Status and the Grand Strategies of Established Powers

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Very drafty – please do not cite without permission, but comments are welcome
In 1999, Zalmay Khalilzad coined the term “congagement” to describe a hybrid grand strategic approach to China’s rise. Congagement combined economic and political engagement aimed at transforming the Chinese regime and enmeshing China within the liberal international order with military containment aimed at deterring and preparing to defend against Chinese adventurism should engagement fail. Congagement soon became the standard descriptor for US policy: the pursuit of deep trade and investment ties in China along with a commitment (increasing in recent years) to providing security in East Asia in order to prevent and oppose potential Chinese expansionism.

Since then, academic debate about the appropriateness of this approach has proliferated, in the form of a robust and growing literature in international relations (IR) on US grand strategy. The major point of contention has revolved around the value of forward deployed US military resources and the maintenance of security commitments, though there has also been some (though significantly less) debate about the wisdom of accommodating Chinese ambitions and the feasibility of transforming the Chinese regime. This literature – while lively and rich – has raised more questions than it has answered: indeed, it often seems that the exponents of competing arguments are writing past – not fully engaging with – one another. In short, though congagement remains (for now) the best way to describe Washington’s approach to the rise of China, there is surprisingly little agreement about whether it is appropriate, how we would know if it were succeeding or failing, and even about the tradeoffs that it entails. And these questions have become increasingly urgent in recent years, as China seems to have become more assertive in the Western Pacific.

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1 Khalilzad (1999).
A second recent development in IR offers a potentially fruitful but thus far unexploited means of advancing this debate. The past decade and a half has seen the re-emergence and rapid development of serious scholarship on the role of status in world politics. Researchers have shown persuasively that great powers – and especially rising powers – often care deeply about their status or position in an international hierarchy for reasons that may be related to but are not reducible to more traditional concerns with wealth, security, and power. The importance of status ambitions has implications for the way we understand what rising powers want and for the way we think about how they might respond to having their ambitions thwarted or denied. This means that research on status in IR should influence the way we think about the costs and benefits of various grand strategic approaches to managing the rise of new great powers with outstanding status ambitions – like China. Yet debates about US grand strategy continue to be dominated by work rooted in neorealist theoretical frameworks that privilege the role of the rising power’s security concerns and revolve primarily around questions about how different ways of deploying military resources abroad influence these. Insights about the status concerns of rising powers have not been integrated into work on grand strategy, and they may lead to different conclusions or reveal that existing analytical frameworks for analyzing the tradeoffs that established powers face when new powers rise are incomplete.

In this paper, I propose a framework for integrating recent insights about the role of status concerns in world politics with debates about US grand strategic approaches to the management of rising powers. I argue that we can fruitfully understand approaches to the rise of new powers as varying along two dimensions. The first involves questions about how to most effectively manipulate constraints on the rising power’s ability to expand abroad or
challenge the status quo more broadly. This dimension is where most of the recent action has been in debates over the United States’ approach to dealing with the rise of China. The second dimension involves questions about how to influence the rising power’s orientation toward the status quo – its intentions, ambitions, and evaluation of the compatibility of the latter with the status quo order. This dimension has received less attention from analysts of grand strategy, but it provides an entry point for integrating insights about the ways in which the rising power’s status ambitions (and the established power’s treatment of them) matter.

Combining these two dimensions yields four ideal typical grand strategic approaches. *Opposition* denies the rising power’s status ambitions while committing to maintaining a robust military capability to contain its expansion. *Concession* accommodates the rising power’s status ambitions in an attempt to positively influence its orientation toward the status quo, and simultaneously retrenches, effectively abandoning the commitment to militarily opposing the rising power’s domination of its region. *Hedging* attempts to accommodate the rising power’s status ambitions in order to influence its orientation toward the status quo while maintaining a commitment to material containment. *Dismissal* refuses to accommodate the rising state’s status ambitions but also refuses to commit to containment.

These four approaches involve different combinations of solutions to two fundamental grand strategic questions: whether or not maintaining American military primacy in the Western Pacific is feasible and worth the cost, and whether or not China’s orientation toward the status quo is likely to be influenced via accommodation or its absence. They thus have distinct strengths and weaknesses and are attractive for different reasons. Opposition commits to slowing China’s growth and maximizes the ability to deter Chinese expansion,
but at a high cost. It is thus likely to appeal to those who are optimistic about the United States’ long-term ability to maintain a strong forward military presence in the Western Pacific, but pessimistic about the possibility that China’s orientation toward the status quo can be moderated. And it is likely to be particularly unappealing to those who do not see China as an inevitable rival, or who think that the maintenance of security commitments in East Asia is unwise, unsustainable, or both. Concession, on the other hand, commits to trying to influence the rising power’s orientation toward the status quo via accommodation and also withdraws the United States’ security commitments in East Asia. It is thus likely to be appealing to those who are optimistic about China’s willingness to integrate within a reformed version of the liberal international order, and pessimistic about the United States’ ability to maintain military primacy in the Western Pacific. It is likely to be particularly unappealing, though, to those who believe that maintaining military primacy in the Western Pacific constitutes a vital American national interest. Opposition and concession, in other words, involve a stark tradeoff: between high costs and heightened risk of Sino-American conflict, on one hand, and a dramatically reimagined and reduced US role in the world, on the other.

Hedging and dismissal are likely to be attractive because they avoid this tradeoff, but they do so in ways that may make them self-undermining. Hedging (of which congagement is one manifestation) attempts to influence the rising power’s orientation toward the status quo, but is wary of the possibility that doing so may fail. As a result, it maintains a robust forward military posture in order to deter and prepare to respond. It is thus appealing because it simultaneously rejects the notions that Sino-American rivalry is inevitable (associated with opposition) and that the United States must dramatically reduce its role as a provider of
security abroad (associated with concession). Yet the two elements of the hedging approach may work at cross-purposes, especially if one of the rising power’s demands is for an exclusive sphere of influence in its near abroad. Dismissal, on the other hand, attempts to maintain the established power’s privileged position in the international order (by refusing to accommodate the rising power’s demands) without paying the costs associated with doing so. It is thus appealing because it rejects the notion that an established power faced with a dissatisfied rising power must choose between granting the rising power the status and rights that it demands (thus eroding the value of its own position) and avoiding the costs of opposing it. Yet the two elements of dismissal also undermine each other. One of the most strongly supported findings from the literature on status in IR is that denied status claims are likely, for a variety of reasons, to contribute to belligerence and revisionism. This means that refusing to accommodate the rising power is likely to make the need for a robust policy of containment – which dismissal refuses to pay for – paramount.

In the rest of this paper, I fully develop, illustrate, and analyze these four grand strategic approaches. The analysis does not lead to a straightforward conclusion about which approach the United States should adopt. Rather, the purpose is to clarify their relative strengths and weaknesses, the tradeoffs between them, and the assumptions on which they rest. The analysis does, though, point unambiguously toward the conclusion that dismissal should be avoided. This is particularly important because recent developments in Washington suggest that the Trump administration may be moving towards an approach to China that looks very much like this deficient and dangerous strategic combination.
The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the debate over American grand strategy, in particular as it relates to the United States’ response to the rise of China. I then review recent developments in the research program on status in world politics, highlighting findings and insights that are relevant for understanding the costs and benefits of various ways in which an established power can manage the rise of new powers. The paper then introduces a framework that integrates insights about status into debates about US grand strategy, and develops the four ideal-typical orientations described above. The next section analyzes the costs and benefits of each orientation, the conditions under which each is likely to be effective, and the tradeoffs involved, using examples from the history of great power interaction during the 20th century as illustrations. The analysis is particularly attentive to establishing the deficiency of the strategy of dismissal, which best describes the approach the United States and other established powers took toward Japan and Germany during the interwar period. I conclude by suggesting that the Trump administration’s approach to China is in danger of repeating these mistakes.

American Grand Strategy and the Rise of China

Grand strategy refers to the conceptual and theoretical framework that informs the way a state articulates its interests, the primary threats to its interests, and the manner in which it can most effectively deploy its resources to pursue and protect its interests.² The most

² This is an intentionally broad definition of grand strategy. More restrictive definitions limit the concept to the use of military tools (Art 2003), the provision of security (Hemmer 2015, Rosecrance and Stein 1993, Layne 2006), or, in the most constrained definitions, the use of military tools to provide security (Posen 2014). Most prominent recent analysts adopt the broad view articulated above. See, for example, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016), Brands (2014), Trubowitz (2011), Narizny (2007).
prominent writing on American grand strategy is general in focus: authors typically promote one of a variety of relatively coherent approaches to the world, which imply different positions on questions about how Washington should manage the rise of new powers. A second literature – which might be understood as nested within the broader one – focuses more explicitly on different approaches to managing Sino-American relations.³

**The Debate over Containment**

Within both of these literatures, the issue that has received the most attention involves the value of forward-deployed military resources and firm security commitments as means of manipulating actual and potential constraints on Chinese expansion. One position – associated with proponents of “selective” or “deep” engagement in broad debates, as well as of “containment” and supporters of the “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia in the China-specific debate – is that a robust forward military presence and the maintenance of security commitments in East Asia is the best way of preventing, deterring, and preparing to respond to the growth or use of Chinese military capabilities in its near abroad. Forward deployment and the maintenance of security commitments prevents Chinese adventurism because the “American pacifier” reduces the potential for regional conflict spirals that could lead to arms-races or militarized disputes; it deters Chinese adventurism because it serves as a costly signal that the United States is resolved to oppose expansion that threatens American interests or allies; and it puts the US military in position to respond to a crisis quickly in case

prevention and deterrence fail. Taken together, these dynamics mean that leaders in Beijing are likely to calculate that military expansion is prohibitively costly; if, for some reason, they do not, forward-deployment and the maintenance of strong regional alliances maximize the effectiveness of an American response to Chinese military adventurism.\(^4\)

On the other side of this debate are proponents of “offshore balancing” and “retrenchment.” These writers argue that forward deployment of US military assets and the maintenance of firm security commitments are not the most efficient or effective means of avoiding or responding to a challenge from China. For one thing, a forward US military presence might be unnecessarily provocative, prompting leaders in Beijing to infer that the United States has aggressive intentions. Second, the presence of US military assets in East Asia and the maintenance of firm security commitments to regional allies may actually have negative consequences. This allows allies to “free-ride” on the American provision of security (which is, of course, the point from the perspective of the proponents of forward deployment), which prevents them from developing their own capabilities and reduces their ability to balance China on their own, and the degree to which they will be helpful in case a conflict. Moreover, firm security commitments induce a moral hazard dynamic, where allies may calculate that they can behave more aggressively because of the certainty of support from Washington. Third, responding rapidly in the event of a major war may not be particularly attractive: a better option, for a state whose geography allows, is to become militarily involved in a crisis or war only as a last resort and in any event after other combatants have already exhausted themselves. Fourth, retrenching – that is, reducing

military deployments and security commitments abroad – will allow the United States to marshal its resources and improve economic growth, which is bound to stagnate otherwise.\(^5\)

Proponents of offshore balancing and retrenchment do not typically explicitly disagree with proponents of deep and selective engagement and containment about the ultimate objective of US foreign policy. The debate is usually pitched in terms of an argument over the most effective means of preventing Chinese military domination in East Asia, rather than in terms of an argument over the importance or feasibility of that objective. Yet some prominent proponents of offshore balancing do seem to think preventing Chinese regional dominance is less important (or perhaps less feasible) than do proponents of forward posture approaches. Christopher Layne’s work exemplifies this tendency. In his first full-throated defense of offshore balancing (published in *International Security* in 1997), Layne acknowledges that the United States “might need to intervene to thwart the emergence of a hegemonic challenger.”\(^6\) Yet there is little discussion of how one might distinguish a hegemonic challenger from a regionally dominant power, and Layne himself does not seem fully committed to this element of the grand strategy. There is only half a paragraph devoted to explaining why the emergence of a hegemonic challenger might require intervention, and none of the justifications are particularly well-developed or compelling. Layne writes that some future change in technology might reduce the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons; a “Eurasian hegemon” might be able to coerce Washington; and “it might be too uncomfortable psychologically for the United States to live in a world dominated by another

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\(^6\) Layne (1997), pg. 117.
power.” The first justification is highly speculative; the second hardly seems like a legitimate reason to advocate involvement in a major war (after all, the relationship between relative power and the ability to coerce is far from clear); and the third is difficult to square with the idea that American grand strategy should be based on a hard-nosed assessment of the national interest.

Moreover, much of Layne’s analysis is aimed at establishing that the United States has little to fear from the emergence of new centers of power – or poles – in the international system. For instance, Layne is optimistic about the likelihood that states will balance against each other; sanguine about the consequences for US national security that would flow from the emergence of rivalries, arms-races, and even militarized conflicts between other great powers; and hopeful that the United States would gain (in relative, if not absolute, terms) from a less open international economy. Indeed, the reference to America First in the paper’s final pages hammers the point home: the argument has more in common with isolationism than it does with selective or deep engagement. It is premised, fundamentally, not only on a different set of arguments about the best way to keep China from dominating East Asia, but also – and more importantly – on a different answer to the question of whether doing so is necessary at all. Layne’s more recent writing supports this interpretation. In a 2015 piece in *The National Interest*, for instance, he argued not just for a new approach to managing the balance of power in East Asia, but also for the cession of leadership in the region to Beijing.

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7 Ibid., pg. 117
8 Ibid., pg. 124.
This lower assessment of the need to keep China from dominating East Asia is critically important for proponents of offshore balancing because proponents of selective and deep engagement have the better of the argument about how to prevent this outcome. The logic of offshore balancing as a strategy aimed at the containment of an emerging regional power is deeply questionable. It is, for one thing, premised on the notion that regional actors will balance effectively if confronted by a potential regional hegemon. But two centuries of history and decades of research in IR suggest that states often do not balance against growing power particularly efficiently, and even that they sometimes bandwagon with – rather than unite against – powerful actors.10 Offshore balancing is also based on the idea that if regional balancing fails, the United States will be able to serve as the balancer of last resort by intervening. This is also highly uncertain, especially if US military assets have been removed from the region and American security commitments have been withdrawn. Many of the interventions by what Layne calls “insular” states – Great Britain and the United States – that are often interpreted as successes for the logic of offshore balancing came not in response to calculations about the need to stop a rising power from achieving regional hegemony, but rather because of threats to or attacks on forward-deployed national assets or allies.11 The prospect of British intervention in the First World War, for instance, was deeply controversial in London until Berlin violated the neutrality of Belgium, of which Great Britain was guarantor. American intervention in the same war three years later came not in response to the calculation that Germany was on the brink of winning but rather because the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare enraged Wilson and the American public.12

12 Jackson (2012).
And overt American intervention in the Pacific War came decades after it had become clear that Japan was a potential East Asian hegemon and a decade after American leaders realized that Tokyo harbored expansionist ambitions; it was delayed in part because American foreign policy elites disagreed about whether Japanese domination in East Asia was to be feared or welcomed; and it came only as a result of the attack on Pearl Harbor. In short, there is less evidence than the proponents of offshore balancing often claim for the notion that insular states have effectively and efficiently made the transition from offshore to onshore balancing at key moments in history. This is especially important today, because technological and doctrinal developments in China mean that any sort of delayed response might make it prohibitively difficult for an “over the horizon” power to successfully contest a Chinese military challenge to the East Asian status quo.13

Finally, it is not clear whether forward defense postures or security commitments embolden or constrain allies, whether they necessarily imply unsustainably high military budgets, or even whether high levels of military spending (within the range of historical American budgets) have had the kinds of negative economic consequences for which they are often blamed.14 In short, the case for offshore balancing has to be rooted, at its core, in a fundamentally sanguine view of the consequences of allowing China to dominate East Asia because the case for selective or deep engagement as an approach to preventing China from dominating East Asia is far more compelling. The debate, at its core, is most centrally about the importance of containing the growth of Chinese power and influence in its region, rather than about the most effective means of doing so.

13 Montgomery (2014).
14 Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth (2013); Brooks and Wohlforth (2016); Norrlof and Wohlforth (Forthcoming).
The Debate over Engagement

Though questions about the efficacy and necessity of manipulating constraints on Chinese expansion have dominated debates over American grand strategy, a second set of questions has also received some attention. This second set of questions involves the feasibility and efficacy of transforming Beijing’s orientation toward the status quo – that is, its preferences and ambitions, and the extent to which it sees these as consistent or contradictory with the US and Western-constructed and backed liberal international order.

The debate over these questions has also proceeded in both general and Sino-American specific literatures. In the former, it has centered on arguments about the feasibility and effectiveness of what writers refer to as accommodation, positive inducements, or – often derisively – appeasement. In the Sino-American specific literature it has centered on the viability of what is – confusingly – known as the strategy of “engagement.” Readers should keep in mind that this use of the term “engagement” has little relation to the ways in which people like Brooks and Wohlforth or Art use the same term. For the latter authors, “engagement” denotes a grand strategy based on a forward defense posture and the maintenance of firm security commitments abroad. For people writing specifically about Sino-American relations, on the other hand, engagement typically refers to a policy aimed at

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15 Baldwin (1971); Leng and Wheeler (1979); DiMuccio (1998); Nincic (2010, 2011); Rock (2000); Ripsman and Levy (2007); Trubowitz and Harris (2015); Paul (2016).
16 Lieberthal (1995); Zoellick (1996); Wang (1998); Gill (1999); Papayoanou and Kastner (1999); Lynch (2002); Li and Drury (2004); A. Goldstein (2005); L. Goldstein (2015); White (2012).
shaping Beijing’s preferences through dialogue, trade, socialization, and “enmeshment” in the institutions of the liberal order.

On one side of this debate are those that are optimistic about the possibility of altering the rising power’s orientation toward the status quo as a way of reducing the risk of conflict. The logics that underlie this optimism typically operate at two levels. The first is fairly superficial and straightforward: accommodating the ambitions of a rising power might be a useful means of eliminating issues with the potential to cause serious conflict, or at least of making conflict over these issues seem less likely than negotiation to succeed at an acceptable cost. For instance, Charles Glaser has recently suggested that the United States might be able to come to a “grand bargain” with Beijing, in which Washington agrees to the reintegration of Taiwan in exchange for Chinese recognition of the legitimacy of a continuing US military presence in the Western Pacific. The idea here is to simultaneously remove two contentious issues from the agenda, one through concession and one by securing an agreement from Beijing to stop contesting US military dominance in East Asia.17

Others argue that Beijing can gradually be convinced that other elements of the liberal order are profitable or advantageous, and thus not worth challenging or putting at risk. This is, for instance, how economic engagement is supposed to work: the more dependent China’s economic welfare is on trade with United States and, more broadly, the general health of a rules-based international economy based on openness, the less attractive will be any course

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of action that risks upsetting that system.\textsuperscript{18} Ikenberry makes a similar argument about the liberal institutional order: so long as China can be integrated – and given influence – within the set of liberal institutions that make up the status quo order, there is no reason that Beijing will necessarily seek to challenge the order. And, importantly, Ikenberry is optimistic about the ability of the liberal institutional order to integrate and accommodate the demands of rising powers – thus, the Sino-American power transition has the potential to proceed more smoothly than have previous power transitions.\textsuperscript{19}

The second logic operates at a deeper level: foreign behavior might have a significant influence on the rising power’s domestic politics and political structure. This means that the treatment of the rising power’s ambitions and demands might have consequences for the balance of power within the rising state between moderates and hardliners, and even for the rising power’s regime type – both of which could influence the probability of Sino-American conflict. Proponents of “engagement” (as the term is used in the Sino-American specific literature), for instance, have argued that tying China into the international economy might have the effect of liberalizing its domestic economy, and that a new generation of Chinese elites – socialized, in part, through American educational institutions – might adopt a worldview that is less antagonistic to American interests. And assuming that a significant elite constituency with moderate foreign policy views exists, the best way to strengthen them relative to elites with harder line views is to show that moderation, integration, and

\textsuperscript{18} For a review of arguments about interdependence and peace, see Copeland (2014), chapter 1; for an overview of the strategic logics of economic engagement, see Kahler and Kastner (2006).

\textsuperscript{19} Ikenberry (2011, 2014); Ikenberry and Wright (2008).
negotiation can bear concrete fruit – in other words, to accommodate the rising power’s ambitions.\footnote{Papayoanou and Kastner (1999).}

On the other side of this debate are scholars and analysts who are skeptical of the feasibility and value of trying to change China’s orientation toward the status quo. One objection is that while accommodating the demands of the rising power may avoid conflict in the short-term, it may also signal that the established power is weak or unresolved, and thus encourage the rising power to make more aggressive demands in the long run. This argument is related as well to the familiar logic of the commitment problem, in which present agreements between a rising and declining power are unattractive because of fears on the part of the declining power about a future defection by the rising power. Thus, to the extent that engagement or accommodation actually strengthens or facilitates the growth of the rising power, it is strategically foolish.

Opponents of engagement are also skeptical of the value and feasibility of changing China’s political economy or institutions. Mearsheimer, for instance, argues that China cannot rise peacefully even if it is deeply integrated into the international economy. This is because 1) nationalism will remain salient, and “politics…tends to win out over concerns about prosperity when nationalism affects the issues at stake”; 2) events may disrupt economic growth and prosperity in ways that undermine the foundation of the link between interdependence and peace; and 3) the benefits of war sometimes outweigh the costs even when the latter include foregone gains from trade.\footnote{Mearsheimer (2014a), conclusion.}
Friedberg, on the other hand, concedes the argument that a liberal democratic China would obviate the need to worry about Beijing’s domination of East Asia. Importantly, this is the case because, according to Friedberg, in liberal democracies, belligerent elites and the “hyper-nationalist” discourses on which they rely for legitimacy would be checked by moderate elites and competing narratives. The upshot is that “the United States can learn to live with a democratic China as the preponderant power in East Asia, much as Great Britain came to accept America as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere.”

The problem, for Friedberg, is that engagement does not seem likely to turn China into a liberal democracy. It has borne little fruit thus far: “despite decades of rapid economic growth, political liberalization and respect for human have (in the understated words of one distinguished task force) ‘lagged behind expectations.’” This implies that, while the United States should not become openly antagonistic toward Beijing, it should adopt a strategy that leans more toward containment. Doing otherwise “amounts to doubling down on [the] already risky bet” that China will one day undergo a fundamental political transformation.

What’s Missing in the Debate over American Grand Strategy Toward China?

The debate described in the pages above is rich and lively. What it has done most effectively is to lay out two distinct questions or dimensions of debate that should guide policymakers: is a forward-deployed American military presence effective and necessary for the

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22 Friedberg (2011), pg. 251.
23 Ibid., pg. 259.
containment of China? And can Beijing’s orientation toward the status quo be influenced via accommodation or engagement? Answers to these questions imply dramatically different approaches to managing the rise of China, and they thus deserve the attention they have received.

But the existing literature is deficient in two important and related ways. The first is that analyses of these two dimensions of policy are rarely put in serious conversation with one another. It is unusual, among prominent analysts of American grand strategy, to simultaneously take seriously arguments rooted in both the debate over the best way to manipulate the constraints on Chinese expansion and the debate over the best way to influence China’s orientation toward the status quo. A typical move is to dismiss one or the other dimension as largely irrelevant. Mearsheimer and Friedberg both do this, but in different ways. The former argues that China’s orientation toward the status quo has little bearing on the question of whether it should be contained; the latter argues that China’s orientation toward the status quo is largely immune to outside influence. This reduces the debate over American China policy to a question about how to most effectively restrain Beijing from expanding abroad. This move is not entirely unreasonable, but it does have the effect of minimizing or even rendering invisible questions about the ways in which taking steps aimed at containing China may influence Beijing’s orientation toward the status quo. Nincic makes a similar move, but from the other direction: he argues that coercive policies so rarely succeed that debates over how most effectively to engage should take priority.

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This avoids a different question: might effective accommodation or engagement require doing things that make American interests vulnerable?

Another – and, at least among policymakers and analysts, more common – way of avoiding a serious conversation between arguments rooted in the two dimensions of the debate over managing the rise of China has been to promote a hybrid approach. In a way, “congagement” represents a fusion of theoretical insights from the debate over containment and the debate over engagement. But congagement also avoids seriously considering questions about potential interactions between the two dimensions. It does this by adopting a middle ground that borrows from arguments rooted in both dimensions, and simply ignoring or dismissing the possibility that the policies informed by these arguments might undermine each other. Congagement is premised on an assertion – whose logic has never been thoroughly articulated or investigated – that there is no fundamental incompatibility between maintaining a forward-deployed American military presence in order to contain Beijing and simultaneously working to turn China into a supporter of the liberal international order.\textsuperscript{26}

This deficiency is related to another: the debate over the feasibility and value of influencing China’s orientation toward the status quo is underdeveloped. Unlike the debate over manipulating restraints on Chinese adventurism – which is rooted in various versions of realist IR theory and related empirical work on balancing, the security dilemma, and the effects of parity vs. preponderance on conflict processes – it does not have deep roots in a well-developed theoretical and empirical research program. This has important

\textsuperscript{26} See Logan (2013) for an articulation of a related criticism.
consequences. For one thing, it means that the full range of mechanisms through which foreign action might influence China’s orientation toward the status quo has not been articulated. Critics and proponents of engagement alike, for instance, tend to focus on ways in which various kinds of positive inducements can create a China that is friendlier to the status quo order. But there has been little attention to the possibility that the failure to provide positive inducements (or even the threat or imposition of negative inducements) might negatively influence China’s orientation toward the status quo. Moreover, with a few important exceptions, there is very little theoretical and empirical research aimed at showing the domestic political and foreign policy consequences of accommodating versus not accommodating another state’s demands or ambitions. It is this absence of well-established conceptual, theoretical, and empirical roots that allows a critic like Friedberg to claim that calls for engaging and accommodating China are based on “a pleasing theory, but one that has virtually no empirical evidence to back it up.”

This problem is also at the core of congruence’s deficiency: the absence of a well-established theoretical and empirical understanding of the various ways in which accommodating or not accommodating a state’s ambitions can influence its orientation toward the status quo makes it difficult to see – and easy to dismiss – potential incompatibilities between simultaneously accommodating and containing China.

In the next section, I argue that the growing literature on status in international politics has the potential to serve as a useful conceptual, theoretical, and empirical foundation for arguments about the effects of accommodating versus not accommodating a rising power’s demands and ambitions. Rooting debates about the feasibility and value of trying to

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27 Friedberg (2011), pg. 261.
influence a rising power’s orientation toward the status quo in the status literature has the
benefit of widening and deepening our understanding of the effects of accommodation and
accommodation failure. It also provides a straightforward means of placing the two
dimensions of the debate over American China policy in direct conversation with one
another, which yields novel insights about the costs, benefits, advantages, and disadvantages
of various approaches to the management of rising powers by established powers.

Rising Powers, Status Ambitions, and Accommodation

Though the notion that states care about status is an insight that dates all the way back to
Thucydides, IR scholarship has only recently begun to develop a coherent, sustained
research program aimed at understanding the role of status in world politics.28 A small
literature – devoted mostly to exploring the effect of status inconsistency on conflict
propensity – emerged beginning in the early 1970s, but petered out quickly.29 Interest in
status in IR reemerged around the turn of the 21st century, and this new literature – now
almost two decades old and still growing – has turned up a significant number of important
findings about what status is, when and why states care about it, and how it influences
foreign policy.30

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29 See Wallace (1971, 1973); East (1972); Midlarsky (1975); Gochman (1980); Ray (1974);
30 For overviews, see Larson, Paul, and Wohlfforth (2014) and Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth
(2014).
Status refers to an actor’s position in a social hierarchy. Three elements of this definition are worth highlighting. First, a wide range of actors – including both individuals and groups of individuals – can have different forms of status. This means that it is just as valid to think about the distribution of status across individual faculty members within an academic department as it is to think about the distribution of status across universities or the distribution of status across states in the international system. The concept of status, in other words, scales relatively un-problematically from low to high levels of social aggregation.

Second, status refers to an actor’s position in a hierarchy. It is, in other words, a form of rank, and high status typically confers privileges on actors that hold it. There are two common ways of understanding this in more concrete terms. One is to think of a status hierarchy as a series of increasingly elite clubs, in which the key distinction is between members and non-members. The “great power” club is one common example from the world of international politics: members of the club have higher status than non-members, and thus have distinct privileges (and also, arguably, responsibilities). The second is to think of status as a continuous distribution – in other words, even within a particular “club,” actors may still measure themselves against each other and care about the intra-club status ranking.

Third, status is social. What this means is that whether or not a particular actor holds a particular status depends not (or, at least, not only) on the actor’s attributes, but rather on

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31 For an overview of recent work on social hierarchy in IR (including the status literature) see Bially Mattern and Zarakol (2016).
whether the actor’s claim to that status is recognized by relevant others. Another way to put this is that the distribution of status depends not on the distribution of any particular set of resources, capabilities, or characteristics, but rather upon the collective beliefs of the community. This characteristic of status has several implications, the most important of which – at least for the purposes of this paper – is that, unlike many other sources of conflict in international politics, status cannot be seized unilaterally. Instead, dissatisfaction rooted in a status discrepancy or deficit can only fully be resolved through intentional accommodation by other actors.

This latter point raises a thorny conceptual question: what does it mean for one state to accommodate another’s status claims? The standard answer to this question is that accommodation involves behavior by relevant others that signals that they accept as legitimate the status seeker’s claim to a privileged position. In practice, this often involves the treatment of claims to particular rights that are understood as linked or restricted to actors of a particular class – Bull and others, for instance, define “great power” status partially in terms of the set of rights and privileges (like legitimate intervention in an exclusive sphere of influence) to which only members of the club have access. Foreign behavior that appears to acknowledge or acquiesce in status-linked rights claims ratifies the status seeker’s positional aspiration; foreign behavior that appears to reject status-linked rights claims denies the status seeker’s positional aspiration.

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33 On recognition in international politics, see Ringmar (1996); Lindemann (2010); Lindemann and Ringmar (2016); Daase et al. (2015); Murray (2008, 2010).
34 On status as a collective belief, see Renshon (2016, 2017).
35 See Bull (1977); Simpson (2004).
Recent scholarship has made advances in two additional areas that are relevant for an effort to incorporate status dynamics into debates over American grand strategy toward the rise of China. First, when and why do states care about status, and when and why do they sometimes grow dissatisfied with how much status they have? There are, broadly, two answers to the question of why states care about status. The first is rooted in a conception of status as a “reputation for power.” This view implies that status is mostly valuable for instrumental purposes: in Renshon’s words, “it coordinates expectations of deference,” and thus helps states that have high levels of it to get their way without having to resort to force. The second perspective does not deny that status may often function as an instrument of influence, but it rejects the notion that this is solely or even primarily why states care about their relative status. Instead, states care about their standing because individuals derive self-esteem from the status of groups with which they identify. This means that – either because of the state-linked status ambitions of leaders themselves or because national status has domestic political implications – states often worry about and seek to defend or increase their status for reasons that go beyond instrumental concerns.

But not all states seem to care about or seek status equally at all times. While the literature has not yet developed a comprehensive account of variation in national status anxiety, there is a consensus that status concerns are often paramount for rising powers. This is the case for at least two related reasons. The first is that the notion (whether rooted in actual increases in relative capabilities or in dominant narratives) that a state is rising relative to its peers may lead to the expectation that the state deserves concomitantly greater standing and
privileges in the international order.\textsuperscript{36} Put differently, the more the rising power begins to “look like” or understand itself as similar to states that seem to occupy high status clubs and enjoy particular privileges, the more likely people within the rising power are to expect or demand equal status and rights. Second, increasing relative capabilities may produce greater opportunities for a state to seek higher status. Renshon, for instance, argues that status dissatisfaction is a function of a disjuncture between material capabilities and attributed status – material capabilities often grow more quickly than the collective beliefs of other states can keep up with them. This means that, to the extent that higher levels of material capabilities make it easier and more cost effective for states to take various actions aimed at increasing status by forcing other states to update their beliefs, rising power should lead to foreign policies that express ambitions for greater attributed status and thus (at least in Renshon’s opinion) greater influence.\textsuperscript{37}

In addition to establishing and providing a theoretical basis for the notion that rising powers are often dissatisfied with their standing in the world, recent scholarship has also explored the consequences of status dissatisfaction for foreign policy. Like the question of variation in status anxiety, there is no single coherent theoretical account of how and under what conditions status dissatisfaction leads to different kinds of behavioral responses. Different authors disagree about whether responses to status seeking are strategic or prompted by emotional or social psychological dynamics; whether they are aimed at maximizing influence abroad or responding to domestic political demands; and even about what kinds of behaviors are likely to yield higher status in different contexts. What the literature largely

\textsuperscript{36} This is much like Gilpin’s (1981) argument about hegemonic challenges. See also Ward (2017a).
\textsuperscript{37} Renshon (2016, 2017).
agrees on, though, is that un-recognized status ambitions have the potential to lead the dissatisfied state to become belligerent, violent, deeply revisionist, or otherwise disruptive to the status quo order.\textsuperscript{38}

The simplest claim comes from Renshon’s work on status deficits and war. Renshon follows Gilpin in conceptualizing status as synonymous with prestige, or the reputation for material capabilities. On this view, status deficits emerge because changes in the distribution of capabilities are largely invisible and thus do not prompt changes in collective beliefs about the distribution of prestige. This implies that status seeking is a matter of visibly and credibly revealing new information about a state’s material power. Renshon argues that the initiation of military conflict is one behavior that fits these criteria – thus, states that are dissatisfied with their standing in the world are more likely, all else equal, to initiate militarized interstate disputes. Renshon’s analysis of MIDs over the past 200 years provides empirical support for this contention.\textsuperscript{39}

A variety of other authors tell similar stories about the relationship between un-accommodated or challenged status ambitions and belligerence, though in ways that rely on different kinds of mechanisms. Barnhart argues that states that feel “disrespected” are likely to “engage in competitive acts” both as a way of “signaling the status they expect to hold in the international system” and because disrespect and humiliation “engender strong emotional responses” that “increase the likelihood that a state will behave in an aggressive

\textsuperscript{38}This was the contention of the early quantitative literature on status inconsistency. For a prominent recent articulation of a similar claim, see Larson and Shevchenko (2010, 2014).

\textsuperscript{39}Renshon (2016, 2017).
Though status is not the focus of his argument, Hall agrees with the latter part of Barnhart’s argument: violations of expectations rooted in status claims can generate the emotion of “outrage,” which works through personal, performative, and domestic political pathways to push foreign policy toward belligerence.\(^{41}\)

Larson and Shevchenko and Ward focus on a distinct form of status anxiety: the perception of an unjust, apparently permanent obstacle to a state’s status ambitions (Larson and Shevchenko call this “impermeability” while Ward calls it “status immobility”). Larson and Shevchenko argue that the perception of an impermeable obstacle to the satisfaction of outstanding status ambitions is likely to push a rising great power toward adopting geopolitically competitive policies – such as arms-racing, brinkmanship, or territorial expansion – as a way of attempting to force higher status states to recognize its claim to privileged standing.\(^{42}\) Ward argues that status immobility activates mechanisms that make deeply revisionist, anti-status quo policies psychologically and politically attractive. He shows that these processes played important roles in the manner in which Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, and Weimar/Nazi Germany abandoned moderately expansionist foreign policy orientations in favor of foreign policy orientations that rejected, protested, or sought to overthrow central elements of the international institutional and political order within each rose.\(^{43}\)

\(^{40}\) Barnhart (2016).
\(^{41}\) Hall (2017).
\(^{42}\) Larson and Shevchenko (2010, 2014).
Taken together, recent scholarship on status in international politics has identified at least three distinct mechanisms through which accommodation (or, rather, its absence) can influence the foreign policy of a rising great power. The first might be labeled rationalist or strategic. Here, the rising power’s leadership tailors its policy abroad to its assessment of the most effective ways of forcing states that are hesitant to accommodate its claims to give in. This can lead to belligerence when war, conflict, or other forms of geopolitically competitive behavior seem like cost-effective, plausible, or necessary ways of forcing the status hierarchy to adjust. Evidence to support this mechanism comes from Renshon’s statistical analysis of the relationship between status deficits and MID initiation, as well as from Larson and Shevchenko’s analysis of variation in Chinese and Russian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.

The second set of mechanisms is psychological. Here, challenges to or denials of status claims generate emotional responses in leaders or other elites that push rising states toward belligerence abroad. Evidence supporting this mechanism comes from qualitative studies of a handful of 19th century European cases analyzed by Hall and Barnhart.

The third set of mechanisms is domestic political. Here, some sort of challenge to, denial of, or apparent imposition of an impenetrable obstacle to the satisfaction of a status claim creates political dynamics within a state that favor hardliners and hardline policies and make it difficult for moderates to publicly justify policies that seem to accept the legitimacy of the status quo order. Evidence for this set of mechanisms comes from Ward’s work on the revisionist rising powers of the early 20th century as well as, in part, from Hall’s analysis of the domestic politics of outrage in the lead-up to the Franco-Prussian War.
This reading of recent scholarship on status in world politics highlights two significant ways in which it contributes to debates about American grand strategy. First, it provides a robust theoretical and empirical basis for the claim that accommodation or its absence can dramatically influence a rising power’s orientation toward the status quo. Second, unlike most analyses of engagement or accommodation in the context of debates over American grand strategy, scholarship on status has focused not on potential pathways from accommodation to *positive changes* in a rising power’s regime type or behavior, but rather on the *negative consequences* that may emerge from denial, or a failure to accommodate. What this means, in other words, is that assessing the record of accommodation by investigating whether or not it has transformed rising powers into liberal, democratic, supporters of the status quo (as its critics tend to do) is misleading. A full accounting of the costs and benefits of accommodation versus denial must also consider the ways in which appearing to refuse to accommodate has contributed to the transformation of moderately dissatisfied rising powers into belligerent, deeply revisionist, or otherwise disruptive opponents of the status quo.

**Integrating the Debates over Containment and Engagement**

The insights about accommodation derived from work on status in IR raise a potential means of integrating the two largely separate debates around which work on American grand strategy has revolved. We can envision these two debates as occurring along two distinct dimensions. Combining them creates a property-space (depicted in Figure 1) consisting of four ideal-typical orientations that an established power might adopt toward a rising power.
The first dimension – capturing the debate over containment – describes differences of opinion regarding the most effective and efficient means of manipulating restraints on the rising power’s freedom of action. Two ideal-typical positions – described in detail earlier – characterize this dimension. The first advocates the use of forward-deployed military assets and strong security guarantees in order to mitigate the regional security dilemma, deter the rising power from expanding, and be in position to respond most effectively if necessary. The second advocates retrenchment in order to marshal American economic and military resources in case they are needed later, and to force the rising power’s more proximate neighbors to bear the brunt of the cost of balancing its growing power.

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<th>Military orientation</th>
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<th>Retrench</th>
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<td>Hedging</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
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<td>Ex: US “congagement” of China; US toward Post-Soviet Russia</td>
<td>Ex: GB toward Wilhelmine Germany; US toward early Soviet Union</td>
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<td>Concession</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
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<td>Ex: GB toward United States</td>
<td>Ex: US toward interwar Japan; West toward interwar Germany</td>
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Figure 1: The Grand Strategies of Established Powers

**Accommodate**

*Orientation toward status ambitions*

**Deny**
The second dimension – capturing the debate over engagement or accommodation – describes different approaches to the rising power’s demands for higher status and greater concomitant privileges in the status quo order. Two ideal-typical positions characterize this dimension as well. The first advocates accommodating the rising power’s demands in an attempt to minimize the immediate sources of conflict, convince the rising power’s leadership that its interests are best served by integration with and support for the status quo, and strengthening moderates at the expense of hardliners within the rising state. The second advocates denying the rising power’s demands, either because accommodation is thought to be unlikely to change the rising power’s orientation toward the status quo, or because accommodating the rising power is thought to require concessions that would be prohibitively harmful to the established power’s interests.

Both dimensions involve tradeoffs. The first dimension trades off cost against effectiveness: the maintenance of forward-deployed military assets and regional security guarantees are an expensive but effective means of restraining the rising power from expanding abroad. Retrenchment is cheaper but less effective: it risks prompting spiral dynamics, regional bandwagoning by erstwhile American allies, and balancing failure.

The second dimension trades off the defense of the established power’s privileged position against the risk of increasingly deep and serious conflict with the rising power. Meaningful accommodation requires that the established power adjust downward its expectations about the way in which the system is ordered and the benefits it derives. This, of course, will cost the established power – both in material terms and in terms of the manner in which the established power imagines itself and conceives of its interests. What the established power
buys via accommodation is a reduced probability of major conflict with a deeply revisionist rising power, and a concomitantly higher probability that the rising power might become a partner in global governance and even a supporter of a reformed version of the status quo order.

Denying the rising power’s demands, on the other hand, preserves the established power’s privileged position in the status quo order along with its self-conception and understanding of its interests. This course avoids the pain of adjusting the state’s notion of its own status downward, or making any sort of meaningful concessions that might undermine the material benefits it derives from the order, or the way that it understands the legitimacy of its rights or the universality of its values. But it does so at a cost, and the cost is not merely that it foregoes the possibility of turning the rising power into a supporter of the status quo order. As the work on status described above highlights, denial also runs the risk of making the rising power belligerent or geopolitically competitive, or turning it from moderately dissatisfied to deeply revisionist. It thus increases the probability of major conflict between the rising power and the established power.

Combining these two dimensions yields four distinct grand strategic combinations. These are depicted graphically in Figure 1. The first position – *opposition* – combines denial and the maintenance of forward deployed military assets and regional security guarantees. The second position – *concession* – combines accommodation and retrenchment. The third position – *hedging* – combines accommodation and the maintenance of forward deployed military assets and regional security guarantees. The fourth position – *dismissal* – combines denial and retrenchment.
While this is a novel conceptual framework, all four of these ideal typical positions have reasonably close real-world analogues among contemporary policymakers and analysts of Sino-American relations. Hedging seems to be the most popular position, both among scholars and policymakers. As noted above, “congagement” is one manifestation of a hedging orientation, and it has described the United States’ approach to managing the rise of China since at least the second Bush administration. A variety of IR scholars also endorse some manifestation of hedging. Ikenberry, for instance, argues that the United States should aim to integrate China into the liberal international order by increasing its status and influence within the order’s central institutions; at the same time, the United States should work to persuade China to accept the notion that American security interests require the continued presence of significant military assets in the Western Pacific.44 Glaser has recently made a similar argument in proposing a “grand bargain” in which the United States purchases Beijing’s support for forward deployed American military assets by accommodating China’s demands for reunification with Taiwan.45 Steinberg and O’Hanlon also advocate striking a balance that simultaneously accommodates China’s demands for higher standing and greater influence in the world and especially in East Asia and convinces Beijing to accept as legitimate the idea that American national security interests require a significant military presence in China’s immediate neighborhood.46

Fewer policymakers and analysts explicitly endorse the other three approaches. Proponents of “offshore balancing” advocate an approach that is similar to “concession,” though they

46 Steinberg and O’Hanlon (2014).
typically focus more on the dynamics of retrenchment than on the dynamics of accommodation. That is, offshore balancers are more interested in and attuned to the savings that they anticipate emerging from withdrawing forward deployed military assets and security guarantees than they are to the benefits of recognizing (or, at least, not denying) the rising power’s demands. Still, some do note the need to accommodate Chinese status ambitions, and the difficulty of doing so while maintaining a significant military presence in the Western Pacific.  

Proponents of “opposition” see the deficiency at the core of Washington’s recent (and current?) approach to managing the rise of China as the foolish attempt to change Beijing’s orientation toward the status quo via engagement and accommodation. Luttwak, for instance, argues that attempting to integrate China into the liberal international order will only wind up strengthening the Chinese economy, and therefore make it more difficult for Washington to deal with China later. Mearsheimer’s argument – while not as explicit as Luttwak’s about the need to begin undermining Chinese economic growth immediately – has similar implications.  

There are, as far as I know, no academic proponents of an approach approximating “dismissal.” This makes sense because “dismissal” is – for reasons that I lay out below – strategically and logically deficient in ways that the other three approaches are not. But there is some indication that Donald Trump’s combined orientations toward the rise of China and American security guarantees may approximate something like “dismissal.” Throughout the  

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47 Layne (August 26, 2014; 2015); Shapiro (March 11, 2015).  
48 Luttwak (2012).  
49 Mearsheimer (2014a), conclusion.
2016 presidential campaign and transition, Trump expressed a marked insensitivity toward (and even hostility to) the notion that Chinese claims to greater standing and influence in the world might be legitimate and worth accommodating. Indeed, Trumpism is fundamentally rooted – at least in part – in the claim that it is the United States whose rightful place, rights, and privileges in world politics are eroding or under challenge, and that these must be aggressively reasserted. This may leave little room for accommodating Chinese demands for greater status and privileges in the international order. At the same time (and partially by consequence), Trumpism is deeply skeptical of the value of the alliances and institutions that make both forward deployment of military assets and robust security guarantees possible and credible. This means that the United States’ future orientation toward managing the rise of China (at least in the short to medium term) may approximate “dismissal” – the combination of denial and retrenchment.

In the remainder of this section, I fully describe each of these ideal typical orientations, highlight their strengths, weaknesses, and the ways in which they might seem appealing or unappealing to policymakers and politicians, and illustrate each with reference to 20th century cases of interactions between established and rising or dissatisfied powers. The upshot of this analysis is that opposition and concession are strategically and logically consistent but politically unattractive because they require policymakers to make difficult tradeoffs; hedging is politically attractive because it avoids the difficult tradeoffs that opposition and concession require, but potentially deficient because its commitment to containment may undermine its attempt to transform the rising power’s orientation toward the status quo; and dismissal is politically attractive, but deeply deficient because its commitment to denial promises to

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50 For an exhaustive overview of Trump’s worldview, see Laderman and Simms (2017).
generate antagonism between the rising and established power that its commitment to retrenchment refuses to prepare for.

Concession and Opposition: Strategically Consistent but Politically Unattractive

Concession and opposition are both strategically and logically consistent. What this means is that they adopt mutually reinforcing positions along the two strategic dimensions in Figure 1. There are two senses in which the positions that these two approaches adopt are mutually reinforcing. First, in each case, the established power’s military posture anticipates and is tailored to the expected consequences of the manner in which the rising power’s status ambitions are treated. In concession, the accommodation and engagement of the rising power is supposed to prevent major conflict. Pairing accommodation with retrenchment is thus logically consistent: a less aggressive or revisionist rising power is less likely to require an assertive military response by the established power, which makes it more likely that an offshore military posture will be sustainable in the long-run. In opposition, denying the rising power’s ambitions is expected to generate belligerence and revisionism and thus increase the likelihood of major conflict between the established power and the rising power. Pairing denial with containment thus also makes sense: the established power maximizes its ability to manage the potential conflict that its decision to deny the rising power’s ambitions and defend its own privileged position creates.

The second way in which opposition and concession are mutually reinforcing is that the established power’s military posture avoids conflicting with or undermining the signal that the established power is trying to send to the rising power about the legitimacy and
plausibility of its claim to higher status. In concession, the established power attempts to signal that it accepts the legitimacy of the rising power’s claim to higher status. Maintaining a forward-deployed military posture could undermine this signal in at least two ways. First, if one of the rising power’s status-implicated demands is to the right to an exclusive sphere of influence in its neighborhood, then the established power will not be able to maintain military primacy in the rising power’s near-abroad without signaling that it has rejected this demand. Second, the rising power may see the continuing military presence of the established power in its neighborhood as an indication that the established power’s other attempts to signal accommodation are disingenuous, and that the established power expects conflict in the long-run after all.

In opposition, the established power signals that it denies the legitimacy of the rising power or dissatisfied power’s claims to higher status and the rights implicated in those claims. The best case scenario, from the perspective of an established power pursuing this strategy, is to persuade the rising power that its status ambitions are unrealistic and implausible, and that they should be abandoned or reduced. Removing forward-deployed military assets and regional security guarantees undermines this message by calling into question the degree to which the established power is actually committed to opposing the rising power’s ambitions, and thus the degree to which these ambitions should in fact be reduced.

The strategic and logical consistency of concession and opposition, though, comes at a cost. Both approaches are likely to be politically unappealing in ways that may make them difficult for leaders to adopt and sell to other elites or to the engaged public. Concession is likely to be unappealing because it requires advocates to argue publicly that the established power has
to, in an important sense, adjust its own understanding of its current status, privileges, rights, and interests downward. Though concession is rhetorically attractive in other ways – most notably in its appeal to those who might benefit from lower levels of military spending or who worry about being “entrapped” or “entangled” by allies – it necessarily entails a politically difficult shift in the way in which the established power’s place in the world is narrated.

Opposition, on the other hand, is likely to be unappealing because it requires advocates to acknowledge that the established power will likely have to bear the costs of serious, long-term conflict with the rising power. This is likely to be difficult to sell for two related reasons. First, it entails maintaining a higher level of military spending than would retrenchment, as well as the maintenance of security commitments that are vulnerable to criticism on two fronts: that they risk “entrapping” or “entangling” the United States into becoming involved in unnecessary conflicts; and that they require the United States to pay for the security of allies that seem to be free-riding on American efforts. Second, it entails acknowledging that the rising power is likely to become an adversary, which makes it difficult to argue in favor of (especially economic) cooperation that may seem to be beneficial (and lucrative), at least in the short term. In short, fully embracing the reality of future great power conflict is difficult because it seems to foreclose the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of great power cooperation.

The record of 20th century great power interaction provides illustrations of these dilemmas. Shifts toward opposition have been attempted on a handful of occasions in which established powers faced rising or dissatisfied powers. The most notable examples include
Great Britain’s evolving approach to the rise of Germany in the years leading up the First World War, and the United States’ evolving approach to the Soviet Union in the first years of the Cold War. During the decade prior to the outbreak of World War I, Great Britain – under the leadership of Edward Grey and heavily influenced by Lord Eyre Crowe’s analysis of Berlin’s foreign policy – adopted a line that saw Germany as an unappeasably revisionist threat to British interests. London thus gave up on the possibility of accommodating Germany’s ambitions for higher standing and greater influence (which had been seen as plausible under Landsdowne, the previous foreign minister), and instead sought to strengthen its security commitments on the continent in order to deter German expansion.51 But this was politically difficult. British hardliners would have preferred to make a firm, public commitment to defending France in the case of war with Germany. This was not politically feasible because it seemed to raise the probability of British participation in a major European war.52 Instead, London and Paris negotiated the Anglo-French Naval Convention, which arranged for the British to patrol France’s northern coast and leave the French navy free to deploy to the Mediterranean. Though the convention played an important role in the parliamentary debate over war in August 1914, it was not publicized (which undermined its deterrent value) in part to avoid a domestic backlash in Great Britain.53

Between 1947 and 1950, US President Harry Truman – under the partial influence of George Kennan’s analysis of Soviet foreign policy – adopted an approach to managing relations with Moscow that approximated opposition. The concept, as described by Gaddis,

52 Mayer (1969); Gordon (1974).
53 Clark (2012), pg. 231, 540-544.
was to prevent Soviet expansion into strategically important areas of the world, and to apply steady pressure to Moscow in order to persuade the Soviets, eventually, that they could not win a geopolitical competition against the United States. A critically important underlying assumption was that the Soviet Union’s orientation toward the status quo could not be dramatically altered via accommodation: Soviet paranoia and revisionism was, instead, driven mostly by political culture and the domestic politics of authoritarianism. Thus, unlike Roosevelt, Truman proved uninterested in offering Moscow carrots in order to prevent the USSR from becoming an adversary.54

But this approach faced what Thomas Christensen calls “high mobilization hurdles.” Because it required the United States to remain diplomatically, economically, and militarily engaged around the world, it ran into opposition from Americans who had been anticipating a peace dividend after the end of the Second World War. Part of the solution to this problem was to hype the threat that the Soviet Union and communism in general posed to the United States. This contributed, according to Christensen and others, to a suboptimal grand strategy that was incapable of distinguishing between geopolitical and ideological threats in ways that might have been strategically beneficial.55 It also meant that, even when negotiation and accommodation might have made sense, they could not be pursued for fear of undermining the carefully fostered notion that the Soviet Union posed an existential and unappeasable threat to American interests.

54 Gaddis (2005), chapters 2-4.
One indication that concession is politically unappealing is that it has only really been implemented once in the past century or so: by the British in response to the demands of the rising United States for higher standing and greater rights in the Americas. In a process whose initiation was most visible in the 1895-96 Venezuela Crisis, London accommodated American demands for the right to an exclusive sphere of influence in North and South America. The British chose this course, in part, in order to free the royal navy to respond to threats from elsewhere – in particular from Germany and Russia. This was, in effect, the closest real world manifestation of ideal typical concession in modern history. London abandoned opposition to American status-implicated rights claims, at least in part in order to reconfigure the manner in which its military assets were deployed abroad.56

Yet this course was controversial in Great Britain. The prospect of British decline – and the loss of London’s status at the top of the international hierarchy – led some to promote the integration of the empire and the formation of a larger “Greater Britain” that could compete with continental great powers like the United States.57 In the event, concession was facilitated by two factors that make this case unusual. First, the established power faced not just one rising power but a handful. Indeed, it is not at all clear that the Venezuela Crisis would have ended with London accommodating Washington’s claim to special rights in the Western Hemisphere had an Anglo-German crisis – rooted in events in South Africa – not erupted simultaneously. Second, some British elites were able to comfort themselves in the face of the impending decline of Great Britain by identifying as members of an “Anglo-Saxon” social category. From this perspective, the apparent ascendance of the United States

56 For overviews, see Kupchan (2010); Rock (1989); Campbell (1974).
57 Bell (2007).
looked more like the passing of a baton among teammates, rather than the cession of status from one team to another.  

Hedging and Dismissal: Politically Appealing but Strategically Inconsistent

Unlike concession and opposition, hedging and dismissal are strategically inconsistent. Hedging is inconsistent – at least in part – by design. Hedging attempts to accommodate and engage the rising power in an attempt to change its orientation toward the status quo, to turn it into a defender or at least supporter of the order. Yet hedging also acknowledges that this may fail, and that if it does, the established power needs to maintain the ability to deter or respond to an aggressive or expansionist turn by the rising power. Indeed, proponents of hedging approaches (including “congagement”) often envision accommodation and containment working best in combination – the simultaneous promise of carrots and threat of sticks is supposed to be more effective than either on its own. Thus, in many formulations, hedging’s strategic inconsistency is not a bug but a feature.

Yet, while hedging’s two elements may cover for the possibility that one or the other will fail, backfire, or be insufficient, they may also undermine each other. This may be the case for two reasons. First, hedging’s commitment to accommodation may undermine the effectiveness of signals meant to deter. To be sure, proponents of hedging would use a word like “temper” rather than “undermine.” Yet the effect may be not to cause the target to draw accurate inferences about the established power’s interests, commitments, and reservation

value, but rather to confuse the target about the coherence of the established power’s policy or the strength of its resolve.

Second – and perhaps more seriously – hedging’s commitment to containment may undermine (or even prevent entirely) the intended effect of its commitment to accommodation. In theory, there is nothing inconsistent about attempting to accommodate another state’s status-implicated rights claims while maintaining forward-deployed military assets and security commitments in its neighborhood. But – as Bull and others have pointed out – one of the rights that has historically been associated with “great power” status is to an exclusive sphere of influence within which the great power (and only that great power) may legitimately use military force unilaterally in the service of stability.59 This is likely to be especially important if the established power appears to enjoy its own exclusive sphere of influence – such a state of affairs will only reinforce the notion that accommodating a claim to equal rights requires that the established power pledge to grant the rising power its own sphere. Under these conditions, containment via forward-deployed military assets and the maintenance of regional security commitments is fundamentally at odds with the accommodation of the rising or dissatisfied power’s status ambitions.

Dismissal is also strategically inconsistent, though in ways that are more difficult to justify. Dismissal combines denial – the refusal to accommodate the rising power’s status ambitions – with retrenchment. The primary problem here is not one of mixed or crossed signals. Rather, the problem is that the first element of this combination is provocative, liable to

generate antagonism within the rising power, and likely to strengthen hardliners at the expense of moderates. The second element refuses to pay or prepare for these consequences. In contrast to opposition and concession, the strategy’s military posture is not tailored to addressing its likely consequences for the rising power’s orientation toward the status quo.

But dismissal and hedging are also politically appealing in ways that concession and opposition are not. Hedging is appealing because – unlike opposition – it allows proponents to claim to remain committed to integrating the rising power into the international status quo order. It does not require sacrificing the benefits of economic exchange with the rising power, nor does it involve acknowledging that the rising power is likely to turn into a rival. Hedging is politically appealing, in short, because it remains optimistic about the rising power’s future trajectory while at the same time maintaining a military posture oriented toward containment.

Dismissal is politically appealing for two reasons. First, it requires a smaller economic commitment to the military than does opposition. This means that it does not require leaders to mobilize support for a deeply engaged policy abroad, and that opponents of deep engagement can deploy arguments rooted in concerns about budgetary imbalances, economic health, or spending priorities. Second, unlike concession, dismissal does not require the established power to adjust its own conception of its role or rights in the international system to accommodate the rising power’s demands.
The record of 20th century great power interaction also provides illustrations of these two approaches in action. The clearest examples of hedging come from post-Cold War American foreign policy toward Russia and China. At the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy aimed to integrate the new Russia into the “new world order.” Officials in the first Bush administration understood that Russian domestic reformers had to be supported via moves that demonstrated that cooperation with Washington and the West would yield fruit, both in terms of economic development and in terms of mutual respect. Indeed, this included – at least according to some scholarship – promises that “Europe’s post-Cold War order would be acceptable to both Washington and Moscow: NATO would halt in place, and Europe’s security architecture would include the Soviet Union.”

In practice, though, Washington’s attempt to integrate Russia while accommodating its interests and ambitions was paired with a continued and even strengthened commitment to containment. The United States did not withdraw military assets from Europe; Russian interests were not taken into account in the form of revised European security institutions; NATO expanded into what had seemed to be (and, according to some, still was) Moscow’s sphere of influence. Critics of American foreign policy toward Russia attribute Russia’s recent return to antagonism with the West (at least in part) to this strategic inconsistency – accommodation was attempted, but it failed because it was paired with an approach to military posture that undermined accommodation’s intended signaling and domestic political effects and wound up facilitating the return to power of hardliners in Moscow.

60 Shifrinson (2016), pg. 11.
61 Mearsheimer (2014b). For arguments about the significance of status denial for the trajectory of Russian foreign policy, see Larson and Shevchenko (2010), and the recent special issue of Communist and Post-Communist Studies (Forsberg, Heller, and Wolf 2014).
As noted above, Washington has pursued a hedging approach toward the rise of China since the end of the 1990s in the form of what has become known as “congagement.” The objective, as in the case of the United States’ approach to post-Soviet Russia, has been to integrate Beijing into the liberal international order without giving up the ability to contain Chinese expansion or adventurism in East Asia. This entails a robust forward military presence in the region, along with a commitment to enmeshing China within the international economic order and attempting to accommodate its claims to greater influence in international political and economic institutions.

Congagement’s record cannot be fully assessed yet, because China’s future trajectory and orientation toward the status quo remain unknown. But its critics note that it suffers from a similar sort of strategic inconsistency as did Washington’s approach to Moscow during the 1990s. As Justin Logan writes, “Washington’s policy centers on a contradiction: making China more powerful while seeking to make it act as though it is weak. The ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’ aspects of the policy countervail one another.”62 In other words, engaging China facilitates its continued rapid economic growth, which is likely to result in rising ambitions and expectations in China. At the same time, containment denies the legitimacy of these expectations by signaling that the United States plans to remain hegemonic in East Asia. Along similar lines, Robert Ross has argued that the Obama administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’ – an attempt to increase the “containment” element of congagement – has had the

62 Logan (2013), pg. 6.
effect of leading “Beijing to conclude that the United States has abandoned strategic
engagement.”

Yet engagement remains the consensus approach to the rise of China among policymakers
and analysts. This is likely in large part because it refuses to acknowledge the long-term costs
of insisting upon the maintenance of American hegemony in East Asia. As Logan notes,
proponents of opposition have not offered a politically viable means of selling their
preferred approach to the American public. “Pessimists” like Mearsheimer “do not tell a
persuasive story that explains how the political obstacles to [smothering China’s economic
growth] could be surmounted.” Continuing to pursue a policy that facilitates Chinese
growth (thus appeasing domestic groups that profit from trade with China) while hedging
against the possibility that Chinese growth will lead to Chinese expansionism is politically
attractive, if strategically self-undermining.

The best example of dismissal comes from early 20th century Japanese-American relations.
The rise of Japan in the decades after Tokyo’s victory in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War
presented a challenge for the United States, which had recently consolidated a hegemonic
position in its own hemisphere and begun expanding – militarily and economically – toward
East Asia. The emergence of Japan as a potential regional hegemon in its own right appeared
to threaten American economic interests in China, and also posed a potential military threat

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63 Ross (2012), pg. 81.
64 Logan (2013), pg. 8
American policy toward Japan during the three decades or so between the Russo-Japanese War and the beginning of the Pacific War pursued an incoherent combination that simultaneously refused to take Japanese status claims seriously and refused to take effective steps to contain Japanese expansion militarily. As Japan rose, its leaders began to articulate claims to equal treatment alongside other – Western – great powers. Claims to equality implicated rights in two areas. The first was to an exclusive sphere of influence in northeast Asia, including most importantly Manchuria. The second was to freedom from discrimination against Japanese immigrants. Japanese leaders, elites, and parts of the public saw the differential treatment of immigrants abroad as an index of status, and wanted Japan’s claim to great power status to be recognized in the form of the elimination of immigration restrictions that appeared to formally place Japan outside of the Western great power club.\(^6^6\)

Accommodating these claims would have had real costs for Americans, and thus real political costs for leaders. Acknowledging the legitimacy of a Japanese sphere of influence in East Asia would have meant abandoning the commitment to maintaining an “open door” in China (along with whatever economic and political benefits the “open door” seemed to promise). It also would have meant acceding to growing Japanese influence over the political development of China – a position that would not have sat well with the parts of American society and the foreign policy bureaucracy that perceived a moral duty to guide China toward

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\(^6^5\) For overviews of Japanese-American relations during this period, see LaFeber (1997) and Pash (2014).

Christianity and democracy.\textsuperscript{67} Acceding to Japanese claims to equality in the area of immigration rights would also have had political costs. Immigration – and especially immigration from Asia – was a deeply controversial issue in the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, especially along the West Coast. Official restrictions against Asians were popular among Westerners for both economic and racial reasons – during the 1912 presidential election, for instance, Woodrow Wilson campaigned in support of a law that would prohibit Japanese from owning land in California. And the racial implications of the struggle over immigration made claims to equal rights for Japanese controversial in the American South, as well.\textsuperscript{68}

These political obstacles go a long way toward explaining why the United States did not consistently accommodate Japanese status claims in these two areas during the first three decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Theodore Roosevelt – who was no idealist and saw very clearly the potential threat to American interests that a rising Japan might pose – concluded that the United States must either respect Japan’s claims in Manchuria and treat it with respect in the realm of immigration or arm itself to face a future conflict with Tokyo. That the American people seemed inclined to do neither struck Roosevelt as dangerously short-sighted.\textsuperscript{69} Instead of following Roosevelt’s council, American foreign policy simultaneously denied Japanese status-implicated rights claims and refused to do anything concrete to contain Japanese expansion until at least the middle of the 1930s. In 1906, 1913, and 1924, immigration restrictions sent signals that Japanese interpreted as evidence of racial


\textsuperscript{68} Daniels (1977), pp. 60-62; Iriye (1972).

\textsuperscript{69} LaFeber (1997), pp. 79-92; Neu (1967).
discrimination against Asians. In each case, leaders in Washington opposed restrictions because they anticipated negative consequences for Japanese-American relations, but were either unable or unwilling to block the domestic political forces pushing for these policy changes. During the Paris Peace Conference following the conclusion of World War I, Tokyo demanded the inclusion of a racial equality clause in the League of Nations Charter – this would, Japanese leaders thought, formally eradicate racial difference as a marker of status in world politics. Though the racial equality proposal had the support of a majority of the participants at Paris, President Woodrow Wilson blocked it, in part because he anticipated that it would cause problems for him among Southern Democrats sensitive to its implications for domestic racial relations. American policy also periodically sent signals that Washington did not fully accept the legitimacy of Tokyo’s claim to a privileged sphere of influence in Manchuria. For instance, under Taft, Washington attempted to place Japanese-controlled railroad concessions under the control of an international syndicate – a demand that would have been much like Tokyo attempting to internationalize the Panama Canal. In 1915, Wilson imposed limited sanctions on Tokyo as a protest against an attempt by the Japanese to consolidate control over Manchuria and China. In 1932, the Hoover administration responded to Japan’s invasion of Manchuria (a move ostensibly taken in order to protect Japanese interests in the face of rising Chinese nationalism and attendant disorder) by issuing the “Stimson Doctrine,” which declared the Japanese move illegitimate.

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70 Ward (2017b).
71 For an overview of the struggle over the racial equality proposal, see Shimazu (1998).
and warned that the United States would not recognize any change in the territorial status quo effected by force.\textsuperscript{74}

At the same time that it refused to accommodate Japanese status claims, American policy also refused, until at least 1933, to take any steps that would prepare the United States to militarily contain or oppose Japanese expansion. The US Navy stagnated during the years between the end of the First World War and the passage of the Vinson-Trammell Act in 1934. Even then, it was not until the latter 1930s that Washington began to take seriously the urgent need to rehabilitate the navy in order to keep pace with other great powers (especially Japan). This stagnation was driven in large part by domestic political opposition to military spending, and it contributed to the largely toothless approach to Japan that Washington pursued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In 1932, for instance, Hoover rejected calls from hawkish opponents of Japanese aggression in Manchuria for anything more than a symbolic sanction because he thought that the United States could not prosecute a successful war against Japan, and that the American people would not support any move that seemed to make that outcome likely.\textsuperscript{75}

The combined effect of these distinct elements of the United States’ approach to the rise of Japan was the simultaneous production of antagonism toward the United States and the interwar international order, along with the perception among some (though not all) Japanese elites that the United States might not be willing or able to oppose an attempt to achieve hegemony in East Asia. The result was the rise of militarists to power in Tokyo;

\textsuperscript{74} On the Stimson Doctrine, see Rappaport (1963) and Current (1954).
\textsuperscript{75} Rappaport (1963), pp. 88-92; LaFeber (1997), pg. 170.
Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations and the other security institutions of the interwar order; and a period of naval and military expansion that ended at Pearl Harbor.

**Status, Grand Strategy, and Trump’s Approach to the Rise of China**

For almost two decades, the United States’ approach to the rise of China has approximated a “hedging” strategy – what has become known as “congagement.” That may be in the process of changing, along with other massive shifts in American grand strategy under the Trump administration.

Shifting away from “congagement” is not necessarily dangerous or misguided. Indeed, the analysis above implies that hedging strategies often suffer from logical inconsistencies, and that their two components – a commitment to containment and a commitment to accommodation – typically undermine one another. Thus, shifting away from “congagement” toward either an opposition approach or a concession approach might be sensible, contingent on what one thinks about the value and feasibility of attempting to seriously accommodate China versus defending the United States’ privileged position in East Asia.

What *would* be dangerous and misguided, though, is a shift toward an approach approximating dismissal. Failing to seriously accommodate Beijing while simultaneously failing to prepare to confront an increasingly revisionist China would be the worst possible strategic combination that the United States could adopt.
Yet there are indications that the Trump administration is increasingly likely to pursue something like dismissal in its approach to the rise of China. First, the most striking element of Trump’s worldview is a deep skepticism of the value of American security commitments abroad. The president believes – and has believed for decades – that the United States is typically taken advantage of by its allies, who free-ride on the American provision of security in key regions. This attitude threatens the foundation of the United States’ relationships with potential partners in any effort to contain China. It has already had deleterious effects on these relationships. For instance, when the United States withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership just after Trump took office, it abandoned what was not just a trade deal, but also an effort to tie East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Western Pacific states to one another and to the United States in a way that would isolate Beijing and dis-incentivize its neighbors from bandwagoning with it. Once Trump took office, this effort collapsed, and the prospects for a Chinese-led replacement started looking up.

The United States’ recent withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement may have similar implications. The move has frayed Washington’s relations with European powers like France and Germany – states whose support would likely be necessary for any serious effort to economically or militarily oppose the rise of China. French President Emmanuel Macron was quoted in the aftermath acknowledging that China is likely to fill the vacuum left by the United States’ abandonment of its role in the world.

At the same time, though, there is little reason to think that the Trump administration will prove willing to seriously accommodate China’s ambitions for equal status and rights in the international system. This is, in part, due to Trump’s erratic and uninformed approach to
foreign policy, which might result in actions that signal a denial of status claims whether that is the intent or not. One of the first moves that he made as president-elect, for instance, was to speak directly on the phone with Taiwan’s President. The move predictably led to fury in Beijing – a response that seemed to surprise Trump.

Another factor that is likely to obstruct a serious effort to accommodate Chinese status ambitions is that many of the people surrounding and advising Trump in the realm of foreign policy favor taking a hardline toward Beijing. Combined with Trump’s general lack of knowledge and interest in foreign policy, this means that US grand strategy toward China may shift rapidly depending on who is currently in favor in the West Wing. The Taiwan phone call, for instance, was apparently long-planned by advisors – like Peter Navarro and Reince Priebus – who favor Taiwan and want Washington to take a harder line toward the PRC.76 Stephen Bannon – whose influence has waxed and waned over the course of the administration’s first few months – appears to think that war between the United States and China is inevitable.77 And while there are certainly also forces pushing in favor of warmer relations with China (perhaps for reasons related to the Trump family’s business interests) there is little reason to believe that the Trump administration will adopt a coherent, consistent policy aimed at avoiding conflict with China by intentionally and seriously accommodating the latter’s outstanding status ambitions – including, most importantly, an acknowledged sphere of influence in East Asia. What this means is that the United States’ may wind up pursuing an approach to China that will produce a revisionist rising power that Washington is unprepared to confront.

76 Gearan, Rucker, and Denyer (December 4, 2016).
77 Haas (February 1, 2017).
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