winter 2014); Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity."; Ian Hurd, "The Strategic Use of Liberal Internationalism: Libya and the U.N. Sanctions, 1992–2003," *International Organization* 59, no. 3 (2005); Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue!': Communicative Action in World Politics," *ibid.* 54, no. 1 (Winter 2000).

with a view to boosting their status relative to others.<sup>55</sup>

All being said, the performative aspect of prestige could lead us to see differing ways of prestige seeking. Prestige is not only outcome-based but also norm-derived. That is, for the audience to confer prestige, they not only evaluate outcomes of prestige-seeking acts but also make normative judgment about the way those acts are undertaken. The latter issue underscores the performative aspect of prestige seeking.

While as noted, the IR theorists drawing the insights from SIT have given short shrift to the political motives of state leaders seeking status internationally, SIT and the related psychological theories nevertheless offer insights on how norm-driven acts could yield prestige. Particularly, the mechanisms underpinning identity formation are relevant to studying how leaders could legitimize personal authority in domestic elite politics through status assertions in the international arena. To date, the psychological findings have identified critical microfoundations of identity formation. Drawing upon them, IR scholars now gives increasing emphasis to the role of emotions in triggering collective identification with the state. Among others, Neta Crawford and Jonathan Mercer lead an effort to bring in emotions for theorizing international politics.<sup>56</sup> Following them, various scholars have identified three important themes linking emotional dynamics to identity formation. Simply stated, they include: identity formation entails intense emotional arousals; individuals experiencing similar emotional feelings are apt to identify with one another, thus forming collective identities; and in such processes individuals can monitor each other's emotional reactions and bring the uncommitted on board, thereby perpetuating influences of the inspired emotions on state policy and even community building.<sup>57</sup>

These three themes suggest that leaders may use the emotional dynamics underpinning identity formation to their advantage. Inasmuch as emotions induce individuals to see themselves as being committed to a collective cause, leaders could undertake competitive status-seeking acts with a view to inspiring a feeling of identity among the domestic audiences. This in turn allows them to legitimize personal authority in elite politics. In this way, competitive status-seeking measures help to ensure political survival for leaders.

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<sup>55</sup> Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs," *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2010); Andrew A. G. Ross, "Coming in from the Cold: Constructivism and Emotions," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 2 (2006); Neta Crawford, "The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships," *International Security* 24, no. 4 (Spring 2000); Stephen Peter Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Mercer, "Feeling Like a State: Social Emotion and Identity."; Todd H. Hall and Andrew A. G. Ross, "Affective Politics after 9/11," *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (May 2015); Andrew A. G. Ross, *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Simon Koschut, "Emotional (Security) Communities: The Significance of Emotion Norms in Inter-Allied Conflict Management," *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014); Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

To sum up, the existing literature provides the following insights: 1) prestige both motivates and mediates relations of dominance among political actors; 2) prestige is derivative of the process by which states demonstrate competence in pursuing a given end; 3) this process is driven by symbolic acts; and 4) state leaders in their capacity of representing the sovereign authority are uniquely placed to assert great-power status in geopolitics and personal prestige in domestic politics. And yet, scholars have yet to give sufficient attention to the agency of leaders. They tend to identify leaders with the state, thereby assuming away their role in handling the conflicting imperatives of geopolitics and domestic politics. This study seeks to integrate the insights of outcome-based status and norm-based prestige into a two-level game framework for studying the politics of status competition. Because state leaders are central players in the international arena and they arguably often play their international roles with a view to domestic politics, their acts should be viewed as strategies to navigate the “two-level game.”<sup>58</sup> The two-level analytical approach takes the rationalist view that leaders are preoccupied with matters of political survival. Challenges to their political fortunes could arise from both international and domestic arenas. Leaders in turn face a dual task in the daily practice of statecraft: to advance national security while securing the interests of their key constituents.<sup>59</sup> It is questionable, however, that a strictly rationalist position is adequate for operationalizing this assumption in analytic endeavors. The political interests essential to leaders such as power and prestige simply cannot be calculated in tangible terms.<sup>60</sup> As such, it is imperative to address how the subjective experiences of national status and personal prestige underpin leaders’ pragmatic considerations.

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<sup>58</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988).

<sup>59</sup> Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> I appreciate that Peter Trubowitz himself acknowledges this assertion.

## THE ARGUMENT

This study departs from the existing literature on status aspirations and international conflict in two ways. First and foremost, it assumes that state leaders take great-power status and personal prestige to be instrumental. Specifically, great-power status provides a route to geopolitical security, whereas personal prestige could help leaders legitimize their authority in elite politics. A second assumption is that leaders often need to manage tradeoffs among objectives as related to great-power status, geopolitical security, and domestic political survival.

On these assumptions, I advance the central assertion that *when individual leaders rely upon great-power status as a means to geopolitical security and on personal prestige for domestic political survival, for pragmatic reasons they would engage in competitive status-seeking policies*. I test this hypothesis against the backgrounds of *geopolitical threat* and *institutional change dynamics*. These two types of events could heighten the instrumental importance of great-power status and personal prestige to other imperatives leaders face in distinct realms of power politics. Specifically, in the midst of institutional changes leaders may rely upon prestige as the principal vehicle for domestic political survival. On the other hand, a great power extending its geopolitical influences to a third party in the nearby region—usually a materially weaker state—could sensitize leaders to the instrumental role of great-power status as a route to geopolitical security. These incentives can *combine* to make competitive status-seeking strategy a preferable policy for leaders.

In my assertion, states compete for status not for its intrinsic values but for *instrumental* purposes. I argue, moreover, that *by competitive status-seeking measures leaders seek to transcend the tradeoffs among geopolitical security, domestic political survival, and status aspirations*. While such tradeoffs are imposed by exogenous events including (but not limited to) geopolitical threat and domestic institutional change, those events could also motivate leaders to use great-power status and personal prestige as vehicles for addressing various political challenges. Herein lies the political logic of status competition among nations: it is about how leaders seize the opportunity to transcend the value tradeoffs.

Two points in my argument are worth elaborating. First, this study posits two major audiences—geopolitical adversaries and domestic opponents—to competitive status-seeking acts undertaken by leaders. These two audiences operate respectively within the anarchical structure of geopolitics and the hierarchical structure of domestic politics. Leaders' symbolic acts could follow a distinct logic in each of these domains. Relatively sparse social ties and heterogeneous identities are defining characteristics of the geopolitical domain; as such, "actors pursue their own interests in the absence of durable interactions through which they

can monitor and enforce compliance with collective agreements.”<sup>61</sup> Adversaries in this domain must be defeated, accommodated, or deterred. When leaders signal claim to great-power status by displaying state power to a geopolitical adversary, they could hope to deter it once the aspect of power being demonstrated is recognized as a symbol indicative of status superiority.

By contrast, the state structure in its ideal type features a homogeneous identity, hierarchical organizations, and dense networks that sustain collective actions of politicians and bureaucrats. It then features facilitates the generation of pressures for conformity once a leader takes the initiative to mobilize others around a cause of status competition with foreign nations. That leader can expect to gain prestige by taking competitive status-seeking measures. Their acts of status assertion, however, carry tremendous security risks for the state. Therefore, competitive status-seeking strategy is no normal statecraft; it is unlikely to be a preferable policy unless leaders are cross-pressured by imperatives to advance *both* great-power status and personal prestige.

Second, concerns for social preeminence can arise for pragmatic reasons—specifically, leaders may view great-power status and personal prestige as crucial means to tangible political interests such as geopolitical security and domestic political survival. Such concerns would arguably become salient as leaders face significant challenges of geopolitics and domestic politics. This study therefore proposes geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics as stimuli for leaders’ pragmatic concerns for great-power status and personal prestige. Such types of events highlight the circumstances in which leaders may feel compelled to value great-power status and personal prestige as crucial political resources. In such circumstances, leaders’ concerns for great-power status and personal prestige arise out of political necessity, and are therefore distinguishable from the innate psychological desire for social preeminence. The latter is constant. Pragmatic concerns for social preeminence—notably great-power status and personal prestige—are *variable*. In addition, events associated with geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics can impose on leaders the tradeoffs among geopolitical security, domestic political survival, and status ambitions. Such events, therefore, provide good settings for applying my theoretical assumptions about state preference for status.

### *Hypotheses*

Why do leaders engage in competitive status-seeking strategy that carries tremendous security risks? In tackling this question, I focus on the instrumental importance of

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 49-50.

great-power status and personal prestige respectively to geopolitical security and leaders' domestic political survival. I therefore propose the **prime hypothesis**: *pragmatic concerns for social preeminence – notably great-power status and personal prestige – can motivate leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking measures.*

This hypothesis contrasts with, and seeks to improve on the conventional viewpoint that leaders pursue great-power status for its intrinsic values, ranging from the need for avoiding frustrating feels to a full satisfaction of self-esteem. Three auxiliary hypotheses follow. They describe distinct mechanisms uncovered by the conventional viewpoint. Chapter 2 will specify how these three hypotheses support the prime one – hence the focus here is on their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the conventional view.

**Hypothesis 1** *The aspect of state power leaders would display as a status symbol has to do with the strategic role of a third party (normally a lesser power) in a geopolitical competition between the major powers.*

The conventional view suggests that a geopolitical rivalry arises when state leaders feel humiliated in diplomatic bargaining, especially when their status claims are unheeded or misunderstood by the interlocutor. The mishandling of status claims tends to foster a sense of “status inconsistency” that can exacerbate leaders' threat perception. But this view is indeterminate as to the aspects in which leaders would endeavor to enhance great-power status. By contrast, my hypothesis adds “status symbols” into the equation, stressing the instrumental purpose of leaders in utilizing status symbols to enhance the state's geopolitical security. Meanwhile, an emphasis on status symbols allows for differentiation of competitive status-seeking strategy from normal security-seeking behavior.

**Hypothesis 2** *When driven by the quest for geopolitical security alone, concerns for great-power status are permissive but not sufficient for leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy.*

This hypothesis contrasts with the conventional view that state leaders care about status for its intrinsic values. To the extent that this viewpoint holds true, status cannot be traded off for other national objectives. If, however, leaders concern themselves with status for instrumental purposes, they are not likely to pursue status at the expense of other critical interests. Thus, while competitive status-seeking strategy may further security interests as enhanced status could elicit deference from other states and increase a state's geopolitical autonomy, leaders would tend to be prudent and adopt risk-efficient strategies in dealing with geopolitical threats.

**Hypothesis 3** *When preoccupied with personal prestige at home, leaders would be averse to escalation of international conflict that could undermine their ability to advance national wellbeing.*

The conventional viewpoint asserts that leaders share with the general public a universal drive for status preeminence in the international community. It follows that

leaders pursue status in order to satisfy their public's desire for status. My hypothesis, however, contends that state leaders derive prestige from their perceived ability to advance national wellbeing at large. Hence, when their priority is to legitimize their authority at home by enhancing personal prestige, it is preferable to avoid escalation of an international conflict that may intrude on their domestic agenda.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Several key concepts form the basis for my theoretical claims. They warrant particular clarifications.

**Power** is an ability to carry out one's will despite resistance from other individuals. This definition underscores the compulsory aspect of power and is adopted most frequently by political scientists.<sup>62</sup> It is actor-centric; as such, it is oblivious of scenarios in which significant asymmetries of influence are not derived from an actor's possession of resources but rather from structural inequalities that grant some actors prerogatives at the expense of others.<sup>63</sup> This study is inclined toward this actor-centric view of power as its central focus is on foreign policy statecraft by individual leaders. Leaders engage in power politics – whether at home or abroad – when they regard power as prerequisite for fulfilling other aspirations.

**Authority** means legitimate power. Legitimate power (e.g. authority) would elicit voluntary compliance from the target actors, thereby perpetuating dominance of the power wielders.<sup>64</sup> In this sense power begets legitimation. For state leaders, legitimizing political power could enhance their power positions and the chance for political survival.

**Power vs. state power.** Throughout this study, I differentiate between power and state power. State power refers to coercive resources exercised by the state authorities. As social and physical conditions underpinning interpersonal interactions are different than those underlying interstate relations, power arguably follows distinct operating logics in different realms. In this study, I assume that among individual persons power takes the form of *coordination* capacity: it resides in an actor's ability to get a group of people to work toward an end. Coordination enables leadership. That is, persons who succeed in coordinating a group of supporters can exercise leadership and impose personal will upon the outsiders. By contrast, state power suggests material or ideational *resources* that state leaders could employ to influence their counterparts of other states.<sup>65</sup> This amounts to what Hans

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<sup>62</sup> See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich ed., Ephraim Fischhoff et al trans. (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 53; Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957); Terry M. Moe, "Power and Political Institutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>63</sup> Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>64</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 53.

<sup>65</sup> For this distinction between power based on coordination and power based on resources, see Russell Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 35-37.

Morgenthau termed as “elements of national power.”<sup>66</sup> State power is multidimensional in that the resources at state authorities’ disposal are disparate.

**Status** refers in international relations to “collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes.” And these attributes include “wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, and diplomatic clout.”<sup>67</sup> Status could manifest itself either as *membership* in a club of state actors, or as a state’s *superior standing* relative to others.<sup>68</sup> The former can be more inclusive than the latter. Although the “club” is by nature exclusive, it can nevertheless accommodate quite a few actors and allow them to live with one another peacefully. By contrast, the quest for superior standing—especially great-power status—is apt to cause zero-sum competitions. This study is focused on this competitive aspect of status. Acquiring such type of status could contribute to the state’s geopolitical autonomy and security.

Relatedly, **status aspirations** represent a projection onto the state level of individual ambitions for preeminence in a given hierarchy; they are thereby associated with leaders’ quest for international preeminence of the nation. Conceptually, status aspirations could originate from the innate drive for honor, which is normally conferred by the community due to an actor’s admirable traits. As such, it is essential that an actor follow certain rules on the way to obtaining honor. However, “the value placed on honor.....and the intensity of the competition for it tempt actors to take shortcuts to gain honor,” argues Richard Ned Lebow, and “if the rules governing the honor are consistently violated.....competition for honor is transformed into competition for standing, which is more unconstrained and possibly more violent.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, inasmuch as the competition for status does not require an actor to internalize the normative commitments, state actors can achieve great-power status by virtue of the advantages they establish over the adversaries. In such cases, status preeminence is outcome-based. This tends to be prevalent in the geopolitical arena, where no overarching authority exists to define and maintain the norms of state behaviors.

**Competitive status-seeking strategy** (in other words, “**competitive assertions of status**”) involves acts, measures, or policies as undertaken by leaders to assert great-power status for the nation. It is characterized by symbolic acts of displaying an aspect of state power to bolster leaders’ status claims. State power is a central vehicle for leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking acts. Conceivably, certain state assets at the leaders’ disposal are essential to a state’s capacity to operate in the anarchical international system and physically not easy to manipulate—as such, they are too important and too vast to be

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<sup>66</sup> See Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, chap. 9.

<sup>67</sup> Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth, “Status and World Order,” in *Status in World Politics*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*.

<sup>69</sup> Lebow, *Why Nations Fight*, 71.

used for deception. Accordingly, if leaders can achieve status preeminence for their nation vis-à-vis other nations by demonstrating a superior aspect of state power, that aspect of state power would provide an “index” for international audiences to predict what the leaders would do in the future in accordance with their claim to great-power status.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, outcompeting adversaries—that is, to make the target state recognize the advantage of power resources that leaders employ to pursue great-power status—serves to deter the geopolitical adversaries and could thereby enhance national security. Pursuing security via competitive status-seeking strategy is a distinctive strategy. It is distinguishable from other types of security strategy, such as coercive diplomacy, balancing strategies, and conventional diplomacy—Chapter 1 will undertake this conceptual task.

Similar to status, **prestige** means public recognition of an actor’s prominence in a realm of social activities. It amounts to “external honor,” a symbolic award that “must be conferred by others and can only be gained through deeds they regard as honorable.”<sup>71</sup> I consider prestige to be norm-based. Inasmuch as prestige involves normative assessment of an actor’s social performance, this study associates prestige with leaders’ efforts to legitimize their grip on state authority. Hence, in this study “*status*” is the shorthand for national status, whereas “*prestige*” for personal prestige. State leaders seek great-power status vis-à-vis their counterparts of other states; they seek to boost personal prestige among domestic political elites.

Both great-power status and personal prestige rest on favorable beliefs held by relevant audiences. For leaders to foster that belief, they need in the first place to demonstrate traits of state assets or their personalities that might confer great-power status or personal prestige.<sup>72</sup> Such acts are symbolic by nature and are subject to varying interpretations by audiences. In this study, I treat competitive status-seeking strategy as a “two-level game” in which leaders try to assert great-power status and personal prestige *simultaneously*. Hence, in undertaking competitive status-seeking acts, leaders do not necessarily differentiate between great-power status and personal prestige. While leaders are asserting status claims to international audiences via competitive status-seeking acts, such symbolic acts also serve to boost personal prestige to home audiences.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

This study seeks to make three original contributions to the bodies of literature on status

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 26-40.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>72</sup> Following Robert Jervis, I suggest that signaling acts are symbolic behaviors to boost one’s claims. According to him, a state actor fosters its own “signaling reputation” by “issuing signals ties the actor’s reputation to acting according to [those signals].” See Jervis, *The Logic of Images*, 80. Further, Larson, Paul and Wohlforth argue that typical of status seeking are “symbolic” and highly “visible” acts. Such acts are intended to “draw attention to [a state’s] accomplishments and make a claim.” Larson et al., “Status and World Order,” 12.

aspirations and international security. First, the existing scholarship considers status aspirations an invariant and universal drive underlying states' international conduct. This study challenges this notion by treating status aspirations as a variable to be explained rather than a constant motive as often assumed. Status aspirations, by definition, are a projection onto the state level of individual ambitions for preeminence in an international hierarchy. Whether leaders view great-power status as worth pursuing is arguably contingent on the geopolitical and domestic political challenges they face. An investigation into the manners in which they reconcile status ambitions with these commitments could highlight non-psychological sources of competitive status-seeking behaviors. On this matter, I argue that geopolitical security threats can heighten leaders' preference for great-power status, but the relevance of this preference to national security policy is also a function of necessity of personal prestige for leaders' political survival.

Stressing the rationalist microfoundation of status aspirations means that as state objectives, status and security are complementary rather than antithetical. This is my second departure from conventional wisdom. My claim is that a state may seek higher status *with a view* to enhancing security in the geopolitical arena—that is, maximizing its autonomy from other states' interference. And yet, with a few exceptions this line of reasoning has yet to be extended theoretically very far and examined empirically in detail.<sup>73</sup>

To be clear, this study does not privilege either status aspirations or security imperatives in ontological terms. Given its central focus on the instrumental roles of great-power status for states and of personal prestige for the leaders, my argument underscores the interplay between status aspirations and security imperatives. Specifically, I argue that status aspirations assume much significance when they become intertwined with conflict of security interests, as individual leaders tend to assess security threats according to their sense of status recognition by the state they are interacting with.

The final aspect of originality in my argument lies in its integration of rationalist and psychological microfoundations altogether. While the argument highlights the instrumental rationality of state leaders trying to advance national security and legitimize their authority in domestic elite politics, leaders may also need to elicit emotional attachment from audiences who can provide crucial support to their political activities. The symbolic acts of displaying state power against a foreign adversary, I argue, allow leaders to translate the great-power status into personal prestige. This is achievable because domestic audiences—political elites organized in small groups—tend to put their trust in leaders who

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<sup>73</sup> For the few works that emphasize the instrumental role of status in advancing other state interests, see Jonathan Renshon, "Status Deficits and War," *International Organization* 70 (Summer 2016); Xiaoyu Pu and Randall Schweller, "Status Signaling, Multiple Audiences, and China's Blue-Water Navel Ambition," in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

can signal the readiness to defend their corporate interests couched in terms of national status.<sup>74</sup> In this way, my argument highlights the psychological underpinnings of domestic prestige politics in which leaders engage. It is the very psychological dynamics that enable leaders to gain support from the “veto players” at home for their policy of status competition abroad.

## PLAN OF THE THESIS

The thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the dependent variable—namely, competitive status-seeking strategy. In particular, it defines the behavioral traits of this strategy and specifies three varieties of it—namely, offensive alliance, delegitimation strategy, and the display of military power. In each variety, leaders demonstrate a distinct aspect of state power to assert great-power status. The state power being displayed provides a vehicle for bolstering status claims. Chapter 1 also discusses why the existing theories fall short in explaining status competitive seeking. Chapter 2 lays out my theoretical argument on why leaders would adopt competitive policies to pursue great-power status. It is focused on the role of personal prestige in power politics and the logic of symbolic acts in leaders’ practice of status competition. Relatedly, this chapter addresses the empirical matter of when leaders are likely to engage in competitive status-seeking strategy. It specifies two types of events—namely, geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics—that could inspire leaders’ pragmatic concerns in geopolitical or domestic arenas while exacerbating the tradeoffs among geopolitical security, domestic political survival, and great-power status.

Chapters 3-5 investigate three empirical varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy by scrutinizing Chinese security strategy from 1962 to 1979. Each chapter is devoted to addressing one variety. Chapter 3 examines China’s pursuit of offensive alliance from 1962 to 1965. This was motivated by Chinese leaders’ pragmatic concerns for great-power status as fueled by the presence of the US-centric alliance network in East Asia on the one hand, and for personal prestige on the other, which was related to the Mao-Liu split following the Seven Thousand Cadre Conference in early 1962. Chapter 4 focuses on China’s pursuit of delegitimation strategy against the Soviets till the outbreak in 1969 of armed conflicts along the Sino-Soviet borders. This strategy was manifest in Mao’s rejection of the Soviet leadership’s proposed collaboration on aiding North Vietnam as well as the peace initiatives. The Chinese leadership was determined to undermine the Soviet leadership in the

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<sup>74</sup> For the socio-psychological mechanisms at work here, see Mark Van Vugt, Robert Hogan, and Robert Kaiser, "Leadership, Followership, and Evolution: Some Lessons from the Past," *American Psychologist* 63, no. 3 (2008); Anthony Lopez, Rose McDermott, and Michael Bang Petersen, "States in Mind: Evolution, Coalitional Psychology, and International Politics," *International Security* 36, no. 2 (2011); Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict*.

international communist movement in general and extrude Moscow's influences from Vietnam in particular. To this end, it resolved to promote its ideological appeal in fighting against the US-backed Saigon regime. This period also witnessed one of the most dramatic events in Chinese political history – that is, the Cultural Revolution. The CR established Mao as the absolute leader in China by eliminating his once designated successor Liu Shaoqi. Although factionalism was rampant in Chinese elite politics during the CR, Mao's absolute authority removed the necessity for him to engage in prestige politics, as well as the domestic political motive of competitive status-seeking strategy. After 1968, when the most radical phase of the Cultural Revolution came to an end and the Liu-Deng faction that had been perceived as rivaling Mao prior to 1966 was out of power, China's delegitimation strategy against the Soviets began to phase out.

Chapter 5 investigates the evolution of Chinese security policy from 1969 to 1979. It begins with the Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 and ends with the case of China's invasion of Vietnam in February 1979. The primary aim of this chapter is to compare two cases in which China employed military force to deal with a geopolitical threat. The empirical scrutiny suggests that while both cases feature displays of military force by China, only the 1979 case can be coded as a competitive status-seeking measure. The 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict is better categorized as coercive diplomacy. During the conflict, the Chinese conducted the military act in a relatively prudent manner. Through reassurance signals and diplomatic concessions, the Chinese leaders meant to stabilize the border conditions after they exerted military pressures upon the Soviets. By contrast, China's punitive war against Vietnam in 1979 was mainly designed to display military power. While its geostrategic purpose was to deter the Soviet Union from encircling China through its alignment with Vietnam, the military operation qualifies as a competitive status-seeking act for its lack of conflict-preventive measures and reassurance signals that were present in the 1969 case.

The final chapter summarizes the key findings of this study, lays out its implications for policy and theoretical debates, and suggests avenues for future research.



## Chapter 1

### The Security Logic of Status Competition

*Behavior that is felt to be too important or costly in its own right to be used for other ends is an index, and such behavior tends to make the greatest impact on observers. Thus a state that attacks one of its neighbors will generally be predicted to be aggressive in the future. A state that is willing to sacrifice major values rather than fight will be thought weak in capability or resolve. A state that runs very high risks in one situation will be thought to be willing to run risks under similar circumstances. In these situations.....the actors cannot manipulate their behavior to give the desired image without incurring prohibitive costs to the values the image is supposed to serve.*

**Robert Jervis<sup>1</sup>**

While status goods are of intrinsic importance for human psychology, their instrumental relevance for power politics should not be disregarded. Great-power status, in particular, could help to advance geopolitical security for a state. A state could earn great-power status by displaying some material and ideological assets that lesser states do not possess and are thereby incapable of displaying to international audiences. And if the relevant international audience recognizes the displayed aspect of state power as an “index” of great-power status, the symbolic acts of displaying state power will achieve certain deterrent effects on the adversary’s future actions. As some prominent scholars recently note, “high status...confers tangible benefits in the form of decision-making autonomy and deference on the part of others concerning issues of importance, including but not limited to security and prosperity. The higher a given state’s status, the more other states adjust their policies to accommodate its interests, institutions, and ideas.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter explores the security rationale behind competitive status-seeking strategy and critically examines some mainstream theories on why states undertake conflict-prone behaviors in the international arena. After introducing the puzzle of “assertiveness,” it undertakes to define the meaning of competitive status-seeking strategy in a restrictive manner. This would allow for its clear differentiation from the security strategies normally practiced, including balancing, coercive diplomacy, and the conventional practice of diplomacy. The third section distinguishes competitive status-seeking strategy from these types of security strategy. The fourth section elaborates on three ways in which states

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<sup>1</sup> Jervis, *The Logic of Images*, 28.

<sup>2</sup> Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth, "Status and World Order," 18-19.

undertake competitive status-seeking strategy: offensive alliance, delegitimation strategy, and the display of military force. Finally, I critically examine a few theories on why states are prone to use coercive power. The analytic gaps they leave off highlight the need for a theory of competitive status-seeking strategy.

### **The Puzzle of “Assertiveness”**

My conceptualization of competitive status-seeking strategy is more than an intellectual exercise. Rather, it involves a critical engagement with the term “assertiveness” in current discourses. When a state displays a certain aspect of power to assert status claims, it shows a tendency to impose one’s claim upon others—as such, its behavior may be considered “assertive.” This issue rose to prominence as China has shown greater willingness to bring its state power to bear upon the conflict of interests with other states after 2008.<sup>3</sup> Often, students of China’s “new” assertiveness tacitly equate competitive status-seeking acts with coercive diplomacy, stressing the Chinese inclination to use coercive power.<sup>4</sup> Conceptualizing competitive status-seeking strategy this way is not essentially wrong, but inadequate. It misses some defining characteristics of this strategic act.

A close inspection does reveal that China’s international conduct after 2008 fits uncomfortably with the security strategies commonly practiced. Quite evidently, China’s growing readiness to resort to coercive power signals a clear departure from its previous grand strategy known as “peaceful rise.” The grand strategy of peaceful rise commits China to fostering a favorable geopolitical environment for its economic modernization. It accords priority to accommodating other states’ aspirations and avoiding international conflict.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, China’s assertiveness seems to prioritize the use of coercive power over the practice of diplomatic engagement that has characterized China’s “peaceful rise.”

More controversial is whether the Chinese assertive acts fit the categories of balancing and coercive diplomacy. On careful scrutiny, both categories risk obfuscating some crucial aspects of China’s conduct. “Balancing,” by definition, is characterized by state efforts to acquire resources within or beyond a state’s borders to safeguard core security interests.<sup>6</sup> This concept does not tell how a state would employ the power resources at its disposal. For instance, a strategy of balancing may commit China to enhance its capacity for power

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Debating China's Assertiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (Winter 2013/14); Thomas J. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China-Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011); Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013); Michael Swaine, "Perceptions of an Assertive China," *China Leadership Monitor* 32, no. 2 (2010); Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Zheng Bijian, "China's "Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 118.

projection in defense of its territorial claims being challenged by other states, but it has little to say about the precise way in which China would demonstrate its newfound power to deter others from challenging its territorial claims. Conceptualizing the Chinese assertiveness as a balancing strategy also conveys an impression that China has been trying to balance against America's geopolitical influences in East Asia.<sup>7</sup> But there is no clear evidence to suggest that China's assertive acts in the South and East China Seas are directed against the United States per se. It may be true that Beijing's assertive acts signify an overall geopolitical challenge to the U.S. in East Asia, as the 2008 Financial Crisis reduced the power disparities between China and the United States.<sup>8</sup> But it might also be the case that China was just intent on gaining a local advantage in the maritime disputes. After all, it was the growth of Chinese power and the intensification of China's disputes with other states that encouraged America to "rebalance" to Asia.<sup>9</sup> Viewed in this light, the balancing elements in Chinese security policy are less salient than commonly assumed.

Coercive diplomacy is inadequate too for conceptualizing Chinese international conduct in recent years. By definition, the conduct of coercive diplomacy entails two coordinated steps: the exercise of coercive power and the signaling of reassurances. The latter component is meant to signal that the coercive acts are contingent upon the opponent's behaviors and will observe restraint. It thus requires the coercer state to specify its demands well *before* taking actions to exert coercive pressures.<sup>10</sup> China's assertiveness lacks this component critical to the practice of coercive diplomacy.<sup>11</sup> On top of that, even when Beijing tried to reassure its opponent in a given dispute about its limited aim, its attempt to show self-restraint often lagged much behind the coercive acts. Often, the Chinese government shows little inclination for reassurance acts until it believed that an effective level of deterrence has been established by its previous exercise of coercive power.<sup>12</sup> As such, China's behavior does not meet the definition of coercive diplomacy as a practice of "forceful persuasion." It instead consists of a set of incoherent and half-hearted measures to

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<sup>7</sup> For the range of grand strategic options that could allow China to enhance its regional influence, see Barry Buzan, "The Logic and Contradictions of 'Peaceful Rise/Development' as China's Grand Strategy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Mastanduno, "Order and Change in World Politics: The Financial Crisis and the Breakdown of the U.S.-China Grand Bargain," in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> For the empirical evidence of the U.S. balancing against China, see Nina Silove, "The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Alexander George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> For the overall lack of a consistent signal in Chinese great power diplomacy, see Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, "New Type of Great Power Relations: A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016). Wu Xinbo—a prominent policy analyst in Shanghai—also suggests that "on disputes over Nansha Islands [South China Sea], Beijing should further clarify its sovereignty claims over the area." See Wu Xinbo, "Agenda for a New Great Power Relationship," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2014): 71.

<sup>12</sup> For an examination of this behavioral pattern, see Zhou Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and Self-Restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea Policy," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016); Edward Luttwak, *The Rise of China Vs. The Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

establish a sphere of Chinese influence based on the displays of China's coercive power.<sup>13</sup>

If the existing categories of security strategy cannot fully account for the salient aspects of China's international assertiveness, then a new conceptual category is warranted. Inasmuch as China's seemingly assertive behaviors entail any novel conceptualization, the prerequisite is to impart a coherent meaning into its conventional usage. It turns out, however, that the term "assertive" is often invoked too loosely in foreign policy discourse. "Early in the [William] Clinton years," according to Charles Krauthammer, "Madeleine Albright formulated the vision of the liberal internationalist school then in power as 'assertive multilateralism.'" <sup>14</sup> Here, "assertive multilateralism" suggests a strong willingness to marshal America's diplomatic resources (notably allies and security partners) around the globe for coping with the post-Cold War security challenges.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, foreign policy analysts attached the same label to the Bush doctrine, characterizing it as a kind of assertive approach to national security—although it represents a radical departure from Clinton's grand strategy.<sup>16</sup> Even a more aggressive policy than the Bush Doctrine had the same tag on it. In the wake of Japanese annexation of Manchuria, a prominent observer referred to Tokyo's attitude to the international affairs as "assertive," suggesting that Japan had embarked on vindicating its vision for Monroe Doctrine in Asia.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, if the term tends to be used in such a loose manner, it is imperative to specify it in a way that grants it analytic purchase on a definitive range of phenomena.

While the term "assertive" has been loosely employed to characterize apparently disparate foreign policies, it is still possible to instill coherence into its meaning by focusing on behavioral *style* and by positing the underlying  *motive*. In the cases invoked above, all leaders sought to demonstrate a certain aspect of state power. In the Clinton case, America's assertive international approach features a display of diplomatic aspect of US power by mobilizing allies through multilateral institutions. By contrast, the Bush administration and the militant leaders in Japan of the 1930s were disposed to demonstrate superior military strengths of their states.

On the other hand, some prominent scholars have taken note of a persistent theme of

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<sup>13</sup> Luttwak, *The Rise of China Vs. the Logic of Strategy*.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *The National Interest*, no. 70 (Winter 2002/03): 11.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Assertive Multilateralism and Post-Cold War U.S. Foreign Policy Making," in *After the End: Making U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World*, ed. James M. Scott (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> For the description of the assertiveness of the Bush Doctrine, see Lamont Colucci, "Grand Strategy Transformed: 9/11 and the Birth of Crusading Realism," in *The Impact of 9/11 on Politics and War: The Day That Changed Everything?*, ed. James Woolsey and Matthew Morgan (New York: Palgrave, 2009); Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005). For an elaboration of the substantial content of the Bush Doctrine as related to the rationale and practice of American foreign policy, see Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2003). All these authors unequivocally agree that the Bush Doctrine could be understood as an inclination toward the use of American power in an assertive and unilateral fashion.

<sup>17</sup> Yasaka Takaki, "World Peace Machinery and the Asia Monroe Doctrine," *Pacific Affairs* 5, no. 11 (1932).

assertiveness throughout the history of American foreign policy, regardless of the concrete form of strategy the leaders adopted in response to the particular challenges. Without specifying the term “assertive” though, their works nevertheless show an America persistently obsessed with vindicating its national greatness and cultural, as well as ethnic, superiority over other countries via the use of coercive power.<sup>18</sup> These historical accounts demonstrate that by acting assertively American leaders at various times unanimously sought international recognition of the nation’s positive traits on which its claim to great-power status rests.

Motivated by the desire for status preeminence, an assertive act may entail a confrontational stance. Status is positional a good: it is based on one’s superiority over others by virtue of the activities or traits.<sup>19</sup> When state leaders “perceive a gap between what they think others *should* think about their state’s standing and what they estimate others actually *do* think,” according to William Wohlforth, they “seek to rectify it, possibly through assertive action.”<sup>20</sup> The struggle for status therefore entails pressing one’s advantage with a view to impressing the observer with the kind of superiority the actor claims. In the realm of security affairs where no overarching authority reigns above states, leaders are prone to employ whatever they have at their disposal to attain positive comparisons with their counterparts. As such, state power may frequently act as a vehicle for status competition, and status-motivated policy can readily assume abrasive and risk-acceptant features.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, from the vast literature on China’s international conduct in 2009-2010 Alastair Iain Johnson succinctly summarizes the meaning of assertiveness as “a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before.”<sup>22</sup> Apparently, Beijing’s recent assertiveness was driven by status ambitions: that is, Beijing sought to gain international recognition of their enhanced power relative to the United States after the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> See Markey, “Prestige and the Origins of War”; O’Neill, *Honors, Symbols, and War*, 193-94; Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> William Wohlforth, “Status Dilemmas and Interstate Conflict,” in *Status in World Politics* eds. T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 118.

<sup>21</sup> Randall Schweller, “Realism and Present Great Power System: Growth and Positional Conflict over Scarce Resources,” in *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War*, ed. Ethan Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); William Thompson, “Status Conflict, Hierarchies, and Interpretation Dilemmas,” in *Status in World Politics*, ed. T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); William Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>22</sup> Johnston, “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?” 10.

<sup>23</sup> Yan Xuetong, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (2014); Luttwak, *The Rise of China Vs. The Logic of Strategy*; Aaron Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing’s Assertiveness,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014); Yahuda, “China’s New Assertiveness in the

The motives of an “assertive” power are puzzling from a hyper-rationalist standpoint. A prudent rising power should hide its capacity for challenging the status quo until it commands overwhelming advantages. As such, Chinese behaviors should not have signaled a departure from its decades-long commitment to “peaceful rise.” Some of Chinese endeavors to develop military power and consolidate military presence in the disputed maritime zones appeared as balancing strategies and coercive diplomacy, which represent self-help motivations. Yet, both categories fall short in capturing the Chinese ambitions for status as suggested by official and scholarly discourses. Addressing the puzzle of assertiveness thus requires careful analysis of how status motives could reshape leaders’ strategic considerations.

### **Seeking Status for Security**

To attain “a positively distinctive identity,” group leaders may endeavor to “emulate the values and practices of the higher-status group with the goal of gaining admission into elite clubs” (e.g. social mobility), try to “equal or surpass the dominant group in the areas on which its claims to superior status rest” (e.g. social competition), or “reframe a negative attribute as positive or stresses achievement in a different domain” (e.g. social creativity).<sup>24</sup> Of these status-seeking strategies, competitive strategy arguably signals the strongest resolve for pursuit of status. Competitive status-seeking strategy can be distinguished from alternative strategies by its emphasis on the confrontational approach to enhancing status. As such, the “costly” signals issued by competitive status-seeking acts are most conspicuous. This is conducive to asserting great-power status.

Competitive status-seeking strategy commits leaders to challenging a higher-ranked state in the area where its superior status is manifest—and this risks conflict escalation and even war. Many international conflicts are subject to this explanation, as scholars have invoked status aspirations in explaining states’ willingness to expend blood and money in international conflict, especially over peripheral matters loosely related to core security interests.<sup>25</sup> These studies, however, suffer from a selection bias given their focus on the issues of relative insignificance to states’ geopolitical security. Absent security challenges, status aspirations can easily rise to prominence. Selecting the cases this way certainly simplifies the task of establishing status aspirations as a state objective in their own right. Yet, it leaves how status aspirations interact with other imperatives—notably, those related to security—unanswered. As such, status aspirations remain a contested factor for

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South China Sea.”; Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: WW Norton, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Larson and Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” 67.

<sup>25</sup> See the Introduction chapter.

explaining international conflict.<sup>26</sup>

To meet this challenge, this study calls attention to the security rationale behind competitive status-seeking measures, and compares such measures with the relatively risk-averse strategies such as balancing strategies, conventional diplomacy, and the prudent conduct of coercive diplomacy. Here it is worth asking why leaders prefer to advance geopolitical security through competitive status-seeking policies. And because such policies could incur substantial security risks in the short term, another interesting puzzle is why the whole leadership could rally behind them. Analysts, in turn, should shift their attention from status aspirations as an individual-level psychology to a collective commitment, and take power politics (in both geopolitical and domestic arenas) into account. This is not to suggest that individual leaders and their psychological traits do not matter at all. Quite the contrary, my emphasis is precisely on how psychodynamics of individual leaders enable their collective actions. Next chapter will address the instrumental role of personal prestige for individual leaders in domestic political survival, whereas this chapter aims to explore the security-seeking logic behind competitive status-seeking strategy. Its central focus is on the instrumental importance of great-power status in safeguarding geopolitical security for states – and by extension, their leaders.

Competitive status-seeking strategy has three defining features. First, the purpose of undertaking it is to outperform other states in a given realm of international politics. For this purpose, state leaders normally display an aspect of state power relevant to the field of status competition. Second, inasmuch as the aspect of state power being displayed would serve as a symbol of great-power status, leaders who perform competitive status-seeking acts want to elicit recognition of their preeminence in the issue area where they demonstrate state power. And they tend not to back down in the face of counter-pressures from others. Third, state leaders are inclined to appeal to or attack a third weaker party with close links with the dominant rival (e.g. the higher-ranked power). A lesser state (or middle power) is arguably easier to be coopted or coerced than a great power.<sup>27</sup> Appealing to or taking on a weaker party therefore makes it easier for leaders to proclaim victory in status competition.

Competitive status-seeking strategy, in short, features efforts to assert great-power status through symbolic acts displaying state power. Such acts help further states' geopolitical security by virtue of the subjective nature of status. Because status is *perceptual*, it could arise out of an image of powerfulness, which helps to deter challenges from potential adversaries. Following Jonathan Renshon, I argue that when engaging in

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<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Thompson, "Status Conflict, Hierarchies, and Interpretation Dilemmas"; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, 16-21, 50-52.

<sup>27</sup> These three defining features are derived from the literature on competitive policies for status enhancements. See ft. 8 in the preceding chapter.

competitive status-seeking strategy, state leaders seek to reshape the expectations of observers and update their assessment of the state's demonstrated attributes. "For conflict to be 'status enhancing,'" in his words, "states must reveal capabilities (military or otherwise) in conflict that provide new information on where they should stand in a given hierarchy."<sup>28</sup> And because human mind is slow in coming to terms with substantive elements of power, an enhanced status would be "sticky." That is, "once a state obtains a certain status along with the accompanying privileges, it retains a presumptive right to that status which can outlast the initial conditions that give rise to it."<sup>29</sup> Even if great-power status by itself does not secure tangible benefits for a state, it nevertheless promises to lower the costs of state actions and increase dramatically the prospects for success. As a few leading scholars note, "recognition by others as a major power creates legitimacy for a wide variety of foreign policy pursuits, making it less costly to intervene in disputes or creates mechanisms for cooperation. The reputation associated with major power status should strengthen the credibility of both threats and commitments made by these states."<sup>30</sup> For these reasons, status can be instrumental in advancing geopolitical security for a state. Prevailing in a status competition could elicit voluntary deference (albeit limited in scope and degree) from the adversaries over time.

Whereas the subjective nature of status makes great-power status worth pursuing, the intersubjective nature of status makes state seeking possible. Status is *social*: what symbolizes status depends on what is commonly valued by the interacting players. To paraphrase Alexander Wendt, status is what states make of it.<sup>31</sup> The intersubjective nature of status allows a certain aspect of state power to be attached symbolic significance. Inasmuch as people generally believe that certain material and ideological assets—such as the quality of allies, the regime's ideological appeal, and military power—in large part determines a state's autonomy and geopolitical influences, such aspects of state power are well suited for the purpose of asserting great-power status. And yet, state power is multidimensional: state authorities can possess a multiplicity of assets for safeguarding against external interference with the sociopolitical orders within the state's territory. Which aspect of state power would be used to signal status claims? This is contingent on leaders' interactions with their international counterparts. In particular, "status claims are related to the resources or capacities at a given state's disposal, but the relationship between specific

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<sup>28</sup> Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> Larson et al, "Status and World Order," 19.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Volgy et al., "Status Considerations in International Politics and the Rise of Regional Powers," in *Status in World Politics*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> See Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992); Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

resources or capacities and status is always contestable.”<sup>32</sup> Undeniably, it is a matter of contingency as to how states find themselves competing for status in a particular field and by particular resources at their disposal. That noted, inasmuch as status is of instrumental importance for leaders in securing their claim to particular interests, they will pay close attention to the field that highlights the symbolic significance of concrete means. Status competition is by definition field-specific: it is contingent on the recognition by the interacting players that a certain aspect of state power can symbolize status preeminence, thereby highlighting a particular field of international activity. Often a field of status competition arises spontaneously. It manifests itself when leaders sense a challenge to their claimed status and see advantages in employing a given asset to signal status claims.<sup>33</sup>

Interstate rivalry could sensitize leaders to the instrumental importance of great-power status which for reasons discussed above, provides a route to geopolitical security. As status aspirations and security imperatives become intertwined, leaders may expect state power to act as status symbols that could perpetuate the deterrent effect of its use. For the sake of simplicity, this study considers only interactions among three players, which is the threshold condition for status competition to unfold. Thus, it operationalizes competitive status-seeking strategy in terms of state efforts to display an aspect of power against a materially weaker state aligned with a powerful one, which poses a geopolitical threat. This approach to simplification is warranted as it is sufficient to illuminate a crucial logic of deterrence: if a state can demonstrate its capacity for extraordinary actions of which its adversaries are incapable, it would be able to deter the adversary – either by strength or by attracting a larger audience – in the future.<sup>34</sup> Effort at simplification, though, should not confine our attention to just three players in international hierarchies. Its purpose is simply to capture a central strategic logic of competitive status-seeking acts.

To ascertain when leaders expect to advance geopolitical security by asserting great-power status for their nation, I propose a hypothesis as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** *The aspect of state power leaders would display to assert great-power status has to do with the strategic role of a third party in a geopolitical contest between the major powers.*

(Leaders may pursue competitive status-seeking strategy with a view to promoting geopolitical security. The third party’s role in great power competitions reveals the linkage of status ambitions and geopolitical security. When that state locates in a major power’s vicinity, or on its route to critical strategic area, or acts as a key ally, its strategic role gains salience. Its entry into the fray of great

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<sup>32</sup> Wohlforth, “Status Dilemma and Interstate Conflict,” 121.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Musgrave and Daniel Nexon, “Defending Hierarchy from Moon to the Indian Ocean: Symbolic Capital and Political Dominance in Early Modern China and the Cold War,” *International Organization* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2018).

<sup>34</sup> While this point remains a matter of debate, there does exist empirical evidence in support of it. See Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics,” *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2015).

power politics, moreover, tends to confirm the hierarchical nature of the ongoing great power competition. To compete for status, a major power may either find the third party—a materially weaker state—as a crucial audience to bestow status, or as a foil against which they can display status symbols to the major geopolitical adversary. Hence that lesser state is of both symbolic and strategic value.)

### **Distinctiveness of Competitive Status-Seeking Strategy**

Competitive status-seeking strategy features distinctive features vis-à-vis some security strategies commonly practiced. Competitive status-seeking strategy is distinct from the conventional practice of diplomacy conceived as “a business of adjustment.”<sup>35</sup> In undertaking competitive status-seeking acts, leaders want to dictate the terms of the dialogue at hand. In this regard, they prioritize confrontational over accommodative stance. Further, conventional diplomacy is an art of employing *non-violent* means to achieve foreign policy objectives.<sup>36</sup> As such, diplomats must be willing to pursue “joint gains through the exchange of information and arguments.”<sup>37</sup> Broadly speaking, though, diplomacy features various symbolic acts to communicate state intentions.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, to the extent that the acting state tries to force the target state into an inferior status, its practice of competitive status-seeking strategy departs critically from the conventional practice of diplomacy.

Competitive status-seeking strategy is distinct from balancing strategies in terms of its emphasis on *performative* acts. In conceptualizing competitive status-seeking strategy, I argue that the image of power is no less important than the substance of power. In this regard, I do not take issue with the widely shared view that state power is resource-based and exists as deployable assets.<sup>39</sup> Rather, competitive status-seeking strategy refers to strategies of *using* power; as such, the quantity and quality of resources that constitute state power fall outside of its purview. Of course, state power is unavailable without certain material and institutional resources. Nonetheless, the way leaders bring state assets to bear upon a challenge deserves no less attention than the resources at their disposal.

Balancing, by definition, refers to “a state’s effort to amass *military might* so as to deter another’s aggression or prevail in a conflict should deterrence fail [emphasis added],” and this can be done through alliance building, doctrinal or technical innovations, and military

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<sup>35</sup> Watson, *Diplomacy*, 72.

<sup>36</sup> For the elaboration of the meaning and practice of diplomacy, see Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Washington D.C.: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, 1988); Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>37</sup> Rathbun, *Diplomacy’s Value*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> For discussions of how a state could possibly manipulate the opponent’s perception of its power and interests, see Jervis, *The Logic of Images*; Todd H. Hall, “We Will Not Swallow This Bitter Fruit: Theorizing a Diplomacy of Anger,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011); Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: WW Norton, 2001), 55-67.

buildups.<sup>40</sup> Yet, the power resources that enable competitive status-seeking strategies are not limited to military forces. Rather, they could include any type of power resources that leaders can mobilize to impress the adversaries with the state's international competence. Since a great power is distinguished not only by military power but also by diplomatic assets (such as alliance network) and the ideological appeal of its legitimating principles, the nonmilitary aspects of state power could serve as crucial vehicles for status assertions. Hence, this study emphasizes that besides military power, diplomatic assets (notably allied partners) and the regime's ideological appeal could also act provide resources to symbolize a state's distinctiveness and enable leaders to assert great-power status.

Finally, competitive status-seeking strategy overlaps with coercive diplomacy to some extent: both require the demonstration of power to deter or compel the adversary. But these two strategies are not identical. Coercive diplomacy by definition combines coercion and reassurance; its ultimate purpose is to *induce* the target state to behave in the desired way.<sup>41</sup> Coercive diplomacy features an exercise of coercion *as well as* restraint. In practicing coercive diplomacy, leaders need to reassure the target state that the compliance with the demand would not lead to further punishment.<sup>42</sup> The reassurance element is missing in the practice of competitive status-seeking strategy. In undertaking competitive status-seeking acts, leaders tend to view the issue at hand as a matter of status superiority. It is not desirable for them to publicly reassure the target state that their objective is limited, because doing so would undermine the resolve (as perceived by other players) to assert the nation's status and leaders' prestige.

### **Varieties of Competitive Status-seeking strategy**

Competitive status-seeking strategy features displays of state power, which enable leaders to assert great-power status. For heuristic purposes this study specifies three varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy: offensive alliance, delegitimation strategy, and display of military force. Types of competitive status-seeking strategy as specified here are not exhaustive. They nevertheless represent demonstrable aspects of state power that could differentiate great powers from others.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph Parent and Sebastian Rosato, "Balancing in Neorealism," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 56.

<sup>41</sup> See Schelling, *Arms and Influence; The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>42</sup> Paul Lauren, Gordon Craig, and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Challenges of Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 196-213.

<sup>43</sup> Due to this focus on "displayable" aspects of state power, I leave economic resources out of the equation. In contrast to diplomatic allies, ideological appeal, and military power, economic resources are "latent" power—they are not ready for immediate use by government leaders. Economic assets are therefore hard to display on their own; rather, they can only contribute to competitive status-seeking acts by enhancing other kinds of displayable assets. As my case studies show, China used its economic resources to support the Hanoi ally for its offense against the Saigon regime—the US key ally in Southeast Asia. Likewise, through the leverage of economic support China tried to impose its ideological doctrines on Hanoi in terms of how to fight the war against the US. In both cases, economic resources receded into the background vis-à-vis the displayable aspects of Chinese power such as diplomatic ally and ideological appeal.

### *Offensive Alliance*

Offensive alliance is a cooperative arrangement between the allied partners committed to attacking a third party.<sup>44</sup> Competent allied partners can facilitate a state's projecting its power capabilities abroad. Through an offensive alliance, leaders could display the diplomatic asset of their state. By showing that the state is superior in its diplomatic aspect of power, they assert great-power status in the international arena.

International relations scholars have only made modest effort to theorize about offensive alliances.<sup>45</sup> But the symbolic value of offensive alliance has readily featured in this limited literature. Thomas J. Christensen argues that communist alliance in the Cold War was revisionist and revolutionary in nature, as the communist ideology committed its members to undermine the western camp led by the United States. For members in such alliances, "the creation, preservation, or bolstering of the member's reputation as a loyal and pure supporter of revolution against the status quo" is a central commitment.<sup>46</sup> In the case of communist states, allied partners assumed symbolic value in demonstrating their strength vis-à-vis their capitalist adversaries.

The symbolic value of alliance partner is manifest not just in offensive alliances, to be sure. The resilience of contemporary liberal international order hinges not only on the materially preponderant power of the US government, argues John Ikenberry, but also on the cohesion of an alliance system composed of liberal democracies which achieved remarkable success in socioeconomic development.<sup>47</sup> In this case, allied partners constitute crucial elements of American power. That noted, offensive alliance provides a vehicle for *displaying* state power. By encouraging them to take offensive action, leaders in effect assert great-power status by showing that their state is powerful by virtue of its diplomatic asset. As to be shown in Chapter 4, in forging offensive alliance with the Hanoi regime, Beijing was intent not merely on undermining the American influence in Indochina; it also sought to demonstrate the value of Hanoi as a diplomatic asset vis-à-vis the impotent Saigon regime.

### *Delegitimation Strategy*

Delegitimation strategy is another variant of competitive status-seeking strategy. It aims to publicize the inconsistency of the target state's actions with its proclaimed values.

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39, no. 1 (1997): 156.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994).

<sup>46</sup> Christensen, *Worse than Monolith*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "American Power and the Empire of Capitalist Democracy," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 5 (2001).

Delegitimation strategy may work to impose costs upon the target state. If the target state is revealed as being hypocritical and self-serving in its international conduct, it is more likely to be feared than admired, and other states would then be less inclined to support its initiatives abroad. Eventually, the target state's international influences would be undermined.<sup>48</sup>

The ideological aspect of state power features centrally in the pursuit of delegitimation strategy.<sup>49</sup> It enables a state to demonstrate the superiority of its ideological precepts. All stable regimes need to derive legitimacy to rule from an ideological paradigm. Ideological precepts can act as a component of state power if they appeal to foreign audiences – this is loosely labeled as “soft power.”<sup>50</sup>

The ideological appeal of a political regime provides an important vehicle for leaders to compete with another state's for great-power status. Thus leaders can display the ideological aspect of their state power to signal status claims. And yet, competing and ambiguous norms are pervasive in international political life. It is often possible to invoke a set of norms to justify one's behaviors that are unjustified in light of an alternative set of norms.<sup>51</sup> As such, delegitimizing rhetoric may not suffice to convince international audiences. Delegitimizing rhetoric must be coupled with the deeds to act out the normatively appropriate conduct. Both elements are requisite for the practice of delegitimation strategy. This variety of competitive status-seeking strategy features displays of the ideological aspect of state power.

As to be shown in chapter 5, China intensified its effort to delegitimize the Soviet leadership in the communist hierarchy by increasing material and diplomatic support for the Hanoi regime. As Hanoi was engaged in armed struggles against the US-backed Saigon and American military presence in Vietnam, Beijing's support for Hanoi was designed to enhance its credentials for leadership of international communist movement. Leaders in Beijing wanted to demonstrate to the communist audiences worldwide that it was more committed than Moscow to challenging the U.S.-led capitalist order. At a minimum, by coupling anti-Soviet rhetoric with a costly effort to support Hanoi, their delegitimation strategy aimed to undercut Moscow's influences on the course of the Vietnam War.

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<sup>48</sup> Stephen Walt, Stephen Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 160-78; Martha Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009); Randall Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011).

<sup>49</sup> The ideological element of state power is what E.H. Carr called “power over opinion.” See Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 120-30; G. John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization* 44, no. 3 (1990); Rodney Bruce Hall, "Moral Authority as a Power Resource," *ibid.* 51, no. 4 (1997).

<sup>50</sup> See Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). To be sure, in Nye's definition, the regime's ideological appeal is not the sole element of soft power. For the sake of conceptual clarity, I focus only on the ideological appeal of a political regime when treating it as an element of state power.

<sup>51</sup> For the strategies to cope with the stigma imposed by other states, see Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society," *International Organization* 68 (Winter 2014).

### *Display of Military Power*

Displays of military power could deter or compel an adversary through the image of powerfulness having been established. It works through a different logic than imposing brute force. Thomas Schelling's explanation is worth citing.

[B]rute force succeeds when it is used, whereas the power to hurt is most successful when held in reserve. It is the threat of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply. It is *latent* violence that can influence someone's choice—violence that can still be withheld or inflicted, or that a victim believes can be withheld or inflicted. The threat of pain tries to structure someone's motives, while brute force tries to overcome his strength. Unhappily, the power to hurt is often communicated by some performance of it.<sup>52</sup>

Following this logic, competitive status-seeking strategy aims to reshape the image held by the target state with respect to the status seeker. The display of military power—a variety of such behavior—is designed to convey an impression of the state's powerfulness. When the display of military power does create such an impression, it would help deter potential challenges. The symbolic display of military force can serve this strategic end. In this variety of competitive status-seeking strategy, military power acts as a status symbol not a brute force; its function is to convince rather than suppress the adversaries.

Competitive status-seeking strategy can be distinguished from coercive diplomacy by its emphasis on a different function of military power. Whereas coercive diplomacy employs military power as a bargaining instrument, military power serves as a vehicle for status assertion in competitive status-seeking strategy. In undertaking competitive status-seeking acts, state leaders do not normally take on the dominant adversary; rather, they tend to employ military power against a lesser state aligned with it. Taking on a weaker power affords them a better chance to assert great-power status, as they can avoid being frustrated by superior material forces. Moreover, when competitive status-seeking acts feature displays of military power, such acts are normally decoupled from the reassurance message that is critical for the prudent conduct of coercive diplomacy.<sup>53</sup> For instance, China fought a limited war with Vietnam in 1979 with a view to deterring the Soviet Union from continuing to provide military supplies to Hanoi. China's military act qualifies as competitive status-seeking strategy against the Soviets, as it was employed directly against an allied partner of the Soviets. Without the Soviet threat, China would not have chosen to use military power against Vietnam. Moreover, the Chinese act fell short of specifying the

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<sup>52</sup> Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> For the most systematic discussion of requirements for the prudent conduct of coercive diplomacy, see James Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

concrete demands for Vietnam. This makes it difficult to reassure Hanoi of the limits of military operations prosecuted by the Chinese, despite their unilateral efforts to limit the scope of war. These traits indicate that Beijing's leaders were intent on asserting great-power status through a punitive military act against Vietnam.

### **Critique of Existing Theories: Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism, Authoritarian Politics, and Diversionary Conflict**

Contemporary theorists have made various arguments about why states are prone to use coercive power in advancing their security interests. They provide critical insights into the pattern of state behaviors that can be associated with competitive status-seeking strategy – namely, the display of state power to press one's claim. However, these theories have in large part disregarded the role of great-power status in enhancing a state's geopolitical security and the importance of personal prestige for leaders' political survival. And the way they theorize about domestic politics is inadequate for addressing how leaders' concerns for great-power status and by extension, personal prestige inform foreign policy statecraft. By examining these theories, I seek clearer definition of research puzzles over which my conceptualization of competitive status-seeking strategy could offer explanatory leverage.

#### *Offensive Realism*

Competitive status-seeking strategy typically involves displays of state power to assert great-power status over target states. This is not foreign to offensive realist scholars, who are inclined to view coercive strategies as the norm of great power politics. Competitive status-seeking strategy amounts to "blackmail" in the offensive realist handbook. In undertaking it, a state pressures its opponent into compliance by threatening use of coercive forces. It is "coercive threats and intimidation, not the actual use of force, [that] produce the desired outcome."<sup>54</sup>

This is precisely how competitive status-seeking acts work strategically. That is, if a state's power is proven superior to another's (and ideally, that state thereby establishes prestige), it can make the target state submit. For offensive realists, this strategy promises to increase the prospects for state survival in the anarchical international environment. Absent an overarching authority to enforce order in international politics, the argument goes, demonstrating a state's strength helps to enhance its security. And inasmuch as great powers are those with capacity to coerce other states, it is necessary for them to demonstrate

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<sup>54</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 152.

their coercive capacities.<sup>55</sup>

The offensive realist argument is not essentially wrong but incomplete. It does not address why coercive strategies must be the optimal strategy to enhance state security interests. It is not logically compelling to argue that to defend their country state leaders have no choice but to threaten other states with coercive power. After all, coercive strategies tend to be costly and pursuing them risks escalation of international tensions. They act as the dominant strategy for security only when armed conflict is the norm of international politics, as offensive realists tend to assume.<sup>56</sup> But this may not always be the case in international political life. The empirical records of China's international behaviors, for instance, suggest that China was reluctant to escalate territorial disputes and even became accommodative to other states' territorial claims after it established a strong hold over the territory in dispute.<sup>57</sup> Such kind of evidence could falsify offensive realism and there are a lot.<sup>58</sup> As such, offensive realism is inadequate for explaining why coercive strategies did not occur in many circumstances.

### *Defensive Realism*

Contra offensive realism, defensive realists view a state's preference for coercive means as an anomaly in its pursuit of geopolitical security. According to defensive realists, non-coercive strategies, such as defensive alliance, diplomatic reciprocations, and peripheral concessions, are often available to state leaders.<sup>59</sup> Hence, security-seeking states should try hard to avoid international rivalries through prudent policies.<sup>60</sup> In the cases whereby leaders rejected prudence in favor of competitive status-seeking strategy, defensive realists tend to fault domestic political pathologies for their imprudent use of power.<sup>61</sup>

Jack Snyder, in particular, argues that state leaders may logroll their interests with imperialist groups aspiring to overseas resources, such as access to military bases, colonies, raw materials, and markets. A domestic ruling coalition thus formed would pursue competitive policies. Couched in terms of national glory, moreover, the competitive status-seeking measures as undertaken by leaders are likely to gain legitimacy among the

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<sup>55</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 3.

<sup>56</sup> See John Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994); Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," *ibid.*, no. 2 (Fall 1994).

<sup>57</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>58</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behaviour 1949–1992: A First Cut at the Data," *The China Quarterly* 153 (1998).

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 02 (1978); Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987); Charles L Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994/95).

<sup>60</sup> Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism* (London: Springer, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

general public and may even delude leaders themselves into the myths of expansion.<sup>62</sup> Opponents of Snyder's argument, however, suggest that logrolling among domestic interest groups is not always possible and state leaders could be paralyzed by intense elite competitions. As various individuals and elite groups vied for shaping state policy, leaders would be handicapped in their ability to mobilize domestic support for any coherent policy.<sup>63</sup> Hence, defensive realism is indeterminate as to when state leaders opt for imprudent coercive strategies, including competitive status-seeking strategy. To conclude, defensive realism provides a baseline expectation regarding when state leaders tend *not* to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy. Yet, it needs do more to specify domestic political mechanisms that help make competitive status-seeking strategy a preferable security strategy for leaders.

#### *Thesis of Authoritarian Politics*

Both offensive realism and defensive realism are "third-image" theories, as they accord analytic priority to systemic pressures and incentives. The thesis of authoritarian politics reverses this logic. It stresses that the logic of political survival in authoritarian regimes are the principal driver of foreign policy. This thesis is composed of a disparate set of arguments about the propensity of authoritarian leaders for conflict escalations in the international arena.<sup>64</sup> There is no need here to review these arguments individually. For theory-testing purposes, I focus instead on a common theme as regards when authoritarian leaders are prone to conflict with their international rivals. In this way, competitive status-seeking strategy falls under the purview of the authoritarian politics thesis.

Bruce de Mesquita and others argue that authoritarian leaders have stronger propensity for military conflict than democratic leaders in dealing with foreign adversaries. The reason is that authoritarian leaders do not face a high probability of domestic punishment even as they suffer international defeat.<sup>65</sup> Critics of this argument contend that the leaders of authoritarian regimes do confront domestic constraints no less severe than those in democracies. In their view, authoritarian rulers also need voluntary support from a fraction of domestic elites; as such, these leaders cannot afford to squander valuable national assets on foreign adventures. Scholars in turn give particular emphasis to the distribution of power

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<sup>62</sup> Snyder, *Myths of Empire*.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey Taliaferro, Norrin Ripsman, and Steven Lobell, eds., *The Challenge of Grand Strategy: The Great Powers and the Broken Balance between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> See, for instance, Jeff Colgan and Jessica Weeks, "Revolution, Personalist Dictatorships, and International Conflict," *International Organization* 69, no. 1 (Winter 2015); Jessica Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014); Mark Peceny, Caroline Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, "Dictatorial Peace?," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (2002); Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., "Testing Novel Implications from the Selectorate Theory of War," *World Politics* 56, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>65</sup> "Testing Novel Implications from the Selectorate Theory of War."

within authoritarian regimes,<sup>66</sup> personal idiosyncrasies of individual leaders,<sup>67</sup> and the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes to domestic challenges.<sup>68</sup> These factors are considered likely to inform the risk-taking propensity of authoritarian leaders in international disputes.

Still, the thesis of authoritarian politics is not precise enough to capture the more subtle dynamics in authoritarian politics. While it fares well in addressing the average effects of regime dynamics *across* regimes, there are limits to its approach in explaining within the same authoritarian regime. For instance, it cannot address why the same Chinese leaders espoused dramatically different strategies in a relatively short period from 1962 to 1982. These years witnessed vagaries in all aspects of Chinese communist regime except that China remained an authoritarian power throughout—in this period, the ruling power did not reach beyond the Politburo composed of around two dozens of people. In sum, while the thesis of authoritarian regime performs relatively well in explaining the propensity for conflict of authoritarian leaders, it is inadequate for addressing when the same leaders of an authoritarian regime adopt practice competitive status-seeking strategy and when not.

#### *Diversionsary Conflict*

The thesis of diversionsary conflict expects leaders to resort to conflict strategies—including competitive status-seeking strategy—at the time of regime crisis. The embattled leaders, according to this thesis, “pursue conflict abroad to increase public support at home by diverting attention from domestic troubles through rallying around the flag or by demonstrating their competence as statesmen.”<sup>69</sup> At its core, it rests on the *competence* logic and the *rally-around-flag* logic in explaining why domestic regime crisis induces leaders to engage in external conflict.

The competence logic assumes that leaders can establish public confidence in their leadership by achieving successes on the international stage. Yet, it fails to consider that international conflict incurs uncertain and tremendous risks for leaders. If they lose in a war or brinkmanship with other states, they would only demonstrate incompetence. So there is no solid reason why leaders are willing to risk war to gain domestic legitimacy. On the other hand, the rally-around-flag logic rests on the presumed positive correlation between intergroup tension and in-group cohesion.<sup>70</sup> As state leaders officially act as a nationalist

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<sup>66</sup> Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*.

<sup>67</sup> Jeff Colgan, "Domestic Revolutionary Leaders and International Conflict," *World Politics* 65, no. 4 (October 2013).

<sup>68</sup> Brian Lai and Dan Slater, "Institutions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes, 1950–1992," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 1 (2006); Amy Oakes, "Diversionsary War and Argentina's Invasion of the Falkland Islands," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>69</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, "The Limits of Diversion: Rethinking Internal and External Conflict," *ibid.* 19, no. 2 (2010): 311.

<sup>70</sup> For elaboration of this psychological mechanism and its application to political life and international relations, see Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1998); Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* 49, no. 2 (1995); David Rousseau, *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities: The Social Construction of Realism and Liberalism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

symbol, they are well placed to use national security affairs to elicit loyalty from the domestic audiences. Personifying the state means they could associate national loyalty with the deference to their personal authority. In the face of an external adversary, leaders are able to garner additional support at home.

Intuitively appealing as the thesis of diversionary conflict is, there is not much evidence to suggest that the two mechanisms discussed above have operated strongly in the real world.<sup>71</sup> There are, after all, multiple alternative measures for state leaders to resolve crisis at home. They can, for instance, promote nationalist education and campaigns, tighten social control, enhance institutional capacity, or simply intensify crackdowns.<sup>72</sup> All these measures incur much less risks.

In sum, competitive status-seeking strategy incurs risks too high to be considered a desirable option. If leaders employ it simply to enhance their domestic authority, this practice is dangerous for both leaders and nations. The failure to deal with the geopolitical threat via competitive status-seeking strategy invites domestic backlash perilous to state leaders' power positions at home. Even if competitive status-seeking strategy proves sufficient to deal with the geopolitical threat, the display of state power—a behavior typical of it—may conceivably aggravate the security dilemma and worsen the external security environment for the state. This in turn would drain considerable resources and energy from the leadership's drive for domestic consolidations.<sup>73</sup> For all these reasons, the diversionary conflict thesis contains serious flaws in theoretical and empirical terms.

## Summary

This chapter investigates the security rationale behind competitive status-seeking strategy. It then elaborates on three varieties of it, and finally critically discusses the existing theories that provide some analytic leverage on this type of security strategy. Competitive status-seeking strategy involves symbolic acts of displaying state power, and the very aspect of state power being displayed serves as a vehicle for asserting a state's great-power status. For heuristic purposes, I specify three varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy: offensive alliance, delegitimation strategy, and the use of military force. Respectively they

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<sup>71</sup> For assessment of diversionary conflict thesis, see Jack Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in *Handbook of War Studies* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Amy Oakes, *Diversionary War: Domestic Unrest and International Conflict* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012); Fravel, "The Limits of Diversion: Rethinking Internal and External Conflict."; Sara Mitchell and Brandon Prins, "Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004); Alastair Smith, "Diversionary Foreign Policy in Democratic Systems," *International Studies Quarterly*, no. 40 (1996).

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance, Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Anne-Marie Brady, "The Beijing Olympics as a Campaign of Mass Distraction," *The China Quarterly* 197 (2009).

<sup>73</sup> See Levy, "Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique"; Fravel, "The Limits of Diversion: Rethinking Internal and External Conflict."

display diplomatic assets, ideological appeal, and military strengths as distinct aspects of state power. Existing theories do provide certain insights into likely causes for leaders' pursuit of competitive status-seeking strategy. Yet, as they give short shrift to prestige motives underlying competitive status-seeking strategy, they ultimately fall short in specifying the conditions under which this type of strategy may be pursued. By clarifying the meaning of competitive status-seeking strategy and critically examining the theories pertinent to it, this chapter lays the groundwork for advancing my theoretical argument. Whereas this chapter addresses the relevance of competitive status-seeking strategy for national security interests, the next will combine this insight with an elaboration of the instrumental importance of personal prestige for individual leaders. I will also address methodological issues such as case selection, congruence and process-tracing methods. Taken together, these two chapters seek to address the origins of leaders' concerns for social preeminence and how such concerns motivate leaders are prone to pursue great-power status vis-à-vis other states via competitive policies.

## Chapter 2

### The Political Logic of Status Competition: Leaders and Pragmatic Concerns for Social Preeminence

*No serious policymaker could allow himself to succumb to the fashionable debunking of “prestige,” or “honor” or “credibility.”*

**Henry Kissinger<sup>1</sup>**

*If status were only important because of its value in terms of wealth and security, then it could be bought and sold without much difficulty.....It is the emotional and domestic political significance of status that makes this difficult and that makes status distinct from other kinds of resources.*

**Steven Ward<sup>2</sup>**

Whereas the preceding chapter investigates the security logic of competitive status-seeking strategy and laid out its varieties, this chapter probes the instrumental purposes such behavior could serve for *individual leaders*. It tackles two issues. Why is prestige important for leaders in political arenas? And when do concerns for “social preeminence” (with great-power status and personal prestige as two key varieties) arise and motivate leaders to adopt competitive policies in pursuit of great-power status?

Conventional wisdom suggests that individuals’ quest for social preeminence among the peers is hardwired into human nature. This study, by contrast, sheds light on the pragmatic considerations that leaders harbor in promoting two varieties of this aspiration. That is, among foreign leaders the goods of social preeminence concerns great-power status, and among domestic political elites it is about personal prestige. For pragmatic reasons state leaders pursue both varieties of social preeminence. Peculiar challenges to leaders’ positions in geopolitical and domestic political arenas provide stimuli for such concerns, and they intensify the tradeoffs among great-power status, geopolitical security, and domestic political survival that leaders face. These assumptions bolster my central assertion that leaders undertake competitive status-seeking acts for instrumental purposes.

Typically, competitive status-seeking strategy entails symbolic acts of displaying *an aspect of state power*—be it diplomatic, ideological, or military—toward geopolitical

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from Tang, “Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict,” 35.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Power*, 38.

rivals—such acts serve to assert leaders' claim to great-power status for the nation. In undertaking competitive status-seeking acts, leaders treat state power resources at their disposal as status symbols, rather than a means for international bargaining. That is, by displaying an aspect of state power to signal status claims, leaders seek a favorable recognition of the nation's status in the field of status competition. Once this recognition is secured, the great-power status would have certain deterrent effects on the geopolitical competitors. Conversely, recognizing the limits of state power being displayed would mean giving up the status claim issued. It is wrenching and at times politically difficult for leaders to back down in such circumstances; but carrying through the demand may cause a deterioration of a state's geopolitical environment. For this reason, leaders need to take calculated risks in deciding to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy. In the final analysis, the pursuit of competitive status-seeking strategy involves a significant tradeoff between immediate risks and security in a long run. It is then worth asking: what purposes does competitive status-seeking strategy serve for individual leaders? And what factors can affect their political decisions as regards competitive status-seeking strategy vis-à-vis other security strategies?

To address these issues, this chapter proceeds as follows. It begins with a set of assumptions about the role of leaders in national security strategy and the role of personal prestige for leaders in legitimating authority in domestic elite politics. With an emphasis on leaders' position in the nexus of geopolitics and domestic politics, ultimately I seek to address the rationales behind leaders' pursuit of competitive status-seeking strategy. The second section underscores two stimuli to leaders' pragmatic concerns for great-power status and personal prestige, which are expressions of social preeminence in the international and domestic arenas respectively. In particular, geopolitical threat could sensitize leaders to the importance of great-power status as a route to geopolitical security, and institutional change dynamics could heighten leaders' reliance upon personal prestige for domestic political survival. In underscoring these two stimuli, I do not mean to dismiss alternative events that could fuel pragmatic concerns for social preeminence on the part of individual leaders. My purpose, rather, is to underscore ways in which human aspirations for social preeminence among the peers could take on instrumental importance for leaders and lead them to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy. This chapter concludes with a note on methodology.

### **Social Preeminence and Power Politics**

In power politics a preeminent standing is of instrumental importance for leaders. It allows leaders to legitimate personal authority at home and in the international arena, further a

state's geopolitical autonomy. Whereas the preceding chapter suggests that great-power status may enable the state to gain an upper hand in security competitions, this chapter investigates the instrumental role of personal prestige for individual leaders at home, as well as in the nexus of great-power status and personal prestige. Taken together, they elaborate on the central argument of this work – namely, leaders seek to further their interests in *both* geopolitical and domestic political arenas by undertaking competitive status-seeking strategy, a policy that may help to advance great-power status and personal prestige. Competitive status-seeking strategy enables state leaders to signal capability and resolve for safeguarding the great-power status being challenged by geopolitical rivals; at the same time, leaders can exploit such symbolic acts to assert personal authority in domestic elite politics. Through competitive status-seeking strategy leaders thus seek to address geopolitical and domestic political challenges all together. They are likely to opt for this strategy when their pragmatic concerns for social preeminence have to do with both great-power status and personal prestige.

This argument builds on three assumptions. First, it assumes that power is pervasive to political activities in which state leaders are engaged. Second, personal prestige could act as a vehicle for leaders to legitimize their authority in domestic elite politics. Finally, competitive status-seeking strategy involves symbolic acts as undertaken by leaders in the two-level game of geopolitics and domestic politics.<sup>3</sup> This section shall elaborate these assumptions.

### *Leaders, Strategy, and Power Politics*

State leaders are central agents of national security strategy as they embody sovereign authority. My analytic focus is on the daily practice of national security strategy, as opposed to “grand strategy.” Grand strategy suggests broad patterns of state policy directed toward security objectives. It entails planning for the longer future and often involves a multiplicity of actors for its implementation. State leaders sit atop of the process of grand strategy, but are not in control of all aspects of it.<sup>4</sup> Strategy, broadly conceived, could simply mean “a constant adaption to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance,

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the two-level games framework, the terms such as “multi-vocal signaling” and “nested games” connote complex interplays of multiple political environments. All this suggests that leaders often need to fight in one arena while keeping a watchful eye on what happens in another. See George Tsebelis, *Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991); Daniel Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 99-100.

<sup>4</sup> Luttwak, *The Logic of Strategy*; Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). It remains a matter of debate, though, regarding whether grand strategy by definition entails deliberate planning. See Kevin Narizni, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007), 8-10.

uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate.”<sup>5</sup> While leaders arguably can exert more decisive influences in the daily practice of strategy than in making grand strategy, a universal logic of strategy informs their political acts—that is, they may often find themselves having to signal to multiple audiences, who tend to interpret their acts in different ways.<sup>6</sup> This study emphasizes that competitive status-seeking strategy is characterized by symbolic acts and involves two major audiences—the international and the domestic. Competitive status-seeking strategy, I argue, arises out of leaders’ attempt to achieve social preeminence in both geopolitical and domestic arenas—and it is pragmatic by nature.

While state leaders are disparate in personalities, belief systems, and political experiences, they can nevertheless share some generic features. This study *assumes* that leaders are preoccupied with power in their engagement with politics. This is not to say that power—the ability to dominate minds or actions of others—is the sole objective for leaders. Leaders might not be keen on their power positions at all times. My point, rather, is that power is necessary—though not sufficient—for attaining almost every important value in politics and statesmen therefore cannot afford to ignore it.<sup>7</sup> This assumption is quite sweeping, but it helps instill analytical rigor into discussions of how leaders craft state policy. As Hans Morgenthau famously argued, “we assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power,” and “that assumption allows us to retrace and anticipate, as it were, the steps a statesman—past, present, or future—has taken or will take on the political scene.”<sup>8</sup>

State leaders are supposed to act as statesmen in furthering the general welfare of the body politic—namely, the national interest in general and geopolitical security in their conduct of foreign affairs. But they also have to act as politicians in managing the ruling coalition composed of heterogeneous interests and preferences.<sup>9</sup> Political power is necessary for leaders to safeguard against external interference and internal challenges. As such, the pursuit of power by leaders could be manifest in their policy to advance geopolitical security and in their effort to legitimate domestic advantages. Geopolitical security and domestic political survival are dominant ends political power could serve.

It is worth emphasizing that security imperatives provide a compelling justification for

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<sup>5</sup> William Murray and Mark Grimsley, “Introduction: On Strategy,” in *The Making of Strategy*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Luttwak, *The Logic of Strategy*.

<sup>7</sup> This contention has two logical components: first, power is necessary for statesmen to accomplish something important; second, those who ignore power may be eliminated by political competition and thereby do not exist to be examined empirically.

<sup>8</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> In the “two-level game” literature, it is generally assumed that power is of fundamental importance to political leaders. See Peter Evans, Harold Karan Jacobson, and Robert Putnam, eds., *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993); Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988); Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

leaders to pursue power on the state's behalf in the geopolitical arena. Where an overarching authority is unavailable to provide protections for states, the pursuit of power resources is critical to a state's security interests.<sup>10</sup> For sure, it is advisable for security seekers to observe prudence in order to prevent potential adversaries from forming a counterbalancing coalition. And in certain circumstances, leaders may find in strategies of self-restraint the best route to security.<sup>11</sup> Yet this does not obviate the need for power, which serves as the last resort for geopolitical security. In the final analysis, the anarchical conditions in geopolitical arenas do provide incentives for states to accumulate and assert state power. Leaders in turn often need to show their readiness to employ state power one way or another.

While students of status politics (including the preceding chapter) already stress that great-power status may help to advance a state's geopolitical autonomy by eliciting voluntary deference from other states, they neglect to point out that some symbolic acts as undertaken by individual leaders can blur the distinction between geopolitical and domestic arenas. Hence, it is imperative to focus on the instrumental roles of great-power status and personal prestige for leaders operating in the nexus of geopolitics and domestic politics. This is essential to understanding the ways in which leaders' concerns for social preeminence can inform their strategies to attain geopolitical ends.

#### *A Vehicle for Power Legitimation: Prestige and Political Survival*

Leaders are entitled to formidable power because they symbolically represent state sovereign authority. Prestige mediates the exercise of power by leaders. It allows them to see their power being demonstrated as legitimate. Prestige also allows leaders to draw upon the personalistic sources of power by highlighting their centrality in the political arena. For these reasons, prestige could serve as a crucial vehicle for leaders to legitimize power into authority – not least in domestic politics.

In the first place, *prestige mediates the exercise of power*. The state, by definition, suggests a collection of political institutions holding a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.<sup>12</sup> Essential to the state is a totality of formal, regularized practices of political power.<sup>13</sup> By

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<sup>10</sup> For the argument that power positions are a key component to national security interests, see Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>11</sup> On this score, I side with the defensive realist position. See Jeffrey Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000/01); Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism* (London: Springer, 2010). Of course, there are outstanding cases whereby states opted to pursue security through expansion, a policy that eventually undermined their security by either exhausting their own security assets or provoking a counterbalancing coalition. But it is also clear from those cases that overexpansion became evident not until two generations of state leadership have passed away. Arguably then, for each generation of state leaders, their pursuit of security still makes them prone to avoid risks. See Snyder, *Myths of Empire*.

<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich ed., Ephraim Fischhoff et al trans. (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 54.

<sup>13</sup> Gianfranco Poggi, *The State: Its Nature, Development, and Prospects* (Cambridge, U.K.: The Polity Press, 1990), chap. 1.

definition, power refers to the ability of persons or institutions to get others to do what they want.<sup>14</sup> And yet, “the human mind in its day-to-day operations cannot bear to look the truth of politics straight in the face.....it must disguise, distort, belittle, and embellish the truth.”<sup>15</sup> As such, human beings tend to rely upon some socially acceptable symbols to accept power as a relation of dominance—and in this way, they legitimize power as a form of authority. Prestige provides just that vehicle. “The basis of every authority, and correspondingly every kind of willingness to obey,” according to Max Weber, “is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige.”<sup>16</sup> According to Barry O’Neill, prestige obtains when: 1) the members must “believe that the person is generally admired in the group”; 2) “the admiration must be seen as having some grounds, such as the individual’s deeds or possessions”; and 3) “the members expect the person to gain influence in the group from the admiration.”<sup>17</sup> Taken together, prestige manifests itself in public messages symbolizing leadership qualities; it lets people *see* power as morally justified and legitimate.

There is no denying that prestige motives are fundamental to human beings. As such, they may take precedence over other human aspirations such as power and wealth.<sup>18</sup> And yet, the ontological priority of prestige motives does not necessarily undercut its practical relevance in politics understood as the struggle for power. That is, it is precisely because the need for prestige is fundamental to human psyche that prestige is a necessary ingredient of power politics. Since, on the one hand, prestige endows the exercise of power with moral significance, political actors may tend to think that their contests for power serve larger purposes than simply dominating their opponents. Following the faith in the moral purpose of power could make add to the prestige of leaders. Prestigious leaders are admirable and as such, they can attract more followers. On the other hand, prestige enables leaders to experience the feeling of being powerful. Like all rational people, leaders tend to use emotional feelings as evidence of their belief.<sup>19</sup> And because prestige can inspire emotional feelings of pride, they provide clues for leaders in sensing the social relationships concerning dominance and subordination. As Morgenthau put it,

The individual seeks confirmation, on the part of his fellows, of the evaluation he puts upon himself. It is only in the tribute others pay to his goodness, intelligence,

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<sup>14</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 53; Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957).

<sup>15</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 263.

<sup>17</sup> Barry O’Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 193.

<sup>18</sup> See Lebow, *A Cultural Theory; Why Nations Fight*; Daniel Markey, “Prestige and the Origins of War: Returning to Realism’s Roots,” *Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (1999). In addition, there is a theme underscoring that the struggle recognition motivates the evolution of social orders and by extension, international society. See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, U.K.: The Polity Press, 1996); Christian Reus-Smit, “Struggles for Individual Rights and the Expansion of the International System,” *International Organization* 65, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>19</sup> For general discussions on this point, see Jonathan Mercer, “The Illusion of International Prestige,” *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017).

and power that he becomes fully aware of, and can fully enjoy, what he deems to be his superior qualities. It is only through his reputation for excellence that he can gain the measure of security, wealth, and power he regards to be his due.<sup>20</sup>

In brief, leaders seek recognition from the followers for their power to be exercised. They have the courage to wield power only if they feel like being powerful. Prestige enables them to have such feelings. Prestige indicates the relations between the leaders and the led through the symbols of legitimate power (e.g. authority). It thus allows power holders to see that they are powerful.<sup>21</sup> Democratic leaders are prone to be interested in public opinion polls, which demonstrate the amount of prestige they enjoy among the constituents. Authoritarian leaders stage ritualistic performances to see that they be politically popular. China's Party Congress, for instance, serves as an important stage on which the top leaders can *see* their prestige if the audience—which is usually composed of sociopolitical elites—responds favorably to their ritualistic acts.<sup>22</sup> Of course, while prestige may indicate who holds legitimate power, it is no guarantor of political survival. A democratic leader who manages to derive prestige from charming characters or policy success does not necessarily win election. A prestigious authoritarian leader could be overthrown when the challengers succeed in coordinating their efforts in secret for a coup. The feeling of being powerful gained through prestige may be deceptive, but it is tempting and might be of political necessity. It enables people to feel about their agency. Without such feelings, political actors would not have the psychological strength to act.<sup>23</sup> Prestige gives them such feeling.

It is important to note that prestige is not just a trapping of institutional authority. Rather, as this study emphasizes, prestige helps leaders legitimate political power and perpetuate political survival when institutions could not perform this function. Leaders can generate prestige via symbolic acts; they can project images in ways that could elicit admiration and deference from the target audience.

Hence, *prestige allows leaders to draw on the personalistic sources of power*. Political institutions depersonalize power; prestige highlights the personal face of power. Inasmuch as *individual* leaders could draw upon their prestige to gain power, prestige enables the leaders to operate independent of their institutional base. We can thus expect that leaders

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<sup>20</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 87.

<sup>21</sup> This view is derived from the notion of "ontological security," namely, the tendency of individuals to find stable roles in relation to one another. In this sense, being powerful is an identity and feeling this identity is secure is the precondition for the practice of power. See Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the Ir State* (London: Routledge, 2008); Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Guoguang Wu, *China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Mercer, "Emotional Beliefs."

operating in the weakly institutionalized regimes are sensitive to prestige. That is, if institutions do not serve as a secure source of power, the leaders have to rely upon their prestige—derivative of a personalistic aspect of power—to extract domestic support.

Leaders signal claim to prestige via acts that “condense into one symbolic event, sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promise of future greatness.”<sup>24</sup> Such acts are symbolic. Their meanings depend on particular ways in which the leaders manage to inspire the audiences. As such, symbolic acts are subject to performative manipulations through which leaders could highlight positive personal traits. Once the audience favorably views their traits being demonstrated, they gain prestige. And once prestige enables a leader to become the focal point of a group, it generates political influences by allowing group members to coordinate their actions around that leader.<sup>25</sup> Through symbolic acts, a leader could generate prestige that promises political influence.

Undeniably, leaders vary widely in terms of the personal traits from which they could derive power and influence. But prestige is essential to demonstrate their positive traits and legitimize their political authority. It is thus *instrumental* for leaders in the domestic politics of political survival. Prestige helps transformative leaders employ their charisma to convey the message of change of sociopolitical orders. For leaders to demonstrate their unique traits associated with charisma, they must be recognized as leaders in the first place. Prestige can give charismatic personality public salience. By showing symbols of prestige through public messages, charismatic leaders could demonstrate personal appeals to an audience who then becomes willing to recognize their authority. While prestige is no substitute for charisma, it brings charisma to public attention.

Prestige may be necessary for transactional leaders too. Such leaders flourish by virtue of skills of mediation. They derive power from the give-and-take relations they forge with a coalition of supporters.<sup>26</sup> To bring their skills of mediation to bear upon coalition management, however, leaders need to assume centrality in the political arena in the first place. Prestige is thus essential to transactional leaders who need to take a position well connected to various factions. When formal institutions do not provide a reliable base of power, it is not institutions that bring prestige—rather, it is prestige that helps forge political linkages across formal institutions. In such circumstances, transactional leaders would need prestige to hold their coalition together. In short, when leaders decide to draw on the personalistic sources of power, they tend to rely on prestige as a crucial political capital. This holds true for various leadership styles ranging from charismatic to transactional leadership.

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<sup>24</sup> Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Russell Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 34-37.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of transformative and transactional leadership styles, see James M. Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

*Competitive status-seeking strategy: An Art of Killing Two Birds with One Stone*

In undertaking competitive status-seeking acts, leaders seek to outperform a higher-ranked state in its area of superiority. By demonstrating symbols indicative of state power, they can signal (albeit not necessarily gain) claims to great-power status in geopolitics and personal prestige in domestic elite politics. Competitive status-seeking strategy may feature such moves as the declaration of commitment to offensive alliance, demonstration of military force, and efforts to outperform other states in fulfilling an ideological commitment. These acts are designed to demonstrate state power in material and ideational forms.<sup>27</sup> By undertaking such acts, state leaders hope to project an image of powerfulness to international audiences on which their claim to great-power status rests, while at the same time, their very displays of resolve to defend the national interest make themselves entitled to a significant degree of prestige at home.<sup>28</sup> As such, competitive status-seeking strategy is an art of asserting claims to great-power status and personal prestige as perceived by international and domestic audiences respectively.

A critical issue deserves particular emphasis here. For an actor to establish prestige, he or she must demonstrate the symbols that the target audience may associate with prestige—that is, the actor must *signal claim* to prestige.<sup>29</sup> But it is pointless for an actor to do so without knowledge about how audience would confer them prestige. The actor's prestige by definition rests on the audience's favorable recognition of his/her characters being displayed. It is therefore essential that we specify how the symbolic acts undertaken by leaders can appeal to the audience.

Typically, leaders can expect to establish social preeminence among the peers (in the international and domestic arenas) by norms or outcomes. Inasmuch as in the normative structures in international politics are often fuzzy and incoherent, social preeminence tends to be *outcome-based*—it stems from the successful employment of state power capabilities. That outcome can contribute to the establishment of a “reputation for unchallengeable

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<sup>27</sup> “Since military strength is the obvious measure of a nation’s power,” according to Morgenthau, “its demonstration serves to impress the others with that nation’s power.” Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 92.

<sup>28</sup> Following Erving Goffman, I emphasize that the leaders are consciously manipulating the symbols in the hope of others could treat their acts as symptomatic of their characters. When an actor tries to give off an expression, Goffman argued, he/she may in effect engage in “a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way.” See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> In practice, the question of how leaders project images about their state and themselves are inseparable with the question of how the relevant audiences perceive their acts. It is based on their speculation about how their acts will be received that leaders engage in a certain symbolic act. For the sake of analytical clarity, however, it is necessary here to make a conceptual distinction between the actor's strategy and the audience's perceptual tendency. For this clarification, see Robert Jervis, “Signaling and Perception: Drawing Inferences and Projecting Images,” in *Political Psychology*, ed. Kristen R. Monroe (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002).

power,” which in turn could serve to deter potential adversaries.<sup>30</sup> In undertaking competitive status-seeking strategy, however, state leaders may not only expect to gain outcome-based social preeminence from a success in outperforming a higher-ranked state; they may be driven by a desire for *norm-based* preeminence as well. This rests on a normative understanding of the symbolic act a leader takes at a given moment, and leaders can earn it by evoking an emotional attachment among the audience via his/her performances on the political stage.<sup>31</sup> Ideally, competitive status-seeking acts could allow both the leader and the audience to share a collective *feeling* of acting *as* the state.<sup>32</sup> As the audience is more likely to identify with the leaders who generate such emotional feelings, leaders can expect an increase of trust from their audience who are normatively committed to their acts.<sup>33</sup>

Since, however, competitive status-seeking strategy features symbolic acts displaying state power, it may intensify the security dilemma and worsen the geopolitical environment in which leaders operate. It is thus worth asking: why do leaders opt for competitive status-seeking strategy at the risk of deteriorating their geopolitical environment? To address this puzzle, it is critical to highlight that a *time lag* always exists between the outcome-based and norm-based social preeminence—and this grants leaders room for political maneuver. That is, leaders can decidedly achieve norm-based social preeminence well before they are able to derive prestige from any desirable outcome of their acts. Whereas this is a result of emotional resonance among the audience inspired by the leaders’ act, outcome-based social preeminence would not come into being until the audience observes a clear effect. And since it takes time for an act to generate effect and for that effect to be seen, leaders may prioritize norm-based social preeminence—if they desperately need prestige to legitimate their authority in domestic elite politics. Once they strengthen their hold on power at home, they can wait and see if their acts of competitive status-seeking strategy do help to establish a reputation for superior power—an outcome that contributes to great-power status and personal prestige of the leaders. If, on the other hand, competitive status-seeking strategy does not work as well as they expect, leaders are free to abandon it without fearing a loss of prestige at home. To the extent that competitive status-seeking acts already help them solidify personal authority at home, they are supposed to enjoy considerable latitude in interpreting their international acts.

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<sup>30</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 96; Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Here, I draw critically on the insight from Mercer that norms can be emotionally driven—that is, what are seen by social actors as regulating their behaviors or even constituting their identity are a function of their emotional attachment. See Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs.”

<sup>32</sup> See Jonathan Mercer, “Feeling Like a State: Social Emotion and Identity,” *International Theory* 6, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>33</sup> For the empirical research on this issue, see Anthony Pescosolido, “Emergent Leaders as Managers of Group Emotion,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 13, no. 5 (2002); Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2013). For its application to international relations, see Todd H. Hall and Andrew A. G. Ross, “Affective Politics after 9/11,” *International Organization* 69, no. 4 (May 2015).

How does competitive status-seeking strategy help leaders establish norm-based social preeminence? Why is the audience willing to confer prestige upon leaders who are to put the national wellbeing at stake by engaging in competitive status-seeking strategy? The answer can be found in what is called “coalitional psychology.” It suggests that member players are quick to respond to a leader’s symbolic acts that “broadcast” an issue as the shared problem for the whole group.<sup>34</sup> In-group members, by implication, tend to identify with the leader showing readiness to defend group interests, not least security and self-esteem.<sup>35</sup> Typically, as competitive status-seeking acts features a display of the leaders’ commitment to promoting great-power status, such acts could inspire an “emotional belief” from domestic audiences (especially among a small number of the ruling elite) that such leaders personify an identity they share and value—such as communists, liberal democrats, or a national identity on which state legitimacy rests.<sup>36</sup> This very belief could lead the audiences to see the leaders as being prestigious. Put differently, by undertaking competitive status-seeking acts—notably, displays of state power—leaders frame the geopolitical challenge as a identity issue and show their readiness to promote group security and self-esteem. As such, they establish a focal point around which to mobilize their followers, and their very centrality in the group thus inspired could yield personal prestige.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the opponents of competitive status-seeking strategy would not be able to gain personal prestige that is norm-based in the domestic realm, even if their proposed strategy may work better in furthering the national interest. Even in the United States—a liberal democracy encouraging free and open debate on national policy—the emotional reaction to the external security threat could be overwhelming, and such an atmosphere could leave the opponents of assertive foreign policy vulnerable to charges of being unpatriotic.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony Lopez, Rose McDermott, and Michael Bang Petersen, "States in Mind: Evolution, Coalitional Psychology, and International Politics," *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 72-73.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Van Vugt, Robert Hogan, and Robert Kaiser, "Leadership, Followership, and Evolution: Some Lessons from the Past," *American Psychologist* 63, no. 3 (2008). Also see Joey Cheng, Jessica Tracy, and Joseph Henrich, "Pride, Personality, and the Evolutionary Foundations of Human Social Status," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 31, no. 5 (2010).

<sup>36</sup> See Mercer, “Emotional Beliefs”; “Feeling like the State”; Rousseau, *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities*; Gries, “Identity and Conflict in Sino-American Relations”; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> The logic of coalitional psychology is consistent with SIT’s argument that in-group conformity heightens the psychological need for favorable comparison with outsiders. Because leaders officially represent the state, they are well placed to assert personal prestige associated with state sovereignty. Seen in this light, competitive status-seeking strategy, by showing readiness for competition with outsiders, enables leaders to assert great-power status in a way that generates pressures for in-group conformity. The domestic audience then may regard state leaders as the focal point of group identity. Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization* 49, no. 2 (1995); Henri Tajfel, "Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations," *Annual Review of Psychology* 33, no. 1 (1982); Michael Hogg, "A Social Identity Theory of Leadership," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>38</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (London: University of California Press, 1999); Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004); Jack Snyder, Robert Shapiro, and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009).

In a nutshell, competitive status-seeking strategy allows leaders to achieve social preeminence via norms *as well as* outcomes. A favorable outcome that benefits the nation at large—such as outperformance over a higher-ranked state in geopolitical contests—allows leaders to boost great-power status by good outcomes *over time*. The competitive status-seeking acts as undertaken by leaders, on the other hand, may evoke emotional attachment from an audience who can confer them personal prestige *immediately*—hence social preeminence among political elites at home. To recapitulate, through competitive status-seeking acts in the international arena, state leaders can expect to garner domestic support and enhance their grip on power while anticipating the benefits to the nation to accrue over time.

It is an unconvincing argument that in promoting great-power status by competitive policies, state leaders are purely motivated by the self-serving desire for domestic political survival. After all, if leaders could run tremendous risks abroad just for domestic gains, why could not they make concessions abroad and minimize risks in return for some domestic benefits? “Efforts to gain.....prestige, or to save face may fail, be unnecessary, or involve inordinate risks,” argued Robert Jervis, “but they cannot be dismissed merely as efforts that sacrifice valuable resources to win domestic votes..... For if they succeed they can bring rewards all out of proportion to their costs by influencing the psychological environments and policies of other decision-makers.”<sup>39</sup> Precisely because great-power status can be instrumental in advancing security for the body politic, it could also help leaders promote personal prestige. When status-seeking policies promise little chance to enhance national security, leaders may prefer to insulate domestic political contest from the realm of security strategy—this allows them to focus exclusively on the domestic front to secure their power position. In the final analysis, the geostrategic relevance of competitive status-seeking acts should not be discounted, notwithstanding leaders’ incentive to derive personal prestige from them. Competitive status-seeking strategy is thus an art of killing two birds with one stone.

Hence **my central argument:** *Competitive status-seeking strategy by state leaders involves acts of displaying state power to assert great-power status vis-à-vis the target states, and by such acts leaders seek to simultaneously advance geopolitical security and strengthen their power positions at home.* For individual leaders, the quest for great-power status could reflect their desire for social preeminence vis-à-vis foreign leaders. The pursuit of personal prestige is motivated by a similar desire, but the chief audience is on the home front. Hence, the pragmatic concerns for social preeminence may have to do with great-power status in the international arena and personal prestige in the domestic arena. And when fueled by both geopolitical

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<sup>39</sup> Jervis, *The Logic of Images*, 8.

and domestic political challenges, concerns for great-power status and personal prestige can combine to motivate leaders to engage in competitive status-seeking strategy.

### **Hypotheses on Competitive Status-Seeking Strategy:**

#### **Political Challenges, Value Tradeoffs, and Pragmatic Concerns for Social Preeminence**

Leaders serve as guardians of national security, and they need to derive political power from persistent elite support under a stable regime. Therefore, in pursuing either personal prestige or great-power status, they cannot afford to ignore challenges to the state's geopolitical security and their own political survival at home.

Leaders would confront a tradeoff between status aspirations and geopolitical security when a *great power threat* emerges in their proximate region or the region of vital geostrategic concern. They may also have to reconcile the imperative of domestic legitimation with status aspirations in the midst of *institutional change dynamics*. These geopolitical and domestic challenges, on the other hand, could fuel leaders' pragmatic concerns for social preeminence. Confronting a threatening power in its own region, leaders may consider great-power status a route to geopolitical security. Likewise, leader may have to rely upon personal prestige as a vehicle to political survival when institutional change dynamics intensify elite competitions. Among others, geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics represent peculiar political challenges: they could 1) *fuel leaders' pragmatic concerns for social preeminence*, and 2) *impose value tradeoffs upon the leaders*.

#### *Stimulus for Concerns for Great-Power Status:*

##### *Does a Threatening Great Power Extend Its Influence to a Third Party?*

A geopolitical threat features three elements: geographical proximity, power superiority, and offensive posture.<sup>40</sup> Empirically, state leaders could sense a geopolitical threat when *a great power extends its geopolitical influence to the proximate region, or a region of their vital concern*. This trend signals that great power's offensive intent, and enhances its capacity to restrain the geopolitical autonomy of other states.

Geopolitical threat can fuel leaders' pragmatic concern for great-power status when the expansion of geopolitical influences of a threatening state involves a *third party*, which is normally a materially weaker state. As Hypothesis 1 suggests (as introduced in Chapter 1), the nature of the threat posed by the great power's alignment with a smaller one could define the field of status competition. A geopolitical threat can be military or ideological. Militarily, a critical empirical criterion for judging geopolitical threat is *a major power*

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<sup>40</sup> See Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987). Here, I treat the perception of threat as contingent on diplomatic interactions and therefore do not include it as a stable indicator of threat.

deploying military forces near another power's border. In the process, it may seek to use the smaller state as a stronghold. Geopolitical threat can also arise from *doctrinal change of an adversary that signals shift from defense- to offense-oriented strategy*.<sup>41</sup> Offensive posture signals hostile intention, and leaders tend to assume worst-case scenarios in an international system dominated by self-regarding states. An offensive posture threatens to put leaders at a disadvantage in psychological and geostrategic terms, as they perceive the adversary's doctrinal change would encourage its aligned smaller power to act opportunistically to challenging their claims. Needless to say, being challenged by a lesser power could undercut their status claims.

Besides military threat, *rival ideology* can pose consequential challenges to a state's geopolitical security. "The ability to undermine a foreign government through propaganda or subversion can be an especially potent form of offensive power," according to Stephen Walt, "because it allows one state to 'conquer' others at little or no cost to itself."<sup>42</sup> Leaders may worry that a third party's diplomatic commitment would be shaken by its internal ideological change. Throughout history, great powers engaged frequently in forcible regime change to prevent strategically important regions from falling under the sway of rival ideologies. These interventions were not motivated purely by ideological passions; rather, leaders could be rational in acting preemptively to prevent ideological rivals from controlling the nearby states.<sup>43</sup> Leaders, in turn, may want to assert great-power status by holding onto an ideology.

In short, great-power status could act as a vehicle for leaders to advance geopolitical security. As such, leaders' status concerns arguably intensify when a dominant rival extending its geopolitical influences to their neighborhood.

#### *Stimulus for Concerns for Personal Prestige: Institutional Change Dynamics*

Typically, institutional changes are triggered by crisis events with nationwide consequences that threaten the daily functioning of a political regime.<sup>44</sup> The events may include transnational ideological drives,<sup>45</sup> economic crisis,<sup>46</sup> the removal of a dictator having

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 52, 162-63.

<sup>42</sup> Walt, *Revolution and War*, 19.

<sup>43</sup> John Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); Mark Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789-1989* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> See Mattei Dogan and John Higley, "Elites, Crises, and Regimes in Comparative Analysis," *Historical Social Research* 37, no. 1 (2012): 272-73.

<sup>45</sup> Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics*; Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes: Indonesia and Malaysia in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

governed for decades,<sup>47</sup> and so forth.<sup>48</sup> When pressures for institutional change polarize the elite, individual leaders may use personal prestige as a vehicle to domestic legitimation, which could enhance the prospects for their political survival. Then, prestige politics on the home front may become manifest in the competing ideological cues issued by leaders.

“Competition of ideas and struggle for power to make rules are often at the heart of institutional change,” as noted by a leading social scientists.<sup>49</sup> In the midst of institutional changes, institutional authority is not able to serve as a reliable source of power for individual leaders—instead it becomes the subject of contestation.<sup>50</sup> The power struggle occurring in the midst of an institutional change is distinct from policy disputes or personality clashes that happen in normal politics. Disputes in normal politics do not involve any significant change of the rules of political game. Institutional changes, however, mean that the existing rules cease to work effectively in regulating elite activities as leaders debate how political orders should be reorganized. In the process, they tend to mobilize supporters across the regime via ideological cues. Ideological doctrines could appeal to the shared values of a community. By invoking such doctrines leaders seek to personify the state as a political community. This allows them to assume centrality in the networks of ruling elites and gains prestige accordingly.

Prestigious leaders then provide focal points around which to coordinate activities of the followers while exerting pressures on the uncommitted. As a majority of elite members flock to the side of a “prestigious” leader, that leader would be able to sideline the opponents in pursuit of his/her favored policy. In this way, prestige provides a sort of political capital, whereas institutional change dynamics could heighten leaders’ reliance upon it for political survival. Here, an observable implication is that leaders openly identify with disparate ideological lines. In this endeavor they commit personal prestige. Once attached to an ideological line, a leader in effect publicizes his/her preferences for the political order. There would be reputational costs if he/she acts to refute the images being advocated, as few politicians want themselves to be viewed as being opportunistic. While leaders may be able to adjust policy without flouting the ideological lines they are committed to, they still need ideological cues as a vehicle for political mobilization. This is

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<sup>47</sup> Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>48</sup> Dogan and Higley, “Elites, Crises, and Regimes in Comparative Analysis,” 274-79.

<sup>49</sup> Shiping Tang, *A General Theory of Institutional Change* (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

<sup>50</sup> Pressures for institutional change could generate crisis for the regime. Whether regime crisis leads to social revolution or less violent institutional changes thus hinges on how intra-elite dynamics play out. On this issue, see Mattei Dogan and John Higley, eds., *Elites, Crises, and the Origins of Regimes* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Benjamin Smith, "Life of the Party: The Origins of Regime Breakdown and Persistence under Single-Party Rule," *World Politics* 57, no. 3 (2005).

testified by the fact that they are fond of invoking ideological cues to their followers. In short, ideologies serve as blueprint for actions to reorganize political orders; they are rallying points for collective political actions; and leaders commit prestige in the process. Thus, if leaders decide to engage in prestige politics in the midst of institutional changes, we should expect to see them appeal to ideological doctrines in order to legitimize their political authority—and this serves to indicate their reliance upon prestige as a sort of political capital.<sup>51</sup>

To be sure, institutional change dynamics may be more likely to induce prestige politics in authoritarian and hybrid regimes than in liberal democracies: the former lacks robust legal procedures to prevent the struggles for institutional change from becoming too personalized.<sup>52</sup> Still, in liberal democracies leaders' reformist ambitions may provide strong incentives for prestige politics. When democratic leaders find the current institutions obstructive, they may still resort to prestige politics in order to pursue their policy agenda.

#### *Four Hypotheses on Leaders' Choice*

Thanks to the instrumental role of national status and personal prestige, competitive status-seeking policies promise to further leaders' interests in geopolitical security and domestic political survival *simultaneously*. Hence my **Prime Hypothesis**: *pragmatic concerns for social preeminence – notably great-power status and personal prestige – can motivate leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking measures*. Empirically, state leaders are most likely to engage in competitive status-seeking strategy when they rely upon personal prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival in domestic elite politics while regarding great-power status as a route to geopolitical security. By implication, state leaders undertake competitive status-seeking acts *in hopes of* transcending the tradeoffs among status ambitions, geopolitical security, and domestic political survival.

As noted in Chapter 1, leaders' concerns for great-power status are instrumentally related to geopolitical security—hence **Hypothesis 1**: *The aspect of state power leaders would display to assert great-power status has to do with the strategic role of a third party in a geopolitical contest between the major powers*.

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<sup>51</sup> Henry Kissinger made an incisive remark on ideological principles. In his view, the frequency with which ideological principles are invoked could serve as an indicator for the stability and legitimacy of a political order. “The characteristic of a stable order is its spontaneity; the essence of a revolutionary situation is its self-consciousness. Principles of obligation in a period of legitimacy are taken so much for granted that they are never talked about. . . . Principles in a revolutionary situation are so central that they are constantly talked about.” See *A World Restored*, 3. For the idea of ideological polarization, see Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics*, 40-41; For a general discussion of the role of ideas in institutional change, see Stephen E. Hanson, *Post-Imperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimar Germany, and Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

(The lesser state's strategic role may in large part be determined by the great power competition. Yet, the aspect of state capacity as displayed by a major power is closely linked to the nature of the field in which status competition arises. In this regard, the lesser state acts as a key intermediary in status politics between the major powers. By displaying its competence in some actions, a major power can expect to elicit cooperation from a lesser state, or deter it from cooperating with its geopolitical rival. For instance, in the circumstance whereby the major power A acts to strengthen its regional partner at the expense of B's, B may support its ally to fight back aggressively. In this case, allied partners act as a vehicle for geopolitical competitions, and B could display allied partnership as a status symbol—that is, an asset on which its status claims rests—to its adversaries. Likewise, when A promotes a rival ideology in a lesser state of geostrategic concern to B, leaders of B may worry about A exerting certain control over that lesser state by mind. They, in turn, may employ an ideological rhetoric—coupled with the provision of geopolitical aid to that lesser state—to delegitimize the ideological authority of A. While doing so, B intends to enhance its ideological appeal to the lesser state which if wooed to its side, can provide a buffer against the geopolitical expansion of A. Finally, when A takes measures to enhance military cooperation with a lesser state which is located close to B, leaders of B may perceive this as A's attempt to turn the lesser state into a material base for projecting military power against them. In this circumstance, leaders of B may find it necessary to display military power against the lesser state with a view to deterring A from continuing to deploy military power in its backyard. Here, military power provides a vehicle for signaling status claims.)

Yet, leaders face significant tradeoffs among geopolitical security and great-power status as a geopolitical threat arises. As guardians of national security, state leaders may prefer security strategies that are relatively risk-averse if their dominant concern is with security imperatives only. Hence,

**Hypothesis 2** *Leaders' concern for great-power status – fueled by the need to cope with geopolitical threats – is permissive but not sufficient for their choice of competitive status-seeking strategy because such kind of policy is too risky.*

(Inasmuch as competitive status-seeking strategy provides a means to geopolitical security, leaders would not opt for this policy when they feel that the single-minded pursuit of great-power status abroad would cost their security tremendously. Instead, they may pursue other security-seeking policies that can be justified in terms of status enhancements. For instance, they can try to equip the troops with high-technology weapons. In so doing, leaders could enhance the state's military power while basing their claim to great-power status upon cutting-edge technology. Leaders can also seek to engage diplomatically with a great power adversary. By showing their equal standing with a great power in peace promotion, leaders can expect to boost their status abroad. Finally, even if leaders have no choice but to undertake coercive diplomacy in order to deter a great

power rival from challenging their core claims in the geopolitical arena, they can conduct themselves in a prudent manner in order to prevent an escalation of the conflict.)

Although institutional change dynamics provide structural incentives for leaders to engage in prestige politics in the situation of institutional change, the agency of individual leaders matters significantly. Individual leaders could decide whether to use personal prestige as a vehicle for power struggle. If they do, there will be a tradeoff between status ambitions (as leaders identify personal prestige with national aspirations for status) and the imperatives of domestic legitimation. Given the considerable risk and uncertainty of diversionary conflict, they would not opt for the diversionary strategy of seeking to achieve status ambitions abroad for domestic political gains. Hence,

**Hypothesis 3** *Concerns for personal prestige could make leaders averse to international conflict that may undercut their reputation for advancing national wellbeing.*

(Leaders are normally expected to advance national wellbeing of which peace is a fundamental element. If they unnecessarily provoke an international conflict that could spiral out of control, such acts could invite domestic skepticism about their leadership competence.<sup>53</sup> Whether leaders' engagement in international conflict is deemed necessary is a function of the gravity of the geopolitical threat they face. Without a great power posing immediate challenges to the state's geopolitical autonomy, leaders' initiative to escalate international tensions would cost their prestige domestically. Inasmuch as leaders can derive prestige from domestic achievements, they would prefer to concentrate on the home front. Thus, if they rely upon prestige as a principal vehicle for domestic political survival, they would be averse to escalation of international tensions and not prefer competitive status-seeking measures.)

To recapitulate, great-power status and personal prestige are important varieties of "social preeminence," and leaders may concern themselves with such goods for pragmatic reasons related to geopolitics or domestic politics. Yet, when fueled by either geopolitical threat or domestic institutional change *alone*, pragmatic concerns for social preeminence on the part of individual leaders are unlikely to cause competitive assertions of status. This is a risky policy after all, and so leaders are arguably inclined to pursue great-power status by risk-averse strategies or put status aspirations on the back burner. State leaders, however, are most likely to opt for competitive status-seeking measures when their concerns for social preeminence are instrumentally related to *both* geopolitical threat and domestic institutional change. In such circumstances, they face no significant tradeoff among great-power status, geopolitical security, and domestic political survival—rather, competitive status-seeking strategy may enable them to transcend such tradeoffs.

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<sup>53</sup> What matters here is whether a leader is viewed as culpable for conflict initiation/escalation or not. In the former case, a leader may be perceived as incompetent in advancing the national interest. On this matter, see Sarah E. Croco and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "War Outcomes and Leader Tenure," *World Politics* 68, no. 4 (October 2016).

### **Falsifying the Argument**

My argument can be falsified if it is shown that pragmatic concerns for both great-power status and personal prestige can motivate leaders to make concessions with the adversary – through either secret diplomacy or open negotiation. In such cases, leaders try to transcend the tradeoffs among geopolitical security, domestic legitimation, and status ambitions through a conciliatory rather than competitive policy. Certainly, leaders can reap maximum benefits at home and abroad from a cost-efficient strategy of diplomatic accommodation. If they succeed, the direct threat to their state's geopolitical security will be degraded as the higher-ranked power extends recognition of great-power status. Meanwhile, the peace dividends thus obtained could please the majority of the political audiences, who would be willing to bestow prestige upon the leaders embracing moderate foreign policy line.

It has been hypothesized that the leader with a hawkish reputation can afford to pursue conciliatory policy toward the adversary without a loss of personal prestige at home.<sup>54</sup> There is, moreover, evidence that leaders were able to protect personal prestige in the conduct of secret diplomacy and in some circumstances, they could even turn domestic vulnerability into an advantage in establishing the credibility of their offer of concessions.<sup>55</sup> Future studies along this direction have the potential to falsify my theoretical argument. The core issue is how much latitude individual leaders could enjoy in conducting secret diplomacy with the adversaries.

Moreover, it is important to note that in such cases the risks are no smaller than pursuing competitive status-seeking policies. Inasmuch as the leader may have to become implicated in the conduct of secret diplomacy with the adversary, he/she would commit personal prestige to the conciliatory policy vulnerable to domestic criticisms. Thus, it is worth asking: why are leaders willing to incur significant risks of political survival in pursuit of conciliatory policy? And how their concerns for national status and personal prestige lead to prudence? Beyond the potential to falsify my argument, these questions are theoretically interesting and practically significant.

### **Case Selection Issue: Why China**

China's Cold War experience is well suited for illustrating the nature of great-power status

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth A. Schultz, "The Politics of Risking Peace: Do Hawks or Doves Deliver the Olive Branch?" *International Organization* 59, no.1 (Winter 2005).

<sup>55</sup> See Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Tying Hands Behind Closed Doors: The Logic and Practice of Secret Reassurance," *Security Studies* 22, no.3 (2013).

and personal prestige as perceived by state leaders, thus promising valuable insights as to why leaders become risk-acceptant in pursuit of great-power status. There has been an abiding aspiration for generations of Chinese elites to lift China from colonial inferiority to great power preeminence in the modern era.<sup>56</sup> Arguably, China's status-enhancing drive reached a climax after the founding of the People's Republic, a regime that has managed to accumulate unprecedented material power through national reunification, social integration, and industrialization.<sup>57</sup> The Chinese drive for status enhancement, however, was complicated by their exclusion from the western-dominated international society and frictions with the Soviet-led socialist bloc.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, the Chinese communist regime typically enshrined elite solidarity around the "leadership core" (*lingdao hexin*), a term that carries tremendous prestige for individual leaders. As such, personal prestige seems to be a crucial vehicle for power legitimation in Chinese elite politics.<sup>59</sup> Arguably, Chinese leaders' quest for great-power status can generate implications for their personal prestige at home. Moreover, given that these leaders operated in volatile geopolitical and domestic political environments during the Cold War, for their part great-power status and personal prestige were not only symbolically significant, but also instrumentally relevant for the imperatives of geopolitical security and domestic political survival.

My case studies are mainly focused on the evolution of China's foreign and security policy from 1962 to 1979 (Chapters 3-5). Selecting cases from this short period is ideal for demonstrating the distinctiveness of my argument for two reasons. First, this period is rich with two types of events as posited by my theoretical argument as "stimuli" for leaders' pragmatic concerns for social preeminence—namely, geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics. In the geopolitical arena, China's relationship with the two superpowers varied dramatically, and this provides good opportunities to observe the nature and degree of leaders' concerns for great-power status. On the domestic front, Beijing's leadership encountered a series of profound crises that unleashed pressures for institutional change, from the Great Leap Forward fiasco to the Cultural Revolution and to the supreme leader's demise. This in turn allows us to observe multiple times the nature and degree of leaders' concerns for personal prestige.

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<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Yongjin Zhang, *China in the International System, 1918–20: The Middle Kingdom at the Periphery* (London: Springer, 1991); "China's Entry into International Society: Beyond the Standard of 'Civilization'," *Review of International Studies* 17, no. 01 (1991); Guoqi Xu, *China and the Great War: China's Pursuit of a New National Identity and Internationalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> Gilbert Rozman, ed. *The Modernization of China* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

<sup>58</sup> Yongjin Zhang, *China in International Society since 1949: Alienation and Beyond* (London: Palgrave, 1998); Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); James David Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1977).

<sup>59</sup> Guoguang Wu, *China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

A scrutiny of Chinese security policy in this period, therefore, promises insights into how pragmatic considerations have informed Chinese statecraft in managing the tradeoffs among status ambitions, geopolitical security, and domestic political survival. Ultimately, I seek to shed novel light on how pragmatic considerations of great-power status and personal prestige could inform foreign and security policy in general, a topic that remains understudied. This work aims *not* at a comprehensive account of Chinese security policy in the Cold War. Rather, my account of China's diplomatic and political history in 1962-1979 provides theory-generating cases to contribute to a typological theory of why and when leaders adopt competitive policies in pursuit of great-power status.<sup>60</sup>

A second reason for selecting the Chinese case for theory development is that some salient geopolitical and domestic political factors in the 1962-1979 period could militate against the causal mechanisms my argument underscores—as such, my cases qualify as “hard” ones.<sup>61</sup> Domestically, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping (albeit to a lesser extent) arguably stand as unchallengeable leaders in Chinese politics after 1949. As such, prestige must have followed from their predominant authority rather than vice versa. If, however, my empirical evidence shows that in the daily practice of politics even such leaders need to use personal prestige to legitimize their power positions, this could enhance the applicability of my theoretical insight to a number of cases beyond the Chinese context, where leaders rely upon personal prestige more than institutions as a central vehicle for political survival. This insight could arguably apply with particular force to democratizing and hybrid regimes, where political institutions are not robust enough to guarantee leadership authority.

Equally important, my case studies challenge the authoritarian politics thesis that holds constant the preferences of individual leaders. The authoritarian politics thesis assumes that the personality trait of a single dictator either dictates foreign policy agenda or is constrained by other leaders holding conflicting preferences. This assumption, however, overlooks the possibility that some leaders may manage to shape the preferences of other. My case studies will show that despite intra-leadership differences over domestic agenda and the fact that not all leaders value great-power status as worth pursuing, both Mao and Deng were capable of gaining support from other leaders for their risky of status competition that for the time being, puts alternative political visions on the back burner. Their ability to reshape national visions constitutes empirical novelties vis-à-vis the authoritarian thesis, thus demonstrating the distinctiveness of my theoretical argument.

Geopolitically, the intensity of China's confrontation with both superpowers at various

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<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of typological theory, see Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005), chap. 11.

<sup>61</sup> George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 75, 115-23.

junctures from 1962 to 1979 suggests that security imperatives should have trumped other concerns. My argument, though, stresses the role of great-power status in enhancing long-term security for a state. Yet, the security imperatives imposed by the superpowers' involvement in China's vicinity arguably left the leaders with little luxury to engage in such kind of forward thinking. Hence, status aspirations are not supposed to have been a central driver in China's security policy in a period of intense security competitions. My argument—whereby status aspirations operate as a central variable—should have great difficulty in explaining China's international conduct in the 1962-1979 period.

By contrast, Chinese security policy from 1962 to 1979 is an easy case for the structural realist theories, which are focused exclusively on security imperatives leaders face. Offensive realism asserts that under the anarchical condition of international politics, states should act opportunistically to undermine one another. China apparently is an easy case for bolstering this prediction, as it engaged in intense conflicts with both superpowers at various junctures from 1962 to 1979 in defense of its core security interests. And yet, if the empirical evidence shows that China's impulse to engage in geopolitical competition with the superpowers was motivated by the leaders' concerns for great-power status as well as personal prestige, offensive realism's assertion about anarchy-induced security imperatives is problematic. By contrast, defensive realism counsels prudence in foreign policy statecraft. It does not expect state leaders to take high risks in security competition until they exhaust all relatively risk-averse strategies.<sup>62</sup> Hence, it would expect the Chinese leaders *not* to risk escalation of conflict with the superpowers before all other strategies such as balancing, conventional diplomacy, and prudent exercises of coercive diplomacy are attempted and fail. Yet, if my empirical evidence shows that in certain circumstances, the Chinese leaders exhibited a strong propensity for risk-taking in pursuit of status, it proves able to reveal the explanatory limits of defensive realism.

In the final analysis, if the empirical evidence on the leaders' concerns for social preeminence fares relatively well in explaining variation in Chinese security strategy, it would gain plausibility and distinctiveness vis-à-vis the authoritarian politics thesis and offensive/defensive realism—theories that give short shrift to great-power status and personal prestige as motivating forces of foreign policy. It then would be reasonable to argue that in international politics, leaders may pursue great-power status by competitive policies with a view to advancing geopolitical security for the state while seeking to consolidate their authority in elite politics via personal prestige. To recapitulate, the Chinese case not only illustrates how great-power status and personal prestige can take on

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<sup>62</sup> For this tenet in defensive realism, see Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism* (London: Springer, 2010).

instrument importance for leaders and how concerns for these varieties of social preeminence lead policymakers to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy; it also lends itself to explanations grounded in several mainstream theories in the field of security studies. If my case fares well in confirming the theoretical argument on why leaders adopt competitive policies in pursuit of great-power status, then it promises to fill the analytic gaps in offensive realism, defensive realism, and the authoritarian politics thesis (as identified in the preceding chapter). For all these reasons, China's security strategy from 1962 to 1979 qualifies as a hard case and accordingly, deserves careful scrutiny.

To recapitulate, the cases selected from China in the 1962-1979 period features considerable variation in the intensity of Chinese leaders' pragmatic concerns for social preeminence. Changes in this independent variable are correlated with the rise and fall of particular varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy in Chinese security strategy. I therefore can identify the regularity with which two varieties of leaders' concerns for social preeminence—namely, great-power status and personal prestige—are correlated with competitive status-seeking strategies, the dependent variable. China's involvement in the Cold War thus provides a crucial source of insights for theory development. Further, the cases in the 1962-1979 period of China features rich empirical details that allow for illustration of the causal mechanisms posited in my argument. The documentary and secondary sources have been accumulative since the 1990s. They are sufficient now to provide evidence as regards the motives underlying the Chinese practice of the varied types of security strategy, including balancing, conventional diplomacy, prudent conduct of coercive diplomacy, and varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy. The growing bodies of Chinese language sources—especially the released documents, official biographies, and memoirs concerning the top Chinese leaders—have revealed how Beijing's leaders viewed their nation's status in the face of geopolitical challenges, how the prestige politics among them played out on the home front, and what motivated them to pursue different types of security policy. They are crucial to revealing why leaders become anxious for social preeminence in geopolitical or domestic political arenas and how they manage tradeoffs between status ambitions and other political imperatives—hence a wonderful testing ground for the theoretical arguments of this study.

Needless to say, the Chinese case is interesting in its own right. To understand the meaning and logic of the perceived "assertiveness" in Chinese security policy practices since 2010, it is necessary to explore if a similar pattern of behavior has occurred in the past. China's rise to international prominence is characterized by the quest for great-power status vis-à-vis the established superpowers. Its status aspirations were arguably strong in the years 1962 to 1979 given that China suffered from intense alienation by the international

society during this period.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, pressures for institutional change are no less intense nowadays than they were in the 1962-1979 period. Hence, we should expect that pragmatic concerns for social preeminence remain a central variable for explaining China's recent turn to assertiveness in the conduct of foreign and security policy—a trend that is to have far-reaching consequences for international order.

### **The Case Study Methods:**

#### **Cross-Case Comparison, Within-Case Variation, and Process-Tracing Tests**

This thesis adopts comparative and process-tracing methods for case studies. These methods are well suited for my purposes of 1) investigating leaders' motives for competitive status-seeking strategy, and 2) establishing a building block of a typological theory of status competition by highlighting the distinctive causal mechanisms that have to do with the instrumental relevance of great-power status.<sup>64</sup> As a first step, I categorize the events under study into three cases, and trace the variation on the posited motives and the outcome within each case. If there is a recognizable pattern of correlation with the outcomes in each case, then the process-tracing task shall be undertaken to verify the causal mechanisms underlying the pattern of correlation. This task entails identifying crucial pieces of evidence for the links of particular events to leadership motivations and eventually, to the anticipated outcomes. The evidence gathered should serve to test the hypotheses derived from my theoretical arguments.<sup>65</sup> In sum, this work features multiple cases, within-case congruence method, and process-tracing tests.

#### *Multiple Cases*

This work divides a longitudinal period of 1962-1979 into several cases which correspond to three varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy. As those three varieties feature distinct aspects of state power by which leaders could assert their nation's status, they constitute distinctive strategies for status competition in their own right. Status symbols are by definition context-dependent, or field-specific. "A focus on the social fields provides a way of theorizing how processes of social construction create *strategic context* through which actors pursue power politics."<sup>66</sup> As the geopolitical context in which leaders considered state power a symbol for status varies across fields, we should expect to see leaders use different material and ideological assets to assert great-power status. This study divides

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<sup>63</sup> Yongjin Zhang, *China in International Society since 1949: Alienation and Beyond* (London: Palgrave, 1998).

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of the configuration of these two methods on research practice, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*; John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*; Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

<sup>66</sup> Musgrave and Nexon, "Defending Hierarchy from Moon to the Indian Ocean," 593.

cases according to the emergent fields in which status competition occurred.

Selecting on the dependent variable is nevertheless a flawed research strategy: it is prone to misidentify causal variables or exaggerate the causal importance of particular variables. As a remedy, I focus on within-case variation on the independent and dependent variables, and seek process-tracing evidence for the underlying causal mechanisms.

#### *Within-Case Congruence*<sup>67</sup>

Each empirical chapter will discuss the international context in which state leaders entered into status competition with other states. Here, I undertake what is called “descriptive inference” by detailing how the great-power status assumed instrumental importance for leaders in coping with challenges to the state’s geopolitical security. This helps to substantiate H1. If, as H1 suggests, the aspect of state power leaders choose to display in their competitive status-seeking acts is determined by the strategic role of the lesser state in the great power rivalry, then it is important to observe how the great power rivalry arises and involves that lesser state as a critical audience. For H1 to withstand the test, the evidence must show that the “status symbol” – namely, particular material or ideological assets on which states rest their status claims – did emerge out of the deepening great-power rivalry which involves the role of a lesser power.

By descriptive inference I will also address how politics of personal prestige intensified and attenuated on the home front. Here, the process-tracing observations must draw attention to the instrumental importance of personal prestige for leaders’ political survival. We should then expect to see individual leaders concern themselves with personal prestige when the ruling elite becomes divided in the shadow of a crisis event that threatens the daily functioning of the political regime – a hallmark of institutional change dynamics.

Against the geopolitical and domestic political background introduced, I shall employ the congruence method to test H2-3 by examining within-case variations. The process-tracing evidence must show that in the absence of either geopolitical or domestic political challenge, leaders tend to prioritize geopolitical security and domestic political survival over status seeking in risk-acceptant manners. Although the evidence might show that the preferred policy is compatible with non-competitive policies for status enhancements, such kind of evidence remains supportive of my claim that leaders can put ambitions for great-power status on the back burner. In such circumstances, status aspirations are not strong enough to motivate leaders to stake other important interests on the pursuit of status.

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<sup>67</sup> For practical guide, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, chap. 9.

### *Process-Tracing Tests*<sup>68</sup>

Extensive scrutiny of the empirical details that reflect within-case variation can put the Prime Hypothesis to a test. Process-tracing tests not only complement the congruence method, but also serve to decisively confirm the PH and rule out alternative explanations. If the PM in this study holds true, we should be able to see the following phenomena. They provide observable implications of the causal mechanisms operating between pragmatic concerns for social preeminence (*independent variable*) and competitive status-seeking acts (*dependent variable*).

*Aligning geopolitical and domestic challenges.* If my central claim holds true—namely, pragmatic concerns for social preeminence as related to *both* great-power status and personal prestige can motivate state leaders to engage in competitive status-seeking strategy, we should expect to see that some individual decision makers align external threats and internal perils in the policy deliberations. This could be a deliberate signaling act, as it suggests to the rest of the leadership that failure to follow a hard line would incur fatal geopolitical and domestic political costs. Alternatively, the alignment of geopolitical and domestic political challenges in leaders' discourses may genuinely reflect their concern.<sup>69</sup> On both counts, policymakers seem anxious for the political implications of a loss of personal prestige *and* great-power status. This could lead them to evoke a particular identity that blurs the distinction of the two variants of social preeminence, namely great-power status and personal prestige.

*Sensitivity to domestic reputation costs.* After a leader takes the initiative to bridge great-power status and personal prestige via symbolic acts of competitive status-seeking strategy, other leaders can choose either to bandwagon with or oppose that leader. Arguably, if personal prestige becomes instrumental in enhancing the chance for domestic political survival, individual leaders would be very sensitive to personal reputation costs associated with their advocated policy option. Evidence pertaining to this can be found in biographies or private recollections by the leaders and their associates. It should display leaders' sensitivity to the political costs of being soft on the geopolitical rival(s).

*Bandwagoning for prestige.* If fears of losing personal prestige are a key motivating force for the support by the whole leadership for competitive status-seeking strategy, we should expect to see a radical shift of attitude toward the hard line signaled by the leader who acted first. That is, the uncommitted tend to bandwagon for prestige by espousing competitive status-seeking strategy. Organized in small groups, state leaders tend to share a

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<sup>68</sup> For practical guide, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, chap. 10; Stephen van Evera, *Guide to Method for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey Checkel eds., *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>69</sup> Janice Gross Stein, "Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat," *Political Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1988).

homogeneous identity and can easily monitor the performance of one another in living up to it. By engaging in competitive status-seeking acts, the leaders heighten the inside-outside differentiation, thereby strengthening the in-group identity around which to mobilize their supporters. If the leaders initially embracing moderate lines are aware of the political cost of challenging the in-group identity, they will soon shift to the hard line. Those who fail to abandon moderate positions would leave themselves vulnerable to charges of compromising the national interest. They thereby risk losses of prestige—a crucial vehicle for political survival—and being sidelined in the leadership.

*Proclaiming victory.* International political outcomes, especially those related to war and peace, are often subject to competing interpretations.<sup>70</sup> If leaders engage in competitive status-seeking strategy in part out of concern for personal prestige as related to domestic political contests, they would endeavor to prevent the geopolitical risks from undercutting their prestige at home. Hence, they would take every opportunity to claim credit for their competitive status-seeking acts in the geopolitical arena, and we should expect to see they proclaim victory when the consequence of their conflict strategy remains unclear. And yet, proclaiming international victory is also crucial to shaping the actor's image as perceived by the adversaries. This can serve important strategic purposes. "The actor will often want his opponent to think that he thinks he won because the opponent is then more apt to believe the actor will behave similarly in the future," notes Jervis. "This impression will deter the adversary if the actor's actions had exacted a high price from him in the previous interaction."<sup>71</sup> Hence, by proclaiming victory of the competitive strategy for asserting great-power status, leaders seek to advance their interests in geopolitical security and domestic legitimation simultaneously.

The former two "observable implications" constitute what is vividly called "hoop test" evidence. Their presence is necessary for bolstering the PH, and their absence is sufficient to disconfirm alternative arguments. The hoop test evidence is not sufficient to decisively confirm the PH but it boosts our confidence that further tests are warrants. The latter two "observable implications" offer such tests, counting as "smoking gun" evidence. They are not necessarily able to rule out alternative explanations, but can lend essential support to my PH. The most significant value of smoking gun evidence lies in demonstrating that the PH has strong explanatory leverage over some given facts.

## **Caveats**

Four caveats are in order. First, this study is more concerned with the *motives* behind

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<sup>70</sup> On this matter, see Dominic D.P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Jervis, *The Logic of Images*, 201.

competitive status-seeking measures than with the effects of such policies. I argue that leaders are driven by pragmatic concerns for great-power status and personal prestige to engage in competition with the geopolitical adversaries for status preeminence. The latter could act as a political vehicle to legitimize their power at home, whereas the former could serve as a shortcut to geopolitical security. Leaders, however, could only *hope* to attain these ends with a single stroke. At the moment of taking acts, they are not in a position to command solid information of how their opponents—both internally and externally—would react. Thus, while I posit a prestige motive behind state leaders trying to obtain status via competition, there is no guarantee that leaders are often able to enhance personal, as well as national, prestige, by undertaking competitive status-seeking acts. Conceivably, they may miscalculate the outcome of their acts.

Second and relatedly, I do not suggest that competitive status-seeking strategy be the most efficient way for leaders to cope with geopolitical and domestic challenges. It is a risky policy after all. It threatens war, which may cost state leaders politically. At the very least, it could escalate international tensions, which could divert the energy and resources of leaders away from the imperative of consolidating their domestic authority. I therefore suggest that competitive status-seeking strategy is no normal statecraft and leaders opt for it only when leaders' pragmatic concerns for social preeminence—that is, for great-power status and personal prestige—intensify to an extreme degree. This circumstance arises when leaders tend to view great-power status as a route to geopolitical security while being anxious for personal prestige in domestic elite politics; hence they would opt to engage in competition with foreign adversaries for status preeminence. In undertaking competitive status-seeking acts leaders seek to attain *both* great-power status and personal prestige—in large part for instrumental purposes of geopolitical security and domestic political survival.

Third, I do not take issue with the view that the quest for social preeminence is a universal human drive.<sup>72</sup> Quite the contrary, I fully accept that prestige motives are hardwired into human psychology. Precisely because the quest for personal prestige is so fundamental a driver of human actions, state leaders have to rely upon it in judging their power advantage relative to their competitors. On the other hand, prestige helps legitimize power because the audience tends to view leaders with prestige symbols as unchallengeable and even morally superior. In the final analysis, prestige can be instrumental precisely because human aspirations for it are innate.

Finally, geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics—two peculiar stimuli to

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<sup>72</sup> For instance, see Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations; Why Nations Fight*; Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, U.K.: The Polity Press, 1996); Reinhard Wolf, "Respect and Disrespect in International Politics: The Significance of Status Recognition," *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (2011).

leaders' pragmatic concerns for social preeminence—must be understood as being specific to the cases under investigation. Though the cases under study could represent generalizable types of events, alternative types of stimuli certainly exist and are worth exploring. An increase of the number of cases under investigation would entail identifying additional types of events that could impose value tradeoffs and sensitize leaders to great-power status and personal prestige for pragmatic reasons.

That noted, geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics are arguably relevant to a large number of cases. Typically, they have co-emerged in great powers undergoing sweeping changes at home. Great powers since the age of industry have derived their strength from the sweeping domestic transformations—known as the “revolution of modernity.” In the process, the transformative dynamics of industrialization, rational state-building, and ideological revolutions strengthened state capacity to turn material assets in the society into power capabilities in international politics. These dynamics, in turn, radically refashioned power balances and intensified security competitions among states that espoused them.<sup>73</sup> And yet, while acting as an indispensable source of strength for the state, they also provide much pressure for institutional change. As such, geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics could emerge in pairs, and leaders may perceive this dual challenge through the lens of great-power status and personal prestige. In historian T. G. Otte's account, on the eve of the WWI leaders of the belligerents all preoccupied themselves with great-power status and personal prestige (albeit to varying degrees), as they were cross-pressured by external adversaries and domestic challengers.<sup>74</sup> Nowadays, the Chinese leaders conceivably face similar challenges. Rapid economic growth has brought about sweeping societal changes that weakened their legitimacy basis, whereas the enhanced state power also tends to intensify the regional security dilemma. Notably, various pieces of evidence suggest that handling the cross-pressures of regime legitimacy crisis and international tensions constitutes a significant challenge to contemporary Chinese leaders.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Buzan and Lawson, *The Global Transformation*.

<sup>74</sup> T. G. Otte, "War, Revolution, and the Uncertain Primacy of Domestic Politics," in *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict*, ed. Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>75</sup> See Christopher R. Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era* (London: Routledge, 2006); Peter Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalism, Diplomacy, and the Strategic Logic of Anti-foreign Protests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

## Summary

### *Guiding Questions*

Why do state leaders adopt competitive policies in pursuit of status preeminence internationally? Why do leaders value status aspirations as worth pursuing in a competitive geopolitical environment?

### *Arguments*

1) Leaders take great-power status to be instrumental in advancing geopolitical security of the state. Great-power status could act as a vehicle for leaders to advance geopolitical security (**H1; observable implication: third-party concerns**). As such, leaders' concerns for great-power status arguably intensify when a dominant rival extending its geopolitical influences to their neighborhood.

**H1:** *The strategic role of a third party (normally a lesser power) in a geopolitical competition between the major powers could inform which aspect of state power leaders would display to signal status claims.*

2) Leaders often need to manage tradeoffs among geopolitical security, domestic legitimation, and status aspirations.

**H2:** *When inspired by the quest for geopolitical autonomy, status concerns are permissive but not sufficient for leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy.*

**H3:** *When their personal prestige is under severe challenge at home (**observable implication: pressures for institutional change, normally unleashed by crisis events**), leaders would be averse to the escalation of international conflict that could undermine their ability to advance national wellbeing.*

3) Pragmatic concerns for social preeminence—notably great-power status and personal prestige—can motivate leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking measures. Empirically, competitive status-seeking strategy is a preferable policy for leaders who rely upon personal prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival at home while regarding great-power status as a route to geopolitical security (**PH**).

The PH suggests that pragmatic concerns for both great-power status and personal prestige can motivate leaders to adopt competitive status-seeking policies in order to transcend the value tradeoffs. Here, the **observable implications** include: *aligning geopolitical and domestic challenges; sensitivity to domestic political costs of pursuing non-competitive policies; bandwagoning for prestige; and proclaiming victory.*

Research Design Table

Independent Variable	Geopolitical Dimension	Domestic Dimension	Value Tradeoff	Outcome	Case
	Yes (intensified concern for great-power status)	Yes (intensified concern for personal prestige)	Transcend	Competitive status-seeking strategy (PM); the aspect of state power being displayed is a function of the lesser state's geostrategic value (H1)	Offensive alliance with Hanoi ( <u>Chap. 1</u> ); delegitimation strategy against the Soviet Union ( <u>Chap. 2</u> ); limited use of force against Vietnam ( <u>Chap. 3</u> )
<i>Pragmatic Concern for Social Preeminence</i>	Yes	No	Prioritize geopolitical security but not necessarily forgo status ambitions	Defensive alliance, diplomatic engagement, or prudent conduct of coercive diplomacy (H2)	China's diplomatic and military support for Hanoi in the 1950s; the Taiwan Strait crises (1954, 1958); the Sino-Soviet alliance up to early 1963 ( <u>Chap. 1</u> ); the US-China rapprochement and normalization; the 1969 Zhenbao Island conflict ( <u>Chap. 3</u> )
	No	Yes	Prioritize personal authority but not necessarily forgo status ambitions	Diplomatic engagement, delegitimation rhetoric without risk-prone acts (H3)	China's diplomacy in Africa; the Sino-Soviet split to 1965 ( <u>Chap. 2</u> )
	No	No	Moderate	Conventional viewpoint	

Within case variation on the independent variable; cross-case variation on the dependent variable (for testing H1)

## Chapter 3

### The “Left Turn” in China’s Security Strategy: Beijing’s Pursuit of Offensive Alliance in the Vietnam War, 1962-1965

*A Chinese military delegation led by Marshal Ye Jianying visited Hanoi in December 1961 to suggest that our southern comrades should only attack at section or company level, never at battalion strength. That, the Chinese said, was the way to defeat the American-backed regime in the South. Peking’s main worry.....was that if we provoked the Americans into counter-attacks close to the Chinese border, they would have to intervene as had happened in Korea.*

#### **Memoirs by a Senior Vietnamese official<sup>1</sup>**

*We believe that even if the war does expand into China we will still aid the Vietnamese people, as long as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Movement in the south make the request. There is no clear line indicating the expansion of war, and war will spread like fire. America wants to play with fire and take the chance. China wants to quench the fire. [But] America does not stop and continue to flare up the fire. It is the Americans who are expanding the war, not us.*

#### **Zhou Enlai’s conversation with the Pakistan President (April 1965)<sup>2</sup>**

Chinese security policy in the 1960s took a “left turn,” which was evidenced by Beijing’s active support for Hanoi’s conduct of guerilla warfare against the Saigon regime.<sup>3</sup> After late 1962 the Sino-Vietnamese security cooperation took on features of an offensive alliance. Beijing used Hanoi as a geopolitical ally to implement an offensive strategy against the US-sponsored Saigon regime. In particular, the leaders in Beijing constantly urged their counterparts in Hanoi to step up guerilla insurgencies in South Vietnam, a region governed by the American-backed Saigon regime. Inasmuch as allied partners represent a crucial aspect of state power, Hanoi served as a vehicle for China to display state power on which its claim to great-power status rests. In this regard, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) acted as a symbol for China to assert status superiority over America.<sup>4</sup> China’s

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<sup>1</sup> Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, trans. Judy Stowe and Do Van (London: Hurst, 1995), 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Zhou Enlai wajiao wenxuan* [selected works of Zhou Enlai on foreign affairs] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 1992), 441.

<sup>3</sup> Jun Niu, "1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy," *Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Working Paper* no. 48 (October 2005).

<sup>4</sup> “The spread of revolution to the South in the 1960s was not the same type of goal for China as was the eviction of the French from the North in the early 1950s,” as Thomas Christensen argues, therefore “it can hardly be seen as a defensive measure or as one purely related to China’s parochial national interest.” Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 168.

strategy had the potential to promote its status as well as security vis-à-vis the United States in Southeast Asia.

China's policy as such departed significantly from Beijing's erstwhile effort to maintain the balance of power in Southeast Asia. It also marked a shift of the leadership's priority away from domestic recovery in the wake of the disastrous Great Leap Forward (GLF). Unquestionably, the weakening or elimination of US influence in the Saigon regime could elevate China's status in Southeast Asia. While in this way competitive status-seeking strategy could advance Chinese security in the long run, such kind of policy arguably incurred short-term risks of escalating conflicts with the U.S. It is worth asking: why did the Chinese leadership take such risks to engage in competitive status-seeking acts vis-à-vis the United States?

This chapter addresses this puzzle by focusing on China's geopolitical rivalry with the United States in Asia and the evolution of the split between Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi, two dominant leaders in the Chinese Communist regime. Pragmatic concerns for great-power status and for personal prestige, it argues, combined to cause the leaders in Beijing to espouse competitive status-seeking strategy as an approach to US-China confrontation in Vietnam.

This chapter begins by discussing China's perception and strategies toward the American threat since 1950. As the US threat was largely predicated on Washington's network of allies in East Asia, allied partners acted as a crucial vehicle for the US-China geopolitical competition. This chapter also shows that while in the 1950s the Chinese leaders, notably Mao Zedong, sought to enhance China's great-power status in his dealings with the United States, they nevertheless managed to abstain from undertaking competitive status-seeking measures. Chinese security policy took a radical turn after 1962, as the Chinese leaders came to urge the Hanoi regime to intensify the guerilla insurgents in South Vietnam. This policy shift had to do with a crucial domestic development. The Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in that year triggered an open split between Mao and Liu, which in the following years was further exacerbated by disputes over how to conduct the Socialist Education Movement. The chapter then investigates in detail how the elite conflict in the post-GLF period inspired the pragmatic concern for social preeminence on the part of individual leaders. It points out that the failure of the GLF failure generated intense pressures for institutional change, which in turn caused ideological polarization between Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi. The ideological polarization indicated that the Chinese leaders had come to rely on personal prestige as the principal vehicle for legitimizing their authority in elite politics. Such concerns for personal prestige combined with the instrumental importance of great-power status for geopolitical security to motivate

competitive status-seeking acts. This was evident in Beijing's Vietnam policy, where the Chinese abandoned the less risk-prone strategies pursued in the 1950s in favor of a risk-acceptant policy of status competition against America.

### **The International Context:**

#### **Geopolitical Threats from America and China's Status Aspirations**

Since the early Cold War, the US-China geopolitical rivalry had become so intense that from the Chinese standpoint, status aspirations and security imperatives were inextricably linked. Washington's unequivocal support for the Kuomintang regime, the formidable presence of American military force in East Asia, and the ideological animosity of Americans toward communism all hindered China from asserting its influences beyond its borders. They in turn made the US an existential threat to the People's Republic of China. The new regime then became preoccupied with the United States' allied partners, which provided crucial vehicles for the US to project military force. In particular, the Chinese leadership anticipated an imminent aggression from America against their regime as coming from three fronts: Vietnam, North Korea, and Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> Their heightened perception of threat persisted into the 1960s, and played a pivotal role in shaping China's international behavior.<sup>6</sup>

The Chinese threat perception grew out of the intensifying superpower competitions in the early Cold War. In the wake of WWII, with the US-Soviet confrontation unfolding in Eastern Europe, Berlin, and the Middle East, the US-Soviet leaders turned increasing attention to East Asia, and in particular, to China.<sup>7</sup> The superpower antagonism informed the Chinese Civil War from 1946 to 1949 and posed a significant challenge to the communist survival. The Chinese communists were acutely aware of this. Early in 1946, on the eve of the civil war with the KMT regime, Mao put forward the concept of "intermediate zone" (*zhongjian didai*). This concept referred to the geopolitical area that lay between the US and the Soviet Union, including "many capitalist, colonial, and semi-colonial countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa." Before consolidating control over this vast area, Mao argued, the imperialist America would not attack the socialist Soviet Union—the "guardian of world peace."<sup>8</sup> Yet, located in this "intermediate zone" China was to bear the full brunt of

<sup>5</sup> For the threat assessment of the PRC elites in the early years of the regime's establishment, see Michael Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Jian Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> For the strategic interaction between the United States and China that produced the irreconcilable tension in the early Cold War, see Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton University Press, 1996), chaps. 4-5; Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), chap. 6; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Patterns in the Dust: Chinese-American Relations and the Recognition Controversy, 1949-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> See Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 127-130, 246-251; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60-62.

<sup>8</sup> *Mao Zedong xuanji* 4 (Selected works of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Renmin, 1991), 1193-1194.

America's aggression.<sup>9</sup> Washington therefore appeared as the dominant threat to the newborn communist regime in Beijing. On the eve of the founding of the PRC, Mao explicitly claimed that the imperative for the CCP was to "prepare to fight" against America.<sup>10</sup>

The alliance networks America had forged in postwar years were of much relevance to the US-China rivalry after 1949. The US occupation of Japan, the extension of security commitments to Taiwan and South Korea following the Korean War, and the US-led formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization in 1954 all contributed to the projection of American geopolitical influences to Asia. Allied partners thus served as America's diplomatic assets and crucial components of American power.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, they featured centrally in China's threat perception. As the premier and the first foreign minister of the PRC, Zhou Enlai remarked that, "America is not an Asian country, and its security is not being threatened by any Asian countries.....But the US government has been planning to establish a series of so-called defensive blocs in the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the Near East.....Needless to say, the US seeks to establish aggressive blocs (*qinlue jituan*)."<sup>12</sup> Here, Zhou suggested that by virtue of its extensive alliance networks across the globe, the US was able to project military forces and imperil the security interests of various countries including China.

Hence, the Chinese communist foreign policy from its inception was driven by a heightened perception of the America threat. It was, though, mediated by concerns for great-power status. The idea of the "intermediate zone" reflected a remarkable mixture of security imperatives and status ambitions. It connoted China's aspiration for assuming international leadership in a vast area lying beyond superpower confrontation. This area would assume symbolic significance to China's great-power status *and* had a strategic value for holding off superpower intervention. Mao conveyed this aspiration to Joseph Stalin during his first visit to the Soviet Union in late 1949. The Soviet leader showed willingness to accommodate Mao's status aspiration, which motivated his regime to contest with the US for status preeminence in Asia.<sup>13</sup> All being said, the geopolitical threats from the American side were unquestionably intense, which could fuel the pragmatic consideration of Beijing's leaders who were committed to advancing great-power status.

### **China's Security Strategy prior to 1962:**

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<sup>9</sup> Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*, 13-33.

<sup>10</sup> See *Mao Zedong xuanji* 4, 1483.

<sup>11</sup> See Victor Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> *Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan* [selected works of Zhou Enlai on foreign affairs] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 1992), 69.

<sup>13</sup> Sergei Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 72-73.

### **Alliance Building, Conventional Diplomacy, and Coercive Diplomacy**

In practice, China did not try to advance its security through status competition with the United States until the early 1960s. Some scholars contend the quest for favorable recognition in international society acted as an invariant motive of Chinese diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the evidence shows that the Chinese leadership prior to the 1960s was not so determined to pursue great-power status at the risk of conflict escalation with the United States. Thus it is reasonable to argue that status ambitions on the part of Chinese leaders varied in intensity, which determined Chinese strategy toward geopolitical rivals.

Undeniably, the Chinese leaders had repeatedly evoked terms such as international duty and national pride as justifications of critical foreign policy decisions, notably the Chinese interventions in Korean and Vietnamese conflicts in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> But China's international behaviors in the 1950s in large part confirm the defensive realist hypothesis that security-seeking states are averse to risks of conflict escalation and war. When security imperatives clashed with the status aspiration, Chinese leaders often preferred risk-averse strategies to competitive status-seeking measures. *Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.*

In general, the Chinese leaders pursued three broad strategies throughout the 1950s, including conventional diplomacy, alliance building, and coercive diplomacy. In the aftermath of a violent and prolonged conflict on the Korean Peninsula, the Chinese leaders tried to reach out to their American counterparts via the ambassadorial-level talks in Warsaw. Due to the ideological conflict and strategic distrust, China's diplomatic engagement with the US had deadlocked by the early 1960s.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the Chinese nevertheless went to considerable lengths to engage their dominant geopolitical, as well as ideological, adversary in diplomatic talks. The quest for a regular and productive pattern of interaction with the adversary is a defining feature of Chinese diplomacy in the 1950s. In this regard, the Chinese took full advantage of multilateral diplomacy at the Geneva Conference to defuse geopolitical tensions with the Americans. Also on that occasion, under Mao's instructions Chinese diplomats launched a peace offensive to earn trust and popularity among the post-colonial countries in Southeast Asia. Beneath their high-pitched rhetoric asserting national dignity lay a clear sense of security imperatives to reduce the opportunity for the US intervention.<sup>17</sup> "Mao's conciliatory attitude," historian Yang Kuisong argues, "was neither driven by the logical result of his ideological beliefs or the product of his

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<sup>14</sup> Zhang, *China in International Society since 1949*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), chap. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Yafeng Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy: U.S.-China Talks During the Cold War, 1949-1972* (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 2006), 106.

<sup>17</sup> See Yin Qingfei, "Lun zhongguo dui laowo, jianpuzhai zhonglihua zhengce de xingcheng" [the origins of China's neutralization policy toward Laos and Cambodia] MA Thesis, Peking University, 2011; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chap. 2.

revolutionary experiences, but rather a diplomatic tactic determined by realistic policy needs.”<sup>18</sup> Quite evidently, leaders of a revolutionary communist regime had left competitive status-seeking strategy off the agenda when status aspirations clashed with security imperatives. The dictates of geopolitical security conditioned their preference for status preeminence.

Besides conventional diplomacy China also undertook alliance building and coercive diplomacy in coping with the geopolitical threat posed by US military presence in Asia. In those cases, the Chinese practices are consistent with the defensive realist hypothesis that security imperatives could motivate the leaders to stabilize its security relations with other states, including the adversaries. The leaders in Beijing aligned China with one of the superpowers, the Soviet Union, to balance against the US. The Sino-Soviet alliance also allowed China to benefit from extensive cooperative programs with the socialist superpower. The technological and financial assistance lent by the Soviets proved essential for China’s industrialization in the 1950s. This in turn contributed to the growth of China’s national power and enhanced its capacity to deter the US incursion into its territory.<sup>19</sup>

It is also worth noting that China conducted coercive diplomacy with a remarkable degree of prudence. In 1954 and 1958 China launched large-scale shelling on the Quemoy Islands to deter Washington from enhancing its security cooperation with Taipei. China’s purported objective, in Mao’s words, was to use “the policy of brinkmanship to counter against [John] Dulles’s [policy of brinkmanship].”<sup>20</sup> In conducting the military operations, Mao took pains to avoid war with the United States. By signaling self-restraint and adjusting China’s conflict behavior to America’s diplomatic signals, the Chinese leaders sought to dampen the escalatory potentials of military force.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Beijing intended the employment of coercive power to facilitate diplomatic dialogues with Washington. And Beijing did manage this intention to signal to the US through the bilateral ambassadorial meetings in Warsaw.<sup>22</sup> In the conduct of coercive diplomacy, China clearly did not let its employment of military force compromise the chance for diplomatic engagement.

There are cases of Chinese intervention into the neighboring areas by coercive forces; but these cases are exceptions that prove the rule. That is, when force was employed to promote regimes favored by the Chinese, the ultimate objective was to promote a balance of power,

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<sup>18</sup> Yang Kuisong, “Mao Zedong and the Indochina Wars,” in Priscilla Roberts ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 66.

<sup>19</sup> Zhihua Shen and Danhui Li, *After Leaning to One Side: China and Its Allies in the Cold War* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011); Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong junshi wengao*. 3 (The manuscripts of Mao Zedong on military affairs since the People’s Republic of China) (Beijing: Junshi kexue, zhongyang wenxian, 2009), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture*. Allen Whiting, “China’s Use of Force, 1950–96, and Taiwan,” *International Security* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2001).

<sup>22</sup> For detailed evidence, see Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, 81-89, 98-99.

rather than undo the US practice of hegemonic leadership in East Asia. China fought a limited war in Korea in the early 1950s to safeguard the newly founded Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a buffer state between its Northeastern border and the pro-US Republic of Korea. To a lesser degree, China intervened in its southern vicinity supporting the Ho Chi Minh-led armed struggle against the French colonial authority. The Chinese interventions were seemingly driven by an impulse to reclaim the status preeminence associated with the Sino-centric tributary system in ancient times.<sup>23</sup> Undeniably, however, the security interests involved were also significant enough to warrant military interventions. As such, security imperatives were arguably a principal cause for China's interventions; status aspirations in these cases did not operate alone to motivate the Chinese to risk war with the US. Given, moreover, that the ultimate purpose was to attain a balance of power rather than create an image of superior power in its vicinity, the Chinese acts hardly fit with the category of competitive status-seeking strategy.

In short, China's employed military forces against the Americas on the Korean peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait in prudent manner. In Indochina, by contrast, both the US and China mobilized allied partners for geopolitical competitions. In the context of the growing US involvement with Indochina to fill the geopolitical vacuum left by the French after 1954, Beijing took great pains to help institute a stable regime in Hanoi that could serve as a Chinese ally. And yet, while mobilizing an allied partner, the Chinese were not keen on showing a superior strength. The overriding concern of Chinese leaders was to forestall the repetition of the Korean situation in 1950 whereby Washington's intervention in a regional conflict effectively threatened Chinese security. The Hanoi regime was critical in staving off the American involvement in Indochina. Although the Chinese tended to justify their support for the Ho Chi Minh-led revolutionary forces in Indochina in terms of socialist solidarity, they did not want Ho to attain more than what is required of a defensive alliance. In the early 1950s, Beijing provided Ho's forces with tremendous material supplies and tactical guidance for fighting against the French authorities in Vietnam. Leaders in Beijing, however, did not give their allied partners a free rein. This became evident at the Geneva Conference in 1954. As the conference negotiated an end of the Indochina conflict, the Chinese denied Ho the chance to unify Vietnam by force by recognizing the legitimacy of the Saigon regime. China did so out of a geopolitical rationale. For one thing, Beijing was anxious about the possible US armed intervention if the DRV managed to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem who established a regime under France's support in Saigon, South Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> For another, the unchecked expansion of Vietnamese influence across Indochina clashed

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<sup>23</sup> Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World*, chap. 2; Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation*.

<sup>24</sup> Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 138-141.

with Beijing's quest for geopolitical predominance in Indochina. Zhou Enlai in turn criticized the Vietnamese leading delegate Pham Van Dong for advocating the "Indochina Federation."<sup>25</sup>

For all its ideological fervor in supporting the Vietnamese revolutionaries, the Chinese act of restraining Ho Chi Minh from unifying the country reflects Beijing's immediate concern with geopolitical security. The Chinese leaders were not just concerned by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's ambition. They were also acutely aware that a drive to promote revolutionary regimes could exacerbate security dilemmas across Indochina.<sup>26</sup> In a 1957 meeting with Ho Chi Minh, Zhou cautioned his counterpart that encouraging communist forces to take power by force in Laos could invite the US intervention and the resulting consolidation of US positions in Indochina.<sup>27</sup> The rationale behind Chinese security policy thus meets the defensive realist expectation that state leaders could pursue geopolitical security by taking measures to enhance their state's defensive capacity and signal their status quo oriented objectives. Indeed, strategies such as defensive alliance (e.g. external balancing), coercive diplomacy, and conventional diplomacy all took precedence in Chinese security policy statecraft up to the 1960s.

Such a defensive realist strategy was put to a test in 1962 when the Kennedy administration was poised to enhance its political and military influence in Saigon. The new administration assigned the US forces an active role in conducting counterinsurgency operations *within* South Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> By 1962 the Strategic Hamlet programs guided by the US military advisors had come to reduce guerilla forces' access to South Vietnamese peasantry.<sup>29</sup> Modest as it was, the programs' success alarmed the leadership in Hanoi and stimulated them to seek external support. China was undoubtedly a crucial source of support. While the temporary success of the American-led counterinsurgency in defense of the Saigon regime presented no immediate threat to China, it nevertheless carried geopolitical implications: if China had shown itself incapable of supporting its ally, its perceived capacity to counter the American threat would have diminished.<sup>30</sup> This point was driven home to the Chinese as Ho Chi Minh visited Beijing in the summer of 1962. During his visit, Mao met Ho's request for military and economic resources that "would be used to

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<sup>25</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of this geopolitical concern on the Chinese part, see Ying, "Lun zhongguo dui laowo, jianpuzhai zhonglihua zhengce de xingcheng."

<sup>27</sup> Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 127.

<sup>28</sup> Saunders, *Leaders at War*, 119-28.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 141; William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996), 231; Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War* (Berkeley, Calif.: The University of California Press, 2013), 109-10.

<sup>30</sup> As the Foreign Ministry of China pointed out at the time, the US military presence in South Vietnam was a war that indirectly targeted China. See *Zhongguo gongchandang lishi, 1949-1978* [History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1949-1978] (Beijing: zhonggongdangshi chubanshe, 2010), 650.

support guerilla warfare in the south.”<sup>31</sup> Crucially, this offer signified the beginning of China’s departure from its erstwhile prudent policy, which sought to utilize Hanoi as a buffer state while checking its drive for reunification. Thereafter, the Chinese Communist elite began to use Hanoi as a vehicle for spreading revolution in Indochina. In doing so, China virtually shifted to competitive status-seeking strategy.<sup>32</sup>

The root cause for this policy shift can be found in concerns for personal prestige that were pervasive within the Chinese leadership after 1962. As noted, the US-led network of alliances designed to contain the PRC regime fueled the Chinese concerns for great-power status. After 1962, competitive status-seeking strategy not only provided a vehicle for advancing China’s geopolitical security but also allowed individual leaders to boost personal prestige in domestic elite competitions. As such, this policy became preferable for leaders in Beijing despite the fact that it incurred tremendous risks of conflict escalation.

### **Failure of the Great Leap Forward and the Emergent Mao-Liu Split**

Early in 1959 Mao had ceded his de jure authority to Liu Shaoqi, who assumed the position as the chairman of state. Accordingly, Liu gained sufficient autonomy to interpret Mao’s words and implement policy on his own. This division of authority opened the way for an intensification of power struggles between Mao and Liu after 1962.<sup>33</sup> The proximate cause for the split of the CCP leadership, however, was the failure of the Great Leap Forward programs. Beginning in 1957, the GLF was designed to achieve rapid industrialization of China and dramatically increase agricultural productivity across the country. By early 1962, however, nationwide famines had clearly shown that the GLF programs were unsustainable.

The 1962 Seven Thousand Cadres Conference witnessed an open split between Mao and his presumptive successor Liu Shaoqi. It signified the beginning of the prestige contest between the two leaders which lead up to the Cultural Revolution. In the second half of the year, Mao began to assault the moderate foreign policy line associated with Wang Jiaxiang, a senior diplomat. In so doing, he reoriented Chinese security policy toward an assertive line. These events testify that individual leaders’ reliance upon prestige as a political vehicle could combine with geopolitical imperatives to motivate a strategy of competitive status-seeking strategy. The political logic of status competition is manifest here—that is, leaders may engage in competitive status-seeking strategy in the hope of enhancing a state’s

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<sup>31</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 116.

<sup>32</sup> Christensen, *Worse than Monolith*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> It is misleading, though, to characterize this period as the struggle between two ideological lines. Yet, to the extent that ideology serves as a device for political mobilization rather than a coherent belief system, it is appropriate to see Mao and Liu as representing divergent ideological lines in their approaches to policy issues. See Lowell Dittmer, *Liu Shao-Chi and the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Politics of Mass Criticism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982); Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

geopolitical security as well as their domestic power positions.

### *The Seven Thousand Cadres Conference*

From January 11<sup>th</sup> to February 7<sup>th</sup> 1962, the CCP Central Committee convened in Beijing over seven thousand party cadres to report on local socioeconomic situations during the GLF. The proximate cause was the enormous difficulty the provincial leaders had faced in meeting the grain levies set by the central authorities. Since 1960, the economic difficulties caused by the Great Leap Forward had come to threaten the daily functioning of the regime. By late 1961, provincial leaders began complaining that the grain levies imposed by the central leadership were unrealistic. As prospects for the collapse of state power loomed large, the grain levy problem became a serious concern for the central leadership. By convening local cadres in the capital, the central leadership wanted to collect their complaints and seek their advice for solution of the ongoing crisis.<sup>34</sup>

The Seven Thousand Cadres Conference gained its name for the large number of participants. Over seven thousand party cadres attended the conference; in total more than ten thousand people arrived in Beijing overnight.<sup>35</sup> The central leadership did not decide to convene a meeting on such a scale until the early winter of 1960, and its opening was not publicized.<sup>36</sup> The conference was not intended for individual leaders to display their consensus symbolically. There were serious challenges to reckon with. Mao was nevertheless optimistic about the ability of party elites to forge consensus through this conference. He left Beijing for vocation in Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang province in late November, and did not return to the capital until December 19.<sup>37</sup> The period of his absence proved to have been fatal to his prestige and authority. As the State Chairman and presumably Mao's successor, Liu Shaoqi came to take command as the de facto supreme leader in daily affairs during this period. But he did not meet Mao's expectation in acknowledging the merits of the Great Leap Forward. Rather, Liu urged the drafters to emphasize the mistakes committed by the central leadership. This instruction later on aroused Mao's dissatisfaction.<sup>38</sup> And yet, Liu's defiance testified to a decline of Mao's authority as well as the deep divide within the central leadership with respect to his competence. By the time the draft was sent to Mao, the small number of central leaders who

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<sup>34</sup> Zhang Suhua, *Bianju: qiaianren dahui shilu* [The Turbulent Situation: An Authentic Record of the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference] (Beijing: zhongguo qingnian, 2006), 18-22.

<sup>35</sup> Bo Yibo, *Ruogan zhongda juece yu shijian de huigu* (Recollections of Several Significant Decisions and Events) (Beijing: Zhongyang dangxiao, 1993), 1014.

<sup>36</sup> Qian Xiangli, "Lishi de bianju: cong wanjiu weiji dao fanxiu" (the historical turn: responding to crisis and combating revisionism, 1962-1965), in *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi* vol. 5 (the history of the People's Republic of China), edited by Qian Xiangli (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008), 68; *Mao Zedong zhuan* [biography of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2013), 52-56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 68; *Mao Zedong zhuan* [biography of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2013), 2150.

<sup>38</sup> Zhang, *Bianju*, 42, 58.

had read it already had “much heated discussions” (yilun shenduo).<sup>39</sup> Peng Zhen, a politburo member, openly demanded that Mao take responsibility for the massive failures of the Great Leap Forward. According to the memoirs of Bo Yibo, a Politburo member at the time, Peng argued that it is crucial that Chairman Mao acknowledge his mistakes during the Great Leap Forward; otherwise “it would be odious to our party”<sup>40</sup>

Clearly Mao’s prestige was in decline. The Chairman suffered a serious setback during the conference at which Mao reluctantly made a self-criticism and took responsibility for the failure of the GLF. The Chairman also admitted that his expertise on economic reconstruction was inferior to other leaders, including Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and Chen Yun.<sup>41</sup> Chen Yun, however, declined Mao’s invitation to give a speech on the GLP ostensibly because “there are disagreements about the severity of the current [economic] difficulty and the time needed to surmount it.”<sup>42</sup> The real but unspeakable reason for Chen’s silence, as he admitted years after, is that he “did not want to embarrass Chairman Mao.”<sup>43</sup> By implication, Chen sensed that the GLF had brought about a significant decline of Mao’s prestige among the party elites.

Liu Shaoqi’s performance at the conference substantiated this—indeed, Liu took the initiative to boost his authority at Mao’s expense. In his speech Liu blatantly rejected Mao’s optimistic assessment of the immediate economic situation. He argued that the GLF brought about grave and devastating consequences for the economy. His appraisal that GLF programs were “manmade” fiascos was remarkable. Liu’s very courage of speaking out against the GLF’s excesses was greeted by loud applauses from the audience—and this signified a rise of his prestige that promised to enhance his decision-making authority.<sup>44</sup> Chairman Mao made no comment on the speech.<sup>45</sup>

Retrospectively Bo Yibo remarked that Liu’s remarks on the GLF “sounds quite reasonable today; but at that time they were too provocative, thereby foreshadowing the intensification of inner-party struggle in the years to come.”<sup>46</sup> Yet, there is no denying that Liu’s speech gained him considerable popularity. The conference’s major achievement—the reexamination of the GLF’s failures and the reestablishment of policy lines for economic recovery and domestic reconstruction—were attributed to Liu rather than Mao. Deng Liqun, who attended Mao’s speech at the conference, recalled that he did not find Mao’s speech inspirational (*bu guo yin*) at the time.<sup>47</sup> Another participant of the conference remarked in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>40</sup> Bo, *Ruogan zhongda juece*, 1026.

<sup>41</sup> Bo, *Ruogan zhongda juece*, 1030-1031.

<sup>42</sup> *Chen Yun zhuan* [biography of Chen Yun] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2015), 1302.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 1302-1303.

<sup>44</sup> Zhang, *Bianju*, 130-132.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>46</sup> Bo, *Ruogan zhongda juece*, 1046.

<sup>47</sup> Deng Liqun, *Deng Liqun zishu, 1915-1974* [autobiography of Deng Liqun, 1915-1974] (Beijing: renmin, 2015), 357.

hindsight that “the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference was audacious in breaking through the existing framework, [but] this was [made possible] not by the Chairman [Mao] but by [Liu] Shaoqi.”<sup>48</sup> Whereas Mao was no longer viewed among party elites as an infallible icon, Liu had established himself as a competent leader in managing state affairs. In the wake of the conference, a revised version of Liu’s 1939 essay “How to be a Good Communist” (lun gongchandangyuan de xiuyang) was republished in the authoritative official media outlet *People’s Daily* on the forty-first anniversary of the founding of the CCP. In the same year the first volume of his selected works was also released. In the public rhetoric, some CCP leaders came to make more references to Liu than before in their public speeches.<sup>49</sup> These signs of prestige indicated Liu’s emergence as a dominant leader who was comparable to Mao in decision-making authority.

Mao’s response testifies to the significance of prestige as a sort of political capital. In the wake of the conference, the Chairman turned furious even over minor policy changes such as the rehabilitation of the intellectuals and the cadres.<sup>50</sup> Any indication of growth of Liu’s prestige could irritate him. Although the Chairman was still recognized as the great revolutionary, a relative decline of his prestige vis-à-vis Liu threatened to undermine his control over the overall policy line. According to Li Zhisui, Mao was in bad mood during the conference, being convinced that Liu was no longer loyal to him.<sup>51</sup> Prestige had long been a crucial sign of his charismatic authority; as such, signs of his declining prestige as China’s supreme leader in early 1962 indicated the weakening of the Chairman’s authority. His authority was no longer unchallengeable.

Yet, as the GLF disaster cast Mao’s authority into doubt, the supreme leader relied upon prestige more than ever as a dominant vehicle to enhance personal authority. Prestige signifies who gains an upper hand in the political arena. The ascending prestige of Liu increased his salience as the State Chairman in charge of daily policymaking. Institutionally, Liu’s official position had given him certain latitude in implementing directives taken from Mao. Yet more important, an enhancement of Liu’s prestige in the wake of the Seven Thousand Cadre Conference helped strengthen his authority over the party elites. Mao perceived Liu’s rise in prestige as an ominous departure from the revolutionary path to communism he himself embodied. He thereby needed prestige more than ever to strengthen his grip on authority. Consequently, the Mao-Liu split involved more than normal policy disputes; it was to spiral into an authority contest that set the stage for the Cultural

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<sup>48</sup> Zhang, *Bianju*, 315.

<sup>49</sup> MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 262-263. Also see, Deng, *Deng Liqun zishu*, 340-341.

<sup>50</sup> Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, trans. Tai Hungchao (New York: Random House, 1994), 391. Li’s account was partially substantiated by the official record of Mao’s complaint in August that many government authorities did not report their work. See *Jianguo yilai mao zedong wengao* 10 (manuscripts by Mao Zedong since the founding of the PRC) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1996), 135.

<sup>51</sup> Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, 386-387.

Revolution.<sup>52</sup>

Inevitably, the Mao-Liu split led to a polarization of the central leadership. While as noted, some leaders challenged Mao's authority, the Chairman still gained substantial support from his close lieutenant Lin Biao. At the conference, Lin openly denied the Chairman's culpability for the GLF fiascos, asserting that economic failures and policy setbacks associated with the GLF were attributable to the local cadres' defiance of Mao's leadership. At the same time, Lin stressed the importance of inner-Party solidarity around Mao. As he argued,

"In times of troubles, we must rely even more on the leadership of the center, on the leadership of Chairman Mao, and trust Chairman Mao's leadership even more. If we just do that it will be even easier to overcome our troubles. The facts prove that these troubles spring precisely from our failure in many instances to act according to Chairman Mao's directives."<sup>53</sup>

While arguing so, Lin helped to boost Mao's prestige as China's supreme leader. As he managed to attach Mao's personal prestige to the central leadership, opponents of Mao's leadership would likely suffer psychological pressure for questioning his/her own loyalty to the party. Lin's speech thus convinced many participants of Mao's unshakable authority.<sup>54</sup> Mao also found Lin's speech helped boost his prestige, as he asked the Central Secretariat to distribute Lin's speech among the conference participants.<sup>55</sup> Lin's rapid rise in political influence after the conference represented Mao's effort to mobilize supporters. To regain control over the central leadership, Mao desperately needed support from the party elites.

Lin's defense of Mao contrasted with Liu's critique of the GLF. This revealed a profound split in the party leadership. With the material resources shrunk and ideological commitment to the regime shaken by the GLF, pressures for changing the Maoist institutions created an opening for authority contests among the political elite for which prestige became a critical vehicle. The Seven Thousand Cadres Conference set in motion this very dynamic, as the split between Mao and Liu had become a widely acknowledged fact. Their disputes over the Socialist Education Movement would aggravate the split across the party elites and deepen individual leaders' concerns for prestige, which was instrumental in legitimizing their political power.

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<sup>52</sup> It is worth noting that this view has been explicitly confirmed by the official history of the CCP. See *Mao Zedong zhuan* [biography of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003), 2275. For the argument that the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference signifies an open split in the Chinese communist leadership, see Yang Jisheng and Stacy Mosher, *Tombstone: the Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine* (New York: Penguin, 2013), chap. 15; Kenneth Lieberthal, "The Great Leap Forward and the Split in the Yan'an Leadership, 1958-1965," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Cited in MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 166-167. Also see Zhang, *Bianju*, 145; Deng, *Deng Liqun zishu*, 354.

<sup>54</sup> Zhang, *Bianju*, 147.

<sup>55</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 10 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1996), 62-65.

## **Authority Contests between Mao and Liu:**

### **Ideological Polarization during the Socialist Education Movement (SEM)**

Claiming that a genuine struggle for leadership preeminence occurred between Mao and Liu after the 1962 Seven Thousand Cadres Conference is not without controversy. To date, students of Chinese elite politics remain divided over the existence and nature of the Mao-Liu split. The adherents of the Mao-in-command model deny the existence of any substantial conflict—let alone split—between Mao and Liu in either ideological or policy realm.<sup>56</sup> As a prominent historian Frederick Teiwes notes, Mao “was fully able to get his way once he reasserted his own idiosyncratic concerns on policy and personnel matters starting with August 1962 Beidaihe conference, but he proved unable to frame a clear, unambiguous program for other leaders to implement, thus leaving them uncertain as to his actual intent.”<sup>57</sup> Insightful as it is, this observation begs a critical question: why did Mao frequently shift positions and appear “unable to frame a clear, unambiguous program?”

An easy answer could be that the aging supreme leader was increasingly paranoid and unwilling to put trust in his lieutenants.<sup>58</sup> And yet, it is well known that in the years from 1962 to the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 Mao was actually willing to trust some of his lieutenants such as Lin Biao, Kang Sheng, Yao Wenyan, and Jiang Qing, who were largely operating outside the state bureaucratic institutions under Liu’s supervision. In effect, Mao was reliant on these lieutenants in preparing to launch the Cultural Revolution.<sup>59</sup> Hence it could be argued that his disputes with Liu far exceeded personal antagonism. As other prominent scholars on Chinese politics pointed out, Liu’s opposition to Mao’s charismatic authority was profound, as Liu relied upon a bureaucratic approach to domestic governance. The model of top-down authority Liu upheld clashed with Mao’s charismatic authority that entailed constant grassroots mobilizations. Implicit as they were, Liu’s oppositions effectively pushed Mao into temporary retreats. As the supreme leader fought back, he managed to boost his authority for reversing the institutional change Liu had introduced. Eventually, the competitive dynamics of the Mao-Liu split led to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>60</sup>

My study builds on this argument to bring power politics back in. It suggests that an

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<sup>56</sup> This view is the mainstream line in the PRC’s official history. In addition, see Frederick Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950-1965*, second ed. (New York: ME Sharpe, 1993).

<sup>57</sup> Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China*, xxxvi.

<sup>58</sup> This psychoanalysis actually pervades the memoir of Mao’s physician Li Zhisui. See Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*.

<sup>59</sup> Lieberthal, "The Great Leap Forward and the Split in the Yan'an Leadership, 1958-1965," 125-36.

<sup>60</sup> See MacFarquhar, *The Origins vol. 3*; Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History, 1962-1976* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), chaps. 1-4; Tang Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and the Post-Mao Reforms* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), chap.2; Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Untold Story of Mao's Great Famine*, trans. Guo Jian Edward Friedman, Stacy Mosher (London: Penguin, 2008), chap. 12.

open split did genuinely occur between Mao and Liu, as they competed for authority through prestige politics on the home front. Of course, this is not to suggest that Mao and Liu rigidly held onto two irreconcilable ideological lines. Rather, the ideological lines would better be considered prestige claims—that is, claims for preeminence in the political arena. That is, Mao and Liu exploited ideological lines as mobilizational devices to compete for authority. Admittedly, even in hindsight it is hard to ascertain intentions of individual leaders with much certainty. So the best we can do is to examine evidence that could show their reliance on prestige for political survival. The competing prestige claims first became manifest as Mao and Liu promoted divergent ideological lines. In so doing, they sought to mobilize support from the party elites across the regime. Once the leaders had harnessed personal prestige for political mobilization, policy disputes would assume implications for the balance of political power—and this became evident during the Socialist Education Movement.

*The Divergence of Ideological Commitments between Mao and Liu*

At the outset of the Cultural Revolution, Mao asserted that, “at the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference I have already found that the revisionists were about to overthrow us.”<sup>61</sup> He told Edgar Snow in 1970 that he had made up his mind to purge Liu in early 1965, when the two leaders were having serious differences over the drafting of the third document of the SEM.<sup>62</sup> These comments must be considered with caution, as they might suffer from a hindsight bias. That is, for Mao to rationalize his decision to purge Liu during the Cultural Revolution, he might have to exaggerate antagonisms his former comrade. But Liu’s challenge to Mao gained much credibility in light of the evidence presented here.

Throughout the CCP history Mao had been averse to Liu’s leadership style.<sup>63</sup> But it was the contest for prestige in the wake of the GLP fiascos that turned personal antagonisms into a profound split across the regime. It is worth noting that the leadership approaches of Mao and Liu appealed to differing sectors of party-state elites in China. Liu distinguished himself from Mao by his emphasis on the party disciplines and bureaucratic expertise. As indicated by his prestige among the bureaucratic elites, Liu’s very competence in managing state bureaucracies was a significant source of authority. As such, Liu’s commitment to top-down approach to mass mobilization appealed to the bureaucratic elites, who were expected to play major roles in organizing the mass for political movements. This approach deepened misgiving of the supreme leader who put a premium the bottom-up approach to mass mobilization. For Mao’s part, mass mobilization entailed popular responsiveness to a

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<sup>61</sup> Zhang, *Bianju*, 281; *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 13, 173; Bo, *Ruogan zhongda shijian de juece*, 1169-1170.

<sup>62</sup> Bo, *Ruogan zhongda juece*, p. 1134; Mac Farquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 431.

<sup>63</sup> Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms*, 81.

charismatic leader. It ought to be fueled by emotional dynamics that by nature are not amenable to rational management. Technical specialists are of no use here.<sup>64</sup> Viewed in this light, it is unsurprising that the supreme leader considered Liu's essay *How to be a Good Communist* [Lun gongchandangyuan de xiuyang] a significant proof of Liu's betrayal of the communist cause in China.<sup>65</sup> *How to Be a Good Communist* encapsulated the top-down mobilization approach Liu upheld throughout his political career. Originally published in 1939, the essay represented an effort to strengthen disciplines within the CCP. It placed less emphasis on the class struggle in China's grassroots society than enhancing the moral characters and ideological outlook of the party's rank and file. This reflected the political exigencies of the time. Under the pressures of Japan's invasion, the CCP faced the imperative to increase productivity and popularity in the base areas whereby it had to live with various groups and classes. It was thus necessary to deemphasize the relevance of class struggle and to uphold the virtues of the Chinese communists. This moderate approach to social transformation carried over into the revised version of 1962. In fact, Liu deliberately extended the length of the texts stressing the need for unity of various social groups in that new version.<sup>66</sup> In contrast to the moderate tone of Liu in addressing the non-party elites in the essay, his rhetoric toward the party elites was quite harsh. This reflected his commitment to top-down mobilization approach. In this approach, modernizing China entails party elites becoming disciplined and politically sophisticated. Implicit in it was the notion that social revolution can be engineered by a vast group of well-trained and well-disciplined party elites. This notion stood in sharp contrast to the Maoist conception that revolution is spontaneous and does not require organizational coordination.<sup>67</sup>

Liu's ideological doctrine appealed to the bureaucratic elites whereas Mao's appealed to an ad hoc group of his secretaries and sympathizers (among whom Lin Biao featured prominently). Given his ascending prestige vis-à-vis Mao's after 1962, Liu might have intended the publication of his essay as a symbolic act designed to mobilize supporters among the bureaucratic elites. The timing by which Liu arranged the publication illustrates this point. It is important to note that by 1960, publication of Liu's works had been under preparation—it was Mao who proposed this. Liu at that time was reluctant to devote time to selecting and editing his earlier works.<sup>68</sup> However, as the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference radically altered the intra-elite dynamics, Liu decided to publish *How to be a*

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<sup>64</sup> For the logic of Mao's charismatic authority, see Lowell Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution: The Post-Liberation Epoch, 1949-1981* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>65</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 13 (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 1996), 173. Also see Bo, *Ruogan zhongda shijian de juece*, 1169-1170.

<sup>66</sup> Deng Liqun, *Wo wei shaoqi tongzhi shuo xie hua* [let me say a few words for comrade shaoqi] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo, 1998), 162.

<sup>67</sup> Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Deng, *Deng Liqun zishu*, 330-332.

*Good Communist* sooner rather than later.<sup>69</sup> By implication, the essay's publication signified Liu's ascending prestige vis-à-vis Mao's.

In a nutshell, as Mao fought back to reassert his authority as the dominant leader in the summer of 1962, he was inclined to assert the ideological orthodoxy that embodied his prestige. For this purpose Mao reemphasized the necessity for class struggle. The Chairman himself was acutely aware of the instrumental role of ideological doctrines. He argued in early 1963 that "to overthrow a regime [one] should generate public opinion and do ideological work in the first place; for both revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries ideological work takes priority."<sup>70</sup> Embedded in his ideological messages, personal prestige served as a key vehicle for Mao to legitimize authority at home. Hence, the contrasting approaches by Mao and Liu to engineering China's social transformations gave rise to authority contests in the form of competing claims to prestige.

#### *The Socialist Education Movement*

As stated, the rise of Liu in prestige and authority within the party leadership demonstrated to Mao that the bureaucratic elites were gaining strength as a subversive force in China. To counter Liu's prestige, Mao began to reemphasize the necessity for class struggle in August 1962. He launched mass movements in the rural areas subsequently. "The Socialist Education Movement" he argued, "is the only way to prevent the emergence of 'revisionism'" in China, a term denoting the hostile elements within the party.<sup>71</sup> Liu took the Chairman's orders and appeared submissive to him personally. During the SEM whenever Mao signaled his intention to radicalize or moderate the campaign to fight against corruption, nepotism, and careerism among the rural cadres, Liu took pains to implement the instructions, often in a radical fashion. And yet, Liu's performance challenged Mao's authority. The way in which Liu implemented the SEM, in effect, allowed for promotion of his prestige among the vast bureaucratic elite. As noted, Liu's reliance upon state bureaucracies for policy implementation clashed with Mao's charismatic leadership; in practice, their distinct leadership styles appealed to differing sectors of political elites. As such, the split between Mao and Liu could only deepen as the SEM unfolded.

The stages of the SEM were signified by three official documents issued by the central party leadership. The first document came from Mao's personal initiative. It was issued in the wake of a conference in Hangzhou (the capital city of Zhejiang province) in May 1963

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>70</sup> *Peng Zhen zhuan* [biography of Peng Zhen] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2012), 1156.

<sup>71</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 5 [the chronological records of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2013), 197.

that Liu did not attend. This conference issued a document that committed the party cadres to promoting mass movements in China's countryside. Those instructions were later known as the "Former Ten Points." Mao closely supervised their drafting throughout; as such, Mao's emphasis on the exigency of class struggle featured centrally in those points.<sup>72</sup>

The second document (known as the "Later Ten Points" and drafted in the summer of 1963) aimed to correct the radical trends that swept the countryside. It was issued under the suggestion of Peng Zhen, Liu's close lieutenant and a Politburo member.<sup>73</sup> It put more emphasis on "leadership," demanding that the conduct of the SEM be supervised by the central party leadership. On this point, the "Later Ten Points" reversed the "Former Ten Points." As such, the SEM was more compatible with Liu's preference for strengthening bureaucratic leadership. This document was drafted under Liu's guidance. Mao initially endorsed it. Soon thereafter, he grew unsatisfied and had Liu draft additional clauses.<sup>74</sup>

The final version that came out was called the "twenty-three clauses"; it constituted the third document designed to guide the SEM. In the process of deliberations the Mao-Liu split further intensified. This final version managed to restrict the number of cadres in conducting the SEM and lessened penalties on the local officials in disgrace.<sup>75</sup> During this phase Mao and Liu shifted positions, with Mao stressing the need for moderation and Liu upholding the class struggle doctrine. This was a dramatic episode. But it would not be puzzling if we focus on the authority contest that lay behind the leaders' difference over how to implement the SEM.<sup>76</sup>

In this period Liu assumed the leadership post of the "headquarter" of the SEM, which gave him formal authority over the movement.<sup>77</sup> While Liu faithfully implemented Mao's instruction that the "hostile elements" in local societies be identified and purged, the supreme leader was antagonized by Liu's growing tendency to send bureaucratic elites from Beijing as "work teams" to conduct the SEM in the countryside across China. By counseling moderation, Mao in effect severely criticized Liu's approach. He complained that Liu's work teams had tended to view all grassroots cadres in negative terms and gathered in just a few places to conduct the SEM.<sup>78</sup> At the Central Working Conference in December 1964, the Chairman radicalize the issue.<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, Mao undertook symbolic acts to highlight his charismatic authority. In his effort to escalate the grassroots movements, the supreme leader asserted that the SEM was by nature to struggle with the "capitalist roaders

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<sup>72</sup> *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2282-2294; MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 339.

<sup>73</sup> *Peng Zhen zhuan* [biography of Peng Zhen] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2012), 1098; *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2295.

<sup>74</sup> MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 343-348.

<sup>75</sup> *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2349.

<sup>76</sup> Bo, *Ruogan*, 1128.

<sup>77</sup> *Liu Shaoqi zhuan* [biography of Liu Shaoqi] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2008), 876.

<sup>78</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu*, 1949-1976 vol. 5, 381-382.

<sup>79</sup> *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2337-2338.

in power” (*zichanjieji daolu dangquan pai*).<sup>80</sup> The gist of this message was to instigate rebellion from bottom up to undercut Liu’s institutional basis. Liu refused to echo the supreme leader, as he resisted Mao’s attempt to direct the SEM against the party elite.<sup>81</sup> Mao later complained before Liu and other party elite that he was denied the freedom of speech as a citizen.<sup>82</sup> Although Liu later on made self-criticism in a private meeting with Mao, it was clear to the central party elite that the Mao-Liu dispute over the SEM spiraled into be a struggle for authority within the central leadership.<sup>83</sup>

There is no denying that Liu took great pains not to antagonize Mao.<sup>84</sup> Yet, perhaps what mattered more significantly were perceptions of the leaders and their audiences. The real matter might be that Mao and Liu viewed their interactions as having significant implications for the intra-elite authority structure, and other leaders perceived the issue as such. The Chairman indeed complained repeatedly that his instructions “had no effect” whereas Liu’s instructions were followed faithfully.<sup>85</sup> Liu, on the other hand, did manage to expand personal authority during the SEM. According to Yang Shangkun, the director of the Central Office—the party apparatus answering directly to himself—in the early 1960s, during the SEM, Liu acted to expand authority to issue directly orders to the provincial authorities.<sup>86</sup> Evidently, this move could undermine Mao’s authority. Another prominent case can be found in December 1965, as Liu proposed to circulate Mao’s famous speech “On Ten Relationships” made at the Eighth Party Congress in 1956. The speech itself was a conciliatory move to accommodate the diversifying aspirations in Chinese society. Significantly, in the speech Mao committed himself to a position that class struggle was no longer an overriding issue in China’s sociopolitical developments. On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, Liu suggested to Mao that the speech be circulated among the party cadres above the county level.<sup>87</sup> From the standpoint of power politics, this move might represent an attempt on Liu’s part to lure Mao to undo class struggle as the official line. Mao showed disaffection with Liu’s proposal; accordingly, texts of that speech were not

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<sup>80</sup> *Mao Zedong zhuan.*, 2338, 2340-2341, 2345; Bo, *Ruogan*, 1130; *Liu Shaoqi zhuan*, 888.

<sup>81</sup> In resisting Mao’s assertion that the capitalist roaders were existent, Liu contended that the reality in Chinese society could not be understood in terms of class contradictions. Rather, he argued, class contradictions were often intertwined with the inner-people contradictions (*renmin neibu maodun*). See *Liu Shaoqi zhuan*, 886; *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2338.

<sup>82</sup> Bo, *Ruogan*, 1131.

<sup>83</sup> For some Politburo members and decades-long associate of Mao, such as Zhu De and He Long, the struggle for authority between Mao and Liu was so obvious that they even made an attempt to mediate between the two leaders. See *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2346. Mao’s secretary, Chen Boda, was also inclined to do so. See Chen Boda and Chen Xiaonong, *Chen Boda huiyilu* [memoir of Chen Boda] (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2005), 253-256.

<sup>84</sup> After the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, Liu still sought Mao’s advice in making the decision he deemed vital to the reorientation of China’s domestic policy. *Liu Shaoqi nianpu vol. 3* (chronological records of Liu Shaoqi) (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 1996), 551, 553, 559.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 417. Also see Su Weimin, *Yang Shangkun tan xinzhongguo ruogan lishi wenti* [conversations with Yang Shangkun on some historical issues of the People’s Republic of China] (Chengdu: sichuang renmin, 2015), 151.

<sup>86</sup> Su Weimin, *Yang Shangkun tan xinzhongguo ruogan lishi wenti* [conversations with Yang Shangkun on some historical issues of the People’s Republic of China] (Chengdu: sichuang renmin, 2015), 23.

<sup>87</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 11, 490.

circulated among the local officials.<sup>88</sup>

To conclude, while Liu still appeared willing to follow Mao's instructions, their differences over the method of conducting the SEM nevertheless made Mao hardened his mind to purge Liu, as was seen in the Cultural Revolution. His ideological difference with Liu loomed large behind the policy disputes. As Mao and Liu exploited competing ideologies to mobilize supporters, they increased reliance upon personal prestige to legitimize authority among domestic elites. As such, their ideological divergence was a manifestation of prestige contests that had implications for intra-elite authority structure. In the process, the leaders increasingly relied upon personal prestige as a vehicle to legitimize their claims to power. Combined with geopolitical challenges to China's status in its proximate region, concerns for personal prestige motivated the whole leadership to opt for competitive status-seeking strategy as a means to geopolitical security.

### **China's Shift to Offensive Alliance with the Hanoi Regime, 1963-1965**

In the case of China's pursuit of offensive alliance with North Vietnam, the US threat provided the geopolitical incentives for leaders to engage in competitive status-seeking strategy. Yet such a policy would have been undesirable if the Chinese leaders had not been anxious for personal prestige in the domestic arena. Having examined the US threat – which set the geopolitical context for Chinese leaders' sensitivity to great-power status – as well as the prestige politics in Beijing that intensified their concerns for personal prestige, I move on to discuss the policy of status competition as practiced by the Chinese leaders in the Vietnam War.

#### *Wang Jiaxiang and the "Three Reconciliations and One Reduction" (sanhe yishao)*

The American-led network system in Asia created a grave threat environment for China. While this geopolitical situation sensitized the Chinese leaders to the instrumental value of great-power status, it also tended to turn national security strategy into an issue of prestige politics at home. In the case of Wang Jiaxiang, Mao expected that his demonstrated readiness to engage in status competition with the US could inspire emotional attachment from the domestic audience and put his domestic rival at a disadvantage. The overall effect was to reorient China's security policy from the previous moderate line to competitive policies asserting China's claim to great-power status.

Wang Jiaxiang's proposal for moderation in Chinese security policy took place in the context of Mao's retreat from political centrality in the wake of the Seven Thousand Cadres

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<sup>88</sup> Instead, the document was circulated merely "for the purpose of consultation" (zhengqiu yijian). See *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 11, 491.

Conference. Mao left Beijing for a tour to southern provinces immediately after the conference, which signified his temporary agreement to temper the ideological fervor associated with the GLF.<sup>89</sup> His retreat from centrality in daily politics in Beijing not only precipitated a shift in domestic focus to economic reconstruction after the GLF; it also provided an opening for the leadership to adjust foreign policy in response to a sudden decline of Chinese power. Domestic reconstruction entailed a stable and peaceful geopolitical environment. Wang captured this point when he issued a formal proposal to the top leaders for readjusting China's foreign policy. Wang used to serve as the ambassador to the Soviet Union and had been the director of the CCP International Liaison Department since 1951.<sup>90</sup> In the midst of nationwide famines caused by the GLF, Wang was anxious to scale down China's commitments abroad. In his view, the weakened material capability could not longer sustain China's current role in international affairs. After the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, he (along with two veteran diplomats, Wu Xiuquan and Liu Ningyi) wrote a letter to Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and Chen Yi to elaborate his view on the need for policy adjustment.<sup>91</sup> In the letter, Wang argued for a constructive approach to international affairs consistent with the objective of "creating a long-term peaceful environment for socialist construction." The priority was thus to "concentrate strength on attacking the major enemies and gain more time for improving the domestic economy."<sup>92</sup>

Wang's proposal is commonly known as "three reconciliations and one reduction." The "three reconciliations" suggested that China reconcile its relationship with the Soviet Union, India, and America. The "one reduction" urged the reduction of China's foreign aid so as to make more fiscal resources available for domestic reconstruction after the GLF. This proposal squared with the party's line established after the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, which was committed to shift the focus of the Party's work onto domestic reconstruction. In this respect, it confirms the defensive realist hypothesis that leaders who are focused exclusively on security imperatives would take a risk-averse approach to foreign policy. Wang's proposal, in fact, crystalized the party consensus on a defensive realist policy, as it grew out of long conversations with Liu who shared his preference for a restrained foreign policy.<sup>93</sup>

While foreign policy change endorsed by Liu did not challenge Mao's leadership and prestige as blatantly as his domestic policy did, Mao seized on this issue to undermine Liu.

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<sup>89</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 5, 85.

<sup>90</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 114.

<sup>91</sup> MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 269.

<sup>92</sup> The text of this letter is not available. But some of its content is revealed in *Wang Jiaxiang nian pu* (The Chronological Records of Wang Jiaxiang) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 2001), 488.

<sup>93</sup> MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 270. .

Wang's proposal provided Mao an opening to reassert his authority when the semi-retired revolutionary leader was poised to dominate Beijing's political arena. As the Mao-Liu split unfolded, both leaders began to concern themselves with prestige as a vehicle to enhance personal authority on the home front. In late 1962, Mao took the initiative to assert personal prestige in the arena of security policy by chastising the moderate line proposed by Wang. A symbolic act, such kind of criticism served to revive the Chairman's charismatic authority that had been forged during the Chinese Communist revolution. During the work conference at Beidaihe in early August, Wang's policy line suffered criticism. On September 29<sup>th</sup> Mao made the assertion that, "revisionists from within and without the country were attempting to collaborate, we must be vigilant about this."<sup>94</sup> For the rest of the leadership it was now clear that the moderate line in foreign policy had lost its legitimate ground—its supporters would be vulnerable to being charged as a traitor to the nation.

The vice premier and foreign minister Chen Yi took Mao's hint immediately. A protégé of Zhou Enlai, Chen initially did not voice opposition to the moderate policy line proposed by Wang not long before. Once the Chairman committed himself to a hard line abroad, however, Chen was quick to bandwagon in order to save personal prestige. At the Tenth Plenum of the Eighth Party Congress in late September, Chen took the lead in criticizing Wang's proposal as an "evil wind" (*wai feng*). He aggressively asserted that the difficult years of the GLF "significantly frightened those whose position on Marxism-Leninism was not staunch." By stressing the need to secure China's identity as a revolutionary power, Chen managed to put Wang's moderate line on the defensive. As he suggested, Wang's line was "to [negatively] affect not only the international struggles but the domestic situation as well."<sup>95</sup> These words were very much resonant with Mao's harsh rhetoric on the soft-liners in foreign policy, which equated foreign policy moderation with a compromise of the national interest.

The rest of the leadership soon followed suit as they learnt that any moderate line in foreign policy risked being labeled as compromising the national interest. As such, Mao managed to reverse the moderate policy. Later on, the Chairman explicitly endorsed Chen's open criticism of Wang.<sup>96</sup> In February 1963, Liu bandwagoned with Mao's ideological line by stressing the imperative "to safeguard against the development of revisionist thought at home."<sup>97</sup> Shortly thereafter, Wang retreated into illness and was since then dismissed from all responsibility for foreign affairs.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Wang Jiexiang nian pu*, 491.

<sup>95</sup> The content of Chen Yi's open criticism of Wang Jiexiang is contained in *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 10, 188-89 (fn. 1).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 188; *Wang Jiexiang nianpu*, 493.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>98</sup> *Wang Jiexiang nianpu*, 492.

In hindsight, if Wang's "three reconciliation and one reduction" had been faithfully implemented, Chinese security policy would have met the defensive realist expectation—that is, the Chinese leaders would have opted for a balancing strategy against the US. In particular, they would have continued the defensive alliance with Hanoi rather than encourage it to implement an offensive strategy toward the US-backed Saigon regime. Viewed in this light, Wang's dismissal was a turning point for Chinese security policy. With the entire leadership coming to view the moderate line of foreign policy as politically risky, it was no longer conceivable to engage in conventional diplomacy that features skillful employment of negotiation tactics to engage with the adversary on peaceful terms. Unquestionably, the prerequisite for the whole leadership to discredit Wang's policy line was the perception of America's geopolitical threat as a profound challenge to Chinese claim to great-power status; but the proximate reason had more to do with individual leaders' reliance upon personal prestige as a means for political survival. With the risk-averse strategies as practiced in the 1950s being delegitimized, the Chinese leadership was inclined to adopt a more competitive policy for coping with the American threat in its proximate geopolitical area. Such a policy allowed them to assert to both great-power status vis-à-vis the United States and personal prestige among the politburo leaders.

#### *China's Pursuit of Offensive Alliance with North Vietnam*

Tensions in Southeast Asia paralleled the prestige politics in Beijing. Whereas the US threat in Indochina pressured China to pursue an assertive policy, concerns for personal prestige at home encouraged individual leaders to hew to a hard line abroad. Once Mao committed himself, other leaders rushed to undertake competitive status-seeking acts. In so doing, the Chinese leaders sought to address both geopolitical and domestic political challenges.

Specifically, after Mao took the initiative to advocate a risk-prone approach to challenging America's sphere of influence in South Vietnam, Liu (along with his faction) followed suit in order not to lose prestige. Such an interpersonal dynamic then precipitated a shift in China's alignment strategy with North Vietnam. As noted, Ho Chi Minh's visit to Beijing in the summer of 1962 provided the first opening for Mao to commit himself in supporting the Vietnamese struggle for unification. The Chairman's purported commitment in turn precipitated a shift in the orientation of the Sino-Vietnamese security cooperation. Whereas that cooperative relationship in the pre-1962 period largely served a defensive purpose for China to safeguard its southwest rear against US interference, the following years witnessed China's growing tendency to mobilize Hanoi as a status symbol in contesting the US geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia. In the aftermath of Mao's repudiation of Wang's line, other leaders threw themselves into fulfilling Mao's

commitment to Hanoi's guerilla warfare in the south. In March 1963 when Luo Ruiqing, China's chief of staff, visited Hanoi to discuss the Sino-Vietnamese cooperation *in the event of US attack of North Vietnam*.<sup>99</sup> Luo's visit thus signified Beijing's willingness to risk conflict escalation for supporting the DRV-led guerilla warfare in South Vietnam. Following Luo, Liu Shaoqi paid his first official visit to Hanoi as China's head of state. During his meeting with the Hanoi leadership, Liu expressed his commitment to see the unification of Vietnam by the North, promising that the Vietnamese could "definitely count on China as the strategic rear" if the war expanded as a result of Hanoi's attempt to liberate the south.<sup>100</sup>

As demonstrated by Liu Shaoqi's shifting position on security policy, prestige politics at home could contribute to the imperative of undertaking competitive status-seeking acts abroad. Inasmuch as domestic audiences are more willing to follow the leaders capable of showing resolve to defend corporate interests and identity, symbolic acts of taking on the geopolitical adversary serve to boost personal prestige on the home front. Thus, if concerns for personal prestige at home played any significant role in inducing leaders' support for China's shift to competitive status-seeking strategy, we should expect to see other leaders follow suit after Mao asserted his prestige based on his identity as a guardian of national interests. Indeed, other leaders who had previously upheld moderate policy lines also began to reverse their attitudes. In a meeting with the Communist leaders from Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia in late September 1963, Zhou Enlai's rhetoric somewhat revealed a combination of geopolitical and domestic political considerations driving the Chinese policy of status competition against the Americans. The meeting was also significant in itself, as it marked the Chinese effort to coordinate North Vietnam, and Laos in their struggles against the US-backed Saigon regime. Zhou proposed four approaches to expanding the insurgency in South Vietnam, including "mobilizing the mass and expanding the united front; going to the countryside to wage armed struggle and to establish base areas, strengthening party leadership over all fronts; and increasing contact between countries."<sup>101</sup> Crucially, Zhou invoked China's domestic ideological rhetoric to characterize China's competition with the US for status preeminence. The Chinese premier claimed that "the basic goals for revolution in Southeast Asia" were "anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, and anti-bureaucratic capitalism."<sup>102</sup> This represented an attempt to securing China's superior status as a revolutionary power. Equally important, this rhetoric strongly echoed the ideological rhetoric prevalent in China. Invoking what Mao had inspired, Zhou bandwagoned with the supreme leaders in foreign policy practices.

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<sup>99</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 117.

<sup>100</sup> Liu Shaoqi nianpu 3, 577. The citation is from Chen, *Mao's China*, 208.

<sup>101</sup> Cited in Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 119. The original source is Tong Xiaopeng, *Fengyu sishi nian vo. 2* [the forty years of turbulence] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 1996), 220-221.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, pp. 118-119; also see Tong, *Fengyu sishinian*, 220-221.

The Chinese leadership consensus on supporting Hanoi's offensive guerrilla warfare in the South encouraged the rise of the militant faction in the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP).<sup>103</sup> The four approaches to conducting insurgency as proposed by Zhou found an echo in the grand strategy of the VWP's first secretary Le Duan. Upon his assumption of power in 1960, Le not only managed to resume the offensive in the south, but also centralized control over the guerilla activities there. The creation of the National Liberation Front in 1960 signified his first significant attempt to direct the spontaneous uprisings in the south.<sup>104</sup> In September 1962, the Chinese officials threw their weight behind the NLF by publicly receiving its delegation in Beijing. Both Mao and Foreign Minister Chen Yi met with the delegation, and applauded their conduct of guerilla warfare in the south.<sup>105</sup> The public statement issued thereafter underscored that the Sino-Vietnamese peoples were unified in the common struggle against the US until "the final victory."<sup>106</sup> Here, the statement singled out the US as the principal threat to Asian security and required that the US withdrew all its military forces from East Asia. As such, the term "final victory" understood within this context suggests that Beijing had abandoned self-restraint in its commitment to Hanoi's armed struggle for overthrowing the Saigon regime, which symbolized America's geopolitical influences in Indochina.<sup>107</sup>

Suffice to say, the strategic preferences in Beijing and Hanoi converged in the middle of 1963. This precipitated the formation of an offensive alliance between the two communist parties against the US-backed Saigon regime. In December, a Chinese delegation led by General Li Tianyou, the deputy chief of staff visited the DRV for two months and presented detailed plans as to China's assistance in constructing defense works and naval bases in the north.<sup>108</sup> Precisely at that time Hanoi was about to pass the Resolution 9, which turned its overall national strategy toward an offensive one that aimed to escalate insurgency in the south with a view to achieving decisive victory on the battlefield.<sup>109</sup> Mao also encouraged Hanoi to expand the armed struggle deep into the South. "A moderate [military] strike [by Hanoi] could make no easy solution [to the military situation in the South]," he argued.<sup>110</sup>

It is a plausible argument, though, that the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem in late 1963 had emboldened Mao to go on offensive. The chaotic situation in South Vietnam did create a window of opportunity that Mao could exploit to further undermine US influences in

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<sup>103</sup> Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 51-70.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>105</sup> Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World*, 239-240.

<sup>106</sup> Guo Ming et al, eds, *Jindai zhongyue guanxi ziliao xuanbian, 1960-1969* [selected materials of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the modern era] (Beijing: shishi chubanshe, 1986), 629.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 624-629.

<sup>108</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 120.

<sup>109</sup> Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 165-166.

<sup>110</sup> *Jianguo yilai maozedong junshi wengao* vol. 3, 236-242.

Saigon; but the significance of the Diem's fall to Beijing's policy making should not be overstated. There is no clear evidence that the weakening of the Saigon regime by the anti-Diem coup had led to any significant reassessment of the Indochina situation by the Chinese leaders. As a matter of fact, *prior to* the fall of Diem in November 1963, there were signs of Mao having urged the Vietnamese leaders to take the offensive in persecuting guerilla warfare in South Vietnam. In the middle of 1963, Mao had gone to great lengths to provide guidance for Hanoi's struggles in the south. "The American military is not the major force," Mao instructed his Vietnamese comrades in Beijing, "[so] how to break down Diem's army is the key question for the victory of the revolutionary war in South Vietnam."<sup>111</sup> Targeting South Vietnam's security forces made it relatively easy for Hanoi to score victory. As such, this strategy served Mao's ambition to demonstrate China's *superior* diplomatic asset—the Hanoi regime—toward the United States.

Undeniably though, there is a geostrategic rationale to the Chinese policy of status competition. Arguably, the Chinese leaders could not afford to engage in competitive status-seeking strategy just for domestic political purposes—for such a policy incurred tremendous security risks. The Chinese statement to the NLF delegation clearly demonstrated the security imperatives in Beijing's policy of status competition. Zhou Enlai stressed that the Chinese-supported NLF struggles "have protected the security of the socialist camp and the peace of Asia." Mao claimed that Beijing and Hanoi "relied on each other like tips and teeth." These statements were a strong testimony to the security partnership between the two countries. But the Chinese leaders also emphasized the symbolic value of their partnership with Hanoi, as Mao hailed the NLF as "a glorious example of daring to fight and daring to win for the oppressed peoples and nations throughout the world."<sup>112</sup> In effect, the Chinese treated the Hanoi-backed NLF as a sign of superior diplomatic asset that would enable China to compete with the US for status preeminence. Out of concern for personal prestige, the Chinese leadership all came to espouse Mao's hardline. The Chairman told Van Tien Dung in 1964—the DRV's chief of staff who was also in charge of military operations in the south—that "the more you fear the Americans the more they will bully you.....you should not fear, you should fight." Liu Shaoqi reiterated that "the less you fear them, the more they respect you."<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Zhou Enlai later on argued that Chinese concessions would induce the US incursion. In this way, Zhou conjured up the image of falling dominos. "If the Vietnamese succumbed, then the US would invade (*dong shou*) Cambodia and Laos, and so the issue [of aiding the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>112</sup> Cited in Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World*, 241. All these statements are originally drawn from the declassified documents stored in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet the MOFA prohibited access to the documents after 2010.

<sup>113</sup> Cited from Chen, *Mao's China*, 209. It is important to note this piece of statement remains declassified. I therefore rely upon works by historians who have privileged access to the party documents.

Vietnamese] bears on the overall situation of nationalist liberation movements in Southeast Asia, Asia, and beyond.”<sup>114</sup> These statements by Chinese leaders show that the Chinese viewed their conflict with the US in zero-sum terms and committed not to back down in any circumstances. As such, the Chinese made it clear that they wanted to further their security interests *through* status competition. Status was of crucial importance to China’s geopolitical security. By eliciting deference from the adversary to a state’s power assets, the enhanced status could grant a state greater autonomy in the geopolitical arena, thereby serving its security interests in a long run.

That noted, such kind of policy carried tremendous risks to China’s geopolitical security by inviting the US military intervention to bolster the Saigon regime. In the case of DRV-PRC alliance, a truly defensive realist strategy for China was to bolster the ally’s defense capacity but not to encourage it to provoke conflicts. As the Chinese leaders advised the VWP in 1958, the “‘most urgent task’ was carrying out socialist reconstruction in the north.”<sup>115</sup> In aiding Hanoi’s armed struggle for reunification, however, Beijing deviated from the policy it pursued in the 1950s. That policy meets the defensive realist expectation that state leaders on average are risk-averse – as such, they tend not to worsen their security environment via competitive policies. Yet, after 1962 Chinese leaders shifted to a risk-prone policy of status competition against the US-backed Saigon regime. This was motivated by a combination of geopolitical threats and the Mao-Liu split. The latter intensified prestige politics across the Chinese regime. It provided a critical variable to exacerbate China’s conflict with the US alliance system – Vietnam figured centrally in China’s policy of status competition.

#### *Proclaiming Victory: Optimistic Mao vs Prudent Mao*

The imperative of asserting personal prestige to the home audience – notably the Politburo elite – provided a critical cause for the leaders to accept risks of conflict escalation. Precisely for this reason, leaders may become keen on proclaiming victory before both international and home audiences. This was evident in the rhetoric and statements from Mao. The Chairman claimed on multiple occasions that America’s status on the world stage had been in decline. At a few public meetings with foreign guests in September 1963 and January and July 1964, Mao claimed that two “intermediate zones” already emerged between the US and the Soviet Union.<sup>116</sup> His conception of the first “intermediate zone” was consistent with his earlier thought dating back to 1946, which included the post-colonial states in Asia, Africa, and South America. The second “intermediate zone,” in Mao’s assertion, was emerging in

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<sup>114</sup> *Zhou Enlai zhuan* [biography of Zhou Enlai] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2008), 1620-1621.

<sup>115</sup> Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World*, 239.

<sup>116</sup> For Mao’s comments on the two “intermediate zones,” see *Jianguo yilai maozedong junshi wengao* vol. 3, 196-98

Europe. Here he took Charles De Gaulle's assertion of the French leadership on the European continent to be the case of global resistance against the US hegemony. As a corollary, the US was not in control of the situation in Asia. As Mao argued in January 1964, "America was not able to squash the people [s revolt] in South Vietnam."<sup>117</sup>

Mao's tendency to proclaim victory in the face of both foreign guests and other Chinese leaders is remarkable. It reveals the linkage of geopolitical and domestic political considerations in his mind. By proclaiming Chinese victory, Mao sought to foster optimism that the policy of status competition already worked, thereby boosting his prestige domestically. Although by this single act alone Mao could not prevail over Liu on the home front, it nevertheless was a necessary step for him to counter Liu's ascending prestige.

After 1963 the Chinese generosity in delivering material support for Hanoi's conduct of guerilla activities in the south had become evident. Arguably, the risks of US expanding its involvement in the Vietnamese conflict could also grow. But Mao consistently downplayed the US resolve to keep the Saigon regime stable. Chinese official accounts reveal Mao's lack of concern for the likelihood that the US might escalate its commitment to Vietnam in 1964.<sup>118</sup> It is well documented that the Tonkin Gulf incident took Mao by surprise.<sup>119</sup> After the Tonkin Gulf incident, Mao still tried to openly downplay the gravity of the America threat. When the DRV military leader Le Duan visited Beijing, he told him that the incident "was not an intentional attack by the Americans," rather, it was due to "the Americans' mistaken judgment, based on wrong information." Mao went on to argue that the probability of war was low, "it seems that the Americans do not want to fight a war, if you don't want to fight a war, and we do not necessarily want to fight a war.....[then] there will be no war."<sup>120</sup> In a talk with Pham Van Dong and Hoang Van Hoan on October 5, Mao reiterated his position that the US "is not even in a position to resolve the problem in South Vietnam. If it attacks the North, [it may need to] fight for one hundred years, and its legs will be trapped there."<sup>121</sup>

Apparently, Mao's underestimation of Washington's resolve underwent no perceptible change even after the Tonkin Gulf incident. But the optimism the Chairman displayed on public occasions did not prevent him taking precautionary measures. The Chairman exhibited a prudent character when he urged state agencies to accelerate the massive scale of defense programs. The programs, commonly known as the Third Line Defense (TLD),

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>118</sup> Mao spent most time on practicing horse-riding in order to make a public appearance along the Yangtze River late that year. *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2316.

<sup>119</sup> This incident caused him to cancel the original plan for the open inspection. See *Jianguo yilai maozedong wengao* vol. 11, 120.

<sup>120</sup> Odd Arne Westad et al., *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1998), 72 (fn. 117).

<sup>121</sup> Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, Hoang Van Hoan in Beijing, 5 October 1964 in *Ibid.*, 72.

might genuinely reflect Mao's security concerns, as they were designed to relocate and reconstruct heavy industries from the east coast to the mountainous Southwest China. The industries being relocated were largest in scale in the PRC history. Why was Mao so determined to prepare the whole country for war?

The TLD programs could hardly provide a vehicle for Mao to discredit his political rivals at home. In this regard, the diversionary conflict thesis does not stand up to scrutiny. True, Mao's instructions regarding the TLD were sometimes coupled with rhetorical assaults on the policy implementation by unwieldy bureaucracies.<sup>122</sup> But he could hardly use this defense building as a vehicle to discredit Liu's reliance on bureaucratic institutions in policy implementation. After all, the TLD projects entailed a great deal of expertise that only the technocratic elite under Liu's leadership could provide. As such, imperatives of domestic power struggle could not have substantial impact on Mao's decision to accelerate the TLD programs. In this respect, rationales behind the TLD were not identical with those behind Mao's inclination for an offensive alliance with Hanoi. Mao was genuinely worried about China's direct involvement in a large-scale war with the American military – and he wanted to avoid such a war. “[We must] base [our work] upon war, we should get prepared to fight a general war on the assumption that it will break out any time soon and be on a great, [or even] nuclear war.”<sup>123</sup> Shortly after the Tonkin Gulf Incident he gave tacit support for efforts led by Zhou Enlai to convey to the US government China's unwillingness to fight the Americans.<sup>124</sup>

The dominant reason had to do with the pressing geopolitical threat.<sup>125</sup> “The TLD by all indications was spurred by perceptions of a grave external threat from the United States,” historian Lorenz Lüthi argues.<sup>126</sup> From late October 1964 on, Mao repeatedly stressed the importance of the TLD, as well as other local defense programs.<sup>127</sup> Yet, if security imperatives are the answer, how to explicate this apparent gap between Mao's optimism as shown before the Vietnamese leaders and his emphasis on war preparedness? Why did Mao still give his support to Hanoi's risky, aggressive guerilla warfare in the South when he was seriously concerned for the risk of war with the US? As noted, the supreme leader began to give serious thought about the military threat from the United States in Vietnam. Why did not he alert his Vietnamese comrades to the deepening involvement of US military power in

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<sup>122</sup> Bo, *Ruogan*, 1206.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 225-26.

<sup>124</sup> For the efforts by the Chinese leaders to signal its intention of avoiding war with the United States, see James Hershberg and Chen Jian, “Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy: China's Signals to the United States About Vietnam in 1965,” *International History Review* 27, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>125</sup> For a general discussion of the TLD since the mid-1960s up to the late 1970s, see Barry Naughton, “The Third Front: Defense Industrialization in the Chinese Interior,” *China Quarterly* 115 (1988).

<sup>126</sup> Lorenz Lüthi, “The Vietnam War and China's Third-Line Defense Planning before the Cultural Revolution, 1964–1966,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 49.

<sup>127</sup> *Jianguo yilai maozedong junshi wengao* vol. 2, 273-74, 276-77, 290-92.

the Vietnam War so that North Vietnam could better serve as a buffer state for Chinese security?

My explanation is that Mao needed to fend off potential blames for his decision to support Hanoi's offensive guerilla warfare. Of course, it was not in his interest to acknowledge the adversity in China's geopolitical environment. He needed to feign optimism, accordingly. This may well explain Mao's apparent attitude to the DRV leaders. And yet, Mao's apparent optimism for Hanoi's victory over Saigon was not only intended for the Vietnamese consumption—rather, he also included the communist elite in Beijing as his target audience. In his talks with the visitors from small countries in Asia, Africa, and Australia, he continued to promote China's great-power status. In his assertion, by fighting against the US in Vietnam China was able to achieve preeminent status in world politics. "Our reputation is not good [though]," he remarked sardonically to foreign guests, "[because] we aid anyone in need, and thus became belligerent elements [in the eyes of imperialists]."<sup>128</sup> Quite evidently, Mao was keen to glorify China's promotion of revolutions abroad. And yet, those foreign audiences present at Mao's talks were from states that played little role in issues of the Vietnam War, and many visitors were not senior officials in charge of foreign policy of their own countries. As such, Mao could hardly count on them to help promote China's status around the world. Instead, it was among the domestic audience—notably those in the Politburo—that Mao was more likely to find an echo. As shown in this chapter, Politburo leaders had vied to bandwagon with Mao's hard line on foreign policy whenever the Chairman signaled his position. Thus, by asserting China's great-power status through the Vietnam War, Mao sought to promote personal prestige as a vehicle for political survival at home while fending off American involvement in the China's southern vicinity.

### **Evaluating Alternative Explanations**

There is a rich body of literature emphasizing various factors for Mao's inclination to encourage Hanoi to intensify armed struggles in the South. These factors include Mao's changing assessment of China's security environment, Beijing's competition with Moscow for leadership in the international communist movement, and the Chairman's ideological commitment. Without dismissing their relevance, I seek to provide a more parsimonious argument that highlights the central causal mechanism accountable for Mao's decision. My argument underscores how pragmatic concerns for great-power status and personal prestige combined to lead the Chinese leadership to pursue competitive status-seeking strategy against the Americans in Vietnam prior to 1965. Particularly, I argue that

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<sup>128</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong junshi wengao* vol. 3, 248-49.

institutional change dynamics made prestige a crucial variable in the leaders' calculation, whereas the geopolitical threat highlighted the instrumental role of competitive status-seeking strategy in furthering geopolitical security. Consequently, the Chinese leaders engaged in competitive status-seeking strategy via symbolic acts before both international and domestic audiences. This argument helps to fill some important gaps in the alternative explanations.

#### *Mao's Changing Assessment of China's Security Environment*

There is no doubt that Mao's initial attempt to encourage Ho Chi Minh to go on the offensive in prosecuting the insurgency in South Vietnam occurred in a deteriorating security environment for China. In mid-1962, China was confronted with mounting tensions on its southwestern border with India, the growing signs of an imminent invasion of Chiang Kai-shek's forces from Taiwan, and souring relations with Moscow.<sup>129</sup> Based on this evidence, a preeminent historian argues that the deteriorating security environment convinced Mao to change China's overall security strategy along a radical and offensive-oriented direction.<sup>130</sup>

Yet, there is no sound rationale for a shift toward more assertive foreign policy. Quite the contrary, a perception of multiple threats along the Chinese borders could have advised prudence on the part of decision makers in Beijing. That is, the gravity of security challenges confronting China made it imprudent to expand China's international commitments. In fact, a relatively prudent policy that featured an emphasis on diplomatic engagement with geopolitical adversaries did begin to bear fruit. In the second half of 1962, Beijing's leaders had tried to ameliorate China's security environments via moderate policies. One remarkable instance is that through diplomatic engagement with the US, the Chinese leaders managed to defuse the tension of war cross the Taiwan Strait.<sup>131</sup>

The historical evidence that has become available suggests that China's armed conflict with India in October 1962 was caused primarily by a sudden increase of India's military presence in the border area since early 1962 coupled with Nehru's failure to signal his conciliatory intention.<sup>132</sup> While Mao had been keeping a watchful eye on the growing tensions on the Sino-Indian border, he did not seem to favor border conflict with India as the best option.<sup>133</sup> It was after Beijing's repeated failure to begin serious negotiation with

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<sup>129</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 116.

<sup>130</sup> Niu, "1962."

<sup>131</sup> Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, 117; Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan," 111-12. Whiting, though, gives more emphasis to the rhetorical threat the Chinese diplomats conveyed to their US counterparts through the Warsaw ambassadorial talks.

<sup>132</sup> John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War with India in 1962," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, edited by Alstair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 86-130; Whiting, *China's Calculus of Deterrence*; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 180-97.

<sup>133</sup> For Mao's instructions concerning these developments, see *Jianguo yilai maozedong junshi wengao vol. 3*, 138-40,

New Delhi over the border dispute that Mao suggested a “counterattack” that resulted in the 1962 Chinese-Indian War.<sup>134</sup>

Moreover, it is one thing to argue that Mao perceived a decline in China ability to defend its territorial claims in southwest; it is quite another to assert that this window of vulnerability could radically change Mao’s assessment of China’s *overall* security environment. On the latter issue, the available evidence is not solid enough to warrant any definitive conclusion. We know that Mao tried to justify his decision to use force by stressing the dire state of Sino-Indian border tensions. In March 1963, during a briefing on the military situation of the eastern Sino-Indian border, Mao argued that China was pressured by the Indian encroachment to fight back.<sup>135</sup> While arguing so, he pointed at several leaders present at the meeting, including Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, portraying them as longstanding hardliners on India.<sup>136</sup> But the Chairman’s remark was disingenuous. In fact, since 1959 Liu and Zhou were personally involved with the policy of conciliation with India and Mao endorsed it.<sup>137</sup> It is thus unclear as to whether the hostilities with India were sufficient to lead Mao to believe China’s overall security environment was to worsen dramatically.

What is closer to the mark might be that Mao used the Sino-Indian conflict to stigmatize Wang’s foreign policy line after the hostilities took place.<sup>138</sup> Remarkably, Mao compared the Sino-Indian conflict with the Vietnamese conflict. He asserted that the Indian army equipped with the “modern” logistic system had been defeated by the Chinese army with a backward system, and given this, the modern US military was bound to be defeated by the backward Vietnamese guerilla forces.<sup>139</sup> The fact that the Chairman linked Indian and the Vietnamese situations together, however, is not sufficient to substantiate the assertion that the Sino-Indian conflict had changed his approach to the Vietnamese conflict. As demonstrated in this chapter, during 1962 Mao had brought the Chinese leadership to make quite a few significant moves to step up Chinese support for the Hanoi-led insurgency in the south, which in turn set in momentum China’s offensive alliance with the DRV. These important initiatives took place prior to the Sino-Indian border war; as such, the Sino-Indian border war could not provide much momentum for the overall change of Chinese security policy. The conflict should be better understood as a reinforcing factor vis-à-vis the already existent drive on China’s part to undermine the US geopolitical influence in Indochina.

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142-43, 156-66.

<sup>134</sup> Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 196. MacFarquhar further argues that in October “every move [on the Sino-Indian border] went to Mao for approval.” MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 303.

<sup>135</sup> *Jianguo yilai maozedong junshi wengao* vol. 3, 161.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>137</sup> Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 83-86.

<sup>138</sup> Niu, “1962.”

<sup>139</sup> *Jianguo yilai maozedong junshi wengao* vol. 3, 162.

### *The Sino-Soviet Split*

The Sino-Soviet split is an oft-cited factor in explanations of Chinese decision to assume a more active role in aiding local insurgencies in Vietnam and beyond.<sup>140</sup> True, with the Sino-Soviet relationship turning down since the late 1950s, the Chinese were increasingly anxious for replacing the Soviets as the leader of the international communist movement.<sup>141</sup> As such, there was always a need on Beijing's part to demonstrate its credentials as a revolutionary power sympathetic to national liberation movements. The way in which this ideological commitment reflected China's security concerns is an issue to be explored in detail in the next chapter. Suffice to say here, the ideological passion for promoting revolutions abroad was evident in Chinese security policy throughout the 1960s, and it was caused in large part by the Sino-Soviet split.

There is good reason to suggest that the Soviet factor was not significant enough vis-à-vis the US geopolitical threat to assume centrality in this chapter. In Southeast Asia, the Soviet presence posed little challenge to China's status and security until late 1964, when Moscow began to focus its attention on the Vietnamese situation.<sup>142</sup> Prior to that, the Soviets did not yet present itself as a real target for China to pursue competitive status-seeking strategy. The Sino-Soviet split could hardly act decisively as a geopolitical factor in Chinese geostrategic considerations with regard to Vietnam in 1962-1963. For one thing, the Chinese had already been unrivaled in its influence over the Vietnamese communists in the early 1960s. From the outset of Soviet-Vietnamese collaboration, according to historian Ilya Gaiduk, "on all questions relating to political and military cooperation with the DRV, Moscow was prepared to act only through the Chinese allies."<sup>143</sup> From mid-1961 onward, the Soviet policy showed a strong tendency of disengagement from Indochina, which was accelerated by the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962.<sup>144</sup> All these developments eased the way for China to transform its alignment with the DRV from a defensive to an offensive one. Anecdotal evidence shows that some foreign diplomats were shocked to see the massive presence of Chinese personnel in the DRV, and that the Soviet assistance to the DRV in the area of defense was almost negligible compared to the Chinese role.<sup>145</sup> During a

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<sup>140</sup> Chen, *Mao's China*, 211; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 119-120, 122-129; Christensen, *Worse than Monolith*, 159-177; James David Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1977), 77-78; Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>141</sup> For the struggle-for-leadership argument, see Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, "Jockeying for Leadership: Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, October 1961–July 1964," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2014); Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>142</sup> See, for instance, Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 1996); Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), chap. 10.

<sup>143</sup> Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 65.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-200.

<sup>145</sup> See, for instance, Merle L. Pribbenow II, "The Soviet-Vietnamese Intelligence Relationship During the Vietnam War," *Cold War international History Project (CWIHP) Working Paper*, no. 73 (December 2014).

conversation at the Soviet embassy in Hanoi involving Soviet and other Eastern European diplomats in September 1964, the Soviets remarked that, “friendly relations between the DRV and China are currently almost absolute.” And the Chinese influence on Hanoi even led them to believe that initiators of the Tonkin Gulf incident were the Chinese.<sup>146</sup> Similarly, in December, when the Vietnamese conflict faced imminent escalation in the shadow of the Tonkin Gulf Incident, the DRV Defense Ministry the Soviet military attaché that their service was no longer needed.<sup>147</sup>

Additionally, the Sino-Soviet split was relatively insignificant to the China’s Vietnam policy until 1964 because the Chinese were actually quite tolerant of Hanoi’s ambivalence in parting its way with Moscow. With a tacit tilt toward Beijing, Hanoi did not commit to an open split with Moscow.<sup>148</sup> The Chinese exerted no pressure on Hanoi to change this posture. In October 1962, when Mao already took the lead in committing China to the Vietnamese anti-imperialist cause, Zhou Enlai emphasized that the Sino-Soviet cooperation was necessary for supporting the Vietnamese struggles against America—in his words, there must be “a division of labor” (*fen gong*).<sup>149</sup> In May 1963, in a joint statement with Ho Chi Minh following his visit to Beijing, the Chinese reconfirmed the necessity of Sino-Soviet unity in promoting the international communist movement.<sup>150</sup>

Evidently, the Soviets simply did not become the *primary* geopolitical competitor for the Chinese to compete in Indochina prior to 1965. For sure, we may still not able to rule out the possibility that the Chinese wanted to show before the entire *Third World nationalists* their sincerity in supporting the revolutionary movements by supporting the Hanoi-led armed struggle for reunification. That said, this consideration might probably pale into insignificance compared with the more tangible threat stemming from the formidable US military and diplomatic presence in East Asia at least until late 1964. It is more plausible to argue that the US threat was the dominant factor in the Chinese geostrategic considerations before 1965. It weighs more heavily than the Sino-Soviet split in explaining the Chinese determination to aid the DRV in its armed struggle to reunify the whole Vietnam.

### *Mao’s Commitment to Continuous Revolution*

Historians tend to give pride of place to the idiosyncratic ideological commitment of

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<sup>146</sup> Note on a Conversation by Tarka, Jurgas and Milc at the Soviet Embassy in Hanoi, 10 September 1964 [Excerpts], in “Twenty-Four Soviet-Bloc Documents on Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1964-1966,” ed. Lorenz Luthi, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 16 (Fall 2007/winter 2008), 371.

<sup>147</sup> Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, 17.

<sup>148</sup> For the evidence of Hanoi’s reluctance to openly break with Moscow, see Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 66. In particular, the key document signaling the DRV’s tilt toward China did not mention the Soviet Union by name as the primary target of its criticism. See Sophie Quinn-Judge, “The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-68,” *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (November 2005): 483.

<sup>149</sup> *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* vol. 3 [selected works of Zhou Enlai on military affairs] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 1997), 441.

<sup>150</sup> Guo et al, eds., *Xiandai zhongyue guanxi*, 600-601.

China's supreme leader Mao Zedong, who was the single most influential policymaker in foreign affairs. Mao's abiding quest for great-power status coupled with a persistent impulse to keep revolutionary momentum domestically, they argue, acted as a profound driver behind Chinese communist foreign policy up to the late 1970s.<sup>151</sup> There is evidence, indeed, showing that Mao had linked Vietnam with other revolutionary regimes such as Cuba well before 1962.<sup>152</sup>

True, Mao's commitment to continuous revolution was a critical motive underlying many of his ambitious initiatives, both domestically and internationally. But this statement is too sweeping to yield analytic precision. For Mao to realize his ambition, however, he arguably could not help but to act strategically. Thus, the issue here is how his deep-seated revolutionary commitment could render him anxious to employ personal prestige as a vehicle for power struggle. My argument gives more attention to the intra-elite dynamics than those emphasizing Mao's idiosyncratic characters. It contends that the Politburo elite was a primary target for Mao when he engaged in competitive assertions of national status. There is no denying that in mobilizing the society for the prospects of war with the US, Mao's ultimate purpose might be to keep the revolutionary momentum going on. This was critical in forestalling the degeneration of the party state into a mode of bureaucratic dominance, which the Chairman believed had come to prevail in the post-Stalin Soviet Union.<sup>153</sup> But he did face the imperative to mobilize elite support, especially to gain an upper hand over Liu. This is testified by the fact that the ruling elite bore the blunt of many of his initiatives, such as the promotion of personality cult as well as the class struggle dogma. Both initiatives put Liu's faction at a disadvantage, as their influence was deeply entrenched in the bureaucratic apparatus Mao sought to restructure. Indeed, this period was characterized by a series of events indicative of Mao's attempt to eliminate the senior officials whose loyalty to him was thought problematic.<sup>154</sup> All these suggest that the instrumental role of personal prestige in Chinese elite struggles was no less significant than the purported revolutionary commitment of Mao.

## Conclusion

This chapter argues that from 1962 to 1965 the American influence in Saigon sensitized

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<sup>151</sup> Zhang, *China in International Society since 1949*; Chen, *Mao's China*; Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*.

<sup>152</sup> In his late 1960 meeting with Che Guevara, for instance, the Chairman argued that, "the US does not want Cuba to have national bourgeois. This is the same case for Japan in Korea and China's Northeast [e.g. Manchuria], and for France in Vietnam." See Memorandum of Conversation between Mao Zedong and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, 19 November 1960, "Sino-Cuban Relations and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1960-62: New Chinese Evidence," in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 17/18 (Fall 2012), 51.

<sup>153</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*; Chen, *Mao's China*, 64-71.

<sup>154</sup> Su, *Yang Shangkun*, 134-136, 172-175; Xuezhong Guo, *China's Security State: Philosophy, Evolution, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 158-70.

Chinese leaders to the relevance of great-power status to geopolitical security while at the same time, institutional change dynamics in Beijing heightened their reliance on personal prestige for political survival; these incentives combined to cause Beijing's leaders to throw their weight behind the Hanoi-led guerilla warfare against the US-backed Saigon regime. The deepening of American involvement in the region after 1962 reinforced the security rationale behind competitive status-seeking measures, as the Chinese leaders tended to view status as a route to geopolitical security. Yet, Beijing was fully committed to supporting Hanoi's guerilla warfare in the south *also* because the leaders after 1962 were anxious about personal prestige, which could serve as political capital for their authority contests at home. As such, prestige politics foreclosed choice of more risk-averse strategies than competitive status-seeking measures.

Two points deserve particular emphasis. First, it is important to note that concerns for either great-power status or personal prestige are insufficient to cause competitive status-seeking strategy. The PRC was locked in a geopolitical rivalry with the US alliance system upon its founding, but throughout the 1950s leaders in Beijing actually opted for more risk-averse strategies—such as balancing, diplomatic engagement, and at times, prudent conduct of coercive diplomacy to address the geopolitical challenge. It was not until Mao and other Chinese political elite became reliant on personal prestige as the dominant vehicle to enhance their political authority after the 1962 Seven Thousand Cadres Conference that they began to pursue competitive status-seeking strategy. Wang's proposal of moderation in foreign policy simply provided an opening for Mao to assert his authority. Thereafter, security matters acted as a vehicle through which leaders could assert personal prestige, which had become a crucial source of political authority. Without Mao's initiative to discredit Liu in the foreign policy realm, the US-China rivalry would not have precipitated a shift toward competitive status-seeking strategy in Chinese security policy practices.

Second, although I argue that domestic political considerations are a powerful motive behind leaders' choice on competitive status-seeking measures, this is not to suggest that leaders adopt such a risky policy *just* in order to consolidate domestic authority. Status goods by definition offer security benefits. Highly risky as it is, a competitive strategy for status assertion promises to enhance national security in a long run. We now know that Lyndon Johnson and his national security team—while solidifying American military commitment to South Vietnam—went to considerable lengths to avoid provoking China.<sup>155</sup> Although the Korean lesson of provoking China provided a crucial source of Johnson's

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<sup>155</sup> See Hershberg and Chen, "Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy: China's Signals to the United States About Vietnam in 1965."

prudence, it was Beijing's strengthening of alliance with Hanoi that prompted Johnson and his advisors to draw an analogy between Korea and Vietnam.<sup>156</sup> In the final analysis, a recognition that China was a great power with dominant influence in Indochina led the Johnson administration to observe prudence and try to manage the conflict situation with China.<sup>157</sup>

In short, state leaders may concern themselves with great-power status and personal prestige for pragmatic reasons—specifically, great-power status promises to enhance a state's geopolitical autonomy and leaders may rely upon personal prestige as a vehicle for domestic political survival. And as my case study suggests, when concerned with both great-power status and personal prestige, the Chinese leaders were inclined for status competition against the United States in Vietnam. In so doing, the leaders sought to advance their interests in both geopolitical security and domestic political survival.

My argument promises to fill the voids left by some mainstream theories in security studies, notably defensive realism and the authoritarian politics thesis. According to defensive realism, geopolitical rivalry may not lead directly to competitive status-seeking strategy because competitive status-seeking strategy incurs enormous security risks to the state. For defensive realism to have sufficient analytic leverage over such a conflict-prone strategy, it is essential that domestic political dynamics be brought into perspective. The analyst may therefore turn to the authoritarian politics thesis to emphasize idiosyncratic preferences of leaders. These preferences could dominate foreign policy formulation as authoritarian leaders are unchecked by state constitution and ordinary citizens. Yet, authoritarian regimes do not always give a free rein to the dictator, if he finds himself in personality clashes with others. Personality clashes are a vehicle for constraining authoritarian leaders from running risks of war—for instance, a conflict-prone leader is very likely to be held back by those more sensitive to the costs of war. The authoritarian politics thesis, in particular, could lead us to see the domestically-oriented leader Liu Shaoqi restrain Mao from turning the Beijing-Hanoi security cooperation into an offensive alliance against US-backed Saigon. After all, Liu had managed to dampen Mao's authority on substantive policy issues at home. As such, the authoritarian politics thesis would predict that Mao's preference for an offensive strategy for the Vietnam War met substantial resistance from Liu, who preferred defensive strategy for stabilizing, rather than escalating, the conflict. This did not materialize. In contrast to his relative success in modifying Mao's agenda during the SEM, Liu actually joined Mao in pursuing competitive status-seeking

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<sup>156</sup> Yuen F Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>157</sup> Significantly, the Americans also tightened the reins on the nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan. See Michael Lumbers, "The Irony of Vietnam: The Johnson Administration's Tentative Bridge Building to China, 1965–1966," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 93.

strategy against the US. The authoritarian politics thesis is at a loss in explaining this very elite uniformity around a conflict-prone security strategy. By stressing individual leaders' concerns for great-power status and personal prestige, my argument is better placed to explain elite conformity over foreign policy line. It was the fear of being charged of compromising the national interest, the argument holds, that led the Chinese leaders to concur on the need to advance geopolitical security via competitive assertions of status. By rallying behind competitive status-seeking strategy they bandwagoned for personal prestige.

## Chapter 4

### China's Delegitimation Strategy against the Soviet Union: 1965-1969

*[T]he importance attached by Communists to ideology means that there must always be a "general line" guiding the tactics and strategy of the movement. Setting the line was an easy matter when Stalin was alive. Today, it involves dealings among many parties and regimes, while the preoccupation of Communists with their alleged monopoly on the only "true" and "scientific" understanding of reality results in the quick transformation of differences into matters of principle, with mutual accusations of "dogmatism" or "revisionism" inevitably following.*

**Zbigniew Brzezinski (1963)<sup>1</sup>**

*From the mid-1960s on, our relationship deteriorated and at large, broke off. This is not [due to] the ideological disputes – we don't even think nowadays that everything we said at that time was right. The real issue was inequality [in the Sino-Soviet relationship], which made the Chinese people feel humiliated.*

**Deng Xiaoping in the meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev (May 1989)<sup>2</sup>**

*Beijing and Moscow each sought to convince Hanoi to implement its brand of warfare (Soviet predilection for large-scale urban attack versus Chinese inclination for protracted fighting in the countryside) and adopt its policy advice (to negotiate or not to negotiate). As the Sino-Soviet split increasingly became a zero-sum game, North Vietnam's war effort became a primary battleground in Beijing and Moscow's rivalry for leadership of the communist world.*

**Lien-Hang T. Nguyen<sup>3</sup>**

In the context of the US escalation of the Vietnam War, why could not China and the Soviet Union join hands in supporting Hanoi against the growth of US military presence in Vietnam? This chapter argues that Beijing's pursuit of delegitimation strategy against Moscow's hegemonic influence in the communist world in large part hindered cooperation between the two communist powers over the issue of Vietnam.

Whereas the Hanoi regime acted as a diplomatic asset for China's effort to undermine

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Threat and Opportunity in the Communist Schism," *Foreign Affairs* 41, no. 3 (April 1963): 513.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Deng Xiaoping zhuan, 1904-1974* [biography of Deng Xiaoping, 1904-1974] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2014), 1278.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 119.

the US-back regime and as a symbol for China's status preeminence over the US, the Soviets' deepening involvement in the Vietnam War after 1965 altered the context in which Beijing's leaders tried to assert great-power status and advance geopolitical security. China then undertook delegitimation strategy in response to the emergent Soviet influence in Vietnam. From 1965 to 1968, Beijing sought to outperform Moscow in fighting the American "imperialists"; as such, the Chinese sought to better vindicate their commitment to the revolutionary movements abroad. To this end, Chinese leaders further increased military and political support for Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), while denouncing peace initiatives as signs of Soviet collaboration with imperialist forces.

The Vietnam War thus provided a battleground whereby Beijing's leaders asserted great-power status via two variants of competitive strategy—prior to 1965 they implemented a policy of offensive alliance, and shifted to a strategy of delegitimation thereafter. Both varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy are manifest in the Chinese support for the anti-US struggles in Vietnam. Yet, there is a marked difference. Unlike the pre-1965 strategy in which Beijing had encouraged Hanoi to fight not against the United States but its allied partner in Saigon, after 1965 Beijing's leaders pushed Hanoi to confront Moscow head on—China's major adversary. Furthermore, in an effort to vindicate their favored doctrine of revolutionary warfare, the Chinese leaders went beyond suggesting that the North Vietnamese continue the military fighting. They instead sought to dictate *how* the Vietnamese should fight the Americans. In so doing, Beijing's leaders hoped to delegitimize the ideological authority of the Soviets, portraying their old comrades as a renegade of the communist revolutionary cause. Through both *words* and *deeds*, therefore, Beijing took great pains to undercut Moscow's credentials for assuming leadership in the communist world.<sup>4</sup>

However, after the Tet Offensive in 1968, Beijing altered its approach to Hanoi. Chinese leaders then gradually abandoned its delegitimation strategy against the Soviets in favor of an alignment with America. This policy shift was motivated by two developments: the establishment of Mao's absolute authority in the Cultural Revolution and the decline of Chinese influence on Hanoi.

### **The International Context: Ideological Threat from Moscow and the Sino-Soviet Split**

By the time Washington took over the major fighting role in the Vietnam War in 1965, Beijing already perceived Moscow as its primary geopolitical threat. Unlike the American threat, which was unambiguous upon the PRC's founding, it took more than a decade for the Chinese to form the judgment that Moscow's geopolitical influences in Asia constituted

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<sup>4</sup> Delegitimation strategy, by definition, entails both a hostile ideology and cost-imposing strategy toward the target state. See Schweller and Pu, "After Unipolarity," 47-49; Walt, *Taming American Power*, 160-78.

a dominant threat to Chinese security. The Chinese hardened their view of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical threat after Moscow repeatedly frustrated China's status aspiration.<sup>5</sup> In the process, competing claims to the Leninist revolutionary doctrine became the vehicle for both sides to advance their security interests.<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly, the Soviet hegemony in Asia could impinge on Chinese security. This misgiving on the Chinese part was aggravated by Mao's perception that Nikita Khrushchev had abandoned the Marxism-Leninism revolutionary orthodox in launching the de-Stalinization drive. Taken together, the Soviet domestic and foreign policies under Khrushchev threatened to put Mao's China at a disadvantage in the international arena. As Mao began to question the reliability of the Soviets as an alliance partner, a perception took shape that the SU could undermine regime legitimacy in China—as such, the Soviet threat was ideological.

The Sino-Soviet rift originated from Khrushchev's rejection of Stalin's ideological legacy. The Soviet leader delivered his de-Stalinization speech in February 1956 in the presence of communist leaders from all around the world. The speech dealt a blow to Mao's status aspiration. From the CCP's revolutionary struggles against the KMT regime up to the 1958, Mao had endeavored to elevate China to a great-power status by emulating a wide variety of political and economic practices of Joseph Stalin's regime in the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> The Khrushchev-led iconoclasm against Stalin had negative repercussions for Mao's domestic prestige—albeit to a degree incomparable to the GLF disaster. An implicit response to Khrushchev's charge of Stalin's tyrannical style, the supreme leaders in China ceded some of his decision-making authority by promoting “collective leadership” at home.<sup>8</sup>

Khrushchev's move tended to exacerbate Mao's threat perception by virtue of its demonstration effect. If the Soviet successors could overthrow Stalin's ideological authority, could similar things happen after Mao retired from the front leadership or passed away?

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<sup>5</sup> For the comprehensive examination of the deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relationship from the split to rivalry and eventually, hostility, see Shen Zhihua ed., *Zhongsuguanxi shigang: 1917-1991 nian zhongsuguanxi ruogan wenti zai tantao* [History of Sino-Soviet relations, 1917-1991] (Beijing: Xinhua, 2007); Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*; Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009). For the literature that concentrates on the Sino-Soviet split up to 1963, see Odd Arne Westad, ed. *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Walt notes that an ideology prescribing hierarchical intra-alliance relationships is more likely to be a divisive force in alliance politics because it legitimizes unequal relations and threatens to compromise the autonomy of the inferior party within an alliance. See Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 35-36. The research by Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui has born this point out. See Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui, “Jiegou shiheng: zhongsu tongmeng polie de shengcengci yuanyin” [the structure off balance: the profound cause of the Sino-Soviet split], *Tansuo yu zhengming* [explorations and contestations], no. 10 (2012), 3-11.

<sup>7</sup> As a study reveals, “Mao was a faithful follower of Stalin who took pains to reassure the Boss of his loyalty and who dared to deviate from the Soviet model only after Stalin's death.” See Alexander Pantov and Steven Levine, *Mao: The Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 4. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, chap. 2; Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance*.

<sup>8</sup> Also see Yang Kuisong, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enenyuanyuan* [feelings of gratitude and enmity between Mao Zedong and Moscow] (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1999), chap. 13; Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: Contradictions among the People 1* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

The aged supreme leader was haunted by this question from then on. Although this misgiving did not suffice to turn the bilateral relationship into geopolitical rivalry overnight, it nevertheless induced Mao to question Moscow's leadership role in the hierarchy of the international communist movement. The Chairman viewed his firm commitment to Leninist revolutionary orthodox as a vehicle to promote China's status internationally. Accordingly, he took the lead at the Moscow Conference in the winter of 1957 to challenge Khrushchev's proposal to abandon war as the principal means for Cold War competition. Mao called upon the socialist camp to reject any hope for peaceful coexistence with the capitalist states.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese vision for Cold War competition was to exploit international tension for promoting revolutions in the non-western world.<sup>10</sup> This presented a powerful ideological alternative to the Soviet vision.

Undoubtedly, Khrushchev's proposal of US-Soviet peaceful coexistence could have negative implications for Chinese security. The prospects of US-Soviet rapprochement on nuclear nonproliferation worried Mao that the Soviets were bound to relegate China to a secondary status in the international community—and such an inferior status would significantly circumscribe Chinese autonomy in the geopolitical arena. Meanwhile, the Soviets successfully launched its own satellite *Sputnik* in 1957—and this would reduce the value of China as a strategic partner. The Chinese sense of strategic vulnerability was genuine as well as legitimate. As political scientist Thomas Christensen notes, “in Beijing's view, the Soviet acquisition of a secure, second-strike capability and the relative decline of Chinese power within the alliance carried a dual danger: the Soviets were less likely to support China and more likely to treat China like a weak satellite.”<sup>11</sup> The Soviets' delay in supplying China a prototype of the atomic bomb seemed to substantiate Chinese security concerns.<sup>12</sup> Frustrated by this lack of autonomy in uplifting China's defense capacity, Mao made up his mind to develop an independent nuclear force.<sup>13</sup> At private meetings with military officials, he “amplified on the point of not imitating other countries.”<sup>14</sup>

It was in this context that the Chairman steeled himself for an open defiance of the Soviets. When the Soviet leader proposed to construct a military communication station on Chinese territory and floated the idea of a Sino-Soviet joint submarine fleet, Mao seized this opportunity to hurl outrage at what he regarded as the Soviet great-power chauvinism. To

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<sup>9</sup> Shen, “Tongzhi jia xiongdi,” in *Zhongsu guanxi shigang*, 204-205.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), chap 1.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 196.

<sup>12</sup> *Nie Rongzhen huiyilu* [memoirs of Nie Rongzhen] (Beijing: jiefangjun chubanshe, 1986), 804; John Lewis and Litai Xue, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 60-62.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

the Soviet ambassador, he conveyed the grievance that the integrated Sino-Soviet military systems were to relegate China to an inferior status permanently.<sup>15</sup> Here, the Chinese leader framed Sino-Soviet bargaining over the terms of security cooperation as a matter of status conflict. This led to a dramatic downturn of the bilateral relationship. Mao's outburst startled Khrushchev who rushed to clarify the issue in person; yet Mao was reluctant to mend fences with the Soviets. Upon Khrushchev's departure from China, Mao launched the Great Leap Forward to accelerate China's industrialization. In an effort to mobilize the public morale, the Chairman also engineered the shelling of the Kuomintang strongholds on the islands close to the Fujian Province on the mainland.<sup>16</sup>

In planning this military act, Mao did not consult Khrushchev beforehand. The Soviet leader worried that the Taiwan Strait crisis Mao instigated in 1958 could derail the US-Soviet détente to which he was committed. Shortly thereafter, visible cracks emerged in the Sino-Soviet relationship. The 1959 summit meeting between Mao and Khrushchev in Beijing was riddled with exchanges of acrimonious charges. Several senior Politburo members strongly criticized the Soviet leadership. The Chinese, in particular, accused their Soviet counterparts of lacking sympathy for their commitment to defending its sovereignty claims over Taiwan and Tibet by force.<sup>17</sup> As such, the Sino-Soviet differences over security matters came to a fore.

This meeting turned out to be the last one between Mao and the Soviet leader. Mao's defiance of the Soviets marked the beginning of the end of the fraternal relationship between Beijing and Moscow. For Mao's part, geopolitical concerns were entangled with his status aspiration. Mao believed that the US-Soviet détente as proposed by Khrushchev would frustrate the Chinese effort to attain a great-power status. This, in turn, contributed to his perception of Khrushchev's perfidy in alliance politics.<sup>18</sup> Mao's misgiving had sound geopolitical rationales. A Soviet-American rapprochement could impose additional geopolitical pressures on China, as China would have to face the American threat without substantial Soviet support.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For details of the frictions revolving around Sino-Soviet military cooperation in 1958, see Shen Zihua, "tongzhi jia xiongdi, 1949-1960" [Comrades and Brothers, 1949-1960], in *Zhongsuguanxi shigang: 1917-1991 nian zhongsuguanxi ruogan wenti zai tantao* [History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917-1991], Shen Zihua ed., (Beijing: shehuikexue wenxian, 2007), 224-34.

<sup>16</sup> Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, chap. 6.

<sup>17</sup> See Li Xuefeng trans., "Heluxiaofu yu Mao Zedong huitan jilu" [records of the meeting between Khrushchev and Mao], in *Zhonggong zhongda lishi shijian qinliji* [personal accounts of the significant events in the history of the Chinese Communist Party], edited by Li Haiwen, (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 2010), 37-70; for the version in which the Chinese and Soviet leaders were moderate in tone, see Memorandum of Conversation between N.S. Khrushchev with Mao Zedong, Beijing, 2 October 1959, in "The Mao-Khrushchev Conversations, 31 July-3 August 1958 and 2 October 1959," trans. Vladislav Zubok, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 12/13 (Fall/winter 2001), 262-272.

<sup>18</sup> Shen "Tongzhi jia xiongdi," in *Zhongsu guanxi shigang*, 201-205.

<sup>19</sup> For the account on Sino-Soviet split that places a premium on the conflict of geopolitical interests, see Donald Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict 1956-1961* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962).

Suffice to say, the emergent tensions between Beijing and Moscow is a function of the entanglement of status aspirations and security imperatives. As the magnitude of security matters could induce leaders to rely upon their feelings of pride or humiliation to judge the interlocutors' intentions, leaders' frustrated status aspiration could lead to further distrust and worsen security relations between states. As such, we should expect to see the clash between the Chinese and Soviet leaders in 1959 exacerbate the conflict of interests between China and the USSR in the years to come. Indeed, in the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviets turned to America in pursuit of the common interest in preventing West Germany from acquiring nuclear weapons. The Limited Test Ban Treaty, signed in July 1963 reflected the US-Soviet consensus on peace in Europe.<sup>20</sup> This appeared to Beijing as a US-Soviet conspiracy of denying China the right to a nuclear deterrent capability.<sup>21</sup> The treaty thus reinforced Beijing's perception that both superpowers were posing existential threats. Chinese officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for instance, concluded that the test ban agreements reflected the Soviet leadership's collaboration with other capitalist powers to "isolate us."<sup>22</sup>

The leadership in Beijing, though, did try to mend fences with the Soviets when they were preoccupied with the imperative to save Chinese economy from the Great Leap Forward fiascos. In this context, Mao made the claim that the Soviet authorities remained "a country with whom to seek solidarity" and China should "not criticize it explicitly."<sup>23</sup> Although this spirit of restraint was sometimes interrupted by the Chinese claim to the truth of Marxism-Leninism, it in effect persisted well into 1962.<sup>24</sup> Deng Xiaoping described the Sino-Soviet relationship from 1960 to 1961 as "overall not bad."<sup>25</sup> In late September 1960, he told the Soviet senior officials in Moscow that "differences in opinions" between Beijing and Moscow could be overcome through periodic consultations to promote joint struggles against "the common enemy."<sup>26</sup> And in early 1962, Deng complimented the Soviet proposal for communist solidarity.<sup>27</sup> Newly declassified documents also show that prior to 1963 the Chinese leadership valued Sino-Soviet solidarity tremendously. Zhou Enlai in this period

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<sup>20</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 379-91.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, 192-193.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance*, 161. It is worth noting that this piece of evidence is obtained from the archive of China's Foreign Affairs Ministry, which is not closed.

<sup>23</sup> Wu, *Shinian Lunzhan*, 261.

<sup>24</sup> Li Danhui, "Zuihou de nuli: zhongsu zai 1960 niandai chu de douzheng yu tiaohu" [last effort: struggle and reconciliation between China and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s], *Shehui kexue* [the social sciences] no. 6 (2006).

<sup>25</sup> *Deng Xiaoping zhuan, 1904-1974* [biography of Deng Xiaoping] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2014), 1247.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Vladislav Zubok, "'Look What Chaos in the Beautiful Socialist Camp!' Deng Xiaoping and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1956-1963," *Cold War International History Bulletin (CWIHB)*, no. 10 (March 1998): 157.

<sup>27</sup> Li Danhui, "Cong fenlie dao duikang, 1960-1978" [From Split to Confrontation, 1960-1978], in *Zhongsu guanxi shigang*, 343.

turned down the request from Albania – a former Soviet ally – for weapons as well as food and uniform in order to reduce misunderstanding with Moscow.<sup>28</sup> In August 1961 Zhou conveyed a message to the DRV's minister of foreign affairs that to reconcile the Sino-Soviet differences was less difficult than achieve the Soviet-Albanian rapprochement. The reason, Zhou argued, was that resolving the Sino-Soviet differences did not have to touch on matters of prestige. Zhou's statement, though, did not mean the Chinese could avoid viewing their relationship with the Soviets through the lens of prestige; it was nevertheless clear that for the time being prestige was not a major issue at all in Sino-Soviet relations.<sup>29</sup>

At the very least, the Chinese were committed to keeping the Soviets as a security partner against China's primary adversary, the United States.<sup>30</sup> In June 1962, Liu Shaoqi openly suggested that a unified international front include the "revisionists," namely the Soviets as well as their followers.<sup>31</sup> Also remarkable was Mao's comment on the Soviet Union during the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in early 1962.

"I urge all comrades to firmly believe that the Soviet Union is a good country, and that the Soviet Communist Party is a good party. At any time, at present, in the future, and throughout our lives, we should learn from the Soviet Union, learn from their experience. [If we] do not study the Soviet Union, [we will] make mistakes."<sup>32</sup>

Although these words might not represent Mao's genuine attitude toward the Soviet Union, they nevertheless suggested that the Chairman did not want to part his way with the Soviets for the time being. As such, the nationalist insurgencies in the nonwestern world had yet to become an ideological vehicle for China to challenge Moscow's international authority. There is no denying, though, that by 1960 Beijing had aligned with Hanoi against Khrushchev's proposal for peaceful coexistence with the capitalist rivals, as both parties were respectively engaged in struggles against America's military presence in Taiwan and Indochina. And even earlier than 1960 Beijing had promised "political, economic, and military support" for the pro-Hanoi guerilla forces operating in South Vietnam.<sup>33</sup> However, the Chinese leaders did not throw unconditional support behind the guerilla warfare in

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<sup>28</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Zhou Enlai, 2 February 1961, in "'Albania is not Cuba.' Sino-Albanian Summits and the Sino-Soviet Split," edited by Ana Lalaj and Christian Ostermann, and Ryan Gage, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 16 (Fall 2007/winter 2008), 199.

<sup>29</sup> In Zhou's words, "when trying to reconcile China and the Soviet Union a compromise can be achieved while *preserving the principles*.....But the Soviets would not do the same with Albania. They think that the ALP is small.....and [therefore] use pressure to debase them at all costs; otherwise the Albanians would severely damage [the Soviet] *prestige*, which would have the effect of the other parties in Europe not obeying to the 'stick that keeps the order.' See Information on the Meeting with Comrade Zhou Enlai, 21 August 1961, in "'Albania is not Cuba.' Sino-Albanian Summits and the Sino-Soviet Split," 230.

<sup>30</sup> Dong Wang, "The Quarrelling Brothers: New Chinese Archives and a Reappraisal of the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959-1962," *Cold War international History Project (CWIHP) Working Paper*, no. 49 (July 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Qian, "Lishi de bianju: cong wanjiu weiji dao fanxiu," in *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shi* vol. 5, 264.

<sup>32</sup> Zhang, *Bianju*, 172.

<sup>33</sup> Christensen, *Worse than Monolith*, 160.

South Vietnam in 1960.<sup>34</sup> During the visit to North Vietnam in late 1961, for instance, the Chinese military delegation cautioned their North Vietnamese counterparts *not* to launch large-scale battles.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, although Beijing urged revolutionary parties in Laos to take a tough stance against the coalition government, it ended up accepting the Geneva Agreements in 1962 that reestablished Laos as a neutral state.<sup>36</sup>

The evidence cited above shows that the Chinese charted an ambiguous course in the early 1960s. After 1962, however, the domestic political developments deepened the emergent split and led Mao to give up the hope of *détente* with Moscow. By the year's end, he set out to run a series of commentary articles in the *People's Daily* to question the legitimacy of Soviet leadership in the international communist movement. Through an ideological struggle against Moscow, Mao also sought to delegitimize his domestic rivals. In late 1962, with Wang Jiaxiang being sidelined, the central leadership for the first time officially endorsed the line of "fighting with the revisionists for leadership."<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Mao appointed his close lieutenant, Kang Sheng, to head the "central anti-revisionist drafting group" to work on polemics against the Soviet leadership.<sup>38</sup> The Chairman finalized the draft in early 1963 and brought the Sino-Soviet split to international attention by presenting it as a struggle between the two divergent paths of socialist development.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese employment of delegitimation rhetoric thus gained international salience, which represented a crucial step toward the pursuit of delegitimation strategy.

The final stage of the Soviet-American-British negotiation of the Non-proliferation Treaty coincided with the Sino-Soviet party talks in Moscow. Up to this point, the leadership in Beijing already decided to take a no-holds-barred approach toward the Sino-Soviet differences; they thereby gave the delegation a free rein in criticizing the Soviets.<sup>40</sup> In his public speech, Deng Xiaoping, the head of the delegation, stated that the Sino-Soviet differences began to cumulate since the de-Stalinization drives initiated by Khrushchev. Subsequently Deng cited a wide range of disputes ranging from the Soviet neutrality in the Sino-Indian border conflicts in 1959 and 1962 to Moscow's quest for *détente* with Washington. After repeated failures to solve these disputes, Deng argued, the bilateral relationship had deteriorated to an unprecedented extent. Throughout the statement Deng

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<sup>34</sup> "Mao's post-1958 efforts to rectify the international revolutionary movement by reemphasizing the role of national liberation movements," as diplomatic historian Zhai Qiang argues, "did not immediately translate into an active support for Hanoi's war efforts in South Vietnam." Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 113; Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel* (London: Hurst, 1995), 45.

<sup>36</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, chap. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Li, "Cong fenlie dao duikang," in *Zhongsu guanxi shigang*, 366.

<sup>38</sup> MacFarquhar, *The Origins* vol. 3, 260-62.

<sup>39</sup> Wu, *Shinian lunzhan*, 577.

<sup>40</sup> Yin Jiamin, "Zhongsu lunzhan zhong de Deng Xiaoping" [Deng Xiaoping in the Sino-Soviet polemics], *Dangshi bolan* [general review of the Communist Party of China] 8 (2014), 22-23.

faulted the Soviets for all downturns in the Sino-Soviet relationship.<sup>41</sup> In such a charged atmosphere, the party talks “were neither conversations nor negotiations, but a mutual lecturing about past mistakes, real and invented, of the other side.”<sup>42</sup> When it came to the drafting of a communiqué, Deng even rejected the Soviet suggestion that the words that “meeting proceeded in a friendly, fraternal atmosphere” be injected into the joint statement.<sup>43</sup>

Although there is no evidence to suggest any direct influence of the US-Soviet détente on Mao’s expectations for party talks, Deng’s statement nevertheless revealed quite clearly that the Sino-Soviet rivalry was irreversible. Tensions between the two parties had accumulated to the point of no return. In the process, security imperatives and status aspirations became inextricably intertwined; eventually ideological disputes came to act as a principal vehicle for their competition for influences in the communist world. As the mutual suspicions deepened, Chinese leaders increasingly viewed the Soviet Union as a geopolitical threat. In July 1964 Mao for the first time raised the issue of armed conflict between China and the Soviet Union before Politburo officials.<sup>44</sup> One year later, in the context of the US government escalating the Vietnam War, Zhou Enlai echoed Mao’s threat assessment in stating to the Central Military Commission—the highest organ of military decision making in Chinese political system—that the worst-case scenario was that “the revisionists (e.g. the Soviets) and the imperialists (e.g. the Americans) would join forces to attack [China].”<sup>45</sup>

As the Chinese leaders grew anxious that the Soviet Union was to impinge on its geopolitical security via its policy of détente with China’s primary adversary—the United States, tensions on the northwestern Sino-Soviet borders fueled Chinese perception of the Soviet threat to their regime stability. During the first half of 1962 Xinjiang witnessed a mass exodus of local residents from China. While trying to flee from China, in some places the local population clashed violently with the government apparatus.<sup>46</sup> The Soviet diplomats appeared to be involved in instigating unrest and facilitating some residents’ entry into the Soviet territory. These incidents convinced Mao that “the fraternal Sino-Soviet relations were changing in nature.”<sup>47</sup> Besides America, the Soviet Union now featured prominently in

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<sup>41</sup> Stenogram: Meeting of the Delegations of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party, Moscow, 5-20 July 1963, in “In Memoriam: Deng Xiaoping and the Cold War,” in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 10, 175-179.

<sup>42</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 261.

<sup>43</sup> Wu Lengxi, *Shinian lunzhan 1956-1966* [ten years of polemics] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1999), 618; Yin, “Zhongsu lunzhan zhong de Deng Xiaoping,” 23.

<sup>44</sup> Wang Zhongchun, “The Soviet Factor in Sino-American Normalization,” in William Kirby, Robert Ross, and Gong Li, eds, *Normalization of US-China Relations: An International History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 149.

<sup>45</sup> *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan*, 520.

<sup>46</sup> Li, “Cong fenlie dao duikang, 1960-1978,” in *Zhongsu guanxi shigang*, 344-352; *Mao Zedong zhuan* (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2013), 2186-87.

<sup>47</sup> *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2187.

Mao's threat assessment.

In sum, Chinese threat perception grew in proportion with the leaders' frustration with Khrushchev's lack of willing to help China fulfill its status aspiration. Security imperatives and status aspirations were entangled in the evolution of the bilateral relationship. Botched diplomatic communications, the Soviet-American collaboration on nuclear nonproliferation, and skirmishes on the Sino-Soviet borders all contributed to the Chinese sense of geopolitical threat from the Soviets. Underlying these concrete incidents were dynamics of "status dilemma," which hindered Chinese assertions of great-power status from gaining favorable recognition from the Soviets. As diplomatic bargaining broke down, the conflict of security interests came to the fore.

The Chinese, in turn, expressed its animosity toward the Soviets' lack of attention to its status aspiration in a strong rhetoric to delegitimize the Soviet credentials in assuming the international communist movement. This delegitimizing rhetoric acted as a prelude to the pursuit of delegitimation strategy, and reflected a genuine sense of frustration on the Chinese part. This sense of frustration could turn into fear of Soviet invasion in the context of a substantial conflict of geopolitical interests between Beijing and Moscow.

### **The Emergence of Delegitimation Strategy in China's Soviet Policy: From Rhetoric to Practice**

In practicing delegitimation strategy, a state actor needs bolster the delegitimizing rhetoric with exemplary deeds. Actions speak louder than words. International norms, after all, are always susceptible to conflicting interpretations. As such, the state deploying the delegitimizing rhetoric could hardly convince the international audiences that the target of its critique is inconsistent in words and deeds—and therefore being hypocritical—without exemplifying what a competent practice is.

As state leaders try to bolster its delegitimizing rhetoric with acts, contests over status would concentrate on a concrete issue—and in this study the issue should concern security imperatives of a state. By this definition, competitive status-seeking strategy did not come to dominate China's approach to the SU until the Sino-Soviet rivalry unfolded in China's proximate region—notably Vietnam. The Sino-Soviet split, though, did not evolve into hostility until the armed conflict erupted over the Zhenbao Island in 1969—instead, the split between the two communist powers manifested itself as struggle for ideological authority. Nonetheless, it touched upon security imperatives as the competition reached audiences inhabiting in China's southern vicinity. The Sino-Soviet split provided an impetus for China to convert its delegitimizing rhetoric into practices when the Soviets deepened their involvement in the Vietnam War.

*A Clarification: Delegitimizing Rhetoric and the Role of Prestige Politics at Home*

The Sino-Soviet polemics began with the Chinese decision in April 1960 to challenge Khrushchev's line by reference to reasserting the Leninist doctrines.<sup>48</sup> From then on, the Chinese leadership employed anti-Soviet rhetoric to delegitimize the Soviet leadership in the non-western world. In this regard, ideological appeal came to act as a dominant vehicle for the Sino-Soviet struggle for geopolitical influences. And yet, absent security imperatives delegitimation strategy does not have to be put into practice. The leaders could settle for the delegitimizing rhetoric. This could boost their personal prestige at home and even helped to promote national status without incurring high security risks.

The politics of personal prestige in Beijing contributed significantly to the emergence of the delegitimizing rhetoric in Beijing's approach to Moscow. The Soviet bureaucratic model of socialism under Khrushchev did serve as a convenient adversary against which Mao could assert his ideological authority at home. Resentful of Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin's charismatic authority, Mao identified the Soviet Union as an ideological adversary, a traitor of the socialist cause, and a target of class struggle. In his words, "the capitalist class can be reborn; that's how it is in the Soviet Union."<sup>49</sup> As an eminent historian in China argues, "what stimulated the CCP to take a critical step toward parting with the Soviet Communist Party was not the conflict of national interests between the two countries but the domestic political developments in China."<sup>50</sup>

Yet, we should not attribute the continued deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations solely to Mao's domestic political maneuvers. Had Mao escalated the Sino-Soviet conflict purely for domestic political reasons—that is, to enhance his charismatic authority on the basis of revolutionary commitments as opposed to institutional orders—the Chairman would have settled for the delegitimizing rhetoric without taking on the Soviets over the matters of geopolitical security. After all, delegitimation strategy entails both rhetoric and deeds. And given the risks of war, China did not have to take on the Soviets by asserting the revolutionary doctrines of fighting against the western powers. Rather, it could have employed delegitimizing rhetoric to boost risk-averse strategies of status seeking.

If, on the other hand, the Chairman had considered the Soviet Union to fall under the non-Marxist rulers, it was natural to conclude that its every interest was in conflict with the PRC. As such, the seemingly ideologically charged rhetoric could reveal a genuine concern for the Soviet geopolitical threat. Security imperatives are worth noting. We can surmise here that Mao's domestic maneuver to define the Soviets as an ideological enemy simply

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<sup>48</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 163; Wu, *Shinian lunzhan*, 258-266.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>50</sup> Li, "Cong fenlie dao duikang, 1960-1978," in *Zhongguo guanxi shigang*, 334.

reflects the salient aspect of the Soviet geopolitical threat. Undoubtedly, the Sino-Soviet rivalry began with ideological divergence. In turn, Mao was prone to portray the Soviet Union as posing an ideological threat to the legitimacy of the Chinese socialist regime. To be sure, the intensification of prestige politics in Beijing may be able to explain the timing by which Mao openly stressed the ideological aspect of the Soviet threat—doing so allowed him to stigmatize his opponents as “revisionists” who allegedly had more in common with the Soviets in terms of ideological beliefs. Yet, prestige politics by itself cannot explain why the Chinese adopted delegitimation strategy—a variant of competitive status-seeking strategy. Absent a geopolitical threat, leaders could employ delegitimizing rhetoric to promote other status-enhancing strategies than competitive status-seeking strategy. China’s status seeking in Africa is a case in point.

*A Negative Case in Brief: China’s Status Seeking in Africa*

China’s engagement with African countries features creative status-seeking policies. Typically, practitioners of this type of status-enhancing strategy seek to justify their policy innovations as honorable. Delegitimizing rhetoric can perform this function by stigmatizing certain practices as unjust; it in turn helps to highlight a novel aspect of a state’s international practices. Importantly, delegitimizing rhetoric employed in this way does not lead to confrontational stances and involves little risk of military conflict—hence, “a shortcut to greatness.” In undertaking creative status-seeking policies Chinese leaders found Africa a new area whereby to promote its economic model. In late 1963 and early 1964, a Chinese delegation led by premier Zhou Enlai and foreign minister Chen Yi visited ten African countries. At the end of their visit, Zhou laid out the general principles of China’s foreign aid.<sup>51</sup> The Chinese emphasized their foreign aid was a means for the recipient countries to achieve economic autonomy—rather than socialism; relatedly, the Chinese principles showed “less concern with the issue of ownership of the means of production than with the growth of production in general”; and finally, the actual aid agreements China made with the African countries gravitated toward agriculture and light industry. All these characteristics signified Beijing’s effort to introduce a model “substantially different from the Soviet model of the ‘non-capitalist path of development.’”<sup>52</sup>

Unquestionably, by 1963 the open split between China and the Soviet Union left each other with “no alternatives to a naked competition for influence” among the Third World nations. And since Beijing had “publicly staked its claim to the mantle of leadership of the world revolution....., the People’s Republic of China had to present itself as a full-service

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<sup>51</sup> Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 117-118. For the principles that came to guide the Chinese foreign aid, see *Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan*, 388-389.

<sup>52</sup> Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 119.

alternative to the Soviet Union, with an aid program and development model in addition to its rhetoric of militant anti-imperialism."<sup>53</sup> The Chinese thus sought to demonstrate the appeal of their developmental model. The Chinese were intent on outperforming not just the Soviets but also the Americans in Africa. The Chinese believed that through economic aid they could help the Africans remove shackles of their colonial past and fend off perils of the American-led capitalism.<sup>54</sup> Their approach was risk-averse, however. The creative status-seeking acts as undertaken by them involved no confrontational stances with either superpower. Rather, it sought to carve out a new realm of international activities whereby to display Chinese honorable traits.

In contrast to creative status seeking, competitive status-seeking strategy is more risk-prone because it is typically confrontation-oriented. Yet this very behavioral style is also instrumental role in advancing geopolitical security. This can be illustrated by China's Vietnam policy in the post-Khrushchev era. After Moscow's new leadership decided to assume a more active role in the Vietnam War, leaders in Beijing became determined to exclude the Soviet influences from Hanoi. To this end, they escalated China's commitment to Hanoi's fight against the Americans. As such, the Chinese set out to bolster the delegitimizing rhetoric with concrete acts. Their Vietnam policy would clearly exhibit elements of delegitimation strategy.

#### *Khrushchev's Fall*

Khrushchev's fall was a critical episode in the Sino-Soviet relations. On October 13, 1964, upon his return from a vacation on the Black Sea, Khrushchev was confronted with a list of convictions issued by other Politburo members. Among the charges, one Politburo member singled out his provocative acts over Suez, Berlin, and Cuba as disgraceful international failures. Khrushchev's opponents believed these fiascos caused a decline in Moscow's international prestige.<sup>55</sup> As such, Khrushchev's fall from power precipitated a shift of Soviet attention toward Vietnam where the new leadership under Aleksei Brezhnev hoped to regain its lost prestige elsewhere in the world.<sup>56</sup> The shift in Soviet policy toward Vietnam, however, was to exacerbate the existing Sino-Soviet rivalry, as the Chinese leaders believed that the Soviets were to replace the American imperialists in a design to contain China.

Initially, Mao took Khrushchev's downfall to be the triumph of his ideological line. This incident met his expectation that the Soviet revisionism was doomed to fail.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 102, 103-104.

<sup>54</sup> Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World*, chap. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and William Taubman, "Soviet Foreign Policy, 1962-1975," in *Cambridge History of the Cold War: Crises and Detente*, ed. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 139.

<sup>56</sup> Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 1996), 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> Li, "Cong fenlie dao duikang, 1960-1978," in *Zhongsu guanxi shigang*, 399; Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 287.

the Chairman sent Zhou Enlai to attend the Moscow conference in late 1964, expecting to reap the prestige of his triumph over the revisionist line.<sup>58</sup> However, the Soviets' clumsy treatment of Zhou at the cocktail party on November 7<sup>th</sup> dashed his hope. At a reception on November 7, the intoxicated Rodion Malinovskii, the Soviet defense minister, proposed that the bilateral relationship would improve if the Chinese could oust their supreme leader. Zhou was furious over such comments, and refused to accept an official apology from the Soviets the next day.<sup>59</sup> Zhou's response was not inappropriate in terms of diplomatic convention. But it is worth noting that Zhou took this opportunity to delegitimize the Soviet leadership in the international arena. In particular, the Chinese premier tried to push the Soviet leadership to postpone the conference of socialist countries, which he claimed was a symbolic heritage of Khrushchev's policy.<sup>60</sup> Further, Zhou asserted that the Soviet leadership inherited Khrushchev pretension to paternalism (*yi laozi dang ziju*) over other communist parties.<sup>61</sup> At the meetings with the communist leaders from many countries, Zhou reiterated the Chinese determination to continue the polemics with the Soviets.<sup>62</sup> He then conveyed to the Vietnamese delegation that the Soviet leadership was "weak and internally controversial, chaotic and turbulent."<sup>63</sup>

The Soviets' misconduct, in short, allowed the Chinese to seize a moral high ground in the ongoing ideological struggle. Mao took advantage of this diplomatic incident to highlight the Sino-Soviet rift. Following Beijing's instructions, Zhou chastised the Soviet leadership for treating "[the Chinese] friends as enemies," capitulating to the American imperialism, and practicing great-power chauvinism.<sup>64</sup> The Chairman endorsed Zhou's diplomatic performance by leading a group of politburo leaders to greet the premier upon his return from Moscow.<sup>65</sup> At the meeting convened upon Zhou's arrival, Mao managed to rally all top leaders around the view that the Soviet leadership was not competent enough to lead international communist movement.<sup>66</sup>

While delegitimizing the Soviet international leadership, Mao reasserted authority before his domestic rivals. In the context of the Brezhnev leadership continuing Khrushchev's China policy, Mao justified his assertive line against Khrushchev by stating that "throughout the whole history of international communist movement, Khrushchev's

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<sup>58</sup> As the Soviet ambassador to China Stepan Chervonenko argued during his meeting with Zhou Enlai, the Chinese initiative "amounted to nothing more than an attempt to improve relations on Beijing's terms." See Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 287.

<sup>59</sup> *Zhou Enlai nianpu* [chronological records of Zhou Enlai] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2007), 686.

<sup>60</sup> Yan Mingfu, *Yan Mingfu huiyilu* [memoir of Yan Mingfu] (Beijing: renmin, 2015), 866-867.

<sup>61</sup> *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, 686-687.

<sup>62</sup> Yan, *Yan Mingfu huiyilu*, 869.

<sup>63</sup> *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, 687.

<sup>64</sup> Wu, *Shinian lunzhan*, 866.

<sup>65</sup> *Zhou Enlai nianpu*, 688.

<sup>66</sup> Wu, *Shinian lunzhan*, 881-83.

performance is only a short episode.....From now on anyone who wants to perform the role of Khrushchevism without Khrushchev will only suffer a similar fate as did Khrushchev." In fact, Mao added these words to an editorial draft for *People's Daily*.<sup>67</sup> Clearly, this was intended for domestic consumption. Mao, in this way, signaled to his domestic rivals that only his own ideological line represented the orthodox of Chinese political life. At this juncture, the contest between Mao and Liu over domestic authority had just reached a pitch.<sup>68</sup> Liu could not afford to challenge Mao on this foreign policy issue. The delegitimizing rhetoric against the Soviets had fostered an atmosphere in which moderate leaders on foreign policy was to lose prestige by being labeled as a "revisionist." Mao was a central player in this prestige politics. In fact, he went further than Liu by suggesting that if the Sino-Soviet split was unavoidable China should take the initiative to part its way with the Soviets.<sup>69</sup>

Beijing's unwillingness to achieve a rapprochement with the Soviet new leadership shows that concerns for personal prestige could add to the momentum of delegitimizing rhetoric. Such rhetoric did fuel tensions between Beijing and Moscow in ways that rendered their conflict of security interests unmanageable. In such circumstances, delegitimizing rhetoric may lead to the pursuit of a delegitimizing strategy, as leaders seek to further their interests in both geopolitical security and domestic political survival.

In theory, though, the delegitimizing rhetoric might bestow upon an emerging power a preeminent status, which would later on help to coordinate international efforts to displace the established hegemon.<sup>70</sup> Yet, by such rhetoric alone it is difficult to ascertain whether a country is trying to advance geopolitical security via status competition or is just seeking status preeminence as an end in itself. Rather, the importance of delegitimizing rhetoric lies in aggravating existing rivalry to the point that the leaders believe that the pursuit of delegitimizing strategy is necessary for safeguarding the country's core interests. As such, it is the Soviet extension of its geopolitical influences to China's key ally—the Hanoi regime—that steered Chinese leaders to adopt delegitimation strategy. By such a policy, China effectively engaged in competitive status-seeking strategy against the Soviet Union in Vietnam—an area critical to its geopolitical security. This argument can be bolstered by the fact that Mao did not turn its delegitimizing rhetoric into a concrete strategy for geopolitical contests against the Soviets until Kosygin visited Hanoi and Beijing in late 1964.

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<sup>67</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 11, 348.

<sup>68</sup> For the Mao-Liu conflict on domestic policy, see Chapter 3.

<sup>69</sup> At a conference attended by a large number of party elites, when Liu remarked that the Chinese should fear splitting with the Soviets, Mao interrupted him saying that if "fearing the split" meant regardless of the Chinese fears, the split with the Soviets was unavoidable; if it was unavoidable, why should we fear it? See *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2237.

<sup>70</sup> Schweller and Pu, "After Unipolarity."

### *Kosygin's Visit to China*

The Soviet premier wished to forge a Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation on the ceasefire in the ongoing Vietnam War; for Beijing's part, his move suggested a Soviet intention to interfere with the Vietnamese affairs over which China used to have a dominant say. As noted, Mao deployed the delegitimizing rhetoric against the Soviets in an effort to assert personal prestige at home. But it was not until the Soviet involvement in the war in Vietnam the Chinese began to translate the rhetoric into actions. Mao's refusal to cooperate with the Soviets to aid the Vietnamese anti-imperialist struggles marked the turning point in Beijing's pursuit of delegitimation strategy against Moscow.

In the context of the US escalating the Vietnam War in late 1964, China showed a strong resolve to assert great-power status vis-à-vis the Soviets. The escalation of the Vietnam War by the US posed a direct geopolitical threat to China, as well as an indirect challenge to the Soviet standing in the US-Soviet global competition. It thus provided an opening for the Sino-Soviet rapprochement. On the other hand, by 1964 the Sino-Soviet polemics had reached a climax. Could Beijing tone down its delegitimizing rhetoric in pursuit of common security interests with Moscow over the Vietnam issue? This constitutes a critical test for my theoretical claim. Whereas defensive realism claims that states tend to join forces against a common threat, my argument would predict that China would not opt for security cooperation with the Soviets, or "external balancing," *despite* a common threat. It holds that prestige politics at home combined with geopolitical pressures to motivate the Chinese leadership to pursue security through competitive status-seeking acts.

From a defensive realist standpoint, we can expect the Sino-Soviet common threats in balancing against the American power to bring the two countries together regardless of their ideological differences.<sup>71</sup> This did not materialize. On the contrary, the relationship between Beijing and Moscow deteriorated after 1965. To explain this deviation from the defensive realist prediction, it is important to focus on *both* the Soviet threat as perceived by the Chinese and the dynamics of elite politics in Beijing. As noted, the Chinese perception of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical threat had hardened by early 1964, and ideological antagonism featured centrally in the Sino-Soviet rivalry. Meanwhile, the Mao-Liu contest for institutional authority had reached its peak on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. In this circumstance, Mao was prone to perceive the Soviet ideological influences as threatening to undermine the Chinese communist regime. In early 1964 the Chairman expressed concern that the Soviets agents had infiltrated China's security apparatus.<sup>72</sup>

Once the Soviets became involved in the Vietnam War, it was tempting for the Chinese

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<sup>71</sup> Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

<sup>72</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 11, 14-15.

to assert great-power status vis-à-vis the Soviets in order to extrude Moscow's influences from China's southern vicinity. In early 1965, Kosygin paid a visit Hanoi on his rout to China. In Hanoi the Soviet premier promised to material and moral support for the Vietnamese struggle against the US forces. While calling for a total withdrawal of US forces from South Vietnam, the Soviet premier tried to get the Chinese to help the US "find a way out of Vietnam."<sup>73</sup> These diplomatic initiatives signified that Moscow began to play a more active role in the Vietnam War. In response, the Chinese warned the Soviet leaders not to use the Vietnamese issue to bargain with the Americans.<sup>74</sup> Now Beijing had decided to focus on Vietnam as an arena of status competition with Moscow.

The Soviet premier Kosygin's vision for Sino-Soviet relations was congruent with the defensive realist rationale. The Soviet premier initially believed that the Sino-Soviet rapprochement was possible. He was keen to see the two gigantic socialist powers set aside their ideological differences in a common struggle against America in Indochina.<sup>75</sup> Kosygin visited Beijing in February 1965 in the hope that the Sino-Soviet relationship could be restored to normalcy. Yet, he was ignorant that the tense political atmosphere in China had created tremendous obstacles to Sino-Soviet détente. By the time he arrived in Beijing, the elite contestation was dividing China's top leadership. Liu had been ascendant among the party elites.<sup>76</sup> While being the preeminent ideological theoretician, Mao had great difficulty in translating his authority into the policy outcomes he desired, as Liu's leadership of the bureaucratic institutions proved capable of implementing domestic policies on his own terms. Accordingly, Mao had little choice but to use foreign policy as a realm whereby he could try to reestablish the indisputable supremacy by demonstrating personal prestige. As such, Kosygin's visit just provided an opening for Mao to assert personal prestige. Consequently, Kosygin not only achieved no diplomatic success in Beijing but also suffered humiliation by Mao.

Details of Kosygin's meeting with Mao not only revealed Beijing's perception of the Soviet involvement in the area of China's geostrategic concern as a serious challenge to the Chinese claim to great-power status; these details also exhibited the peculiar way in which Mao exploited personal prestige as a vehicle for domestic political survival. In the presence of Chinese senior leaders—including Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and Zhou Enlai—Mao conducted himself in a manner that was "emphatically sarcastic, at times bordering on insult." To the Soviet visitors this was intended to assert China's great-power status. To his

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<sup>73</sup> Qiang Zhai, "Beijing and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965-1968: New Evidence from Chinese Sources," *Cold War international History Project (CWIHP) Working Paper*, no. 18 (June 1997): 2.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "The Sino-Soviet Split," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Crises and Detente* ed. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 361.

<sup>76</sup> MacFarquhar, *The Origins* 3, 399-407.

domestic audience, the Chairman often “looked around after each important statement to make sure he made the needed impression.”<sup>77</sup> Such symbolic acts meant the Chairman was intent on bringing his associates on board with the anti-Soviet delegitimation strategy he preferred. In the process, he managed to demonstrate personal prestige to his fellows.

The Chairman was quite sincere in his determination to enhance Chinese status internationally vis-à-vis the two superpowers. In his view, the Soviet-US collaboration had materialized in a way that alarmed the Chinese and the world community at large. An enhanced status would in turn grant other nations geopolitical autonomy. In his words,

The US and the USSR are now deciding the world’s destiny. Well, go ahead and decide. But within the next 10-15 years you will not be able to decide the world’s destiny. It is in the hands of the nations of the world, and not in the hands of the imperialists, exploiters, or revisionists.<sup>78</sup>

In response, Kosygin invoked his defensive realist rationale, arguing that the imperative of fighting against America was sufficient to bring about a Sino-Soviet rapprochement. “Since the Soviets and Chinese had been engaged in the struggle against the imperialists, why can’t we unite in a common fight against imperialists?”<sup>79</sup> Mao ostensibly agreed that threats from “imperialists” could help reinvigorate the Sino-Soviet unity in the future.<sup>80</sup> But he did not specify the terms on which to pursue Sino-Soviet rapprochement. Overall, the atmosphere of their meeting was tense and nothing was achieved.<sup>81</sup>

While a strategy of delegitimation could help China to hold off the Soviet containment, Mao also used it as a vehicle for his domestic power struggle. By demonstrating that the Chinese practice of revolutionary communism had gained traction internationally, Mao hoped to enhance his authority vis-à-vis Liu Shaoqi and other leaders, whom he perceived as the emerging revisionists in China. Since his return to active leadership in late 1962, the Chairman had constantly asserted the interrelationship of geopolitical and domestic threats. Early on he had warned that, “China must oppose and be alert to revisionism at home and abroad,” and Khrushchev was likely to “impose war upon us [China]” and revisionism could “usurp the state and party leadership.”<sup>82</sup> This attitude now carried into his approach to the post-Khrushchev leadership. Needless to say, Mao’s drive to delegitimize the Soviet leadership role in the international arena had both geopolitical and domestic political rationales.

Inasmuch as the leaders in China had come to rely upon prestige as a dominant vehicle

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<sup>77</sup> Cited in Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 145.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>79</sup> Wu, *Shinian lunzhan*, 919.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 920.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 921.

<sup>82</sup> Wu, *Shinian lunzhan*, 778.

for authority legitimation, no one in the Politburo could politically afford to mend fences with the Soviet “revisionists” – being labeled this way meant a loss of prestige at home. Accordingly, the whole leadership felt compelled to support Mao, who set out to couple his delegitimizing rhetoric with competitive status-seeking acts against the Soviets over the issue of Vietnam. As Mao’s attitude toward the Soviet premier already signaled his unwillingness to join hands with the Soviet revisionists, no Chinese leaders could politically afford to seek reconciliation with Moscow. Anyone making such an attempt would be vulnerable to the charge of undermining China’s socialist system by aligning with the Soviet revisionists.

Beijing’s unwillingness to mend fences with Moscow then became evident in the daily practice of diplomacy. Throughout 1965, Sergei Lapin, the Soviet ambassador in Beijing, found it increasingly difficult to meet with China’s senior officials. Those who used to maintain regular contact with the Soviet officials including Liu Shaoqi now merely paid lip service to the need for bilateral diplomatic communications. By late 1965, it became clear to Lapin that setting up meetings with China’s top officials was out of the question. Despite his repeated requests, Lapin was told that Zhou Enlai and foreign minister Chen Yi were “very busy” and Mao was “out of town.”<sup>83</sup> Quite evidently, the Chinese leaders did not believe they could afford domestically to pursue a policy of realignment with Moscow for fighting against America in Indochina. In the final analysis, Kosygin failed to dampen Beijing’s delegitimizing rhetoric because Mao managed to deploy that rhetoric to dissuade Hanoi’s leaders from accepting international mediation. Equally important, in the run-up to the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese leaders – notably Mao – relied upon personal prestige for political survival among domestic political elites. In an ideologically charged domestic political context, the deepening suspicion on the Chinese part over the Soviet initiative over Vietnam stimulated Beijing to turn the delegitimizing rhetoric into delegitimation strategy. Hypothesis 3 is confirmed here: concerns for personal prestige on their own are unable to motivate leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy; as illustrated by China’s employment of delegitimizing rhetoric against the Soviets, in such circumstances leaders would prefer to pursue status on the cheap.

And yet, the delegitimizing rhetoric may help to worsen a country’s relationship with its geopolitical rival, as illustrated by Mao’s employment delegitimizing rhetoric against Kosygin. As their Soviet rival extended geopolitical influences into China’s vicinity, Beijing’s leaders involved in domestic prestige politics would find competitive status-seeking strategy a preferable policy response to this challenge. This is what happened after Kosygin left Beijing.

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<sup>83</sup> Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 158.

*China's Resist-America-Aid-Vietnam War Campaign as Delegitimation Strategy*

As a corollary of refusing to cooperate with Moscow, Beijing took unilateral actions to aid the Vietnamese fight against the US forces. In June 1965, China began to dispatch “volunteers” into Vietnam. Up to March 1968, Beijing had sent 32,000 armed forces to assist Vietnamese communists.<sup>84</sup> Through such symbolic acts, the Chinese signaled remarkable resolve to vindicate its commitment to promoting revolutions. Their ultimate objective was to establish superiority of Chinese communist appeals vis-à-vis the Soviet “revisionist” line.

The Chinese leaders, in turn, launched the resist-America-aid-Vietnam War campaign to compete with the Soviets for status preeminence in Vietnam. After the Tonkin Gulf incident in August 1964, the Vietnam War faced grave prospects of escalation, which constituted an increase of US geopolitical threat to China. By this time, however, China had already focused on the Soviet Union as its dominant threat; as such, the Chinese did not want this chief adversary to intervene in their backyard. Accordingly, they bolstered the delegitimizing rhetoric against the Soviets with attempts to shape the fighting strategy undertaken by the Vietnamese. Ultimately, the Chinese sought to assert their great-power status in the international communist movement—and this made a Sino-Soviet rapprochement against the US in supporting the Vietnamese inconceivable.

Unquestionably, the Chinese aid to the DRV served to defend China against the perceived American aggression in Southeast Asia. In a speech made on the NLF's founding anniversary in late 1965—when the US military commitment to Vietnam was a fait accompli—Zhou Enlai asserted vehemently that the only option for the Vietnamese people now was “to fight the American invaders until they got out of Vietnam” and that the Chinese would always side with the Vietnamese cause.<sup>85</sup> A closer examination, however, reveals that the dramatic increase of Chinese aid to Vietnam was not just intended to counter the escalation of US military commitment to Vietnam in the summer of 1965. It was also aimed at competing with the Soviets for geopolitical influences.

There is substantial evidence to bolster this contention. For one thing, officials in China genuinely perceived the Soviet involvement in the Indochina affairs as collusion with the US strategy of containment. In August 1965, a document from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which now remains semi-classified) judged that “although the Soviet revisionists dare not openly participate in peace talk activities, the Soviet government has privately colluded with the United States.”<sup>86</sup> Clearly, the Chinese up to this point had associated the

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<sup>84</sup> Li Danhui, “Zhongsu guanxi yu zhongguo de yuanyue kangmei” [Sino-Soviet relations during China's Resist-America-Aid-Vietnam], *Dangdai zhongguoshi yanjiu* [contemporary China history studies], no. 3 (1998), 118.

<sup>85</sup> *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan*, 537, 542.

<sup>86</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry Circular, “Vietnam ‘Peace Talk’ Activities,” August 19, 1965, History and Public Policy

Soviet Union closely with the United States in terms of their intent of containing China. In practice, the Chinese went to considerable lengths to bar the Soviets from their aid programs to the Vietnamese communists. Beijing opposed Moscow's plan of dispatching 4,000 military personnel to North Vietnam, refused to let the Soviet air force fly from Kunming to defend the DRV territory, and rejected the Soviet proposal to transport military supplies via Chinese airspace.<sup>87</sup>

Whereas the offensive alliance Beijing had forged with Hanoi around 1963 was designed to undermine the US geopolitical influences by *supporting the guerilla insurgents* in South Vietnam, after 1965 Beijing pursued a strategy of delegitimation in the Vietnam arena designed to counter the Soviet involvement by *vindicating ideological doctrines*. To display ideological appeal as an element of state power, the Chinese signaled commitment to the military struggles undertaken by the Vietnamese revolutionaries while chastising the Soviet policy of détente with America. In this way, the Chinese tried to delegitimize the Soviet influences in the international communist movement in general and on Vietnamese communists in particular. The Soviet policy, a senior Chinese diplomat charged, "is not to render real aid to Vietnam in its struggle against American imperialism, but to put China and Vietnam under [its] control and acquire for [itself] capital for bargaining with the US."<sup>88</sup> By framing the Soviet initiative as an attempt to collaborate with the imperialists, the Chinese leadership tried to prevent the Soviets from wooing the Vietnamese communists to the Soviet "revisionist" side. In a nutshell, an anti-Soviet intention featured prominently in China's drive of aiding the Vietnamese to resist America. It not only acted as a strategy to delegitimize the Soviet authority in the international communist movement; more crucially, it served to hold off Moscow's geopolitical influences in Indochina.

### **The Radicalization of Chinese Politics: Beginning of the Cultural Revolution**

The years from 1965 to 1968 witnessed radicalization of Chinese politics characterized by intensified elite conflicts and social upheavals. The Mao-Liu conflict culminated in the Cultural Revolution in the summer of 1966, and ended with the purge of Liu Shaoqi and his factions in 1967. As Mao found it impossible to reconcile with Liu's vision for bureaucratic mode of rule in China after the Great Leap Forward, their conflict became a life-and-death struggle. Mao eventually made up his mind to demolish the whole bureaucratic structure of

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Program Digital Archive, Jiangsu Provincial Archives, Q3124, D, J123, translated for CWIHP by Qiang Zhai.

<sup>87</sup> Li Danhui, "Zhongsu zai yuanyue kangmei wenti shang de maodun yu chongtu" [contradictions and conflicts between China and the Soviet Union over the issue of aiding Vietnam and resisting America], *Dangdai zhongguoshi yanjiu* [contemporary China history studies], 7 no. 4 (July 2000), 55-56.

<sup>88</sup> Oral Statement by the Head of the Department for the USSR and for the Countries of Eastern Europe of MFA PRC, Yu Zhan, Transmitted to the Embassy on 8 June 1965, in "Twenty-Four Soviet-Bloc Documents on Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1964-1966," ed. Lorenz Luthi, Issue 16, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Fall 2007/winter 2008), 381.

the party and government in which Liu's influences were entrenched. To this end, Mao appealed to personal prestige as a vehicle for legitimizing charismatic authority that enabled him to mobilize grassroots revolts against state bureaucracies. As such, Mao was sensitive to prestige in the domestic arena till 1968 when he set out to restore domestic orders via state bureaucratic authority.

### *The Cultural Revolution and Elite Politics in China*

It is widely acknowledged that Mao's motive in launching the Cultural Revolution was to shake up the party, the state, and the whole Chinese society.<sup>89</sup> As Mao himself remarked,

[The Cultural Revolution] isn't simply a question of replacing the Tsar with Khrushchev, one bourgeoisie with another, even if it's called communist. The thought, culture and customs which brought China to where we found her must disappear, the thought, customs, and culture of proletarian China, which does not yet exist, must appear.<sup>90</sup>

The scope and purposes of the Cultural Revolution are certainly not reducible to elite competitions.<sup>91</sup> Yet, for the sake of exploring the dynamics among institutional change, elite contests, and the politics of personal prestige, this study approaches the Cultural Revolution in terms of a series of conflicts among China's top leaders. In launching the Cultural Revolution, Mao did intend to eliminate his principal rivals, notably Liu Shaoqi and possibly Deng Xiaoping.<sup>92</sup> In Mao's view, these two leaders had betrayed his vision for continuous revolution in China. Specifically, Mao viewed the bureaucratic apparatus run by Liu and Deng as the major impediment to his effort to create an egalitarian Chinese society through constant mobilization of the grassroots population.<sup>93</sup> China's supreme leader thereby called upon the masses to rise up and overthrow a wide variety of sociopolitical institutions.<sup>94</sup> In

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<sup>89</sup> For Mao's motive in launching the Cultural Revolution, see MacFarquhar, *The Origins 3*; Dittmer, *Liu Shaoqi and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*; *China's Continuous Revolution*; Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and the Post-Mao Reforms*.

<sup>90</sup> Cited from Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 167-168.

<sup>91</sup> For the grassroots dynamics of the Cultural Revolution, see, for instance, Shaoguang Wang, *Failure of Charisma: The Cultural Revolution in Wuhan* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1995); Yang Su, *Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>92</sup> It is important to note that Mao intentionally separated Liu and Deng in terms of their "political errors"—that is, their challenge to his authority in the 1960s. However, with the radicalization of the mass movements during the Cultural Revolution, Deng and his family were compromised. See Yang Changgui, "Mao Zedong heshi tichu 'Liu Deng keyi fenkai'" [when did Mao suggest that Liu and Deng were separable], *Dangshi bolan* [general review of the Communist Party of China] no. 9 (2014); Deng Rong, *Wode fuqin Deng Xiaoping: wenge suiyue* [my father Deng Xiaoping: years of the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing: sanlian, 2012), 33-34.

<sup>93</sup> Lowell Dittmer, *Liu Shao-Chi and the Chinese Cultural Revolution: The Politics of Mass Criticism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1974).

<sup>94</sup> For the political history of the Cultural Revolution, see Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Harry Harding, "The Chinese State in Crisis," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

short, Mao was determined to overturn the whole bureaucratic infrastructure centered upon Liu – just as Zhou Enlai remarked, the Cultural Revolution was essentially a “life-or-death” ideological struggle.<sup>95</sup> Large-scale purges followed. Senior leaders were either forced out of their positions or marginalized in their decision-making role, and the majority of them were sent to labor camps in the countryside. Within a few months, the decision-making authority to which Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping had been entitled shifted to the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG), which fell under control of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing.<sup>96</sup> Needless to say, by late 1966 Mao emerged triumphant in his struggle with Liu and Deng.

In hindsight, the ease with which Mao ousted Liu and Deng out of power testifies to his unparalleled charismatic authority. While charisma is a crucial source of Mao’s authority, the Chairman would not have been able to reassert his charismatic authority without asserting prestige. As prestige is derivative of demonstrable symbols that make political audiences believe that someone is superior in characters or skills, it provides a layer of authority and is subject to the audiences’ perception of leaders’ performative acts. It was by virtue of rhetorical skills in deploying revolutionary discourses that Mao managed to establish personal authority against the state bureaucracies led by Liu. Throughout the second half of 1966, Mao put his prestige on display via meetings with the Red Guards at the Tiananmen Square.<sup>97</sup> On top of that, he authorized publication of a series of editorials by official media, which denounced the party elites as “capitalist roaders” – namely, the betrayers of the revolutionary ideal he himself embodied.<sup>98</sup> By criticizing the whole leadership via the editorials, Mao managed to reestablish ideological superiority over the rest of the party elite. In the process, prestige served as the central vehicle for political survival.

### **The Climax of China’s Pursuit of Delegitimation Strategy, 1965-1967**

By the mid-1960s, the Sino-Soviet rivalry had heightened the importance of ideological appeal as a vehicle for status competition that promised to enhance geopolitical security, and the intensification of the Mao-Liu schism had induced leaders in Beijing to boost personal prestige among the party elites. These incentives combined to motivate the Chinese leadership to delegitimize the Soviet leadership in the communist world. Following Kossygin’s aborted effort to promote Sino-Soviet détente, China stepped up competition with the Soviet Union for status preeminence in Vietnam.

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<sup>95</sup> Zhou Enlai *zhuan*, 1672.

<sup>96</sup> Deng, *Wode fuqin*, 33; Liu Shaoqi *zhuan*, 952-953, 962-964.

<sup>97</sup> MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, 106-110.

<sup>98</sup> Harding, “The Chinese State in Crisis,” in *The Politics of China*, 164-170.

*China's Competition with the Soviet Union for Status Preeminence in Vietnam*

Specifically, China was keen to dictate the manner in which the Vietnamese fought against the American forces. In fact, Beijing's leaders by 1964 had come to view the Soviet support for Vietnamese struggle as a step to encircle China.<sup>99</sup> Of course, the US threat remained a serious concern to the Chinese leadership. Their Vietnam policy after 1965, nevertheless, had come to assume a strong anti-Soviet stance. The Chinese government ostensibly allowed the Soviet Union to transport supplies to North Vietnam through the Chinese railway corridors.<sup>100</sup> And yet, logistical disputes soon emerged to plague the delivery process. The high-level officials in both Moscow and Beijing were reluctant to ease the matter.<sup>101</sup> Mao, in particular, portrayed Moscow's proposal for a Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese summit to achieve "concerted actions" as an attempt to bring the Chinese and other "brothers parties to obey their command." The Chinese thereby asserted that realignment with the Soviets in aiding the Vietnamese communists would help Moscow "promote the US-Soviet co-dominance over the world."<sup>102</sup>

If the geopolitical pressures from America's escalation of the Vietnam War after 1965 had been sufficient for the Sino-Soviet leaders to overcome their disputes, the leaders in Beijing would have welcomed and tried to facilitate the delivery of Soviet aid to the DRV. But it turned out that they were persistently opposed to Hanoi's acceptance of Soviet support. In October 1965, Zhou Enlai cautioned Pham Van Dong not to accept military equipment from the Soviets.<sup>103</sup> According to a Soviet intelligence report, Beijing did work to prevent the stationing of the Soviet heavy weapons in Chinese provinces close to Vietnam.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, China stepped up its military aid to Hanoi in 1965, which reached its peak in 1968, the height of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>105</sup> Such a dramatic increase of Chinese aid was in large part motivated by the imperative to compete with the Soviets for status preeminence in Indochina. Arguably, the prospect of Hanoi leaning toward Moscow was more imminent than the expansion of military conflicts to the Chinese borders. For China's part, therefore, the DRV's importance in countering the Soviet design to encircle China from Southeast Asia had trumped its role as a counterweight to US military forces.

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<sup>99</sup> Up to Kosygin's visit to China, Khoo argues, "Mao viewed Soviets as an ideological *and* potential strategic threat to China with whom fundamental compromise was not possible." See Khoo, *Collateral Damage*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 150.

<sup>101</sup> Li Danhui, "Zhongsu zai yuanyuekangmei wenti shang de chongtu yu maodun," 119-120.

<sup>102</sup> *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* vol. 11, 394-395.

<sup>103</sup> In Zhou's words, "during the time Khrushchev was in power, the Soviets could not divide us because Khrushchev did not help you much. The Soviets are now assisting you. But their help is not sincere.....I do not support the idea of Soviet volunteers going to Vietnam, nor [do I support] Soviet aid to Vietnam." See Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, Beijing, 9 October 1965, in *77 Conversations*, 87.

<sup>104</sup> Note on a Conversation with an Unnamed Representative of the International Department of the CPSU CC on the Situation in Vietnam, 9 July 1965 [Excerpts], in "Twenty-Four Soviet-Bloc Documents on Vietnam," 384.

<sup>105</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 137.

At a meeting with the Albanian party leaders Enver Hoxha in late March, Zhou elaborated on the rationales behind Beijing's pursuit of delegitimation strategy against Moscow. This conversation arguably reveals genuine motives on the Chinese part. Albania's alliance relationship with China was largely symbolic, as the country was geographically remote from China and not powerful in material terms. It could not help further China's geopolitical security; rather, its role was to boost China's propaganda campaign against the Soviet Union around the globe. As such, Zhou had every reason to share his thought with this foreign guest in order to keep this ideological ally. While stressing that "the most important [enemy] is.....American imperialism,"<sup>106</sup> the Chinese premier spent more time denouncing the Soviet Union for colliding with the Americans. Zhou asserted in particular that, "Vietnam and Indochina have become the center of the war against American imperialism, modern revisionism, and the reactionaries of the various countries."<sup>107</sup> As a corollary, the Soviet proposal for any kind of peace must be rejected. This line of reasoning figured prominently in Chinese diplomatic strategy. In May, Zhou Enlai insisted to Ho Chi Minh that the Soviet proposal for the cease-fire dialogue between Hanoi and Washington was to "put the NLF [the Hanoi-sponsored guerilla forces] aside and sell out its brothers." Deng Xiaoping went on to argue that Moscow's aid to Hanoi was designed to serve its self-interests and the Chinese were willing to expose this on the Vietnamese behalf.<sup>108</sup> All these remarks resonated with Mao's emphasis on the need to step up military struggles in Vietnam.<sup>109</sup> For the Chinese leaders, any form of military cooperation would increase Hanoi's dependence on the Soviet Union, a superpower they now deemed as a geopolitical threat.

The Chinese leaders not only engaged in the rhetoric of criticizing the alleged Soviet collusion with the US in suppressing the revolutions worldwide; they also made efforts to exemplify what a faithful revolutionary diplomacy should look like. Here, what differentiates the Chinese support for the Vietnamese struggles against the US from its pursuit of offensive alliance with the DRV was that Beijing tried to dictate *how* the Vietnamese should fight against the Americans. It is worth noting that the symbolic value of the Chinese aid to North Vietnam far exceeded its material function of fighting against the US forces. The Chinese aid by itself was actually insufficient to guarantee a military success of the DRV—as Ho Chi Minh said in private, "the Chinese aid was insignificant."<sup>110</sup> By contrast, the Soviet missiles proved to have boosted the DRV's defense performance

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<sup>106</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Comrade Zhou Enlai and Party and State Leaders of the PRA, 27-29 March 1965, in "Albania is not Cuba.' Sino-Albanian Summits and the Sino-Soviet Split," 273.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>108</sup> Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and Ho Chi Minh, Beijing, May 17, 1965, in *77 Conversations*, 85.

<sup>109</sup> Mao Zedong and Hoang Van Hoan, Beijing, July 16, 1965, in *77 Conversations*, 87.

<sup>110</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 334.

tremendously.<sup>111</sup> The Chinese leaders were unimpressed. They instead justified their opposition to the Soviet aid by invoking the People's War doctrine, thereby seeking to display the appeal of China's revolutionary ideology. On this matter, the prevailing ideological discourse in China frequently found its way into the diplomatic statements made by the top leaders in Beijing. Specifically, Zhou Enlai protested to Ho against Hanoi's acceptance of Soviet military aid by asserting that the war "could only be won if it was played by the way China had outlined: Mao's strategy of a people's war."<sup>112</sup> In a speech titled "Long Live the People's War," Defense Minister Lin Biao chastised the Soviet leadership since Khrushchev for seeking peace with the imperialists to demoralize revolutionary forces across the world. Accordingly, Lin extolled Mao's revolutionary doctrine and asserted that the Chinese model of mobilizing the mass has worldwide applicability.<sup>113</sup> In the speech, Lin mentioned Vietnam most frequently as the place where the international revolutionary forces were gaining strength. A rising star in Chinese politics after 1962, Lin followed Mao closely in indoctrinating the military with Mao's ideological thinking. At the critical juncture of late 1965 when the Mao-Liu conflict was at its zenith, many leaders in Beijing certainly could not afford to depart from the Maoist ideology of war, which prioritized grassroots-based guerrilla warfare over military professionalism. By extolling the People's War doctrine, Lin bandwagoned with Mao in order to boost personal prestige.<sup>114</sup>

As a corollary of promoting its own model of revolutionary warfare, the Chinese declined various offers for negotiating an end to the Vietnam War. They insisted that the Vietnamese persevere in their armed struggles, as this would allow Beijing to claim status preeminence over Moscow in terms of the ability to wage revolutions abroad. Hence, the Chinese leadership not only refused to cooperate with Moscow for negotiating any form of peace in Indochina; they also took this opportunity to assault the Soviet credibility in assuming the leadership in the anti-imperialist drive. Between 1965 and 1968, Beijing rejected a number of international initiatives committed to a negotiated peace Indochina.<sup>115</sup> The fact that Moscow was an active force behind many of these peace initiatives gave Beijing considerable ammunition in pursuit of its delegitimation strategy.<sup>116</sup> During the bombing

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<sup>111</sup> Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, 59.

<sup>112</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 320.

<sup>113</sup> Lin Biao, *Renmin zhanzheng wansui* [Long live, People's war] (Beijing: renmin, 1988).

<sup>114</sup> The Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing's fall out of favor with Mao is a case in point. Luo had long been an advocate of developing professional armies for national defense. In the context of US escalating conflict in Vietnam, Mao initially endorsed Luo's plans for intensifying professional military training and rationalizing the strategic planning system. However, Mao changed his idea soon after Lin Biao accused Luo of following a Soviet revisionist line. Accordingly, Luo was dismissed, and his fall out of favor led to his persecution by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. See *Luo Ruiqing zhuan* [biography of Luo Ruiqing] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo, 1991), chaps. 14-15.

<sup>115</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 157.

<sup>116</sup> Indeed, the Soviet policy in this period was intended to woo the Vietnamese from the Chinese side. See Gaiduk, *The*

pause over the 1965 Christmas holiday, the senior diplomat Averell Harriman and the vice president in the Johnson administration, Hubert Humphery, travelled around the world to spread the message of Johnson's readiness to negotiate without conditions. A senior official in the Polish Foreign Ministry, Jerzy Michalowski, also took Harriman's visit to his country as a chance for building bridge between the US and the Sino-Vietnamese bloc. In China, however, the polish diplomat only managed to see deputy foreign minister Wang Bingnan who rejected his peace proposals.<sup>117</sup> In a similar vein, Soviet politburo member Alexander Shlepin was given a cold shoulder in Beijing where Mao only sent deputy premier Li Xiannian to meet with him. Li urged the Soviets to step up pressures on the US in Berlin and West Germany; as such, the Chinese implicitly asked the Soviets to demonstrate they were faithful revolutionaries.<sup>118</sup> It was inconceivable that Moscow would follow the Chinese advice to reverse its policy of détente with Washington. The Chinese purpose, in fact, was not to coordinate with the Soviets in an effort to tilt the global balance of power to their favor. Rather, Beijing simply wanted to embarrass Moscow, which had long been the center of aspiration for socialist and nationalist revolutions around the world. Revealing the Soviets' lack of faith in supporting revolutions in the Third World could serve to delegitimize the Soviet authority in the international communist hierarchy. In stressing the need for armed struggles, Mao invoked an ideological rationale. "The struggle against modern revisionism is the international duty of all Marxist-Leninist," he argued in a meeting with Ho Chi Minh. But he also urged the DRV leader to "consider in what kind of a situation [North Vietnam] will be once [Soviet] revisionism has left the stage."<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, the Chinese were not immune to geostrategic ramifications in the pursuit of great-power status vis-à-vis the Soviets in Southeast Asia. Beijing's overriding objective was to keep Hanoi as a faithful ally. A December 1965 report from the Soviet embassy in Hanoi reveals the geopolitical rationale behind China's policy of status competition. According to the report, China's staunch opposition to peace negotiations "contains the actions of the Vietnamese, reinforces their inflexible positions.....and *in practice* means the tying of the Vietnamese side to the Chinese line."<sup>120</sup> At a later moment, the Chinese premier was quite explicit about China's own security imperatives, as he pointed out to Pham Van Dong, "for a long time, the United States has been half-encircling China. Now the Soviet Union is also encircling China. The circle is getting complete, except [the part of]

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*Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, chap. 5.

<sup>117</sup> Zhai, "Beijing and the Vietnam Peace Talks," 12.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. Also see Janos Radvanyi, *Delusion and Reality: Gambits, Hoaxes, and Diplomatic One-Upmanship in Vietnam* (South Bend, Ind.: Regnery Publishing, 1978), 167.

<sup>119</sup> Excerpts from a Note by GDR Ambassador to the DRV Kohrt on the Current Policy of the Chinese Leadership, 11 December 1965, in "Twenty-Four Soviet-Bloc Documents on Vietnam," 385.

<sup>120</sup> Cited in Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 165.

Vietnam.”<sup>121</sup> As such, Beijing’s assertion of ideological superiority over Moscow acted as a form of soft power to expel the Soviet influences from its southern vicinity. China sought to advance geopolitical security through competitive status-seeking acts.

To summarize, through the substantial aid to Hanoi for its struggle against America, China sought to delegitimize the Soviet credentials for leading the anti-imperialist drive in the international arena. Delegitimation strategy helped to signal Chinese prestige based on the ideological appeal of the Chinese communist regime. It reached a climax after Kosygin’s aborted effort to promote Sino-Soviet cooperation in supporting Hanoi’s armed struggle against the American forces. From 1965 to 1967, both the geopolitical threat facing China and the elite conflict within the country had intensified to an unprecedented degree for China. Mao was particularly active in promoting anti-Soviet stance. In an effort to promote revolution in Vietnam, Mao asserted China’s great-power status vis-à-vis the Soviets in terms of commitment to revolutionary struggles against the capitalist order. Domestically, this strategy also worked to put other leaders at a disadvantage in the run-up to the Cultural Revolution. A variant of competitive status-seeking strategy, delegitimation strategy helped Mao signal resolve to defend the Chinese communist state against the pernicious influence of Soviet revisionism; in this way, it also served as an ideological weapon against those who appeared to have acted against his ideological doctrines. It was through such symbolic acts in the international arena that Mao managed to reassert personal authority on the home front, which was necessary for launching large-scale political campaign in 1966-1967.

It is conceivable, though, that Mao genuinely tried to promote China’s status within the international communist movement. That is, his staunch support for the Hanoi regime might be motivated by the desire to demonstrate Beijing’s competence in living up to the revolutionary doctrine of fighting against imperialists.<sup>122</sup> That desire might be genuine on Mao’s part and shared by other top leaders—in this sense, the Chinese leaders might have valued status in its own right. True, Mao could see intrinsic value in Hanoi’s application of his revolutionary doctrines for fighting against the US in Indochina. But this value was indeed congruent with the need for political survival and China’s geopolitical interests. Undeniably, China’s pursuit of delegitimation strategy against the Soviets could serve Beijing’s geopolitical interest by keeping Hanoi within the Chinese orbit. Also, it might help Mao outmaneuver his domestic political rivals who had appeared as acting against his ideological beliefs. Moreover, focusing on Mao’s ideological predisposition is neither sufficient nor necessary for explaining the Chinese aversion to Hanoi accepting any peace

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<sup>121</sup> Zhou Enlai, Kang Sheng, Pham Van Dong, Beijing, 29 April 1968, in Chen Jian Odd Arne Westad, Stein Tonnesson, Nguyen Vu Tung, and James Hershberg, ed. *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977*, vol. 22, Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Working Paper (May 1998), 127.

<sup>122</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, chap 10; Christensen, *Worse than Monolith*, chaps 5-6.

initiatives from the international community. In what follows, it shall be shown that after Hanoi dealt a fatal blow to America's fighting spirit through the Tet Offensive in 1968, Chinese leaders began to favor the negotiation approach as adopted by their Vietnamese counterparts. The shift in China's approach to the Vietnam War was driven by an acute sense of the Soviet threat, as well as the changing domestic political environment. The prestige politics on the domestic front had come to attenuate with the establishment of absolute authority of Mao. The Chinese leaders thus gained more autonomy in taking a relatively risk-averse approach to coping with the Soviet threat.

### **Toward the Ninth Party Congress: Domestic Order Consolidation and the End of China's Delegitimation Strategy**

The years of 1966-1967 witnessed the most radical phase of the Cultural Revolution. Social disorders, terrors of anarchy, and group violence incidents reigned across China in this period. The collapse of state bureaucracies deprived Liu of his power base—as such, Mao emerged triumphant in the power struggle that began in 1962. Subsequently, he turned attention to the imperative of restoring orders at home. True, the dynamics of elite conflict were still of much relevance to what happened after 1968, and ruthless conflicts among the Politburo elite were indeed a central characteristic of Chinese politics till Mao's death in 1976. However, all these things should not belie the fact that the Chairman was unchallengeable at home during most of the Cultural Revolution. As such, he no longer needed prestige to legitimize personal authority. It was prestige that stemmed from his authority rather than the other way around.

In 1968, as Mao made his mind to restore orders by sending in the People's Liberation Army, he was determined to restore social orders, and reunify the Politburo elite around him. His ultimate purpose was to restore orders and re-institutionalize the pre-Cultural Revolution practices. As two leading historians on the Cultural Revolution note, "the reconstructed political system was in the end not so much what Mao might have called a 'negation' of what had preceded it, as a modified version staffed by new people, principally PLA officers."<sup>123</sup> For all its inadequacies, this system accommodated no rival factions to Mao. So there was no need for Mao to resort to prestige as a vehicle for authority contests. On top of that, the Wuhan Incident in the summer of 1967 laid bare the limits of the Chairman's charismatic authority. That incident happened as a mob of soldiers and party cadres in Wuhan detained the senior officials sent from Beijing to mediate local factional conflicts. Mao was scheduled to meet with the mass rallies in Wuhan at that time, but the

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<sup>123</sup> See MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 247.

spot was too chaotic to guarantee his physical security if he made a public appearance.<sup>124</sup> The Wuhan Incident reveals that “[Mao’s] personal authority gave him enough power to unleash potent social forces.....but not enough power to control them.”<sup>125</sup> Shocked by the Wuhan Incident, Mao decided to enforce social orders. State apparatus was a critical vehicle for him to attain this end, as they would arguably be more effective than grassroots organizations in imposing disciplines.

Now the supreme leader was determined to subordinate his prestige to political institutions. Toward this end, Mao needed the old cadres to help him restore social orders. Many of the old cadres in the political wilderness after late 1966 had close connections with the military; as such, they could provide the last resort for Mao to maintain regime stability.<sup>126</sup> Mao’s decision to bring them back to power showed his disinclination to continue to rely upon prestige for political survival.

Indeed, there is no good reason to resort to prestige politics for consolidating authority when Mao already stood unrivaled domestically. With the removal of Liu out of the political arena and the Liu-led state bureaucracies overturned, Mao had put in place his idealized institutions. At least this was what he declared to be by the end of 1967—and so personal prestige was no longer a dominant vehicle for domestic legitimation. According to an expert on the Cultural Revolution, “labeling Liu Shaoqi the number one enemy served a dual purpose: it answered Mao’s psychological need to find a ‘Chinese Khrushchev,’ and it provided a common target for mass criticism.”<sup>127</sup> More important, eliminating the “Chinese Khrushchev” signified Mao’s political triumph. As such, the Party elite and the whole nation could rally around Mao who was poised to reverse the chaotic course of the Cultural Revolution.

Absent prestige politics at home, the Chinese leadership could address the security imperatives on their own merits without implicating their own prestige in foreign policy decisions—as least Mao was able to do this and relieve other leaders of concerns for personal prestige. Meanwhile, developments in the Vietnam War also reduced the incentive for Chinese leaders to continue their policy of status competition. The Tet Offensive signaled Hanoi’s quest for independence from Beijing’s tutelage in fighting against the Americans. In tactical terms, the Tet Offensive signified Hanoi’s departure from protracted guerrilla warfare in rural areas—a strategy that the Chinese had strongly recommended—in favor of positional warfare targeting the cities.<sup>128</sup> The political implication was that Hanoi would no

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<sup>124</sup> MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, 199-214.

<sup>125</sup> Harding, “The Chinese State in Crisis,” in *The Politics of China*, 147-48.

<sup>126</sup> Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, chap. 5.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>128</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 176-79.

longer act under Beijing's guidance on military matters.<sup>129</sup> On top of that, Hanoi's shift toward positional warfare increased the importance of Soviet weapon support. As long as Hanoi wanted to continue its fight, its reliance on the Soviet material aid was to grow; accordingly, its tilt toward Moscow was irreversible over time.<sup>130</sup> In short, Hanoi's decision on the Tet Offensive indicated that Beijing's delegitimation strategy had almost failed.

Moreover, China's geopolitical environment was undergoing profound changes. America's unilateral halt of bombing North Vietnam indicated a reduction of the military threat in Indochina. And despite the continued Soviet influences in Vietnam, the focus of Sino-Soviet rivalry increasingly shifted to the north in 1968. The militarization of the Sino-Soviet northeastern border and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 combined to convince the Chinese leaders that the probability of the Soviet interference in Chinese domestic politics was high.<sup>131</sup> Finally, Hanoi's refusal to join the Chinese in condemning the Soviet invasion demonstrated that Beijing's delegitimation strategy against Moscow in Indochina was hard to sustain.<sup>132</sup> Equally important, the Soviets had proved themselves more capable of providing material aid that the Vietnamese needed. The year 1967 saw the largest Vietnamese request of Soviet aid, a testimony that the Chinese were no rival to the Soviets in sustaining an anti-imperialist stance.<sup>133</sup>

Given all these developments, China had come close to falling out of favor with the Vietnamese communists. For Beijing's part, then, stabilizing the situation in Indochina began to take priority over the pursuit of delegitimation strategy against Moscow. That could allow China to shift more attention and energy toward addressing the Soviet threat elsewhere. Confronted with this imperative, the Chinese became reluctant to persevere in their competition with the Soviets for Hanoi's mind and heart. Rather, the Chinese leaders could only complain about the North Vietnamese departure from their favored policy line. Upon knowing Hanoi's decision to negotiate, Zhou Enlai argued to the North Vietnamese counterparts that Hanoi had agreed prematurely to the American negotiation offer without gaining sufficient advantages on the battlefield.<sup>134</sup> On this occasion, the chief party ideologue Kang Sheng made no reference to the people's war doctrine that had previously

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<sup>129</sup> Indeed, during the planning period, Le Duan had repeatedly defied Beijing's recommendation that Hanoi conduct a war of attrition. See Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 95-96.

<sup>130</sup> As diplomatic historian Gaiduk notes, the Soviet Union "in 1968 became the principal supplier of arms, ammunition, and equipment." Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, 64. For sure, Gaiduk doubts whether Moscow's influence went hand in hand with the increase of military aid to Hanoi; it is nevertheless true that Hanoi took advice from the Soviets in initiating the Paris peace talks. Specifically, according to Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, "Hanoi followed Moscow's advice to consent to private meetings that had a greater chance to produce substantial progress." See Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 121.

<sup>131</sup> Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 203-10.

<sup>132</sup> Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, 177.

<sup>133</sup> Information, [undated], in "Twenty-Four Soviet-Bloc Documents on Vietnam," 396.

<sup>134</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 172-73.

linked the Cultural Revolution's ideological zeal to the Vietnam War.<sup>135</sup> The Chinese, though, made repeated assertions to the North Vietnamese that the Soviets would be unreliable and that cooperation with them would not Hanoi's interests. But it is worth noting here that they no longer pressured their Vietnamese counterparts to follow their ideological guidance.

China's approach to the Vietnam War took a radical turn when Beijing endorsed Hanoi's participation in the Paris negotiation with Washington.<sup>136</sup> Mao, in particular, decided that the Chinese support for negotiation could better help the Vietnamese. "We agree with your slogan of fighting while negotiating. Some comrades worry that the US will deceive you. But I tell them not to [worry], negotiations are just like fighting."<sup>137</sup>

The Chinese enthusiasm for supporting Hanoi's war effort also waned. As he told the DRV prime minister, "keep what you still need and we withdraw what you no longer need or do not yet need."<sup>138</sup> "After the opening of the Paris peace talks," historian Zhai Qiang observes, "China began to pull back its support troops from the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam]. It completed the withdrawal of its antiaircraft artillery units in March 1969. By July 1970 all the rest of the Chinese support troops had returned home."<sup>139</sup> China had never ceased its anti-Soviet rhetoric afterwards. But for delegitimation strategy to work, words need to be coupled with deeds. Through its unconditional support for Hanoi's fight against the American military presence in Indochina, Beijing had tried unsuccessfully to outcompete Moscow in terms of commitment to anti-imperialist revolutionary doctrines. The departure from this position thus signaled Beijing's abandonment of delegitimizing the Soviet leadership role in the communist world. It is also important to note that by encouraging negotiations Beijing was in effect taking the Soviet stance, which they previously stigmatized as an act of collusion with the imperialists. Needless to say, Beijing had come to phase out its delegitimation strategy.<sup>140</sup>

Beijing's abandonment of delegitimation strategy was made possible by the attenuation of elite infighting in Chinese domestic politics after 1968. Prior to 1968, Mao supported

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<sup>135</sup> For Kang Sheng's words, see *77 Conversations*, 128-131.

<sup>136</sup> Khoo, *Collateral Damage*, 39-41.

<sup>137</sup> Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, Beijing, 17 November, 1968, in *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 179.

<sup>140</sup> China resumed massive delivery of aid to Vietnam in 1971. But this was not designed to demonstrate China's ideological commitment to the Vietnamese revolution; rather, China intended its aid to help the Vietnamese fight more effectively against the US forces and accordingly, to pressure the US to conclude the Paris peace agreement. As the Chinese leaders believed, this would help disengage the US from military and diplomatic commitments in Vietnam and keep the Vietnam issue from complicating the US-China collaboration against the Soviet Union. See Li Danhui, "Zhongmei huanhe yu yuanyue kangmei: zhongguo waijiao zhanlue tiaozheng zhong de yuenan yinsu" [the US-China rapprochement and the China's efforts to aid Vietnam and struggle against the US: the Vietnam factor in the adjustment of Chinese foreign policy strategy], *Dangde wenxian* [party literature], no. 3 (2002), 73-76.

Vietnamese fighting America *partly* in order to boost personal prestige and discredit his political rivals. With this objective accomplished after the purge of Liu and Deng, geopolitical issues rose to the top of Mao's agenda. Absent the need to use national security strategy as an instrument in domestic prestige politics, Mao could rely upon other risk-averse strategies than delegitimation strategy to address the Soviet threat.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter addresses a second variant of competitive status-seeking strategy as practiced by Chinese leaders: delegitimation strategy. It is particularly focused on the implications of the Sino-Soviet split for China's approach to the Vietnam War after 1965. With Moscow showing a tendency to intervene in Vietnam, the delegitimizing rhetoric employed by Beijing in the early 1960s began to evolve into delegitimation strategy, which could serve to extrude the Soviet influence from Indochina. With the post-GLF dynamics of institutional change heightening individual leaders' reliance upon personal prestige, on the other hand, the Chinese leaders—notably Mao Zedong—had growing incentives to opt for delegitimation strategy—a variant of competitive status-seeking strategy—that promises to serve their geopolitical and domestic political ends. As such, China's delegitimation strategy against the Soviet Union reflects the instrumental roles of personal prestige and great-power status—specifically, it underscores the importance of prestige in legitimizing leaders' personal authority at home, and the relevance of great-power status to China's geopolitical security.

The escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965 presents a critical case for testing this claim against competing hypotheses. Defensive realism posits that external imperatives can motivate a prudent policy of balancing. This hypothesis is disconfirmed by the fact that the concern for personal prestige—fueled by institutional change dynamics—did hinder Beijing from joining forces with Moscow to support Hanoi's fight against the United States. On the other hand, the authoritarian politics thesis seems well placed for explaining Mao's persistent tendency to compete with the Soviet Union for leadership of the international communist movement. This thesis, however, is indeterminate as regards the concrete strategies by which Mao competed with Moscow. Arguably, Mao's delegitimizing rhetoric on Moscow's betrayal of revolutionary Leninism reflected an idiosyncratic preference for preeminence in the communist world. However, personal idiosyncrasies as a constant cannot explain variation in China's international conduct. Specifically, the personality factor does not explain why Mao did not translate delegitimizing rhetoric into competitive acts against the Soviets in Africa, whereas he did so in Vietnam. As such, focusing on the characters of authoritarian leaders does not offer sufficient explanatory leverage over the

variation in China's international conduct.

By contrast, my argument suggests that leaders would opt for competitive status-seeking strategy when they face the need to assert great-power status in response to geopolitical threats and rely on prestige for their political survival at home—in so doing, they assert (but not necessarily gain) great-power status and personal prestige to both geopolitical and domestic political rivals. This argument not only explains the anomaly in Chinese security policy seen from the defensive realist standpoint, but also addresses the variation in a crucial aspect of Chinese international conduct—namely, the translation of delegitimizing rhetoric into delegitimation strategy against the Soviet influences in Vietnam. The argument advanced here, however, does not seek to explain all cases of Chinese promotion of revolutions in the Third World. Indeed, the Chinese support for the Third World revolutions beyond Vietnam receives scant attention here. Investigating why China launched comprehensive campaigns to discredit the Soviet leadership in the communist world is certainly important in its own right.<sup>141</sup> That said, inasmuch as this study is focused on the relevance of security imperatives to competitive status-seeking acts, it is appropriate to select the Vietnam War as a case study.

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<sup>141</sup> See, for instance, Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 160-70.

## Chapter 5

### China's Use of Military Force: From the 1969 Border Conflict to the Invasion of Vietnam in 1979

*Our proposals are: (1) Our border garrisons should not respond to the demands of the Soviet border garrisons. (2) We should adjust the positions of our cannons, aiming at the enemy's artillery posts and concealed concentration areas for T-62 tanks and armored vehicles. After the enemy artillery has fired for a few days, we should suddenly fire back, causing heavy casualties for them. We should then issue our protest statement.*

**Zhou Enlai's report to Mao Zedong and Lin Biao (April 1969)<sup>1</sup>**

*We find that Vietnam has become totally Soviet-controlled, and the fact of its flagrant invasion of Cambodia, its plot to establish an Indochinese Federation under Vietnamese control is more grave than you think.....Proceeding therefore from global strategic as well as from Asian considerations, we consider it necessary to put a restraint on the wild ambition of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate limited lesson.*

**Deng Xiaoping's conversation with Jimmy Carter (January 1979)<sup>2</sup>**

This chapter addresses a third variety of competitive status-seeking strategy in Chinese security policy: the use of military force. Given its conceptual proximity to coercive diplomacy, this chapter in the first place tries to empirically distinguish coercive diplomacy from a competitive status-seeking policy of using force. A second task then is to examine how great-power status and personal prestige could take on instrumental roles for state leaders and motivate their pursuit of competitive status-seeking strategy.

It is critical to note that *not* all policies involving the use of force qualify as a strategy for competitive status-seeking strategy. When it comes to the use of military power, competitive status-seeking strategy entails states demonstrating military power as a symbol of status. To this end, leaders would place a premium on the symbolic value of military power. Thus, a state's international conduct may exhibit a lack of specification of political demands on the adversary prior to the employment of military power. In addition, the use of military power for the purpose of competitive status-seeking strategy would lack the reassurance

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Report, Zhou Enlai to Mao Zedong and Lin Biao, 3 April 1969, in "New Evidence on Sino-Soviet Rapprochement," in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 11 (Winter 1998), 162. For the original text, see *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan*, vol., 554-55.

<sup>2</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, vol. XIII (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2013), 767-68.

component essential to the conduct of coercive diplomacy. Finally, for the practitioners of competitive status-seeking strategy to enhance the prospects of success in achieving preeminent status internationally, they would prefer not targeting the chief adversary, which is higher-ranked and often militarily powerful. Instead, the leaders would likely impose military punishment on a materially weaker state aligned with their major geopolitical adversary. All these behavioral traits are sufficient to differentiate status competition from coercive diplomacy when it comes the display of military power.

The two cases examined here illustrate these differences between a military strategy of status seeking and coercive diplomacy. While in both cases China employed military power, the two cases assume dissimilar characteristics. China's use of military force against the Soviet border guards in 1969 approximates to a model of coercive diplomacy. In this case Beijing's leaders stressed the need to stabilize the border conditions and went to considerable lengths to deescalate tensions with the Soviets. By contrast, China's military operation against Vietnam in 1979 was designed to punish Hanoi for its alignment with the Soviet Union and the occupation of Cambodia, China's crucial diplomatic partner in Southeast Asia. Apparently, the use of military force by China in 1979 did not aim at altering Vietnam's international conduct immediately. In this case, China's conflict strategy features a lack of specification of demands on Vietnam, and Beijing's signaling of self-restraint to Hanoi was half-hearted. China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 as such is better categorized as competitive status-seeking strategy against the Soviet Union, whose support for Vietnam is directly accountable for China's military acts.

Why did the conflict behaviors undertaken by the Chinese leaders differ so significantly between the 1969 Sino-Soviet and the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border wars? Through an examination of China's conflict strategy in 1969, the development of US-China relations, and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in February 1979, this chapter argues that state leaders are not likely to opt for competitive status-seeking strategy unless institutional change dynamics at home fuel their concerns for personal prestige while geopolitical threats encourage them to assert great-power status which provides a route to security. In the 1969 case, only a geopolitical threat is present. When individual leaders do not need rely on personal prestige as a vehicle for consolidating domestic authority, there are no concerns for personal prestige and so leaders' implementation of conflict strategy approximates the model of coercive diplomacy. This was manifest in Beijing's defensive posture and demonstrated restraint during the Zhenbao Island crisis. In the 1979 case, the Sino-Soviet rivalry had featured elements of military confrontation and the Deng-Hua struggle for post-Mao institutional reforms heightened the instrumental importance of personal prestige as a resource for political survival. Correspondingly, China's conflict behaviors exhibited elements of

competitive status-seeking strategy. Typically, it chose a lesser power—Vietnam—as the direct target of military operation. In addition, China fell short in specifying its demand on Vietnam and trying to reassure Hanoi of the limits of its actions prior to the 1979 military invasion.

The two cases of China's use of military power also contrast with the case of US-China rapprochement. The US-China rapprochement shows that absent pressures for institutional change, leaders would not rely upon prestige as a vehicle to legitimize their power at home. As such, they could afford to make concessions with the adversary.

### **The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict**

In early 1969 Mao took an important step to restore domestic orders by convening the party elite across the country to Beijing for the Ninth Party Congress. As many of the delegates to the congress were radicals who benefited from the Chairman's campaign to overthrow the old bureaucratic elites, they arguably harbored full-hearted loyalty to Mao who now decided to end the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>3</sup> The Ninth Party Congress signified Mao's ability to impose solidarity upon the party elite. Arguably he would enjoy considerable latitude in conducting national security strategy. It was striking to audiences in China and beyond that during this period Mao escalated conflict with the Soviet Union over the Zhenbao Island, a disputed territory on the Sino-Soviet borders. Why did this armed clash happen? What factors could inform Mao's decision to take on the Soviets?

#### *The Escalation of the Sino-Soviet Border Rivalry*

Mao's decision to escalate conflict against the Soviet Union in 1969 is explicable in light of his threat perception of the Soviet intent of encroaching on the Chinese borders.

Early in July 1964, Mao was keen on emphasizing the existing Sino-Soviet tensions. He reacted vehemently to the signing of a Soviet-Outer Mongolian defense agreement.<sup>4</sup> In this context, he intensified criticism of past Russia-Soviet imperialist practices before a group of Japanese visitors in the same month. However, Mao's statement worked to sabotage the border negotiations between the Chinese and Soviet diplomats, which had come close to a successful end.<sup>5</sup> One of Mao's close associates recalled that Mao did not want to achieve any concrete result in the negotiation.<sup>6</sup>

This piece of evidence should be treated with caution. It is likely though that Mao probably intended to advertise an imperialist image of the Soviet Union, which could help

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<sup>3</sup> MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 288-89.

<sup>4</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 276.

<sup>5</sup> Li, "Cong fenlie dao duikang, 1960-1978," in *Zhongsu guanxi shigang*, 396.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 396 (fn. 5).

to justify his anti-Soviet rhetoric. He thus might have intended the anti-Soviet rhetoric as a prelude to the full-fledged practice of delegitimation strategy. Equally important, however, Mao's perception of the Soviet threat might have gone beyond border issues. The Chinese fear of encirclement by superpowers was persistently intense during the Cold War—and this misgiving just intensified after the mid-1960s. The Soviet-Mongolian Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance was signed in 1966, as the Cultural Revolution chaos attended by the ideological excesses posed an unprecedented threatening image to both countries.<sup>7</sup> The treaty signified a formal alliance against China: it allowed the Soviets to station increasing military forces along the Chinese borders.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the promulgation of the Brezhnev Doctrine afterwards signaled Moscow's resolve to eliminate by force the perceived rivals within the socialist camp.<sup>9</sup> These developments in and beyond China's neighborhood deeply unsettled Mao, who arranged for the publication of a People's Daily editorial denouncing the Soviet invasion of a small country.<sup>10</sup> Reportedly, Mao even stated that the Soviet army would invade China to bring the "revisionists" back to power.<sup>11</sup> At various meetings with foreign delegations, Mao and Zhou invariably charged the Soviet military invention as an imperialist practice.<sup>12</sup>

Reportedly, there occurred over four thousand border clashes from October 1964 to the Zhenbao Island clashes. Although this number might be exaggerated, it nevertheless testified to the severity of Sino-Soviet tensions along the borders.<sup>13</sup> Such level of security threat was serious enough to warrant the use of military force, by which leaders in Beijing could signal Chinese resolve for defending their territorial claims and deter the Soviet force. Yet, Chinese military response was characterized by a great deal of self-restraint. As Beijing's leaders took pains to contain the conflict in intensity and scope, the Chinese behavior approximates coercive diplomacy more than competitive status-seeking strategy.

### *China's Coercive Diplomacy toward the Soviet Union*

On March 2, the local Chinese military units clashed with the Soviet forces. There is no

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<sup>7</sup> Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 174-195; Sergey Radchenko, "The Soviets' Best Friend in Asia: The Mongolian Dimension of the Sino-Soviet Split," *Cold War international History Project (CWIHP) Working Paper*, no. 42 (November 2003): 16-19.

<sup>8</sup> Xu Yan, "1969 nian zhongsu bianjie de wuzhuang chongtu" [The 1969 Armed Conflict on Sino-Soviet Border], *Dangdai shi yanjiu ziliao* [studies of contemporary history], no. 5, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6 [the chronological records of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2013), 188.

<sup>11</sup> See Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 210.

<sup>12</sup> See Chen, *Mao's China*, 245.

<sup>13</sup> Niu Jun, "1969 nian zhongsu bianjie chongtu yu zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng" [the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict and the adjustment of China's foreign policy strategy], *dangdai zhongguoshi yanjiu* [studies of modern Chinese history], no. 1 (1999), 71.

definitive conclusion as to who shot first, but it is highly likely that the Chinese did.<sup>14</sup> In the following days, the concentration of Soviet troops along the borders brought the conflict to the verge of an all-out war between the two nations. The second violent clash took place on March 15 on a more intensive scale. As both sides were better prepared for the fight, they inflicted more casualties on each other.<sup>15</sup> The Soviet side followed up with a series of threatening and conciliatory moves to bring down Beijing's resolve. On April 26 Moscow proposed to resume lower-level discussions on the border issue with Beijing. Reopened in late May, the negotiations made no substantial progress.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the Soviets undertook a series of preventive measures, including military deployment on the borders. They also instigated armed frictions in the border areas beyond the Zhenbao Island. From June to August small-scale clashes broke out in the widely scattered locations along the Sino-Soviet border.<sup>17</sup> Apparently, all of these acts were intended to pressure the Chinese to accept Moscow's terms in negotiations. In late August, the Soviet Union openly threatened nuclear attack on China. Meanwhile, the Soviets escalated the conflict by sending about three hundred soldiers – in conjunction with mechanized weapons and air force – to mount a conventional assault on Chinese border guards along the Xinjiang border.<sup>18</sup>

This attack drove home to the Chinese leaders the sense of an all-out war. While Zhou Enlai managed to arrange a meeting with the Soviet premier Kosygin at the Beijing airport, Mao was deeply worried that the Soviet Union would take the chance to launch a surprise attack on China.<sup>19</sup> To prevent escalation of the border conflict, he gave serious emphasis to confidence-building measures, and suggested that the border disputes could be shelved in order for both sides to establish peace.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, Sino-Soviet border tensions began to phase out.

China's conflict behavior during the Zhenbao Island crisis approximates to a model of coercive diplomacy more than that of competitive status-seeking strategy. Analytically, one can distinguish coercive diplomacy from competitive status-seeking strategy by observing

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<sup>14</sup> For the causes and details of the crisis, see Xu Yan, "1969 nian zhongsu bianjie de wuzhuang chongtu"; Kuisong Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History* 1, no. 1 (2000); Lyle Goldstein, "Return to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why It Matters," *The China Quarterly* 168 (2001); Richard Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics: A Study of Political Change and Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Robinson, "China Confronts the Soviet Union: Warfare and Diplomacy on China's Inner Asian Frontiers," in *The Cambridge History of China—The People's Republic (part 2): Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution, 1966-1982*, eds. Roderick MacFarquhar and John Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 260; Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969," 25-27; Yang, *Mao Zedong he mosike*, 499-500.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, "China Confronts the Soviet Union," 267-68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>18</sup> Li, "Cong fenlie dao duikang," 435-46.

<sup>19</sup> Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 343-44. In particular, Mao cancelled the annual celebration of the National Day so that party and government elites would not have to go to Beijing. See *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976*, vol. 6 (chronological records of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 2013), 267;

<sup>20</sup> Zhou Enlai *waijiao wenxuan*. 462-464.

whether the coercer state offers an opportunity for its target to back down. The instruction issued by the Central Military Commission in early 1968 showed the Chinese inclination to do so. "To resort to any kind of self-defense," it read, "you must see to it that courteous and peaceful means precede military action and that counterattacks are kept within Chinese territory."<sup>21</sup>

The central characteristic of Chinese conduct was a consistent effort to signal self-restraint while prosecuting the conflict for coercive purposes. Typically, China tried to avoid taking on the Soviets on a large scale. From 1966 on, armed frictions between the Chinese and Soviet personnel occurred frequently, as the Soviet border guards shifted to a more aggressive patrolling posture.<sup>22</sup> Mao encouraged the Chinese border guards to use force to counter Soviet aggressiveness, but at the same time he counseled restraint. In 1968, the Central Military Commission instructed local PLA officials to "follow the principle of 'giving tit-for-tat', 'gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck', and to 'use military operations to support the diplomatic struggle'."<sup>23</sup> This instruction suggests that Mao intended the tit-for-tat strategy to signal Chinese resolve for defending the borders rather than to gain local military advantages. Behind the use of force China's intention was defensive.

The Chinese leaders also micromanaged the tit-for-tat strategy to reassure the Soviets that China harbored no intention to escalate the scope and level of violence. The central leadership instructed that "counter-attacks, if any, [were to be conducted] in a concentrated way.....as quickly as possible without getting tied down by the enemy."<sup>24</sup> This strategy, though, failed to deter the Soviets from enhancing their military presence on the borders—and this led to the March 2 ambush by the Chinese border guards of the Soviet soldiers. Nevertheless, in the middle of the conflict escalation, Mao again counseled restraint. On March 15, as the second armed conflict erupted Mao suggested that while it was important to enhance China's military preparedness for the long term, the current Sino-Soviet hostilities should not be related to any kind of "great war" (*da zhan*).<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, he endorsed the military's proposal not to retaliate immediately against the Soviet shelling on April 3.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, Mao micromanaged the conflict with the Soviets in order to signal the Chinese

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Gong Li, "Chinese Decision-Making and Thaw of U.S. Relations," in *Reexamining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973*, ed. Robert Ross (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 329-30.

<sup>22</sup> Xu Yan, "1969 nian zhongsu bianjie de wuzhuang chongtu" [the 1969 armed conflict on the Sino-Soviet Border], *Dangdaishi yanjiu ziliao*, no. 5: 4-5; Fravel, *Strong Border, Secure Nation*, 206-7.

<sup>23</sup> Cited from Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969," 27.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Gong Li, "Chinese Decision-Making and Thaw of U.S. Relations," in *Reexamining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973*, 330.

<sup>25</sup> See *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong junshi wengao* 2, 357.

<sup>26</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 240.

resolve to defend their border while trying to restrict the scope of the conflict. He had gone to considerable lengths to reassure the Soviets lest the military conflict ran its course. In late March, Mao approved Zhou's proposal for resuming border negotiations.<sup>27</sup> In mid-May, the Chinese government issued an official statement on the Sino-Soviet border conflict, in which Mao ruled out the option of preemptive strike.<sup>28</sup> In the meeting with a North Korean delegate, Mao said that China did not hope to fight war with the Soviets and there was no need to chastise the Soviets frequently.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, after September 1968 the *Peking Review*—a major Chinese official journal for foreign consumption—significantly reduced polemical invectives against the Soviets.<sup>30</sup> All these signs suggest that Mao resorted to means of diplomatic engagement to ensure that the military pressures China had exerted on the Soviets in early 1969 could work to restore the border peace. In this regard, Chinese conflict behaviors throughout the crisis approximates to the model of coercive diplomacy.

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<sup>27</sup> *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 3 [chronological records of Zhou Enlai] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1998), 286; *Mao Zedong nianpu 1949-1976* vol. 6, 237; *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* 13 [Mao Zedong's manuscripts since the founding of the People's Republic of China] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 1987-1997), 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu 1949-1976* vol. 6, 251.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 269. Also see Niu, "1969 nian zhongsu bianjie chongtu yu zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng," 73.

<sup>30</sup> For the content analysis of the *Peking Review*, see John Garver, "Chinese Foreign Policy in 1970: The Tilt Towards the Soviet Union," *The China Quarterly* 82 (1980).

*Why the Status Motive Did Not Lead to Competitive status-seeking strategy*

Although the geopolitical factor predominates my explanation, the psychological factor cannot be ruled out. Undeniably, the Chinese threat perception was mediated by Mao's psychological dynamics and geostrategic concerns. Given that the great-power status could allow Beijing to gain an upper hand in its competition with Moscow for geopolitical influences in Asia and Mao had been engaged in the status struggle with the Soviets for years (as discussed in the preceding chapter), the status motive might have been a key factor in Mao's geostrategic considerations. Thus, the Zhanbao crisis presents an ideal case for studying leaders' decision when status ambitions diverge from security imperatives.

It is important to note, on the other hand, that by 1969 personal prestige was no longer Mao's dominant consideration. With Mao being domestically unchallengeable, there was no need for him to *rely* upon personal prestige to legitimize authority. From his unrivaled authority could flow enormous prestige (rather than the other way around). Mao's unchallengeable position at home, therefore, granted him enormous latitude in foreign policy decisions. He was arguably able to deescalate the conflict with the Soviets. While the status motive cannot be ruled out, the empirical evidence demonstrates that Mao was capable of prudence in the conflict situation with the Soviets when an all-out war seemed to be imminent. *Hypothesis 2 is confirmed in this case*: status ambitions were a permissive factor for Beijing to launch a preventive conflict to deter the Soviets troop presence on the Chinese borders; yet this factor was insufficient to make the Chinese so determined to undertake conflict behaviors in the way that fits the model of competitive status-seeking strategy.

The Zhenbao Island conflict in March 1969 took place at the time when Mao held indisputable power domestically. He had faced no rivals since mid-1968. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping as well as the leaders associated with them had been ousted from power. Mao's domestic priority then shifted from enhancing his grip on power via grassroots mobilization to restoring institutional order. By denouncing Liu and Deng as capitalist roaders, Mao ushered in mass movements against the bureaucratic establishment in which Liu and Deng had entrenched influences. As Mao declared war on the entire state bureaucracy, the ultraleftists took this opportunity to fill government posts with their own supporters. Led by Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and the nominal leader of ultraleftist factions in the Politburo, the radicals set out to grab the leadership posts from the veteran revolutionaries in the name of promoting the Cultural Revolution and mobilizing the mass. The radicals were composed of intellectuals and secretaries close to Mao and relatively junior bureaucrats. The veteran revolutionaries—whose political careers dated back to the 1920s—were guardians of institutional orders, and unsurprisingly averse to the leftists' ambitions. While the destructions Mao wrought on the existing institutions precipitated the

split of the Politburo into rival factions, all pledged loyalty to Mao. Unlike the Mao-Liu factions, therefore, none of these rivals constituted a real challenge to Mao's authority.

In spite of this, tensions between the veteran revolutionaries and the radicals culminated in an emotional exchange at an enlarged Politburo Standing Committee meeting in February 1967 (known as the "February Countercurrent"). It annoyed Mao. The supreme leader found it hard to believe that the old revolutionary cadres—his decades-long lieutenants—harbored strong opposition to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>31</sup> Yet he showed leniency to the veteran revolutionaries to avert "the danger that the old guards would unite against himself."<sup>32</sup> The old guards had deeply entrenched influences in the government and military establishment. For the purpose of stabilizing the political order, Mao managed to mediate the conflict between the old guards and the radicals. With unrivaled authority at home, Mao decided at the Twelfth Plenum of Eighth Central Committee in October 1968 that, "the revolution should approach its end by next summer."<sup>33</sup> As the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution came to an end after 1968, the Chairman came to realign himself with the veteran revolutionaries who were to help him restore domestic orders. In the preparatory stage of the Ninth Party Congress in 1969, he even managed to raise the profile of the veteran revolutionaries who challenged his Cultural Revolution programs in February 1967.<sup>34</sup> In particular, the Chairman suggested that the veteran revolutionaries be seated on the front lines and some of them be rehabilitated into the Politburo.<sup>35</sup> In so doing, Mao sought to restore institutional power as the dominant means in providing ruling the country. Needless to say, he had decided to put individual charisma on the back burner, as it proved more efficient in eliminating political rivals than in constructing a new order at home.

This is not to argue, of course, that the Chinese supreme leader harbored no status ambitions. He might have sought great-power status for its own sake—and this was showcased by his abiding preoccupation with elevating his status in the international communist movement.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, the authoritarian politics thesis may suggest that an authoritarian leader like Mao who emerged out of harsh political struggles at home is prone to conflict abroad.<sup>37</sup> Since the 1960s, according to Jin Qiu, "Mao's psychological adjustment to aging was not that of a person coming to terms with himself and his family and immediate circumstances, but that of a man exaggerating the relationship between himself

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<sup>31</sup> Qiu Jin, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 105.

<sup>32</sup> See MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 197.

<sup>33</sup> Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash," 22.

<sup>34</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu 1949-1976* vol. 6, 210, 237; *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* 13, 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Mao Zedong ninapu 1949-1976* vol. 6, 242.

<sup>36</sup> Chen, *Mao's China*, chaps 3, 8; Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*.

<sup>37</sup> See Colgan, "Domestic Revolutionary Leaders and International Conflict"; Rosen, *War and Human Nature*, chap. 3.

as a powerful charismatic leader and the people, the country, and the causes he had led.”<sup>38</sup> As such, the Chairman was keen to demonstrate his indispensability to the Communist cause in China and the world.

While status ambitions could be relevant in Mao’s decision to escalate the border disputes with the Soviets in 1969, status-seeking acts abroad had no similar implications for domestic politics as they had in the years of Mao-Liu split.<sup>39</sup> Mao no longer expected his pursuit of great-power status to contribute to personal prestige at home. As the Chairman was intent on restoring institutional orders in the state bureaucracies, personal prestige was no longer the dominant vehicle for him to legitimize power. In particular, Mao sought to dampen the personality cult of himself by suggesting the term “Chairman Mao” be replaced by “Comrade Mao” at the preparatory meetings for the Ninth Party Congress—which was intended to provide a ritual for declaring an end to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>40</sup> Mao’s unchallengeable position at home meant he did not need to rely upon prestige as a crucial vehicle for legitimizing his personal authority. This in turn allowed for more flexibility in his management of conflict crisis with the Soviets; he now had the freedom to back down from a tough stance abroad. As noted, he repeatedly counseled restraint in the use of military force against the Soviet border guards and had tentatively turned to diplomatic means to defuse the border tensions. In the final analysis, even if Mao’s decision to escalate the border conflict with the Soviet Union was in part driven by prestige, he could afford to cope with security imperatives in a risk-averse manner. As such, Chinese conflict behaviors during the 1969 border conflicts exhibit no substantial traits of competitive status-seeking strategy. As is to be shown, during the crisis, statements by Mao and Zhou represented their effort to reassure the Soviets about the Chinese intention to restore peace with the Soviets. They feature elements of reassurance characteristic of a prudent exercise of coercive diplomacy.

#### *A Diversionary Conflict?*

The Zhenbao Island crisis coincided with the opening of the Ninth Party Congress. For contemporary observers, this conveys the impression that Chinese leaders initiated the border conflict *in order to* reimpose disciplines on Chinese society at large.<sup>41</sup> Historian Yang Kuisong provides the most detailed account supportive of the thesis of diversionary conflict. In his argument, Mao intended the crisis with the Soviet Union to rally the party elite, as well as the general public, around him. This argument can be corroborated by Mao’s hyperbolic, bellicose rhetoric after the hostilities broke out, leading one to believe that Mao

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<sup>38</sup> Jin, *The Power of Culture*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Yang Kuisong, *Mao Zedong he mosike de enenyuanyuan* [feelings of gratitude and enmity between Mao Zedong and Moscow] (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu 1949-1976* vol. 6, 209.

<sup>41</sup> Goldstein, “Return to Zhenbao Island”; Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969.”

intended the Sino-Soviet hostilities to serve his domestic agenda.<sup>42</sup>

In theory, though, the border tension Mao provoked might help to boost his prestige in the eyes of his domestic audiences, who might believe that the border conflict lent credence to Mao's great-power status vis-à-vis the Soviets. And the Chinese supreme leader did exploit the prospect of war after the Zhenbao Island conflict broke out in March. During the Ninth Party Congress convened in late April, Mao repeatedly stressed that the Soviet invasion could help Chinese society to get mobilized.<sup>43</sup> But the supreme leader's public rhetoric does not necessarily reflect his genuine motive in escalating the border conflict with the Soviets. Crucially, it was *in the wake* of the eruption of the hostilities that Mao invoked this diversionary conflict logic. And despite his rhetoric that the whole national should get mobilized for a world war in the future, he did not stress the imminence of the war.<sup>44</sup> Prior to the conflict, there was in fact few mention of the need for domestic mobilization. Rather, the Chairman repeatedly emphasized the security threat posed by the Soviet army on the disputed borders. Hence, the argument that Mao initiated the Zhenbao Island crisis in order to enhance domestic solidarity is problematic. Intuitively appealing as it is, the diversionary conflict thesis does not stand up to scrutiny in the case of the Zhenbao island conflict.

On top of that, the diversionary conflict thesis as applied to the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict is flawed in theoretical terms. Arguably, armed conflicts with the Soviets carried real danger of war. Had the Soviet army invaded Chinese territory, the war would have destroyed the sociopolitical orders Mao had taken great pains to reestablish thus far. China in 1969 had passed the most violent phase of the Cultural Revolution. Even if Mao had been determined to use a foreign policy crisis to quiet down domestic chaos, he would have chosen to instigate a crisis with the Soviets a year earlier, when the PLA was sent to take heavy-handed measures against the Red Guards movement in 1967.<sup>45</sup> It turned out that the Chinese leader was able to cope with the regime crisis by means of sheer crackdown. Even if social orders had not been fully restored across China by 1969, this imperative at home arguably could only have a moderating effect on China's conflict behavior. That is, it provided stronger incentives for China to *avoid* than to aggravate any international conflict. As Zhou told Kosygin at the Beijing airport, "now we have very many domestic problems to deal with. How can you believe that we want a war?"<sup>46</sup> Shortly thereafter, Zhou incorporated the suggestion of restoring border tranquility in a draft letter to Kosygin, to which Mao added that, "the stopgap measures to prevent armed conflict [should] not affect respective interpretations of the border issues and the sovereign ownership of the disputed

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<sup>42</sup> Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969."

<sup>43</sup> Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969," 30; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enenyuan*, 500.

<sup>44</sup> See *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong junshi wengao* vol. 2, 357.

<sup>45</sup> Jin, *The Culture of Power*, 86.

<sup>46</sup> Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969," 38.

areas by both sides.”<sup>47</sup> This statement reflected Mao’s intention to keep the status quo on the border. After the Zhou-Kosygin meeting in September the Sino-Soviet crisis began to phase out. In spite of this, the Chairman in October relayed again his concern about the worsening Sino-Soviet relationship. As he remarked, “there is no need to continue diatribes against the Soviets.....The Sino-Soviet split will only delight the Americans.”<sup>48</sup> Quite evidently, Mao was reluctant to mobilize the Chinese public by inflaming anti-Soviet rhetoric. The fact that he did not do so suggests he had put aside the ideological agenda in pursuit of security-related ends. Seen in this light, domestic priorities strongly motivated the Chinese leaders to favor stability over conflict on the Sino-Soviet borders. Mao’s emphasis on domestic mobilization and ideological rhetoric would be better seen as a post-hoc rationalization of his decision to escalate border conflict with the Soviets.

#### *The Emergent Idea of US-China Rapprochement*

The formidable power at Mao’s disposal allowed him a wider room for maneuver in foreign policy. After 1969, Chinese diplomats, who had been recalled to participate in the Cultural Revolution at home, were returning to their posts.<sup>49</sup> By implication, the daily functioning of Chinese diplomacy had returned to normal—and this signifies the top leaders’ decision to disentangle foreign affairs from internal turmoil. Upon the departure of a senior diplomat Lei Yang to Poland, Zhou Enlai instructed him to “take a close look at the development of Sino-American relations, especially the signs of change in US policy, and to report back on anything significant.”<sup>50</sup> From then on, the leadership in Beijing began to probe the possibility for ameliorating relations with the United States.

The Chinese leaders were capable of this dramatic adjustment because absent pressures for institutional change they no longer relied upon prestige as the dominant vehicle for political survival. This is indeed consistent with my hypothesis that absent concerns for personal prestige, leaders would turn to relatively risk-averse strategies in handling security imperatives. Mao’s misgiving about the Soviet threat led him to reassess China’s security environment and the probe the possibility for strategic adjustments. In February 1969, Mao called on four marshals, Chen Yi, Nie Rongzhen, Ye Jianying, and Xu Xiangqian, to study the international situation. As veteran revolutionaries and establishment leaders, the four marshals were long marginalized in their decision-making roles after the outset of the Cultural Revolution. The fact that the veteran revolutionaries were assigned such an important job signaled Mao’s determination to redefine national priorities. The new

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<sup>47</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 266; see also *Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan*, 462-464.

<sup>48</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 269.

<sup>49</sup> Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, 137.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

direction of national policy was not immediately clear, though. Initially, the four marshals proceeded slowly and limited their first report to only general discussions of the international situation. While their reports argued that the probability of Soviet invasion of China was low, the issue of US-China rapprochement was too sensitive for them to touch upon.<sup>51</sup> With the specter of an all-out war looming large in the following months, the four marshals eventually ventured to suggest playing the “American card” against the Soviets – although they intentionally kept this suggestion ambiguous in order not to deviate too far from the ideological orthodox of US-Soviet hostility toward China.<sup>52</sup> There is no clear evidence suggesting Mao’s immediate response to the four marshals’ reports.

Still, the Chairman did once urge the four marshals to provide “unconventional thought” on the international situation. This is sufficient to demonstrate that an idea of US-China rapprochement was emerging in the Chinese leadership. Zhou Enlai conveyed Mao’s message by suggesting that discussions among the four marshals not be restricted by any frameworks [*buyao you tiaotiao kuangkuang*].<sup>53</sup> Crucially, this occurred shortly after the Ninth Party Congress, which still adhered to the ideological dogma in asserting the US-Soviet collusion against China. Of course, the four marshals felt restrained in proposing a too dramatic change in Chinese security policy lines. And careful investigations of Mao’s instructions in 1969 do suggest that Mao harbored no conclusive thoughts on the imperative of seeking rapprochement with the United States.<sup>54</sup> But it is nevertheless clear that he allowed Zhou and the four marshals to make unprecedented suggestions. This extraordinary move facilitated his initiations of the US-China rapprochement once the Nixon administration proposed to resume diplomatic exchanges between Beijing and Washington. It is very likely, argues an eminent Chinese diplomatic historian, that “Zhou acted within the ideological parameters Mao had established to initiate the shift of Chinese security policy.”<sup>55</sup>

## The US-China Rapprochement

The diplomatic history of the US-China rapprochement is well known. The success of the two former adversaries in reaching a modus vivendi was made possible not only by the

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<sup>51</sup> Xiong Xianghui, *Wo de qingbao he waijiao shengya* [my career in intelligence and foreign services] (Beijing: zhonggong dangshi, 1999), 165-178; Chen, *Mao’s China*, 246. Their meetings were covered in official biographies of the four marshals. See *Ye Jianying zhuan* [biography of Ye Jianying] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo, 1995), 599-600; *Nie Rongzhen zhuan* [biography of Nie Rongzhen] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo, 1994), 938-939; *Chen Yi zhuan* [biography of Chen Yi] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 1991), 876-877; *Xu Xiangqian zhuan* [biography of Xu Xiangqian] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo, 1995), 741.

<sup>52</sup> Xiong, *Wo de qingbao he waijiao shengya*, 182.

<sup>53</sup> See *Ibid.*, 170; also see *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 254.

<sup>54</sup> Niu, “1969 nian zhongsu bianjie chongtu yu zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng”; Lorenz Lüthi, “Restoring Chaos to History: Sino-Soviet-American Relations, 1969,” *The China Quarterly* 210 (2012).

<sup>55</sup> Niu, “1969 nian zhongsu bianjie chongtu yu zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng,” 77.

common interests of Beijing and Washington in containing the Soviet aggressive posture but also by their patience and far-sightedness in diplomatic engagement. Scholarly works have scrutinized the US-China diplomacy that culminated in Richard Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972. The Nixon trip signified the beginning of the US-China collaboration, and is worth being studied in its own right.<sup>56</sup> This study does not repeat that endeavor. Instead, the emphasis here is on the diplomatic prudence of Chinese leaders who, despite ideological radicalism and dogmatism prevalent in the Cultural Revolution, were not so much constrained by pragmatic concerns for personal prestige. In addition, this section pays special attention to Lin Biao's role in this grand strategic adjustment in elite politics. Given that the alleged Mao-Lin split following Lin's failed coup and death has been considered an outstanding ideological barrier against the US-China rapprochement, it deserves particular treatment here.<sup>57</sup>

The US-China negotiation over Taiwan's status is a case in point. Taiwan had long been a symbolic challenge to the CCP rule on China's mainland. Given the purported commitment of the CCP regime to "reunification," the willingness on Beijing's part to postpone the settlement of the Taiwan issue is arguably an extraordinary concession. The concession initiative originated from a Politburo meeting in May 1971. Under Mao's supervision, it was determined that even if the US government failed to meet the Chinese demand to withdraw its military personnel from Taiwan and commit to noninterference in the cross-Strait relations, liaison offices could still be established in both capitals to facilitate official communications.<sup>58</sup> After Zhou Enlai's first meeting with Henry Kissinger during the latter's secret visit to Beijing in early July 1971, Mao immediately decided to put the Taiwan issue on the back burner. The Chairman's decision had to do with the perception of declining US geopolitical influences in Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> As he told Zhou, "we are not in hurry on the Taiwan issue because there is no fighting there.....but there is a war in Vietnam and people are being killed there. We should not invite Nixon to come just for our own interests."<sup>60</sup> This statement, though, might indicate Mao's aspiration for preserving China's prestige in the communist world – indeed, Chinese leaders had gone to considerable lengths

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<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Chen, *Mao's China*, chap. 9; Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, chaps. 6-8; Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2008); Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961–1974: From "Red Menace" to "Tacit Ally"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Robert Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969-1989* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994); Robert Ross, William Kirby, Gong Li, ed. *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> John Garver, *China's Decision for Rapprochement with the United States: 1968-1971* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982); Robert Ross, "From Lin Biao to Deng Xiaoping: Elite Instability and China's U.S. Policy," *The China Quarterly* 118 (June 1989).

<sup>58</sup> Zhou Enlai zhuan, 1096-1097; Yafeng Xia, "China's Elite Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement, January 1969–February 1972," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 17-19.

<sup>59</sup> Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, 37-38; Chen, *Mao's China*, 263-264; Zhou Enlai zhuan, 1096.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Chen, *Mao's China*, 267.

in keeping the DRV informed of progress in US-China rapprochement. Yet, it was Mao's sincere hope to ease the way for the US to disengage from Indochina, as that would allow in Washington to concentrate on the endeavor to balance against the Soviet influences in Asia.<sup>61</sup> Arguably, by accelerating this process and gaining American support for Beijing's confrontation with Moscow, China could put itself in a more favorable position vis-à-vis both superpowers. Viewed in this light, Mao's promotion of prestige fell in line with the imperative of enhancing China's geopolitical autonomy.

In Kissinger's account, the Chinese leaders were farsighted in their willingness to table the status of Taiwan for the pursuit of common interests with the United States.<sup>62</sup> This account confirms the defensive realist logic in Beijing's pursuit of rapprochement with Washington—namely, states tend to balance against the dominant threat, despite their differences in other aspects. Moreover, rapprochement with America would spare the Chinese leaders some geopolitical pressure from the US allies, which had haunted them since the 1950s. If US-China rapprochement were achieved, then Taiwan would cease to be an immediate threat to China's territorial security. As Mao confided privately to his doctor Li Zhisui, “we have the Soviet Union to the north and the set, India to the south, and Japan to the east. If all our enemies were to unite, attacking us from the north, south, east, and west, what do you think we should do?.....Didn't our ancestors counsel negotiating with faraway countries while fighting with those that are near?”<sup>63</sup> For Mao's part, aligning with the United States would not only ameliorate the geopolitical environment but also enhance Chinese capacity to balance against the Soviet military presence in Asia.

To be clear, my analysis does not dismiss status aspirations as irrelevant in Chinese security policy practices after 1969. Rather, it suggests that absent pressures for institutional change, the instrumental role of personal prestige would not be salient, and as the Chinese leaders did not rely on prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival, they could afford to make concessions to their geopolitical adversary the United States in 1972. As noted in the preceding chapter, concerns for personal prestige as fueled by the Mao-Liu split hindered China from mending fences with the Soviet Union in the face of their common adversary (e.g. America) escalating the war in Vietnam; meanwhile, the instrumental importance of great-power status induced leaders in Beijing to compete with the Soviet Union in Indochina once Mao suggested the desirability of doing so. In 1972, by contrast, prestige politics at home was no longer a factor for the formulation of Chinese security policy. The purge of Liu Shaoqi and the sidelining of his associates in 1966-1967 had left Mao as the absolute leader; as such, it was not imperative for Mao to legitimize his domestic

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<sup>61</sup> Li, “Zhongmei huanhe yu yuanyue kangmei.”

<sup>62</sup> Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, Mass.: Little Brown, 1979), 1062.

<sup>63</sup> Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, 514.

authority via personal prestige – now prestige followed from his absolute personal authority rather than vice versa. Accordingly, the supreme leader Mao faced no strong incentives to engage in competitive assertions of status against either of the superpowers. In this context, diplomatic accommodation with one superpower adversary could restore China to the centrality of international community. The US-China rapprochement and China's reemergence in the international community went hand in hand. Absent America's obstructionism, the PRC managed to take over the United Nations membership and the permanent seat in the UN Security Council from the KMT regime.<sup>64</sup> Mao thereby gained an authoritative forum at which to resume his anti-imperialist mantle. As such, competitive status-seeking strategy proved not the optimal approach to promoting the Chinese, as well as Mao's, status aspiration internationally.<sup>65</sup>

In short, Mao was able to reconcile his status aspiration with the security imperatives facing China. In this regard, his diplomatic initiatives featured a willingness to accommodate demands from the adversary. This was manifest in the Chairman's willingness to delegate much of the negotiating work to Zhou Enlai, a life-long diplomat and skillful negotiator capable of flexibility and concessions.<sup>66</sup> During Nixon's visit, Zhou showed himself to be virtuoso in drafting the communiqué in the agree-to-disagree spirit. In it, Washington recognized that there is only one government in China, leaving the dispute over the legitimacy of that government to the Chinese across the Strait. Beijing's leaders acquiesced in this arrangement.<sup>67</sup> Here, they showed sufficient willingness to set aside the issue of Taiwan for the time being and leave it for future negotiations.

It is certainly true that in scrambling this deal, Zhou left himself vulnerable to the ideological charge from the Cultural Revolution leftists that he was appeasing the Americans. The Taiwan issue, after all, was a legacy of the Chinese civil war in 1946-1949 and carried symbolic importance to the CCP's claim to legitimacy in ruling China – and concessions over it could be controversial in any circumstances. Predictably, the Chairman gave countenance to some critiques of Zhou in the aftermath of Nixon's visit. In spite of this, the supreme leader ensured the premier's political survival.<sup>68</sup> Zhou stayed on as the premier and continued to lead the negotiation over establishment of liaison offices in Beijing

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<sup>64</sup> See Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, 42-43.

<sup>65</sup> For Mao's assertion of Chinese claim to great-power status in the international arena in the 1970s, see Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*, 195-203.

<sup>66</sup> Ronald Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>67</sup> To be sure, new historical findings suggest that the Chinese leaders might have put excessive trust in President Nixon's commitment to one-China principle. But the very fact that the Chinese leaders chose to align the Chinese security interests with the US policy signals their flexibility in fostering a favorable geopolitical environment.

<sup>68</sup> As Mao's assistants in charge of diplomatic issues, Wang Hairong and Tang Wensheng once complained that it was Mao who first assigned them to chastising Zhou but then wanted to save the premier's face. See Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* [Zhou Enlai's Later Years] (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2003), 476.

and Washington, which was finalized during Kissinger's visit to Beijing in February 1973.<sup>69</sup>

The bilateral relationship made little progress toward normalization afterward. Apparently, this was attributable to the resurgence of leftist ideology against Zhou.<sup>70</sup> Former party historian Gao Wenqian argues that the US-China normalization came to a halt as Mao tried to prevent Zhou from continuing to gain prestige from his prominent role in diplomacy.<sup>71</sup> And yet, this argument exaggerates the Mao-Zhou friction while according too much weight to Mao's personal role. True, Mao found it difficult to reconcile his anti-imperialist ideological commitment with the geopolitical imperative of balancing against Moscow with Washington's help, and progress in the US-Soviet détente just provided an outlet for his emotional outburst.<sup>72</sup> This exposed Zhou to ideological charges at home, as the premier was the chief proponent of US-China cooperation. Yet, there is no evidence that Zhou's diplomatic performance actually challenged Mao's authority. Quite the contrary, it was apparent to the outsiders at the time that Zhou was submissive to Mao.<sup>73</sup> In hindsight, historians believe that despite the fragile physical condition, Mao retained a firm grip on decision-making authority in almost all realms of national policy up to his death in 1976.<sup>74</sup> Arguably, the stagnation of US-China relations up to Mao's death in 1976 had more to do with geopolitical dynamics and American politics. Specifically, the Watergate scandals caused substantial difficulties for Nixon and his successor Gerald Ford to concentrate on foreign affairs, whereas the lessened Soviet military pressures actually dampened the incentives for Washington to seek closer cooperation with Beijing. These factors played more important roles in slowing down the pace of the US-China normalization.<sup>75</sup>

*Lin Biao's Rise and Fall: the Alleged Mao-Lin Split and Its Marginal Impact on the US-China*

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<sup>69</sup> Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, 50-51.

<sup>70</sup> Kuisong Yang and Yafeng Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao's Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States, 1969–1976," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>71</sup> Gao, *Wannian Zhou Enlai*.

<sup>72</sup> Wang Zhongchun, "The Soviet Factor in Sino-American Normalization," in *Normalization of US-China Relations: An International History*, eds. William Kirby, Robert Ross, and Gong Li (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), especially 161-64; Robert Ross, "From Lin Biao to Deng Xiaoping: Elite Instability and China's U.S. Policy," *The China Quarterly* 118 (1989); Yang and Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao's Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States, 1969–1976."

<sup>73</sup> Kissinger described the Mao-Zhou cooperation on foreign affairs as the follows. "Mao would introduce the basic concepts of the Chinese view in the way a composer might sketch the major themes of his opera in the overture. It was Zhou to mount the actual performances by turning Mao's parables and allusions into operational policies.....in his relationship with Mao, Zhou always took great care to emphasize that he was the subordinate, whether Mao was present or not..... Whenever possible, even when it required a sketch, Zhou would flesh out his observations with quotes from Mao, and he invariably described every new initiative as having been decreed by Mao." See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 158-59.

<sup>74</sup> For Chinese elite politics in the 1970s, especially after the Lin Biao affairs, see Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics During the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972-1976* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007).

<sup>75</sup> Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation*, chap. 3; Gong Li, "The Difficult Path to Diplomatic Relations: China's U.S. Policy, 1972-1978," in *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations* eds. William Kirby, Robert Ross, and Gong Li (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

## *Rapprochement*

Lin Biao's rise and fall was one of the most dramatic events in the PRC history. Apparently, his failed coup against Mao and his death on the route of fleeing China testify to his ambition to replace Mao. In his talk with the American leaders, Mao famously blamed Lin Biao and his faction for thwarting the US-China rapprochement.<sup>76</sup>

Since then, Chinese official history has held that Lin, as well as his faction, long conspired to supplant Mao's leadership.<sup>77</sup> Should this interpretation hold true, there is no doubt that an elite schism unfolded after Lin was designated as Mao's successor at the Ninth Party Congress in 1969. It is important to address whether this open split in Chinese elite politics caused prestige contests between Mao and Lin.

The official accounts, however, provide no clear evidence in support of the allegation of Lin's political ambitions. Even the official biography of Mao Zedong suggests that the Mao-Lin split did not occur until August 1970. It is shown in the released official records that Lin and his faction took great pains to promote the personality cult of Mao and tried to mobilize the whole party elites in support of Mao resuming the state chairman.<sup>78</sup> Suspicious about Lin's political ambition, Mao seized this chance to undermine Lin. In early 1971, the Chairman left Beijing for a tour to southern provinces. During his journey, Mao managed to elicit support from various provincial leaders for his harsh criticism of Lin. As a consequence, Lin had no choice but attempt assassination of Mao and flee China. While it is true that the planned assassination and his family's attempt to flee China clearly signify his split with Mao, this open split did not feature centrally in Chinese politics until 1971.<sup>79</sup> As such, there was no time for Lin to engage in substantial contests for authority with Mao. Since no prestige politics could possibly occur between Mao and Lin in such circumstances, its impact on Mao's foreign policy decisions must have been minimal.

On top of that, a revisionist historical scholarship has flourished since the late 1980s, which argues that the tragic end of Lin Biao is virtually caused by his relentless effort to bandwagon with the supreme leader.<sup>80</sup> While Lin had distinguished himself by

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<sup>76</sup> Mao told Kissinger that there were opponents in China against the US-China rapprochement but they have fled away. Interestingly, despite its wide currency, this statement has never been confirmed by Chinese official sources. Instead, it appears quite often in semiofficial sources. See, for instance, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/85037/8298795.html> (accessed July 21). For English sources of Mao's statement regarding Lin's obstructions of US-China rapprochement, see Kissinger, *White House Years*, 696-697; Xia, "China's Elite Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement, January 1969–February 1972," 3 (fn. 1).

<sup>77</sup> See, for instance, *Mao Zedong zhuan*, chap. 78; *Zhongguo gongchandang lishi, 1949-1978* vol. 2 [History of Chinese Communist Party, 1949-1978] (Beijing: zhonggongdangshi, 2010), chap. 23; Wang Dongxing. *Wang Dongxing huiyi: Mao Zedong yu Lin Biao fangeming jituan de douzheng* [Wang Dongxing's recollections: Mao Zedong's struggle against Lin Biao's counterrevolutionary group] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo, 2004); *Mao Zedong zhuan*, chap. 78.

<sup>78</sup> In an authoritative account, the state-chairman issue is one over which "for the first time since the Cultural Revolution that Mao and Lin had a difference." See *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2533.

<sup>79</sup> *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 396-397, 409; Wang, *Wang Dongxing huiyi*, chap. 4.

<sup>80</sup> See, for instance, Gao, *Wannian Zhou Enlai*; Shu Yun, *Lin Biao shijian wanzheng diaocha* [a full investigation into the Lin Biao incident] (Hong Kong: The Mirror Books, 2007); Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao*:

extraordinary military expertise and loyalty to Mao prior to 1949, he was inactive in Chinese politics until the Seven Thousand Conference at which he openly spoke in support of Mao. Thereafter, Lin worked hard to indoctrinate the PLA with Mao's ideological orthodoxy. His pledging of loyalty boosted Mao's confidence in launching the Cultural Revolution.<sup>81</sup> Since the Cultural Revolution, the PLA had played a dual role: it initially acquiesced to, and in some instances assisted the Red Guards with their efforts to seize state power in various provinces; from the early 1967 on, it was assigned the opposite task: restricting social violence. Lin Biao supervised the implementation of all these policies.<sup>82</sup>

Several points are worth noting, none of which suggest Lin's ambition to undermine Mao's authority. Quite the contrary, Lin's success in indoctrinating the PLA with Mao's ideological dogma after the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, ensured the PLA support behind Mao's drive to launch the Cultural Revolution in 1966.<sup>83</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, Lin took great pains to take a low profile in Mao's byzantine game of power struggle in the central leadership. After the purge of Liu and Deng, Lin confided to his associates that the best way to protect himself was "following Mao unconditionally."<sup>84</sup> In fact, Lin seldom committed to any clear position on policy issues; he instead concurred on almost anything Mao had decided upon.<sup>85</sup> Upon close examination of Lin's involvement in the political decisions during the Cultural Revolution, Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun conclude that Lin's "basic political posture was passive, his few active interventions sought to limit the disruption caused by the Cultural Revolution, and the inevitable tension between military men and civilians did not translate into a Bonapartist challenge."<sup>86</sup>

As regards Lin's political ambitions and policymaking role, recollections by one of Lin Biao's inner-circle secretaries—Zhang Yunsheng—provide critical insights.<sup>87</sup> A critical departure from the conventional view regarding Lin's political ambition, Zhang points out that Lin's political ambition for the top leadership was at best ambiguous, and he provided

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*Riding the Tiger During the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1971* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996); Jin Qiu, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

These authors have privileged access to former party leaders and unpublished party documents. Their claims, however, are rather modest. None of them claim to have provided a full account of the Lin Biao incident and his tragic death; they instead only endeavor to clarify Lin's role during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>81</sup> Qiu Jin, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 72-79.

<sup>82</sup> MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 175-77.

<sup>83</sup> Jin, *The Culture of Power*, 75-77.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. Also see Li Wenpu, "Lin Biao weishizhang bude bushuo" [what Lin Biao's security chief has to say], in Li Haiwen, ed. *Zhonggong zhongda lishi shijian qinliji* [personal accounts of the significant events in the history of the Chinese Communist Party] (Beijing: renmin chubanshe, 2010), 208.

<sup>85</sup> According to Jin Qiu's interview of Lin's close aids, Lin "made few phone calls, had only minimal contact with his colleagues, and received very few visitors." And he spent only half an hour listening to the briefings by his secretary on the important documents. *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>86</sup> Teiwes and Sun, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao*, xi.

<sup>87</sup> Zhang Yunsheng, *Maojiawan jishi: Lin Biao mishu huiyilu* [memoir of Lin Biao's secretary] (Beijing: chunqiu chubanshe, 1988).

vivid evidence showing Lin's lack of interest in foreign affairs.<sup>88</sup> Zhang's recollections repudiate the Chinese official charge of Lin's political ambition. And in recent years accumulative evidence from assistants close to Lin and his family members and from some official accounts have emerged to corroborate Zhang's point.<sup>89</sup> Lin's lack of interest in foreign affairs was particularly remarkable in those accounts. The major official accounts regarding the four marshals' proposal of US-China rapprochement do not emphasize Lin's decision-making role at all, not to mention his alleged obstructionism.<sup>90</sup>

Whereas no evidence can lend unambiguous support to Lin's role in foreign and security policy, circumstantial evidence may provide some clue. In this regard, the so-called No.1 mobilization order (*diyì haoling*) issued in Lin's name in October 1969 stands out as the major piece of evidence revealing Lin's policy preference. Since the mid-May, skirmishes on the Sino-Soviet western borders also escalated, which raised the specter of an all-out war. This development heightened the threat perception of Chinese leadership; Mao in turn stressed the necessity of war preparations on various occasions. In this circumstance, Lin issued a mobilization order to keep the whole military establishment on alert. As Wang Dongxing recalled, Mao was irritated by Lin's conduct and incinerated the document immediately.<sup>91</sup> Wang believed that Lin took the Sino-Soviet border conflict as a chance to probe Mao's alertness to his political ambition—and this interpretation is indeed consistent with the orthodox view established after Lin's failed coup.<sup>92</sup> However, other sources, including some official publications, show that Lin's order completely fell in line with Mao's instructions on mobilizing the countries for war.<sup>93</sup> Significantly, according to Zhang Yunsheng, the document that Mao actually received was simply a draft of the order, which shows that Lin did manage to keep Mao informed.<sup>94</sup> Party historian Shu Yun similarly showed that Lin was simply intent on implementing Mao's instructions on war preparations, and this was indeed shared by Zhou Enlai and other leaders.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, both Zhang and Shu point out that it was other military leaders who entitled the order as No. 1.<sup>96</sup> While this incident aroused Mao's disaffection, it reflected more of the misunderstandings on the part of Mao and other military leaders associated with Lin; Lin's role in it was only marginal.

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<sup>88</sup> For instance, Zhang recalled that Lin sometimes even fell asleep during his briefings on foreign affairs. See *ibid.*, 330-332.

<sup>89</sup> See, fn. 79.

<sup>90</sup> Xiong, *Wo de qingbao he waijiao shengya*, 165-178; *Ye Jianying zhuan*, 599-600; *Nie Rongzhen zhuan*, 938-939; *Chen Yi zhuan*, 876-877; *Xu Xiangqian zhuan*, 741.

<sup>91</sup> Wang, *Wang Dongxing huiyi*, 11; also see *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 271-272.

<sup>92</sup> Wang, *Wang Dongxing huiyi*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> See *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 261, 264-265; Shu Yun, "Lin Biao 'diyì haoling' de taiqianmuhou" [a comprehensive account of the "First Order" by Lin Biao], *Dangshi bolan* [general review of the Communist Party of China], no. 9 (2004), 4-12.

<sup>94</sup> Zhang, *Maojiawan jishi*, 318-319.

<sup>95</sup> Shu, "Lin Biao 'diyì haoling' de taiqianmuhou," 9-10.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 11; Zhang, *Maojiawan jishi*, 319.

In a nutshell, what has emerged from the evidence available so far is a Lin Biao striving to bandwagon with Mao on almost every issue, rather than use Mao's authority to his advantage. Although we are still unable to address why Lin eventually attempted assassination at Mao. This historical episode remains shrouded in mystery, recently available nevertheless shows that Lin had shown no inclination to challenge Mao's position—he made Mao's paranoid largely because he misread Mao's intention.

From the outset, Lin seemingly believed that he could use the proposal for instituting the post of state chairman to mobilize the whole party elite to honor Mao and obtain Mao's favor.<sup>97</sup> His very insistence, however, deepened Mao's suspicion. The Chairman clashed with Lin at the August-September Lushan plenum in 1970 when Lin stubbornly insisted on reinstating the post of state chairman with Mao assuming it.<sup>98</sup> Chinese official accounts, though, portray Lin's initiative as an attempt to position himself as Mao's successor. In their viewpoint, if Mao assumed the post of state chairman, then Lin would naturally become the vice chairman, which would presumably pave the way for his succession of Mao in the future.<sup>99</sup> Yet, this view is already invalidated by the Chinese official accounts, which shows that early on Lin had flatly refused to take the post of vice chairman.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that while Lin relentlessly promoted the personality cult of Mao at the Lushan plenum, Mao approved Lin's speech and agreed to circulate it among the party elites.<sup>101</sup> As such, it was likely that Lin viewed Mao's refusal to assume the post of state chairman as an invitation for greater effort to honor the supreme leader. This turned out to be a fatal misperception. As Mao became increasingly suspicious of him and even openly chastised his misconduct and alleged ambition, his close associates drafted a coup plan (in which his son was involved) but failed to implement. Lin's whole family (except his daughter) then sought to flee China but ended up in an air crash in Outer Mongolia.

To conclude, there is no solid evidence that Lin was determined to expand his power and influences at Mao's expense. Unlike Liu, Lin presented no alternative vision for institutions of Chinese politics that could challenge Mao's initiatives. The Mao-Lin friction over the post of state chairman was in large part an unanticipated event, but it tragically led up to Lin's demise from politics and death. Apparently, Mao-Lin split erupted in late 1970,

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<sup>97</sup> Teiwes and Sun, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao*, 137-39.

<sup>98</sup> The post of state chairman was previously assumed by Liu Shaoqi since 1958 until his purge. Since then, it was left vacant until 1982.

<sup>99</sup> For the critical discussion of this account, see Teiwes and Sun, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao*, 134-151.

<sup>100</sup> During a conference in April discussing the issue of revising the constitution, Lin suggested that he himself would not assume the post of vice chairman and the post of vice chairman itself was not necessary. Moreover, given that the majority of people at the conference were supportive of Lin's suggestion, there was thus no sign of any ambition on Lin's part to exploit the issue regarding the post of state chairman to augment his own standing. See *Mao Zedong nianpu, 1949-1976* vol. 6, 291-92; *Mao Zedong zhuan*, 2534; Wang, *Wang Dongxing huiyi*, 16-17. Also see, Li, "Lin Biao weishizhang bude bushuo," 209.

<sup>101</sup> Wang, *Wang Dongxing huiyi*, 31.

when the two leaders' difference over the state chairmanship deepened reciprocal suspicions. But there is no solid evidence to show any of its significant impact on Chinese foreign-policy making. While in the presence of Nixon Mao blamed Lin for delaying the US-China rapprochement, it is reasonable to argue that on that occasion the Chairman was desperate to salvage his broken prestige. Unquestionably, the Lin Biao Incident dealt a severe blow to the image of the Chairman's infallibility. Thus, Mao had every reason to boost his personal prestige by achievements in foreign affairs. In this regard, the US-China rapprochement was perhaps his most glamorous success.

### **A Resurgence of Competitive Status-seeking strategy: The Soviet-Vietnamese Alignment, Prestige Politics in Beijing, and China's Invasion of Vietnam in 1976-1979**

China's military attack on Vietnam in mid-February 1979 signified a resurgence of competitive status-seeking strategy on the Chinese part. The military operations lasted for roughly a month, during which China invaded the broad northern part of Vietnam, captured two provincial capitals and a key border town, and engaged the Vietnamese army in dozens of battles.<sup>102</sup> As Deng Xiaoping and the official media outlets framed it, this war was designed to "punish" Vietnam for its growing collaboration with the SU and invasion of Cambodia to overturn the Chinese-sponsored regime. Typically, the Chinese leaders did not specify any concrete demands on Vietnam before taking military acts. Given this defining feature, the Chinese act approximates less to the prudent exercise of coercive diplomacy than competitive status-seeking strategy.

The bulk of the existing literature underscores a variety of geopolitical factors to explain China's military acts. They include the Soviet Union's alignment with Vietnam, the worsening of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, and the overthrow of pro-China regime in Cambodia by the Vietnamese military force.<sup>103</sup> However, this geopolitical-oriented view offers partial explanations only. It fails to consider alternative strategies Beijing would have chosen in response to the geopolitical threat from the Soviet-Vietnamese alignment. Moreover, it rests on a problematic assumption that military intervention was a desirable strategy to ameliorate China's geopolitical environment.<sup>104</sup> In fact, the Chinese military was left in a poor condition in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. It was not fit for fighting.

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<sup>102</sup> Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 90.

<sup>103</sup> Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79* (London: Routledge, 2006); Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), chap. 12; Stephen Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Robert Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>104</sup> Edward O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (London: Routledge, 2007).

As such, it is puzzling why the Chinese leaders employed military power in response to the perceived Soviet encirclement.

Given that the display of military power may constitute a key variant of competitive status-seeking strategy, my theoretical argument should be able to address this puzzle. To be specific, my argument suggests that competitive status-seeking strategy is a preferable policy for leaders who rely upon prestige to legitimize their power positions at home while regarding great-power status as a route to geopolitical security. This argument complements, rather than overturn the geopolitics-oriented view. It does not dismiss geopolitical pressures—especially the Soviet-Vietnamese collaboration in support of Vietnam’s expansionist drive in Southeast Asia; but it gives more emphasis to the authority contest between Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping, which heightened their reliance upon prestige as a kind of political capital. It was the interplay of such a pragmatic concern for personal prestige and geopolitical imperatives that encouraged the Chinese leadership to opt for competitive status-seeking strategy as a strategy for dealing with the emergent Soviet-Vietnamese threat.

*The International Context: China’s Worsening Relations with the Unified Vietnam and the Intensification of the Soviet Threat*

Vietnam achieved reunification in 1975 with the US-backed Saigon regime overturned by the military forces Hanoi commanded. While Beijing continued to provide materials support for Hanoi’s struggles for national reunification, the Chinese ideological vigor for promoting revolutions in Southeast Asia actually attenuated in 1975. After Mao’s death, however, Beijing shifted away from its moderate attitude toward the communist insurgents in Southeast Asia. “Compared with that in 1976,” Robert Ross observes, “PRC media attention to the illegal Communist parties of Southeast Asia further increased.”<sup>105</sup> Hua Guofeng himself also hosted a banquet for the Indonesian Communist leader Jusef Adjitorop in Beijing during his visit in May.<sup>106</sup> This gesture of Chinese support for insurgents in Southeast Asia departed from the moderate line Hua initially espoused. This was in large part motivated by Hua’s concern for vulnerability in prestige politics. The arrest of the Gang of Four left Hua vulnerable to the accusation of betraying the Maoist orthodox. The politically inexperienced Hua therefore felt compelled to revert, albeit ostensibly, to the Maoist line.

By echoing Mao’s foreign policy practice dating back to the 1960, Hua signaled his commitment to revolutionary orthodoxy. Yet, Hua met opposition from other Chinese

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<sup>105</sup> Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 139.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

leaders soon after he openly encouraged the communist insurgents in Indochina. Upon his return to power, Deng had endorsed the proposal from Ye Jianying and Li Xiannian to adjust the level of foreign aid.<sup>107</sup> And in July, Li Xiannian instructed the bureaucracies to “put more restrictions on foreign aid” (*kou jin yidian*), which suggests that the central leadership had managed to repudiate Hua’s policy initiative.<sup>108</sup> This instance just proves the bottom line of my theoretical argument. That is, as leaders often pursue status internationally for instrumental purposes, an effort at status enhancement is unsustainable if it deviates too far from a state’s geopolitical imperatives.

That noted, in spite of their difference over foreign aid, leaders in Beijing unanimously perceived the increasingly close relationship between Hanoi and Moscow as a sign of the Soviet threat lurking in Southeast Asia. From late 1977 to early March 1978, Moscow and Hanoi exchanged messages to signal mutual trust and commitment to cooperation. With the enhancement of diplomatic engagement between the two capitals came various economic agreements.<sup>109</sup> When Vietnam’s premier Phan Van Dong visited China in June, Li Xiannian voiced his concern to him over the state of Sino-Vietnamese relations and enumerated major diplomatic problems between the two countries.<sup>110</sup> While Li also expressed to Dong the Chinese commitment to improve the bilateral relationship, China’s attitude toward Vietnam further cooled down soon afterward. During Le Duan’s visit to Beijing in late November, Hua Guofeng openly stated that “the two sides [China and Vietnam] now have had differences over principles [*yuanze fenqi*], some disputes have intensified, and the [bilateral] relationship has worsened.”<sup>111</sup>

Deng Xiaoping’s speech before the Chinese military in late December featured a negative assessment of the international situation. “Because hegemonic powers are fanatical,” Deng claimed, “it is uncertain where they would create small events that may provoke war. [So] [the outbreak of] great war could be postponed, but some accidental, regional incidents are hard to predict.”<sup>112</sup> “In the final analysis,” he concluded, “war will eventually break out. We can’t waste time, [we] should accelerate war preparation, especially the training of military leaders in conducting modern war.”<sup>113</sup> Hua concurred with Deng’s suggestion for an open discussion of this report.<sup>114</sup> The whole leadership soon reached consensus that China was facing an unfavorable geopolitical environment.

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<sup>107</sup> *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1, 168.

<sup>108</sup> *Li Xiannian nianpu* vol. 5 [The chronological records of Li Xiannian] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2011), 496.

<sup>109</sup> Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 145-46.

<sup>110</sup> *Li Xiannian nianpu* vol. 5, 487-88.

<sup>111</sup> Wang Taiping, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi* 3 [diplomatic history of the People’s Republic of China] (Beijing: shijie zhishi, 1999), 66.

<sup>112</sup> *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1982* (Beijing: renmin, 1983), 74.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>114</sup> *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1, 255-56.

In short, Beijing's leaders perceived the growth of Soviet-Vietnamese collaboration after 1976 as a pressing geopolitical threat. The Chinese misgiving about hegemonic powers and their propensity for war contributed significantly to their emphasis on military power as a vehicle for geopolitical competitions with the Soviets. Unquestionably, Hua and the Chinese leadership inherited a highly militarized rivalry with Moscow. After the 1969 border conflict, the Soviet military deployments close to China's borders had loomed large in Chinese threat perception. It was no longer ideological penetration but prospects of military aggression by the Soviets that became Chinese leaders' overriding concern.<sup>115</sup> Ameliorating the relationship with the Soviet Union would entail a comprehensive adjustment of Chinese policy. Hua was obviously unable to accomplish this task overnight. Nevertheless, China's conflict with the Soviets or the Vietnamese was not inevitable. It remained possible for leaders in Beijing to adopt strategies that were relatively risk-averse. To address why Beijing's leaders became risk-prone as they undertook competitive status-seeking strategy, it is then important to examine dynamics in Chinese elite politics after the death of Mao.

*China after Mao: Ideological Polarization, Prestige Politics, and the Deng-Hua Split*

The death of Mao in 1976 left a political and ideological vacuum in Chinese politics. The party elite and the population had submitted themselves to Mao's personalist authority for decades. The death of Mao meant the overarching charismatic authority was unavailable and political orders in China must be legitimized along new lines.<sup>116</sup> Hence, the removal of the absolute central authority unleashed intense pressures for institutional change.

The authority vacuum exacerbated power struggles within the Politburo. In the process, challenger factions exploited the widespread grievances about the Cultural Revolution excesses. As such, both the purge of the Gang of Four and the subsequent Deng-Hua contest revolved around competitions for the supreme authority in Chinese politics. After the purge of the Gang of Four, the Deng-Hua split shifted its focus onto the agenda for institutional reforms in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>117</sup>

Upon his succession to Mao, Hua found his political standing precarious. To strengthen his authority as the supreme leader, Hua aligned himself with the veteran revolutionaries and launched a coup that removed the Gang of Four from the political scene.<sup>118</sup> The removal

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<sup>115</sup> See Wang, "The Soviet Factor in Sino-American Normalization."

<sup>116</sup> While elite competition around the succession issue had been constant since 1969, it was the death of Mao that intensified elite conflict into open split. See Roderick MacFarquhar, "The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism, 1969-1982," in *The Politics of China*.

<sup>117</sup> Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), chaps. 1-2.

<sup>118</sup> The extent to which the so-called "gang of four" threatened Hua's power remains a matter of controversy. Still, it is plausible to argue that the Jiang Qing-led clique took assertive actions that Hua and the elder revolutionaries deemed threatening. From the official sources one can argue confidently that the arrest of the Gang of Four was made possible by the alignment of Hua Guofeng, Wang Dongxing, and Ye Jianying. See *Ye Jianying nianpu* vol. 2 [The Chronological Records of

of the Gang of Four did not take pressures off Hua, however. In eliminating the Gang of Four, Hua became indebted to the veteran revolutionaries, especially Ye Jianying and Li Xiannian, who had helped him consolidate power within the Party. As Ye and Li appreciated Deng's talents and leadership experience, Hua reluctantly approved their request for restoring Deng to leadership posts.<sup>119</sup> Deng was officially rehabilitated at the Third Plenum of Tenth Party Congress in mid-July and assumed the titles of vice chairman of the central party leadership, vice premier of the government, and the PLA's chief of staff.<sup>120</sup> Although these institutional posts did not rival Hua's standing as the paramount leader, they did grant Deng significant decision-making authority on critical matters.

After Deng's rehabilitation, Hua's concern for personal prestige motivated him to take a rigid ideological stance. The bulk of his constituents were composed of relatively junior cadres who rose to leadership posts during the Cultural Revolution. As beneficiaries of the Cultural Revolution, Hua and his political allies had to derive their legitimacy to rule from Maoist dogmas. In this regard, the very good fortune they had enjoyed in the past decade came to be a political liability. Since Hua himself was vulnerable to any charge of betraying Mao's cause, his room for political maneuver was more limited than that of Deng, who was entitled to the prestige of being Mao's lifelong protégé. In their authority contests, then, Deng and Hua found ideological debate a device for mobilizing their supporters. In early February 1977, Hua approved publication of the editorial that called the Chinese people to categorically follow the Mao's instructions. The editorial was then referred to as the "two whatevers" (meaning that whatever Chairman Mao says is eternally correct; whatever Mao says must be categorically followed).<sup>121</sup> Thereafter, the authority contest among the political elite gravitated toward interpretations of the orthodox party line. Through the struggle to give Maoist orthodoxy a plausible interpretation, the contending leaders sought to legitimize their hold on authority in the central leadership. Here, the ideological debate served as a vehicle for them to mobilize supporting coalitions.

Hua, in fact, was not enthusiastic about continuing the Cultural Revolution. Having initially enhanced domestic authority, he declared an end to the Cultural Revolution in 1977.<sup>122</sup> Recent historical studies shows that Hua was virtually a moderate leader, and was not opposed to the rehabilitation of party elites who became affiliated with Deng's reform

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Ye Jianying] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian), 1112-3. For an updated account of the arrest of the Gang of Four based on open and official sources, see Teiwess and Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era*, chap. 8.

<sup>119</sup> Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 196-97.

<sup>120</sup> *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1 [The Chronological Records of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1997] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2004), 162.

<sup>121</sup> *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1, 155.

<sup>122</sup> *Zhongguo gongchandang lishi, 1949-1978* vol. 2 [History of Chinese Communist Party, 1949-1978] (Beijing: zhonggongdangshi, 2010), 1004; *Chen Yun nianpu* vol. 2 [the chronological records of Chen Yun] (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2015), 235.

coalition later on.<sup>123</sup> Yet, as Hua tried to legitimize his authority, he employed a flawed tactic: Hua's purported commitment to the "two whatevers" inevitably antagonized the party elders who fell victim to the Cultural Revolution. The elders rose to the party leadership in the pre-1949 era. They shared Maoist ideology, but not on the terms Hua defined. While the elders held no uniform vision for China's future, they did share one common interest at present—that was to restore their standing after the Cultural Revolution. Yet, the "two whatevers" meant that the Cultural Revolution's verdicts to downgrade them were all justified. As such, Hua's open espouse of the "two whatevers" seemed to frustrate their aspiration. Hua's opposition to bringing Chen Yun, a prominent party leader, back into leadership post, must have deepened their concern.<sup>124</sup>

Deng took this opportunity to mobilize an anti-Hua coalition. From April 1977, Deng began to voice opposition to the "two whatevers" to the party elders visiting his family.<sup>125</sup> On multiple occasions, then, he stressed the need to grasp Mao's thought in "correct" and "comprehensive" manners.<sup>126</sup> "By using this clever formulation," according to historian Ezra Vogel, "Deng accepted the authority of Mao, while asserting, in effect, that Hua Guofeng was not the only one who had the authority to interpret Mao's views."<sup>127</sup> Implicitly Deng asserted his own authority. Whereas his decades-long experience of serving as Mao's lieutenant was certainly a crucial source of authority, it was necessary for him to assert authority through some symbolic acts—just as Hua did by issuing ideological cues of "two whatevers." Prestige, in turn, served as a vehicle for authority contests.

As the prestige politics between Deng and Hua took on momentum, Deng's decades long associate—Chen Yun—published an article in late 1977 to support his political ally.<sup>128</sup> By this move, Chen took the lead in openly challenging Hua. Subsequently in early 1978, Hu Yaobang, Deng's protégé, instigated contestation over "the criterion of truth" (*zhenli biao zhun de taolun*). The contestation soon evolved into an ideological campaign on how to interpret Mao's ideological orthodoxy. The campaign enabled Deng to undermine Hua's ideological authority. Deng openly committed himself in late July, when he criticized the chief of the propaganda department, a proponent of Hua's line, for stifling the lively atmosphere of ideological debate.<sup>129</sup> Shortly thereafter, he intensified criticism of the "two

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<sup>123</sup> Han Gang, "Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi" [several historical truths about Hua Guofeng], *Yanhuang chunqiu* [falls and springs of the Chinese nation] no. 2 (2011), 9-18; "Guanyu Hua Guofeng de ruogan shishi (xu)" [several historical truths about Hua Guofeng (sequel)], *Yanhuang chunqiu* [falls and springs of the Chinese nation] no. 3 (2011), 9-16.

<sup>124</sup> *Chen Yun nianpu* vol. 2, 228; *Ye Jianying nianpu* vol. 2, 1122.

<sup>125</sup> *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1, 157-61.

<sup>126</sup> Yu Guangyuan, *wo yi Deng Xiaoping* (Recalling Deng Xiaoping) (Hong Kong: Time International Publishing, 2005), 185; Zhu Jiamu, *Wo suo zhidao de shiyijie sanzong quanhui* [my account of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Congress] (Beijing: dangdai zhongguo, 2008), 60.

<sup>127</sup> Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 195.

<sup>128</sup> Zhu, *Wo suo zhidao de shiyijie sanzong quanhui*, 60.

<sup>129</sup> *Hu Yaobang nianpu ziliao changbian* (Hong Kong: Time International Publishing, 2007), 318; *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1, 345-46.

whatevers” by associating its proponents with “the thought system of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four.”<sup>130</sup> Given that Lin Biao and the Gang of Four had been stigmatized as traitors to the “correct” Party line, Deng clearly showed his intention to undermine Hua’s prestige.

Deng staked his prestige upon the debate on the criterion of truth, as he sought to seize upon this ideological issue to mobilize the party elites against Hua. In early August, he convened a group of party scholars to his home, and urged them to spell out a new orthodoxy. He specified a few issues for party scholars to work on, including “ideological line” (*zhengzhi luxian*), “[the examples of] competent work units and individuals” (*xianjin danwei he xianjin renwu*), and “[how to] evaluate the cadres” [*pingjia ganbu*].<sup>131</sup> Each touched upon a critical aspect of political life. Instigating such kind of public discussion of ideological issues could publicize the split among the top leaders. Deng, however, believed that doing so would help to expand the coalition of his supporters. In late August, he called on party cadres again to intensify the debate on the criterion of truth. This issue, he argued, “will affect our work if it is not addressed.”<sup>132</sup> The tide against Hua gained momentum during the Central Party Work Conference in November. At that time, Deng suggested that the party cadres “spend two or three days discussing [how to] shift the focus of party work.”<sup>133</sup> Although Deng himself was absent at the beginning of the conference, his suggestion was faithfully pursued. A senior party leader since the 1950s, Chen Yun promoted Deng’s agenda as he intervened to urge the party leadership to “resolve problems concerning the contribution and faults of some important party leaders”—that is, to rehabilitate the cadres victimized by the Cultural Revolution.<sup>134</sup> Chen’s intervention was critical in tipping the domestic balance of power in Deng’s favor. Hua failed to bring the discussion back to the prescheduled topics. As such, Chen’s argument became a rallying cry among the conference participants.<sup>135</sup> Hua had clearly lost control of the event. In hindsight, though, the Central Party Work Conference marked a turning point for the establishment of Deng as China’s paramount leader after Mao. In reality, it took an additional year of ideological and personnel struggles on a less dramatic scale to institutionalize Deng’s authority.<sup>136</sup> As such, at the critical juncture of 1978-1979 personal prestige remained a dominant vehicle of political survival in Chinese elite politics.

In parallel with the prestige politics between Hua and Deng, China’s security environment worsened considerably with the formation of Soviet-Vietnamese alignment.

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<sup>130</sup> *Hu Yaobang nianpu ziliao changbian*, 319.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>133</sup> *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1, 431.

<sup>134</sup> *Chen Yun nianpu* vol. 2 [The chronological records of Chen Yun] (revised ed.) (Beijing: zhongyang wenxian, 2015), 252.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>136</sup> Baum, *Burying Mao*, chap. 3; Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 349-359.

Whereas Deng-Hua split heightened the leaders' reliance on prestige political survival at home, the geopolitical imperatives heightened their sensitivity to great-power status as a route to security. In turn, Deng and Hua found it desirable to adopt competitive policy for the purpose of status assertion. In this effort, they sought to enhance geopolitical security while boosting personal prestige at home.

*1978-February 1979: the Soviet-Vietnamese Alignment, the Third Indochina War, and Deng Xiaoping's Propensity for Competitive status-seeking strategy*

International and domestic developments in 1978 profoundly altered the context in which the Chinese leaders approached the fluid situation in Southeast Asia. Leaders in Beijing regarded the emergent Soviet-Vietnamese alignment and the Vietnamese effort to undermine the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia as part of Moscow's grand design to encircle China. On the other hand, intra-elite debate over the validity of the "two whatevers" further polarized the ruling elite, and elite conflict intensified accordingly. These developments combined to incline the Chinese leaders toward the choice on competitive status-seeking strategy, which took the form of China's invasion of Vietnam in February 1979.

The Deng-Hua split unfolded in the geopolitical context in which the Soviet threat expanded into Southeast via the formation of Soviet-Vietnamese alignment. As noted, the Chinese leaders had long been vigilant with regard to the Soviet influence in Asia. The Soviet threat was constant since the 1969 Zhenbao Island conflict even though conditions on the Sino-Soviet borders had stabilized since the US-China rapprochement.<sup>137</sup> After 1970, needless to say, the Soviet military power had trumped the ideological antagonism as the most salient aspect in the Chinese perception of the Soviet threat. Following America's disengagement from Vietnam in the wake of Saigon's fall in 1975, the Chinese leadership was vigilant about Hanoi's cooperation with Moscow in search for economic and military aid.<sup>138</sup> The Soviet threat from the south deepened considerably as the Soviet Union strengthened its military presence in Southeast Asia. Hanoi's tilt toward Moscow since the 1972 US-China rapprochement had been obvious.<sup>139</sup> After 1975, the Soviets had come to fill the power vacuum left by the American withdrawal from Vietnam by providing the unified Democratic Republic of Vietnam with considerable economic and military aid. By March 1978, the Soviet Union had also taken advantage of developments in Laos-Vietnam relations to establish a strong military presence in Laos, China's neighboring country.<sup>140</sup>

The period from late 1977 to early March 1978 witnessed frequent exchanges between

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<sup>137</sup> Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, 215-17.

<sup>138</sup> Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), chap. 5.

<sup>139</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, chap. 6.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

the top leaders of Vietnam. The Kremlin now praised the development of the bilateral relationship to the degree that Hanoi apparently “flaunted its abandonment of a neutral position in the Sino-Soviet conflict.”<sup>141</sup> In June 1978, “reports began emanating from China that the Soviet Union had established guided missile bases in Vietnam stocked with missiles directed at China.”<sup>142</sup> The Soviet shift to an offensive posture was evident to Beijing—and Deng began to refer to Vietnam as “the Cuba of Asia” before the western visitors.<sup>143</sup> As such, the growing cooperation between Moscow and Hanoi in the military realm had aroused “Chinese fears of an eventual encirclement of China from the south.”<sup>144</sup> The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed between Moscow and Hanoi on November 3 was particularly alarming to them. Deng referred to the treaty as a “military alliance” showing that “a big and a lesser state are cooperating” to “encircle China.”<sup>145</sup>

Arguably, the Chinese sense of threat was genuine and legitimate. It was driven home by the development of the Third Indochina War over which Beijing had little control. The Third Indochina War began with the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in response to Khmer Rouge’s conduct of guerrilla insurgency in the border areas. It soon expanded in scope and intensity.<sup>146</sup> Beijing initially tried to mediate peace between the belligerents, but its diplomatic effort came to no fruition.<sup>147</sup> The Soviet government, meanwhile, provided the Vietnamese army with military support throughout. In November 1978, the Vietnamese army took over Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, so that Pol Pot’s forces were compelled to prosecute guerilla warfare in the countryside.<sup>148</sup> On November 3, the Soviet Union and Vietnam signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which formalized the Soviet-Vietnamese alignment.<sup>149</sup> Facing the prospect of Soviet encirclement, the Chinese leadership was unified in taking precautionary measures against Vietnam and by extension, the Soviet Union. After November, all senior Chinese leaders had expressed anxiety over the deterioration of Cambodia’s resistance in the face of Vietnamese military offensives. A delegation led by Wang Dongxing—an ally of Hua Guofeng—and joined by leaders having factional affiliations with Deng also visited Cambodia in the last months of 1978 to inspect

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<sup>141</sup> Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 145.

<sup>142</sup> See *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>143</sup> Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 275.

<sup>144</sup> Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 48.

<sup>145</sup> Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 209.

<sup>146</sup> O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 37-38.

<sup>147</sup> In particular, when Pol Pot visited Beijing in fall 1977, the Chinese arranged two meetings in early October between Pol Pot and Phan Hien—Hanoi’s representative, in the hope of helping the belligerents work out some ceasefire arrangement. In an atmosphere of hostility, however, the meetings failed to yield any positive results. See Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 159-60.

<sup>148</sup> O’Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War*, 39.

<sup>149</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 213-14.

the local situation.<sup>150</sup>

For Chinese leaders, the Vietnamese expansionism and the emergent Soviet-Vietnamese alignment drove home the urgency of action. Whether in theory or in practice, a variety of strategies were available. If Chinese leaders had sought to address security imperatives on their own merits, they would have settled for balancing strategies, which entailed no more than mobilizing state power and seeking external allies. Indeed, China had enhanced its military preparedness in tandem with diplomatic efforts to balance against the expansion of Vietnamese power in Cambodia. As far back as December 1977, Deng had recommended that China enhance its military preparedness—although how China’s military would be deployed remained unspecified. He then endorsed the report from the General Staff, “Suggestions on [how to] Conduct Military Operations in the Early Stage of Anti-aggression War.”<sup>151</sup> One year later, senior officials, including Ye Jianying and Deng himself, increased emphasis on air defense.<sup>152</sup> From November 5 to 15, Deng made a trip to Southeast Asia during which he visited Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. All these countries played central role in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), an emerging regional organization committed to regional peace and noninterference from outside powers; as such, Deng hoped they could provide essential support to his diplomatic campaign to isolate Vietnam in the international community.<sup>153</sup> Apparently, Deng was implementing a strategy to wear down the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. This strategy proved viable to the extent that Deng and his associates managed to negotiate a deal with the Thai government, which agreed to help transport military materials to the guerilla insurgents in the Vietnamese-occupied areas in Cambodia.<sup>154</sup>

In retrospect, this mixture of balancing strategies by themselves could have worked to wear down the Vietnamese military presence in Cambodia, thereby weakening the Soviet influence in Indochina. As Qian Qichen recalled, upon hearing the Brezhnev’s initiative of ameliorating the Sino-Soviet relations in late March 1982, many foreign ministry officials believed that the Soviet Union was weary of its current overexpansion.<sup>155</sup> Crucially, Qian’s recollection reveals that balancing strategies might have been sufficient to deal with the Soviet threat; as such, it rendered the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in early 1979 unnecessary. To my knowledge, indeed, few Chinese officials have retrospectively attributed to Moscow’s intention to improve its relations with Beijing to the Chinese punitive military acts against

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<sup>150</sup> Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 213-14.

<sup>151</sup> *Deng Xiaoping nianpu, 1975-1997* vol. 1, 255-56.

<sup>152</sup> *Ye Jianying nianpu* vol. 2, 1152-1155.

<sup>153</sup> For details of Deng’s visit, see Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 280-91.

<sup>154</sup> Christopher Goscha, “Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism,” in *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, eds. Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (London: Routledge, 2006), 152-86, especially 178-81.

<sup>155</sup> Qian Qichen, *Waijiao shiji* [ten stories of diplomacy] (Beijing: shijie zhishi, 2003), 4.

Vietnam in 1979. As such, the geopolitical threat alone is not sufficient to justify the Chinese decision to punish Vietnam with military force.

A closer examination, furthermore, reveals that the Chinese leadership just half-heartedly pursued those risk-averse strategies. Deng, in particular, sought to use diplomacy to prepare the ground for a military invasion of Vietnam. According to Ezra Vogel, “Deng regarded the imminent Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia as sufficiently alarming that he put aside work conference participation and normalization discussions with the United States so that he could travel to Southeast Asia for ten days to gain their understanding for *China’s planned response, an attack on Vietnam*” [emphasis added].<sup>156</sup> In other words, Deng already resolved to prosecute the punitive acts against Vietnam before embarking on the Southeast visits. Not surprisingly, he was impervious to the Southeast Asian interlocutors’ concern for China’s planned military response. Specifically, the ASEAN leaders were worried that China’s military conflict with Vietnam would aggravate division within the ASEAN.<sup>157</sup> Among the countries that Deng visited there was a widely shared misgiving about China’s renewed assertiveness. After Saigon’s fall in 1975, the prevailing perception in Southeast Asia was that China represented a geopolitical threat.<sup>158</sup> As Lee Kuan Yew relayed to Deng, “China wanted Southeast Asian countries to unite with it to isolate the ‘Russian bear’; [but] the fact was that our neighbors wanted us to unite and isolate the ‘Chinese dragon.’” After all, Lee argued, “there was no ‘overseas Russians’ in Southeast Asia leading communist insurgencies supported by the Soviet government, as there were ‘overseas Chinese’ encouraged and supported by the Chinese government.”<sup>159</sup> Quite evidently, Deng’s effort to organize an anti-Vietnamese coalition was not likely to succeed due to Chinese practices in the past of promoting revolutions in Asia. Predictably, China’s military operation could only heighten anxieties in Southeast Asia. The US president Jimmy Carter conveyed a similar misgiving during his meeting with Deng. As he argued, if China invaded Vietnam “the peaceful image of the PRC and the aggressive invader of Viet Nam would both be changed [to China’s disadvantage].”<sup>160</sup> Worse still, it could jeopardize the development of US-China relations, because “armed conflict initiated by China would cause serious concern in the United States concerning the general character of China and the future peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue.”<sup>161</sup>

Both Lee and Carter pinpointed reputational costs of China’s military acts against

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<sup>156</sup> Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 280.

<sup>157</sup> National Archives of Singapore, *Oral History Interviews: Dhanbalan, S* (Senior ASEAN Statesmen), Accession no: 001500 (Reel 1).

<sup>158</sup> National Archives of Singapore, *Oral History Interviews: Dhanbalan, S* (Senior ASEAN Statesmen), Accession no: 001500 (Reel 8).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 598.

<sup>160</sup> *FRUS*, 770.

<sup>161</sup> *FRUS*, 771.

Vietnam. But Deng held a different view on reputation. In response to Carter's discouragement, he contended that "China must teach Vietnam a lesson.....[Given that] Vietnam, and then Afghanistan will evolve into prox[ies] [of the Soviets]. The PRC is approaching this issue from a *position of strength*.....If Vietnam thought the PRC soft, the situation will get worse."<sup>162</sup> Essentially, Deng was arguing that in the eyes of adversaries, China must assert its great-power status with a show of strength. In his view, geopolitical adversaries must be defeated or deterred – and international status preeminence is to derive from the outcome regardless of how that outcome is attained.

Needless to say, Deng sought to impress the foreign leaders with China's resolve to punish Vietnam by force. To both Lee and Carter, Deng made it clear that China would "make the Vietnamese pay a heavy price" for their invasion of Cambodia, while the "the Soviet Union would discover that supporting Vietnam was too heavy a burden."<sup>163</sup> Viewed in this light, Deng's Southeast Asia trip was not so much intended to seek diplomatic solution to the Vietnamese-Cambodia conflict than to prepare some diplomatic ground for employment of Chinese military power. More important, it was clear from Deng's statement that China's policy of status competition was primarily directed against the Soviets. These strategic rationales boil down to the point that the symbolic use of military force could signal strength and resolve, which in turn helps to deter the adversaries. As Deng Xiaoping conveyed Jimmy Carter, China's military action would let the Vietnamese "learn that the Soviet Union would not always come to its aid and that Vietnam should reduce its ambitions in the region. And by attacking Vietnam, not the Soviet Union, China would show the Soviet Union that any effort to build up its forces in the area would be very costly."<sup>164</sup> In this way, China's military operations were intended to establish a reputation of strength, which signaled its claim to great-power status. For the Chinese part, an invasion of Vietnam was designed to show strength to the Soviet leaders; ideally such an act could deter the Soviets from continuing to enhance their military presence in Indochina. Additionally, invading Vietnam – the Soviet allied partner in Southeast Asia – might help to drive a wedge in the Soviets-Vietnamese relationship if the Soviets proved unable to offer their ally any form of protection.<sup>165</sup> If the Soviet-Vietnamese relations soured, such an outcome could also have certain deterrent effects on the Soviet expansion in China's vicinity.

#### *Prelude to the Military Operation: Not an Exercise of Coercive Diplomacy*

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<sup>162</sup> *FRUS*, 771-772.

<sup>163</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 2000), 601.

<sup>164</sup> Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 282.

<sup>165</sup> For this strategic logic, see Xue Li and Li Xiao. "Zhongyue bianjing zhanzheng: yuanyin tanxi yu shouyi pinggu" [China-Vietnam border war: causes and gains by China]. *Zhanlue juece yanjiu* [strategic decision research], 67-83; also see Segal, *Defending China*, 216.

Had the Chinese decision just been based on a geopolitical rationale, they would have favored coercive diplomacy and balancing strategies, which allowed the Chinese address the security imperatives on their own merits. As noted, however, China pursued alternative strategies just half-heartedly. In the run-up to China's invasion of Vietnam, China's international conduct assumed features distinct from coercive diplomacy deserves more emphasis.

The first aspect of China's deviation from the practice of coercive diplomacy is that Beijing did not specify its demands on Vietnam. While Beijing invariably denounced Hanoi for pursuing imperialist policy in Indochina by invading Cambodia, it did not specify the terms on which Hanoi could undo its so-called imperialist policy. "Punishing Vietnam" or "teaching Vietnam" was too elusive to make Hanoi aware of any substantive costs Beijing would impose should Hanoi stay in the current course of action.<sup>166</sup> Second, there was "no consistent pattern of escalating Chinese warnings to Vietnam that China would strike, for even the final warning from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on 16 February, was no different from earlier statements."<sup>167</sup> The Chinese denouncement of the Vietnamese was scattered among several editorials on official media, which made it difficult even in hindsight to judge whether China tried to calibrate pressure on Vietnam in accordance to the latter's action. Keeping the pressures constant could not make Hanoi sense anything different; as such, Beijing failed to drive home to Hanoi the imminence of its military invasion. According to an international observer at the time, "the Chinese 'pacification' of the border was intended to 'punish' the Vietnamese and 'teach them a lesson.' Exactly what this entailed was only gradually spelled out after the first week of the invasion."<sup>168</sup>

Additionally, prior to the military acts China demonstrated no serious commitment to solving the mounting tension with Vietnam in 1978. In the context of the Cambodia-Vietnamese conflict, border frictions between China and Vietnam considerably deepened the Chinese suspicions of Hanoi's aggressiveness.<sup>169</sup> Although there was only a slim chance for Beijing and Hanoi to resolve their longstanding tensions, the two sides could have addressed the contentious issues case by case. Whereas in 1969 the Chinese and the Soviets managed to conduct negotiations in the midst of the border conflict, Beijing did not take similar measures to manage the mounting crisis. The Chinese officials simply viewed the border incidents as confirming their view of Vietnamese hostility. This further hardened

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<sup>166</sup> Due the ambiguity in Chinese effort to signal its "genuine" intention, there exist multiple, though not contradictory, interpretations of China's strategic purpose. See, for instance, Xiaoming Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005); Harlan Jenks, "China's' Punitive War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 8 (1979); King Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1987).

<sup>167</sup> Segal, *Defending China*, 213.

<sup>168</sup> Jenks, "China's' Punitive War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," 802.

<sup>169</sup> Khoo, *Collateral Damage*, 125.

their determination to undertake acts of competitive status-seeking strategy. Reportedly, an enlarged Politburo meeting in May had already come to the decision on a limited war to “hit back” at Vietnam. Although this decision was taken in response to Vietnam’s pursuit of “military adventure,” it was quite evident that the military invasion option was firmly on Beijing’s agenda well before all other means for containing Hanoi were exhausted.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, Beijing’s policy establishment seized upon Vietnam’s persecution of ethnic Chinese to publicize and confirm its own perception of Vietnamese hostility soon afterward. According to a high ranking military official who participated in the meetings of military planning in September, the participants were presented with documents showing the alleged atrocities committed by the Vietnamese army vis-à-vis the Chinese residents near the borders and the past records of the Hanoi leadership’s expansionist policy.<sup>171</sup> The participants soon reached a consensus on the need for punishing the Vietnam, despite the remaining differences over the scope and intensity of the military attack being planned.<sup>172</sup>

Given all these distinctive features, China’s punitive military acts against Vietnam fit awkwardly with the category of coercive diplomacy. As such, conventional analyses of China’s military invasion in terms of coercive diplomacy cannot explain this actual deviation from the pattern of coercive diplomacy.<sup>173</sup> This chapter thus categorizes China’s act as competitive status-seeking strategy and deploys the theoretical argument (proposed in Chapters 2) to explain it.

#### *Explaining the Final Decision to Invade Vietnam*

My explanation underscores concerns for great-power status and personal prestige on the level of individual leaders. It argues that the leaders in Beijing shared such concerns, which intensified for pragmatic reasons as related to geopolitical and domestic political challenges. In the midst of institutional change dynamics, prestige tends to become leaders’ own political capital. In 1978 the Deng-Hua struggles for China’s institutional reforms had polarized the regime and encouraged the Chinese leaders to rely upon personal prestige as a crucial political resource. The geopolitical threat from the Soviet-Vietnamese alignment, then, compelled the Chinese leaders to pursue great-power status by a competitive strategy. This strategy promised to enhance geopolitical autonomy of China in a long run while helping individual leaders boost personal prestige. Deng took the initiative to propose the punitive acts against Vietnam in response to the Soviet-Vietnamese collaboration to encircle China. Other leaders acquiesced in and some even showed enthusiastic support. Hence, the

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<sup>170</sup> Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, 123-24.

<sup>171</sup> Zhou Deli, *Yige gaoji canmouzhang de zishu* [Personal recollections by a senior chief of staff] (Nanjing: Nanjing Publisher, 1992), 239-40.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 242-43.

<sup>173</sup> See, for instance, Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, chap. 6; Segal, *Defending China*, chap. 12.

convergence of political incentives—concerning both great-power status and personal prestige—encouraged Beijing’s leadership to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy.

Asserting great-power status through military power promises to deter the Soviet expansion in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, inasmuch as state leaders personify sovereign authority, the Chinese leaders could boost personal prestige among home audiences—especially the political elites—through the symbolic display of resolve for defending the national interest. In this endeavor, they can expect to legitimize and strengthen their power positions at home, as personal prestige highlights the personalistic dimension of power. Hence, leaders seek to further their interests in both geopolitical and domestic political arenas through competitive status-seeking strategy. Deng’s act fits this logic. Along with other leaders, he had been concerned about the emerging Soviet-Vietnamese threat. In the midst of elite power struggles at home, he was increasingly inclined to boost personal prestige. As such, competitive status-seeking strategy provides the very vehicle for him to cope with the geopolitical threats while enhancing personal prestige at home. But why was it Deng Xiaoping rather than other leaders who took the initiative to assert great-power status vis-à-vis the Soviets? This was in large part attributable to Deng’s strong personality. True, Deng’s strong personality might have inclined him to be staunch and at times, ruthless on critical matters whether domestic or international.<sup>174</sup> But it is also reasonable to argue that the politics of personal prestige allowed Deng’s strong personality to play a pivotal role in foreign policy formulation. That is, Deng’s subjective sense of prestige might have enabled him to grasp the instrumental roles of great-power status and personal prestige. Because Deng had a strong personality, he was able to see advantages of engaging in competitive status-seeking acts for enhancing China’s geopolitical security, as well as his domestic authority.

Hence, at the core of Deng’s decision lay pragmatic concerns for great-power status and personal prestige. Specifically, the Soviet-Vietnamese threat sensitized Deng to the relevance of great-power status to geopolitical security, whereas his growing split with Hua increased his reliance on personal prestige for domestic political survival. For Deng’s part, therefore, competitive status-seeking strategy became a preferable policy for addressing both geopolitical and domestic political challenges. And yet, for Deng’s war decision to gain support among the Politburo elite, other leaders needed to share his view, whether implicitly or explicitly. A shared threat perception, however, does not translate directly into the consensus on how to deal with the geopolitical threat. As such, the Chinese leadership’s opposition to the Soviet-Vietnamese alignment does not necessarily mean they would agree

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<sup>174</sup> For a general discussion of Deng’s personality and leadership style, see Michael Yahuda, "Deng Xiaoping: The Statesman," *The China Quarterly* 135 (1993). For the impact of Deng’s strong personality on his decision to punish Vietnam via military invasion, see Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 46-48.

unanimously on a risky policy response. In line with my theoretical argument about personal prestige concerns, we can hypothesize that the Chinese leaders feared of losing prestige among the peers in their decision to support the war against Vietnam. If this hypothesis on personal prestige concerns holds true, we should expect to see individual leaders committed themselves to a “good” reputation for leadership. In foreign policy making, such kind of reputation is associated with an apparent willingness to defend the national interest—no one could afford politically to be accused of compromising the national interest. Thus, if it was the concern for personal prestige which induced individual leaders to take a hard line in foreign policy, we should expect to see Deng’s political rivals become supportive of his proposal to adopt a policy status competition against the Soviet-Vietnamese alignment.

This hypothesis finds empirical support in the last stage of China’s decision process. When Deng formally proposed a punitive war against Vietnam on the last day of 1978, all participants including Hua Guofeng flocked to assertive *lines*. The precise view of Hua and his faction members on how to approach the Soviet-Vietnamese threats remained unclear to date. We now know that they had been involved in the war decision only to a moderate extent until the moment Deng asked for their formal approval. At the moment when their prestige based on the nationalist credentials was at stake, they unanimously supported Deng’s proposal the punitive war. Remarkably, Hua and his faction turned out to be more assertive in supporting the war, as they pressed for expanding the scope, duration, and intent of the operation. In this way, they demonstrated loyalty to the nationalist objective of punishing Vietnam that Deng had spearheaded.<sup>175</sup> Also surprisingly, Chen Yun threw his full support behind Deng a few days later.<sup>176</sup> Chen had long been a prudent policymaker. And the war on Vietnam would surely derail the local economy in the border areas, which ran counter to his abiding reservation against China’s involvement in war.<sup>177</sup> Quite evidently, all leaders sought to bandwagon for prestige once it became apparent that supporting Deng’s decision to invade Vietnam was an effective way to advance personal prestige.

Another piece of evidence on the roles of concerns for great-power status and personal prestige in forging the war decision has to do with the Chinese post-conflict assessment. In the post-war analyses, a historian notes, “a growing discrepancy was evident between a Western view that tended to underscore the PLA’s shortcomings and a Chinese position that

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<sup>175</sup> Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War*, 56.

<sup>176</sup> *Chen Yun nianpu* vol. 2, 265.

<sup>177</sup> Chen Yun’s aversion to war was traceable to his reservation, if not explicit opposition, against sending Chinese troops to fight in the Korean War. See Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, 83; *Chen Yun wenxuan, 1949-1956* [selected works of Chen Yun, 1949-1956] (Beijing: renmin, 1982), 111-12; David Bachman, *Chen Yun and the Chinese Political System* (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute for East Asian Studies and Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1985), 34.

stressed the PLA's victory over the PAVN [the Vietnamese army]."<sup>178</sup> The Chinese leaders had every reason to proclaim victory, which could serve leaders' interests in both geopolitical and domestic political arenas. Shortly after the Chinese military completed their military operations and withdrew from the Vietnamese territory, Deng proclaimed that his policy of punishing Hanoi had been successful. In particular, he asserted that the Chinese victory had "considerably boosted the prestige of our nation in international anti-hegemonic struggles, and the prestige of the PLA among the Chinese people."<sup>179</sup> Here, Deng apparently glossed over the deficiencies of Chinese military in fighting capacities, which in large part resulted from the organizational chaos in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. Since Deng had staked personal prestige on the war, it was in his political interest to frame the war outcome in favorable terms. By claiming credit for China's pursuit of honorable anti-hegemonic cause, Deng could therefore expect to protect his prestige in taking risks for initiating a military conflict with Vietnam.

To be clear, my argument does not suggest that Deng's support for competitive status-seeking strategy was the key to his success in the power struggle with Hua – rather, competitive status-seeking strategy just represents *a* consequence of the Deng-Hua split for the leadership's foreign policy practice. As such, the prestige politics attending to the Deng-Hua split should not be overstated as the overriding cause for China's invasion of Vietnam. Rather, it was the combination of prestige politics at home and the geopolitical threat arising from the Soviet support for Vietnam's military conflict with Cambodia that generated the impulse for China to pursue competitive status-seeking strategy, which took the form of military acts against Vietnam in February 1979.

In the final analysis, China's invasion of Vietnam serves to illustrate how pragmatic concerns for great-power status and personal prestige – as related to geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics at home – led the Chinese leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy. In this case, competitive assertions of status entail the display of military power as a status symbol. The causal mechanisms underlying it are similar to those underlying other varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy: leaders opt for competitive status-seeking strategy in order to assert great-power status and prestige to home audiences. In this endeavor, they seek to deter or compel the foreign adversary while legitimizing their hold on power at home. Since, however, competitive status-seeking strategy carries tremendous risk of escalating international tension, leaders would not opt for it under usual circumstances. The Chinese decision to invade Vietnam shows how individual leaders' pragmatic concerns for great-power status and personal prestige could arise in particular

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<sup>178</sup> Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 117-118.

<sup>179</sup> *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan 1975-1982* [selected works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1982] (Beijing: renmin, 1983), 146.

circumstances, and motivated them to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy. Specifically, the Soviet-Vietnam alignment fueled Beijing's sensitivity to great-power status as a vehicle for geopolitical autonomy (or security), and Deng-Hua split heightened leaders' reliance on prestige as the principal vehicle for political survival. These geopolitical and domestic incentives combined to make competitive status-seeking strategy the preferable policy for the whole leadership. The causal mechanisms examined here represent no general theory of how competitive status-seeking strategy arises; rather, they represent a distinctive, and to some extent generalizable, pathway from leaders' concerns for great-power status and personal prestige to competitive status-seeking strategy.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter addresses the decline and resurgence of competitive status-seeking strategy in Chinese security policy practices. It shows the motivations behind the Chinese use of military force in two cases. When China employed military force against the Soviets in 1969, it was primarily motivated by the geopolitical imperative. By contrast, a critical motivating force behind the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1978 was the leaders' pragmatic concern for personal prestige. This chapter thus demonstrates how variation in the Chinese leaders' reliance on prestige as a political vehicle generated differing approaches to the Soviet threat.

Elite politics in China was fluid from 1969 to 1979. There is no denying that the purge of Liu Shaoqi and various central leaders in 1967 released unruly dynamics of factional infighting during this period. Mao, nevertheless, stood above factional infightings, and retained considerable detachment until his death in 1976. This was due to his unrivaled political authority. As such, Mao did not rely upon personal prestige as a crucial vehicle for political survival at home. And inasmuch as prestige politics ceased to be a domestic political imperative, Mao's employment of military force against the Soviets in 1969 was not driven by concerns for personal prestige on the home front. Although Mao could capitalize on the post hoc effect of taking on a superpower for the purpose of domestic mobilization, prestige politics at home is no essential cause for China's conflict behavior in 1969.

Mao's detachment in the elite conflict, in turn, gave him sufficient latitude in signaling self-restraint in the conduct of coercive diplomacy against the Soviet Union. Subsequently, Mao's unrivaled authority made it possible that Zhou Enlai—a leader on the moderate foreign policy line—gained sufficient latitude to negotiate an *de facto* alignment with the United States. However, Mao's death in 1976 triggered enormous pressures for institutional change of Chinese politics. This contributed significantly to China's policy of status competition against the Soviet Union, which took the form of an invasion of Vietnam in 1979.

This chapter shows the distinctiveness of my theoretical insight on competitive status-seeking strategy vis-à-vis alternative arguments. Defensive realism is at a loss over why the Chinese leaders went beyond the measure of strengthening defensive capacities in response to the Soviet-Vietnamese military collaboration. Given that in 1978 Chinese leadership had managed to combine border defense building with a diplomatic effort to contain the Soviet-Vietnamese alignment, balancing seemed to have been sufficient for safeguarding China's geopolitical security. The Chinese use of force against Vietnam is thus unwarranted from a geostrategic standpoint—as such, defensive realism is inadequate for explaining China's propensity for displaying military power. The authoritarian politics thesis is unable to explain why the whole leadership unanimously rallied behind Deng's decision to invade Vietnam—despite the internecine power struggle. Specifically, it falls short in addressing why Hua Guofeng or any other leader failed to challenge Deng's decision on war. This is a fatal anomaly to the authoritarian politics thesis, as the post-Mao China can be seen as an “elite-constrained” system whereby no single leader can dictate a foreign policy line.<sup>180</sup> Inasmuch as their support was essential to Deng's struggle against Hua, these leaders could have hindered Deng from pursuing competitive status-seeking strategy. The authoritarian politics thesis, however, does not consider why other leaders—at the moment when they held veto power—bandwagoned with Deng on the war decision.

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<sup>180</sup> See Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace*, 40.

## Conclusions and Implications

This thesis investigates the political logic of status competition. It argues that leaders may adopt competitive policies in pursuit of great-power status when they face significant challenges to the state's geopolitical security *as well as* their personal authority at home. The instrumental role of great-power status and personal prestige features centrally in my explanation of competitive status-seeking strategies. This concluding chapter summarizes the arguments and key findings. In addition, it briefly discusses the theoretical implications of my theory and its relevance to contemporary unipolar world. Finally, it discusses the limits of my study and proposes avenues for future research.

### **Great-Power Status, Personal Prestige, and Power Politics**

The political logic of status competition rests on three assumptions. To begin with, state leaders are central actors in formulating and implementing security strategy and in the process, they have to grapple with the tradeoffs among various commitments—not least geopolitical security, domestic political survival, and status ambitions. Second, great-power status and personal prestige are important vehicles for leaders to advance their interests in geopolitical and domestic political arenas.

Third and most importantly, leaders pursue competitive status-seeking strategies when they are anxious about both great-power status and personal prestige—measured against the geopolitical and domestic political challenges. By demonstrating certain symbols indicative of state power, competitive status-seeking acts promise to impress international audiences with a manifestation of state power. Once an impression is established that a state gains advantage over others, it could over time deter other states from challenging its core claims. A favorable image of its power, in particular, could deter the main adversary; or, it could deter lesser states from working with other great powers, thereby denying them access to the actor's vicinity. On the other hand, as competitive status-seeking acts allow individual leaders to demonstrate resolve for engaging in interstate competition, it could sensitize domestic audiences to great-power status as a national interest. In the process of showing readiness for promoting status, a leader seeks to gain personal prestige from the domestic audience expecting him/her to further their collective self-esteem.

One caveat deserves particular emphasis. Leaders, in displaying state power, do *not* necessarily succeed in enhancing their nation's status and personal prestige. Quite the contrary, the pursuit of competitive status-seeking policies threatens to escalate international tension and may even provoke war. Such policies incur tremendous security risks for the

state and ultimately, the political costs would be imposed on leaders themselves. Needless to say, competitive status-seeking strategy is no normal statecraft because it is highly risky. Leaders therefore are unlikely to pursue it unless their pragmatic concerns for social preeminence intensify to an extreme degree. That is, competitive status-seeking strategy is a preferable policy for those leaders who rely upon prestige as *the* vehicle for domestic political survival while viewing great-power status as a route to geopolitical security.

Through a careful investigation of Chinese diplomatic and political history from 1962 to 1979, this study examines how leaders' concerns for great-power status and personal prestige arose and took on pragmatic characters. It finds that in response to institutional change dynamics, the Chinese leaders tended to rely upon personal prestige as political capital to keep their hold on power at home. And they viewed great-power status as a vehicle for addressing geopolitical threats. These incentives could *combine* to make competitive status-seeking strategy a preferable policy for leaders. Hence, they are very likely to undertake competitive status-seeking acts, which could enable them to transcend the tradeoffs among status aspirations, geopolitical security, and political survival in elite politics.

Whether leaders would undertake competitive status-seeking strategy in a particular circumstance is ultimately a matter of human agency. After all, geopolitical threat and institutional change merely represent circumstances whereby leaders' concerns for great-power status and personal prestige are *supposedly* intense. They act as peculiar stimuli to leaders' pragmatic concerns for social preeminence, rather than good measures of psychological phenomena which are not directly observable. Here, I only seek to underscore the fact that concerns for social preeminence may arise for pragmatic reasons, and that as concrete expressions of social preeminence in geopolitical and domestic political arenas, great-power status and personal prestige could act as vehicles for leaders to achieve other important ends, such as geopolitical security and political survival in elite politics.

With this caveat in mind, I argue that in the midst of institutional change dynamics leaders have to rely upon personal prestige for instrumental purposes of political survival among domestic elites. To the extent that political institutions do not serve as a dominant source of power for state leaders, leaders have to exploit the personalistic sources of power such as charisma and interpersonal skills for building and managing the ruling coalition. Prestige accordingly becomes a crucial vehicle for political survival, which allows leaders to consolidate their domestic positions. Personal prestige means positive reputation based on the demonstrated individual qualities. State leaders can gain prestige by displaying symbols that could confer them good reputation. It becomes visible to the political audiences when leaders engage in symbolic acts.

Whereas institutional change dynamics could heighten the need for prestige on the part of individual state leaders, geopolitical threat may compel them to assert great-power status. If a geopolitical rival is challenging a state's core claims and threatens to draw a third party to its side—especially in that state's vicinity, it is imperative for state leaders to demonstrate state power in order to signal resolve for defending its sphere of influence—a hallmark of great-power status. And if they manage to *show* that the state power at their disposal is superior to that of the adversary, then the very act displaying state power can establish a reputation for unchallengeable power, which would further security interests. In the process, leaders may also hope to boost their personal prestige through symbolic acts of displaying state power. This is achievable because political audiences, when organized in small groups, tend to favorably perceive those showing strong resolve for defending the community with which they are associated.

The argument laid out above by no means suggests that through competitive status-seeking strategy, leaders can necessarily enhance the state's geopolitical security and their domestic power positions. My argument, instead, is focused on the motivations behind leaders' practice of competitive status-seeking strategy rather than the political effects of their acts. Whether competitive status-seeking strategy could serve leaders well hinges on a range of other factors operating in complex ways. Addressing that issue is beyond the analytic task of this study.

### **Theoretical Implications**

By investigating the political logic of status competition, this study advances the notion that leaders may undertake competitive status-seeking strategy for pragmatic reasons—that is, for the purpose of enhancing the state's geopolitical security and their grip on authority in domestic elite politics. This insight challenges the conventional wisdom, which implicitly assumes that leaders' aspiration for great-power status is invariant. Rather, it shows that concerns for both great-power status and personal prestige are variables that beg for explanation on the level of individual leaders. By treating status and prestige this way, my study opens a new avenue for theoretical innovation and empirical research.

In investigating the motivations behind leaders' practice of competitive status-seeking strategy, this study suggests two ways in which leaders seek to establish social preeminence—namely by norm or by outcome. Theoretically, I assume that state leaders pursue the latter type of social preeminence in the geopolitical arena and that their pursuit of the former is confined to the domestic realm. This view tacitly assumes that the geopolitical arena is anarchical in general whereby state identities are heterogeneous and interstate networks are relatively sparse. It is unlikely that international audiences could

become emotionally attached to leaders of a certain state who are invoking transnational identity. By contrast, domestic political system features hierarchical authority structures whereby dense networks and homogeneous identity could ensure that home audiences identify with leaders who engage in symbolic acts invoking a nationalist or other forms of political identity.

Due to the disparate dynamics prevalent in the anarchical realm of geopolitics and the hierarchical realm of domestic politics, leaders' symbolic acts follow distinct logics. Homogeneous identities and interaction frequency are not normal conditions of the geopolitical realm; modern states, at least in its ideal type, feature dense networks facilitating frequent interactions and collective identity formation. This disparity means that the prevalent way leaders could establish status preeminence in the geopolitical realm is by trumping their adversaries—hence the logic of gaining great-power status (e.g. outcome-based social preeminence). By contrast, they may find it easier to invoke rally their audience around a collective identity they themselves personify—hence the logic of gaining personal prestige (e.g. norm-based social preeminence). Because leaders more often than not operate at the intersection of anarchical and hierarchical realms, they are apt to find themselves cross-pressured by both. Where they seek both outcome-based and norm-based social preeminence by symbolic acts of competitive status-seeking strategy, my theoretical argument would apply.

Admittedly, this anarchy-hierarchy distinction may be too stark, as it might not strictly correspond to the international-domestic dichotomy. A distinctive feature of world politics is that various hierarchical authority structures are flourishing alongside the anarchical conditions of the system of states.<sup>1</sup> My theoretical insight arguably applies in any circumstance whereby leaders are cross-pressured by political challenges from within and without their polity. To be specific, authority contests within a given polity—whether in the form of national state, empire, or other kinds of polity based on dense networks and a relatively homogeneous identity—could possibly induce leaders to rely upon prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival. If, at the same time, the anarchical domain of geopolitics induces security competitions, leaders would be motivated to engage in competitive status-seeking acts against their geopolitical adversary. The purpose of doing so is to deter external adversaries while enhancing personal prestige to audiences within the polity. Although competitive status-seeking strategy is no normal statecraft, structural attributes of world politics described above do encourage leaders to practice it.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, "Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empire and the East German State," *International Organization* 49, no. 4 (October 1995); David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009); Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, "Hierarchies in World Politics," *International Organization* 70, no. 3 (July 2016).

One instance may help illustrate this point. Studies of democratic peace community, notably the NATO in the Cold War, have suggested that the democratic peace community changed the very structure of politics among modern liberal democracies. In both theory and practice, liberal democracies typically feature strong adherence to liberal values of rule of law, universal human rights, democratic governance, and free trade—as such, there exist dense policy networks and relatively homogeneous identity to facilitate and solidify cooperation among them.<sup>2</sup> In the postwar years, these defining features of liberal democracies provide American leaders with a vehicle for mobilizing their democratic allies in support of their policy.<sup>3</sup> But they at the same time leave American leaders vulnerable to challengers in the international democratic community who could accuse them of abandoning the allies for self-interests. Hence, intra-alliance politics could provide a crucial source of concern for social preeminence on the part of American leaders during the Cold War and beyond.<sup>4</sup> And such kind of concern is pragmatic.

In addition to its potentials for theoretical extension, my argument promises to fill the gaps left by offensive realism, defensive realism, the thesis of authoritarian politics, which have yet to come to terms with matters of great-power status and personal prestige in international security studies. It also improves on some aspects of the diversionary conflict thesis.

First, my theory offers a systematic explanation regarding when leaders become prone to international conflict. Offensive realism cannot account for this variation at all. As it treats systemic pressures for security competition as constantly intense, state leaders should always incline toward the behavioral pattern akin to competitive status-seeking strategy. Hence, it is puzzling to offensive realism why leaders at times do not pursue competitive policies if competitive pressures are invariably intense in an anarchical world. Defensive realism, by focusing on domestic coalitional dynamics and varied degrees of the security dilemma, is better able to address why state leaders shift to a more assertive line of strategy to further state security interests. Yet, because it gives insufficient attention to status as a

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<sup>2</sup> There is an enormous literature on democratic peace dating back to Immanuel Kant. For those pertinent to my argument, see for instance, Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation among Democracies: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Charles Lipson, *Reliable Partners: How Democracies Have Made a Separate Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); John Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994); Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Michael Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1986); "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part I," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1983).

<sup>3</sup> John Owen, "Transnational Liberalism and U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 26, no. 3 (Winter 2001/02); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*; Robert McMahon, "Credibility and World Power: Exploring the Psychological Dimension in Postwar American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 4 (1991); Christopher Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Tudor Onea, *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era: Restraint Versus Assertiveness from George H. W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

vehicle for leaders furthering national security, defensive realism is inadequate for addressing the pattern of competitive state behavior. My theoretical insight fills this gap by according pride of place to status as a national objective without losing sight of its relevance to other political interests of central importance to leaders.

Additionally, by focusing on individual leaders' concerns for personal prestige, I uncover a significant limitation of the thesis of authoritarian politics. The authoritarian politics thesis highlights preferences of individual leaders as regards peace and war. Recent research, in particular, has shown that authoritarian leaders are not necessarily prone to international conflict, as individual leaders could be constrained within their elite circles. My research, however, suggests that the need for prestige—a crucial vehicle for political survival in authoritarian politics—could motivate elite consensus on a risk-prone foreign policy. Seen in this light, even when authoritarian leaders become prone to conflict abroad, this might not have to do with their personal idiosyncrasies. Instead, group dynamics could be a critical force to shape foreign policy considerations of authoritarian leaders.

Finally, my argument improves on the diversionary conflict thesis. The diversionary conflict thesis does stress the positive correlation between intergroup conflict and in-group solidarity—and this offers critical insight to my theoretical argument. This psychodynamic helps leaders to establish personal prestige among domestic audiences, I argue; but it may not be operative in the absence of geopolitical imperatives. Hence, my argument emphasizes that concerns for personal prestige alone cannot motivate leaders to resort to the diversionary conflict logic in their foreign policy strategy. The diversionary logic may be necessary but is not sufficient to motivate leaders to undertake competitive status-seeking strategy.

### **Empirical Findings**

Empirically, this study differentiates competitive status-seeking strategy from other security strategies, notably balancing, conventional diplomacy, and coercive diplomacy. My case studies highlight that in pursuing security through competitive status-seeking measures, state leaders seek to display state power as a symbol for status. Inasmuch as this strategy is implemented at the expense of chance for diplomatic accommodation, competitive status-seeking strategy signals a departure from conventional diplomacy. The fact that this strategy treats state power as a status symbol rather than an instrument for interstate bargaining differentiates it from balancing and coercive diplomacy.

This study illustrates competitive status-seeking strategy via three cases of Chinese security strategy from 1962 to 1979, whereby Beijing's leaders demonstrated diplomatic, ideological, and military aspects of Chinese power. In so doing, it probes the plausibility of

my central assertion that competitive status-seeking strategy is a preferable policy for leaders who consider great-power status a vehicle for geopolitical security and rely upon personal prestige for domestic political survival. My in-depth process tracing of Chinese security strategy from 1949 to 1979 bolsters this claim. The three variants of competitive status-seeking strategy took place in such circumstances: the superpowers' involvement in China's vicinity (e.g. Vietnam) encouraged Beijing's leaders to view great-power status as a route to security *while at the same time*, institutional change dynamics at home heightened their reliance upon personal prestige for power legitimation and political survival. My case studies, in turn, suggest that as leaders' concerns for *both* great-power status and personal prestige significantly intensified for *pragmatic* reasons, Chinese leaders would find it necessary to adopt competitive policies in international politics.

Specifically, China pursued an offensive alliance against the US in 1962-1965. By encouraging the Hanoi regime to expand the guerilla warfare in South Vietnam, the Chinese leadership in effect mobilized Hanoi as a diplomatic asset to undermine the US geopolitical influence in Indochina, thereby asserting great-power status based on the Chinese power. After 1965 as China's leaders came to perceive the Soviet Union as the primary geopolitical threat, they sought status through competitive policies by trying to dictate the tactics by which their Vietnamese counterparts conducted armed struggles in Indochina. Insisting that the Vietnamese communists prosecute guerilla (opposed to conventional) warfare against the US-backed Saigon regime and chastising the Soviet proposal for peace talks in Indochina, the Chinese leaders tried to delegitimize the Soviet Union in the international communist hierarchy. In these two cases, China pursuit of competitive status-seeking strategy took the form of offensive alliance with the Hanoi regime and delegitimation strategy against Moscow. Both policies were driven by the sense of Chinese leaders of the geopolitical challenges to their claim to great-power status, *as well as* the individual leaders' reliance upon personal prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival. The superpowers' involvement in China's southern vicinity sensitized leaders in Beijing to the instrumental value of great-power status, which they believed could provide a vehicle for geopolitical security. Institutional change dynamics unleashed by the Great Leap Forward fiasco, on the other hand, heightened Chinese leaders' reliance upon prestige for political survival in elite politics. They in turn found competitive status-seeking strategy a desirable strategy for coping with geopolitical and domestic political challenges simultaneously.

The Sino-Soviet border conflict in 1969 and China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 illustrate two patterns of China's use of military power. The former case fits the definition of coercive diplomacy. For one thing, China clearly specified its territorial claim to the Soviets before it initiated armed conflict. For another, while engaging the Soviet forces, Beijing's

leaders were keen to open negotiation with Moscow. Such attempts at diplomatic accommodation are not present in 1979. This time the Chinese leadership openly stated their determination to punish Hanoi for pursuing alignment with the Soviets. Equally significant, China did not clearly specify its claims to the Vietnamese as well as the Soviets. Rather, it seems that China was simply intent on establishing an image of being powerful via its employment of military force to “punish” Hanoi. This behavioral trait is more compatible with competitive status-seeking strategy than coercive diplomacy. Additionally, it is important to note that in by 1979 the Soviet military threat that had extended to China’s southern vicinity had prompted Beijing to view military forces as a field of status competition; the struggle between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng for the agenda of post-Mao institutional reforms, on the other hand, fueled Chinese leaders’ concerns for personal prestige. By contrast, in 1969 such institutional change dynamics were nonexistent. The factional infightings during the Cultural Revolution posed no substantial challenge to Mao’s authority, which means he did not rely upon prestige as a dominant vehicle for political survival in elite politics. Accordingly, there was no need for Mao to promote his prestige via status competition, and China’s conflict strategy toward the Soviets follows the pattern of coercive diplomacy. This comparative study shows that status competition is no normal statecraft and leaders pursue competitive status-seeking strategy when they regard great-power status as a vehicle for geopolitical security and rely upon prestige to consolidate personal authority in elite politics.

### **Contemporary Relevance: Status Competition in the Unipolar World**

William Wohlforth argues that the structural condition of the unipolar world—a world in which global power resources are concentrated in a single hegemonic state while other powers enjoy tremendous geopolitical influences in their own regions—would discourage the rising powers from engaging in competition against the US hegemonic leadership.<sup>5</sup> As a corollary, the rising powers may prefer strategies of social mobility and creativity to competitive policies to enhancing their status. My study, however, suggests that certain geopolitical and domestic political conditions characteristic of rising and resurgent powers could work to fuel concerns for social preeminence on the part of individual leaders, and encourage these states to pursue competitive status-seeking strategy to some extent.

Herein lies the relevance of my discussion of status competition to the contemporary world. Three decades after the Cold War saw the emergence of regional powers asserting their power and influences. The dominance of US power on the global scale, as some

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<sup>5</sup> William Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009).

international relations theorists argue, is not to stifle but unleash regional dynamics.<sup>6</sup> The preponderance of power at the disposal of the United States is not sufficient to change the anarchical condition of international political life. As such, regional powers are induced, rather than restrained, to establish great-power status in their own backyards by virtue of their advantageous power resources vis-à-vis the local competitors. Doing so enables them to “tame” the US power—that is, to hinder the translation of US global preeminence into local predominance.<sup>7</sup> In politics among nations, great-power status promises influences short of exercising power in costly ways. And the availability of nuclear weapons and the logic of mutually assured destruction only add to the instrumental role of enhanced status for states.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, we should expect to see a growing propensity among the rising powers for competitive status-seeking strategy. Their preference for competitive policies may further be heightened by the domestic political dynamics that attend to the growth of their power capabilities. All rising powers tend to undergo sweeping societal changes at home that undermine their political institutional orders. As such, leaders tend to rely more on personalistic sources of power, such as charisma and positive reputations for managing the ruling coalition. For their part, personal prestige then becomes a crucial vehicle for political survival. Efforts to demonstrate they are “good” leaders entail symbolic acts—that is, to show the symbols indicative of competent leadership. Inasmuch as great-power status provides a route to geopolitical security and the leaders may rely upon personal prestige for domestic political survival, leaders of regional powers may arguably find it desirable to engage in competition with their proximate rival states—especially those aligned with the United States. While doing so, they employ state power as a symbol for status rather than as a normal instrument in interstate bargaining. This suggests that they will not allow the image of wielding state power to be shattered by a counteraction from the adversary. When competitive status-seeking acts bring them into a serious confrontation with other powers, it is politically desirable to persist rather than retreat. My study, to be sure, falls short in identifying all relevant conditions and mechanisms that could sensitize state leaders to the importance of personal prestige for political survival. Still, I do point out that when leaders rely upon prestige to strengthen their grip on power at home, they tend to be intransigent facing the pressures from the United States. Nowadays, this assertion seems to have been bolstered by the Chinese and Russian defiance against the US allies or diplomatic partners in their own regions—namely, East and South China Seas and Ukraine.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Buzan, *The United States and Great Powers*; Andrew Hurrell, "Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order: What Space for Would-Be Great Powers?," *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Walt, *Taming American Power*.

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

The practice of competitive status-seeking strategy by regional powers such as China and Russia constitutes a novel challenge to the United States in exercising hegemonic leadership. The US hegemonic leadership by definition requires followers.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the regional powers can resist by signaling defiance against the hegemon by demonstrating their material and ideational strengths. In this scenario, the “assertive” regional powers are not seeking to replace the US as the hegemonic leader but imposing burdens on its leadership role. China and Russia intent on establishing spheres of influence in East Asia and Ukraine are cases in point. Their respective acts of status competition as well as their diplomatic collaboration signals defiance against the US hegemony in the regional context without showing willingness to remove the US from its current leadership role in world politics. To paraphrase Thomas Christensen, they are “posing problems without catching up.”<sup>10</sup>

This creates a dilemma for the US hegemony: to relinquish hegemony would invite the regional powers to fill the power vacuums thereby left; to engage in direct confrontation with the assertive regional powers may incur material costs. The Obama administration has tried to cope with this dilemma by avoiding overt confrontations with China and Russia asserting themselves in the regional contexts. It instead opted to “lead from behind,” focusing on enabling the lesser powers to balance against China and Russia. It is quite clear, however, such policy has worked to dissuade China and Russia. The lesser powers may not be responsive to the US request for resisting China and Russia, two gigantic powers intent on expanding regional influences by competitive status-seeking acts. Some powers directly involved in the disputes with China and Russia may succumb and others may not be willing to follow the US in helping to exert pressures on the two gigantic powers. Lesser powers may want to stay clear from dangerous great power conflicts in order to maximize their safety margin.<sup>11</sup>

The current Trump administration in its promotion of “America first” has shown emergent signs of realizing the growing burdens of playing the hegemonic role in world politics. Of course, it remains to be seen how America would shift its burdens, manage its world roles, and assert its great-power status.<sup>12</sup> That said, the rising and resurgent powers’ inclination for status competition might constitute a critical source of difficulty for the US to retain its hegemonic leadership in contemporary world. As the great powers displaying their power to challenge the US in the regional context, they threaten to impose tremendous

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<sup>9</sup> See Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up: China’s Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001).

<sup>11</sup> For this observation, see John Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); William Wang, Stephen Brooks, and William Wohlforth, “Correspondence: Debating China’s Rise and the Future of U.S. Power,” *International Security* 41, no. 2 (Fall 2016).

costs on America assuming commitments worldwide. The optimal strategy for the US then might be “selective engagement,” that is, to concentrate its national security assets on regions of dominant strategic importance to the US future.<sup>13</sup> In pursuing this grand strategy, however, America may also find it necessary to display its power as symbols indicative of its superpower status. In this scenario, it would not be the regional powers but also the United States that tries to advance their core interests in international politics through competitive status-seeking acts.

### **Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

This study advances an assertion that leaders, by displaying state power as a status symbol against a geopolitical rival, seek to further their interests in geopolitical security and domestic political survival simultaneously. The central vehicle for them to kill two birds by one stone is the symbolic acts of competitive status-seeking strategy, which signal leaders’ claims to great-power status and personal prestige. This is the very political logic driving leaders’ choice on competitive policies to enhance great-power status. A key question, then, concerns when this logic would operate strongly on leaders’ mind. My argument is in large part derived from an in-depth study of Chinese security policy and domestic politics from 1962 to 1979. Its generalizability to other cases therefore deserves further investigation. As such, its inherent limits also point to multiple avenues for future research.

First, this study investigates the political logic of status competition by examining how leaders respond to two peculiar types of events—namely, geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics. Such events not only provide incentives for great-power status and personal prestige to take on instrumental roles for leaders but also intensify tradeoffs among geopolitical security, domestic political survival, and status ambitions. In both theoretical and empirical terms, it is certainly insufficient to focus on geopolitical threat and institutional change dynamics as sole catalysts for pragmatic concerns for social preeminence. Future studies should identify alternative events that could sensitize leaders to the instrumental importance of great-power status and personal prestige, and investigate alternative mechanisms for occurrences of status competition among nations. To avoid ad hoc selections, such events must be able to 1) heighten leaders’ pragmatic concerns for social preeminence; 2) intensify the tradeoffs among the interests of central importance to leaders.

Second, while elaborating on some varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy, this study falls short in addressing variation in the *intensity* of competitive status-seeking strategy. It is important to note that the varieties of competitive status-seeking strategy

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<sup>13</sup> For the recent scholarship making the case for “selective engagement,” see Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz, “Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,” *ibid.* 32 (Fall 2007); Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).

discussed here—namely, delegitimation strategy, offensive alliance, and use of force—do not represent varying degrees of risk-acceptance in a state’s international conduct. For instance, Deng chose to employ military force to signal status claims whereas Mao was intent on displaying “softer” aspects of Chinese power such as the regime’s ideological appeal and diplomatic assets. But it was Mao who appeared more prone to international risk as he undertook competitive status-seeking strategy throughout the 1960s. Hence, my study makes no effort to measure—let alone explain—varying degrees of competitive status competition. Future studies can elaborate on more variants of competitive status-seeking acts and compare their levels of assertiveness.

A third avenue for future research concerns the implications of competitive status-seeking strategy. This study argues that through such kind of behavior, leaders *want* to legitimize their authority in domestic elite politics while deterring the geopolitical adversaries from challenging their core claims. But it is agnostic as to how likely this strategy would succeed on foreign and home fronts. As argued, this study is concerned more with the *motives* driving leaders’ acts of competitive status-seeking strategy than the effects of such kind of policy, but the latter issue should not be assumed away. Numerous research has been done on the desirability of using military force to signal resolve, to be sure; they still fall short in addressing the role of other aspects of state power in shaping the reputation for superior power.<sup>14</sup> In the final analysis, it is incumbent upon scholars to examine the *effects* of competitive status-seeking strategies—not least under what conditions they can genuinely enhance geopolitical security and the prospects for political survival of individual leaders.

A related issue is how competitive status-seeking acts can facilitate grand strategic adjustments. Competitive status-seeking strategy may enable ambitious statesmen to transform a nation’s grand strategy. The issue here is how competitive status-seeking acts enable statesmen to shape domestic consensus on the grand strategy they advocate. Arguably, leaders do not often find themselves in a position to institute a radical shift, as their state apparatus is accustomed to the established ways of implementing policy. They accordingly need a solid domestic foundation upon which to institute a new grand strategy. To this end, they need to convince the key constituents that the new grand strategy promises to further the national interest—while consolidating personal authority for pushing forward a novel agenda. Competitive status-seeking strategy could help leaders attain both objectives. By displaying state power as a status symbol, such kind of policy holds out the promise to establish a reputation for superior power abroad and enhance leaders’ authority

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<sup>14</sup> For recent reviews of this issue and a systematic empirical testing, see Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics," *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2015).

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