HOW DO YOU LIKE ME NOW?
STATUS-INCONSISTENCY THEORY AS AN EXPLANATION FOR CHINA’S USE OF FORCE

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“Those who misjudge China’s status in world politics would at least be unable to adopt a proper international strategy.”
– Deng Xiaoping, 1981\textsuperscript{1,2}

“Prestige, in contrast to the maintenance and acquisition of power, is but rarely an end in itself. More frequently, the policy of prestige is one of the instrumentalities through which the policies of the status quo and of imperialism try to achieve their ends.”
– Hans J. Morgenthau\textsuperscript{3}

INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Reform Period in 1978, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has exploded onto the international scene. It has done so by pursuing a successful policy of economic growth, funding drastic increases in both military and political power and transforming the PRC from a relatively minor force in the international system to a major power in today’s world. Not surprisingly, policymakers want to understand China’s growing power, its sources and its implications for international politics and strategy. The rich record of China’s rise stretches back almost thirty years. In the late 1970s, the PRC emerged from the Mao Zedong era and began the process of opening to the outside world.\textsuperscript{4} Beginning with the “Four Modernizations” (agriculture, industry,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} I am deeply grateful for the invaluable assistance I received from all those who took the time to read, edit, and comment on this piece. I owe a debt of gratitude and would like to sincerely thank the following people for their help: Dr. Jennifer Sims, Evan Morrisey, Alissa Gordon, Melinda Baker, Eliza Gheorghe, Jorn Pung, Amy Kirchheimer, Tromila Wheat, and my wife Gretchen for her invaluable patience and willingness to act as a sounding board and willing skeptic during the many hours I spent working on this thesis.
\end{itemize}
national defense and technology) the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) pursued a “reform and open door” policy, and in 1980 Deng Xiaoping went a step further and set three priorities for the PRC over the coming decade: economic development, national unification, and opposition to “hegemonism.”\(^5\) Each of these tasks served a single national goal: return China to its former great power status.\(^6\)

A brief look at China’s economic figures during this period demonstrates the success with which Deng and his successors instituted their reform policies. By 2007 China’s economy accounted for 15.8% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), up from a low of 4.5% in the mid-1970s.\(^7\) To achieve this growth, China’s GDP averaged 9.4% annual growth from 1979 to 2004, and, according to World Bank statistics, ranked third globally in 2008, behind only the U.S. and Japan.\(^8\) Chinese foreign trade fueled this growth, exploding from $20.6 billion in 1978 to a total of $851 billion in 2004.\(^9\) China’s economic revival funded military modernization programs and brought it into the ranks of influential multilateral institutions such as the G-20 and the World Trade Organization (WTO), resulting in increased military and political power. China’s growing strength has generated interest among both scholars and policymakers in the sources of Chinese


\(^6\) Ibid., 123.

\(^7\) David M. Lampton, The Three Faces of Chinese Power (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 78.


\(^9\) Ibid., 18.
foreign policy decision-making and the implications a rising China will have for the international system.

As China’s economic, military and political power has increased over the past thirty years, its leaders have sought to improve their country’s image within the international community. Yong Deng, a leading expert on China’s status, argues that the PRC’s frequency in the use of the term “status” since the mid-1990s may make China “the most status-conscious country in the world.”10 In spite of this, most international relations (IR) scholars continue to use traditional theories, such as classical realism, to explain Chinese foreign policy. While these theories provide valuable insights into state behavior, none of them offer fully satisfactory explanations for China’s use of force. Due to this, a growing number of scholars have therefore begun to study nontraditional factors, such as status, in order to create theories with greater explanatory power. As one of these nontraditional theories, the status-inconsistency theory predicts that increases in a state’s status discrepancy, defined as the gap between its self-conception (the status the state believes it deserves) and its ascribed status (the status other states believe it deserves), result in an increased likelihood of that state choosing to engage in conflict.11 “Status” here is understood to mean a state’s position – not in terms of hard power but in terms of honor and respect -- within the international community. These latter forms of

10 Yong Deng, China’s Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3, 6-7, 10, 15.
what might be called “soft power” weigh heavily in Chinese calculations of a state’s influence in international settings.

The above graphic depicts two cases where a growth in status discrepancy leads to increased likeliness of conflict. On top, decreasing ascribed status, combined with static self-conception, increases the state’s status discrepancy. On bottom, increases in self-conception not matched by increases in ascribed status result in a growing status discrepancy.\textsuperscript{12}

The question thus arises: How well does status-inconsistency theory actually explain China’s use of force over the past thirty years?

\textsuperscript{12} This graphic represents the author’s depiction the status-inconsistency theory. Limiting this graphic to only two cases does not preclude the existence of other possible scenarios, but for the purposes of this thesis, I will assume that self-conception will always remain higher than ascribed status.
In order to evaluate whether this theory offers a compelling explanation for Chinese belligerence during this period, it is useful to consider several cases in which China engaged in some level of conflict to achieve its foreign policy goals. According to status-inconsistency theory, fluctuations in China’s status discrepancy since 1978 should positively correlate with China’s frequency of conflict in the international system. By qualitatively examining each case, I will demonstrate how status-inconsistency theory can fill the holes where classical realist explanations fail to account adequately for China’s use of force.

In conducting this analysis, I will first offer a brief review of both classical realism and status-inconsistency theories, and will then recommend a slight modification to the factors used to measure ascribed status in order to increase the explanatory power of status-inconsistency theory. Next, I will examine three specific cases where China used force to achieve its objectives. Each case will be studied from both the classical realism and status-inconsistency points of view in order to determine how well status-inconsistency theory can explain China’s decision to engage in conflict. Finally, I will conclude by outlining the utility of, highlighting challenges with, and offering recommendations for future revisions of status-inconsistency theory.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Classical Realist Theory*

With the end of the Cold War and the continued rise of the PRC, realists such as John Mearsheimer, Alastair Iain Johnston, Avery Goldstein and Thomas Christensen
began focusing on China as the next state likely to challenge U.S. dominance of the international system.\textsuperscript{13} While each of these authors focused specifically on Chinese security issues, their core beliefs remained grounded in the realist paradigm. Although this broad spectrum includes diverse theories, such as classical realism, neorealism, balance of power, and power transition, that ultimately reach different conclusions, each recognizes a common set of principles that shape the international system: states are primary actors in an anarchic international system who act rationally in pursuit of their own interests.\textsuperscript{14} Classical realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, describe the pursuit of power as the main driver of a state’s interest and behavior, and they recognize the wide distribution of power in multipolar systems as the most stable form of the international system.\textsuperscript{15} This theory argues power balancing is a positive feature of multipolar systems that ensures a roughly equal distribution of power among major states, and classical realists predict the likelihood of war increases as one state in a multipolar system amasses a wealth of power.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, classical realists argue that states rationally create policies and act in manners designed to maximize their benefits, i.e. power, and minimize their


\textsuperscript{14} This is a paraphrase of the realist summary offered in, Jack S. Levy, “The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace,” \textit{Annual Review of Political Science} vol. 1, no. 1 (June 1998): 145.


\textsuperscript{16} Copeland, \textit{The Origins of Major War}, 11.
risks.\textsuperscript{17} For classical realists such as Morgenthau, a rational foreign policy is a good foreign policy.

\textit{Status-Inconsistency Theory}

Because much of the scholarly literature on China’s foreign policy remains grounded in the realist paradigm, the status-inconsistency theory has received little attention from Sinologists. In spite of classical realism’s utility as a tool to explain the factors that drive war among great powers, the theory does not consider inputs such as culture, history, domestic politics and status as drivers that play a role in a state’s decision to engage in conflict. Seeking to bridge this gap, scholars such as Johan Galtung, Maurice East, Michael David Wallace and Yaacov Vertzberger have applied traditional sociological concepts to international relations theory and have written about how a state’s perception of its status can potentially lead to conflict. In “A Structural Theory of Aggression,” Galtung conducts a theoretical study on how stratification of the international system relates to the frequency of conflict among states. He hypothesizes that states ranking high in some categories of power but low in others, what he defines as “rank-disequilibrium,” will prove the most prone to aggression.\textsuperscript{18} Because Galtung’s study remains at the theoretical level, he does not attempt to explicitly identify the most important measures of state power or to lay out a specific method for calculating a state’s rank-disequilibrium. In spite of this, he suggests an analysis of public opinion polls or the unsolicited statements of the state’s leaders as two possible methods for determining

\textsuperscript{17} Morgenthau, \textit{Politics Among Nations}, 10
what measures of power a state deems most important. In his conclusion, Galtung, while never mentioning any specific country, identifies a state that perfectly fits the description of the PRC as a prime candidate for the application of this theory.

In “Status Discrepancy and Violence in the International System: An Empirical Analysis,” East builds on Galtung’s work, and conducts a more rigorous statistical analysis of the correlation between status discrepancy and frequency of conflict. In his study, East hypothesizes that greater amounts of status discrepancy within the international system lead to increased levels of violence. He defines status discrepancy as the correlation between a state’s prestige (measured by the number of foreign embassies established in that state’s capital) and one of two key factors: military potential (measured by annual military expenditures) and economic power (measured by annual Gross National Product). Through statistical analysis, East generates correlations between prestige and both measures of power to determine the annual level of status discrepancy within the international system, and then compares this to the rate of violence during the same period to see whether a relationship exists. He also recognizes the possibility of a time lag between a state’s perception of status discrepancy and its

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19 Ibid., 104-105.
21 While East does not use the terms “self-conception” and “ascribed status,” his methodology treats both economic power and military potential as measures of self-conception prestige as a measure of ascribed status. East acknowledges the simplicity of measuring a state’s economic strength and military potential through the use of the above factors, but argues that the broad scope and timeframe of his study requires such “relatively simple measures.” While Ease explicitly recognizes that states may place embassies in a country’s capital for any number of reasons, he argues, “By placing an embassy in a given country, you are in effect ascribing influence and power to it…Prestige can be defined as the sum of this ascribed influence. Hence, the index is the total number of embassies.” Ibid., 304-305.
actual engagement in conflict, and tests the same factors at one and two year lags.\textsuperscript{22} East’s findings support his hypothesis, with a stronger correlation observed for both one and two year lags in the data.\textsuperscript{23} Although his study focuses on the international system at the macro level, East concludes with policy recommendations that can be applied at the state level, and he goes so far as to highlight the PRC as a prime example of a state where foreign policies should aim to reduce status discrepancy.\textsuperscript{24}

Wallace’s book, \textit{War and Rank Among Nations}, builds on many of the same concepts as East in exploring how status-inconsistency theory explains conflict. Wallace also hypothesizes that higher amounts of status discrepancy in the international system as a whole lead to the greater levels of conflict.\textsuperscript{25} He recognizes the difficulty of quantifying a variable as subjective as status, but ultimately measures self-conception\textsuperscript{26} as a combination of a state’s population, economic output, and military capacity.\textsuperscript{27} Much like East, Wallace defines ascribed status as the number diplomatic missions established in a state’s capital by other nations.\textsuperscript{28} Through three different techniques of statistical analysis, Wallace establishes strong empirical evidence to support his hypothesis. He also recognizes the possibility of a time lag between when a state recognizes growing

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, 313-314.  \\
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}, 314.  \\
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, 316.  \\
\textsuperscript{25} Michael Wallace, \textit{War and Rank Among Nations} (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), 24.  \\
\textsuperscript{26} Wallace differs from East in his terminology. In place of self-conception and ascribed status, he actually uses the terms “capability status” and “attributed status,” respectively. Wallace argues “ascribed status” is an inappropriate term because “ascribed” has more to do with factors a state cannot control, such as its location, rather than with what it has achieved. For the sake of consistency throughout this work, I will continue using East’s terminology of self-conception and ascribed status.  \\
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, 33-35.  \\
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, 38.
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status discrepancy and when it actually engages in conflict, and he controls for this in his methodology. Wallace’s work finds the strongest correlations between status discrepancy and conflicts with no time lag and also when allowing for a lag of ten to fifteen years.²⁹

In his 1990 book, *The World in Their Minds*, Vertzberger examines the role status conception plays in state behavior. While his analysis uses similar terminology and reaches roughly the same conclusions as East and Wallace, he introduces the new concept of a state’s “status conception,” which is formed by its self-conception and ascribed status.³⁰ Although his conclusion supports the theories on status discrepancy discussed above, his work differs from earlier studies by focusing mainly on the individual-actor, rather than the systemic level.³¹ In spite of Vertzberger’s compelling case for the importance of considering status discrepancy as a key driver of state behavior, his analysis leaves room for future application of the status-inconsistency theory at the state level.

Over the past ten years, a growing number of Sinologists have begun studying status as a force behind China’s foreign policy decisions. Yong Deng has written more prolifically about the role status plays in China’s international relations than any other American scholar. His book, *China’s Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations*, remains the definitive piece on the importance China places on

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³⁰ Vertzberger defines self-conception as the status a state believes it deserves and ascribed status as the status other states believe it deserves. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds*, 291-292.
status. Deng uses qualitative assessments of statements by Chinese leaders and analysts to demonstrate how status considerations augment traditional realist, constructivist, and liberal explanations of Chinese international relations, and he argues that increasing its status remains a key PRC goal. In other articles, Deng argues that perceived gaps in China’s international status fuel its drive to become recognized as a legitimate, nonthreatening rising power. Deng concludes that Chinese political leaders have realized material strength alone cannot make China a great power, but rather only through achieving a level of international legitimacy can the PRC enjoy the benefits of increased economic, military, and political power in a benign security environment.

Other Sinologists such as Fei-Ling Wang and Simon Rabinovitch have written on the importance of understanding status as a key driver of Chinese foreign policy. In “Self-Image and Strategic Intentions: National Confidence and Political Insecurity,” Wang outlines how political insecurity has caused China’s government to pursue a conservative foreign policy in hopes of raising its ascribed status. Finally, in “The Rise of an Image-Conscious China,” Rabinovitch discusses the importance of understanding the role image plays for Chinese leaders.

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32 Deng, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 8, 12
33 Deng, “Better Than Power,” 52.
Problems in the Current Form of Status-Inconsistency Theory

Although the above studies on status-inconsistency theory do a satisfactory job of explaining conflict, two major problems exist in the current form of this theory. First, the current body of status-inconsistency work focuses solely on the macro, systemic level of the international system, leaving a gap in the scholarly literature on the effects of status discrepancy at the state-level. Although Wallace acknowledges the importance of applying this theory to individual states in order to determine the connection between status and state aggressiveness, his work focuses solely on the connection between status discrepancy and conflict at the system level. This existing gap in the literature leaves the application of this theory to the state level up to future scholars.

Second, the variable used by previous studies of status-inconsistency for determining ascribed status is a major problem in the current methodology of this theory. While Deng freely concedes that the lack of any clear Chinese definition of the term creates a sense of analytical ambiguity in this field, Wallace also acknowledges the quantitative challenge of defining a nebulous term like “status.” The notion of measuring a state’s ascribed status in the international system simply as a function of the number of embassies and diplomatic missions in that state’s capital does not adequately capture the dynamic nature of international relations, and requires revision in order to strengthen the theory’s definition of ascribed status. As conceived by both East and Wallace, this variable assumes states always open or close embassies or diplomatic

38 Deng, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 8, 12.
39 This and the below discussion of problems with status-inconsistency theory’s measure of status is based on a number of discussions between the author and Dr. Jennifer Sims on March 16 & 31, 2010.
missions as a way to express their perception of that state’s status; however, this is not always the case. In many instances, states may close embassies for any number of reasons not related to questions of status, such as outbreaks of pandemics, budgetary concerns, or threats to embassy personnel. While the state closing the embassy would not wish such moves to be interpreted as censures of the host country, in its current form, status-inconsistency makes black and white distinctions in such cases. In addition to the potential closures discussed above, the advent of real-time, face-to-face communications technologies has the potential to limit the need for countries to maintain traditional embassies in overseas locations. Again, in its current form, status-inconsistency theory’s definition of ascribed status simply cannot account for such changes. Due to these problems, a new method for calculating this variable must be created in order to adequately test the utility of this theory.

My application of status-inconsistency theory to historical cases of Chinese conflict will build on the previous studies discussed above. One key assumption I will make in this thesis is the notion that a state’s self-conception will always be higher than its ascribed status. As measures of self-conception, I will focus on the two factors used in East’s work: economic and military power. While the objective nature of economic and military power leaves the possibility of these specific variables influencing many

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40 This assumption does not deny the existence of other possible scenarios, such as when a state’s ascribed status is higher than its self-conception, but in order to limit the scope of this thesis, I will assume that self-conception will always remain higher than ascribed status.

41 While using objective measures such as these may be inherently problematic because these variables could influence many factors beyond how a single state views itself, this is also a measurement grounded in the established literature that forms the foundation for status-inconsistency theory.
factors beyond a state’s self-conception, the use of these specific indicators offers the advantage of building on established and tested literature.

Due to the previously described problems with existing measures of ascribed status, my analysis of Chinese conflict will employ multiple different inputs, rather than focusing solely on the number of embassies established by other countries in Beijing during the Reform Period. To determine China’s ascribed status, I will consider factors such as the state of diplomatic relations between China and other countries, China’s membership in major international multilateral institutions, the number of head-of-state visits conducted between China and other states, official diplomatic statements made by other countries about the PRC, and any major actions, such as embargos or deliberate support to adversaries, taken by other countries designed to express displeasure with China. While I will leave the development of a quantitative methodology for translating these factors into a comprehensive measure of ascribed status for future studies, my qualitative analysis will consider this expanded pool of variables in determining China’s overall level of ascribed status in each of the below cases.

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<tr>
<th>SELF-CONCEPTION</th>
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<td>Economic Power</td>
<td>State of diplomatic relations</td>
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<td>Military Power</td>
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<td>Number of head-of-state visits between China and other states</td>
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<td>Official diplomatic statements made by other countries about the PRC</td>
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<td>Major actions taken by other countries designed to express displeasure with China</td>
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HISTORICAL CASES OF CHINESE CONFLICT

In order to build upon existing studies that have tested the utility of status-inconsistency theory at the system level, this next section will evaluate three specific instances of Chinese use of force during the Reform Period. Using the measures of ascribed status discussed above, I will qualitatively examine the relationship between status discrepancy and conflict in order to demonstrate the explanatory power of status-inconsistency theory with specific regard to China. This analysis will provide new insights into the general applicability of this theory at the state level, and will also allow me to assess the strength of my recommended changes to the measures of ascribed status.

1979 Sino-Vietnamese War

On 17 February 1979 the simmering Sino-Vietnamese dispute came to a boil as approximately 200,000 Chinese soldiers from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) invaded Vietnam in an attempt “to teach Vietnam a lesson” for its December 1978 conquest of neighboring Cambodia.\(^2\) Although PLA forces vastly outnumbered the Vietnamese, their outdated equipment, lack of combat experience, and a stout defense resulted in sharp losses and the bogging down of Chinese forces after a mere 25-mile push into Vietnam.\(^3\) Recognizing the growing cost of its incursion, the potential for Soviet intervention on the Vietnamese side, and feeling that it had successfully demonstrated Chinese resolve in Southeast Asia, China’s leaders chose to withdraw their

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troops on 5 March 1979. Although the Sino-Vietnamese War lasted only three weeks, the PLA suffered an estimated 20,000 casualties and Vietnam lost approximately 50,000 soldiers killed or wounded. Additionally, the cost of this war resulted in an unbudgeted 20% increase in China’s military spending at a time when the PRC sought to focus on economic, rather than, military development. Finally, this war further strained the PRC’s economy by causing an exodus of 250,000 ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam to China.

In spite of these costs, both sides ultimately claimed victory. China’s leadership argued the major damage caused in Vietnam and the diversion of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia, a Chinese ally, demonstrated their ability to check perceived Soviet and Vietnamese expansion in Asia. On the other hand, Vietnam’s leadership could claim they brought an end to China’s influence in Laos, contained PRC-backed rebels in Cambodia, and forced a humiliating withdrawal of Chinese forces from Vietnam in less than three weeks using second-line troops. As the first conflict of the Reform Period, the Sino-Vietnamese War presents a compelling case study of Chinese rationale for engaging in conflict in the post-Mao era.

Classical realism offers a traditional approach for explaining why the PRC chose to go to war with Vietnam in 1979. While China fought against Vietnamese forces,

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44 Ibid.
47 Sutter, Chinese Foreign Policy: Developments After Mao, 87.
48 The following discussion of costs of the Sino-Vietnamese War is a paraphrase of, Ibid., 87.
realists such as Robert Sutter, Daniel Tretiak and Bruce Ellerman have argued this conflict actually grew out of the threat the Soviet Union (USSR) posed to the PRC.49 Although the USSR and the PRC had signed a treaty of friendship, alliance, and mutual assistance in 1950, this initial period of cooperation lasted only ten years.50 The first cracks in the Sino-Soviet relationship began to appear in the early 1960s. In 1962, the USSR withdrew its technical advisors from the PRC, and expelled Chinese embassy officials from Moscow in 1963.51 These actions, combined with a series of others throughout the 1960s, culminated in two border conflicts between the PRC and the USSR in March 1969.52 While these clashes stopped short of all-out war, they further exacerbated the Sino-Soviet split. By the mid-1970s, relations between China and the Soviet Union had become increasingly strained, and the Chinese viewed the USSR as the principle threat to their security.

Realists such as Sutter have argued that China’s main security interest in Southeast Asia “remained the development of a favorable balance of influence that reduced or precluded the expansion of Soviet power and the power of countries seen by China as Soviet surrogates.”53 After the fall of the U.S.-backed governments in South

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51 Ibid., 21, 38.
52 Ibid., 92.
53 Sutter, Chinese Foreign Policy: Developments After Mao, 73.
Vietnam and Cambodia in 1975, a victorious Vietnam became less willing to cooperate with China’s security interests in Cambodia and developed increasingly close relations with the Soviet Union. The 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation increased China’s perception of Soviet encirclement and further shifted the Asian balance of power in favor of the USSR. Both of these events changed the Asian security environment and threatened China’s regional power. Vietnam’s December 1978 invasion of Cambodia and toppling of the Khmer Rouge regime, which had been allied to the PRC as a balance against Vietnamese power, further threatened China’s regional interests, and led to the Chinese conclusion that it had to use force to check Soviet strength and expansion. Based on this threat, the PRC’s decision to engage in conflict to restore the traditional balance of power and to maintain its influence in Southeast Asia seems rational and appears congruent with classical realist predictions of state behavior. Although the Sino-Vietnamese War proved militarily disastrous for the PLA, it achieved the PRC’s avowed purpose of demonstrating the PRC’s willingness to use force to check Soviet expansion.

Status-inconsistency theory offers an alternative explanation for why China chose to invade Vietnam in early 1979. This theory would predict this war should have been preceded by an increase in China’s status discrepancy; however, by 1979 the PRC had experienced nearly a decade of decreasing status discrepancy. Although Chinese self-conception, as measured by low economic and military power, remained fairly static

54 Ibid., 70.
throughout the 1970s, the PRC experienced major improvements in its diplomatic relations around the world, resulting in a corresponding growth in ascribed status. Although Chinese embassy officials had been expelled from Moscow in 1963, diplomatic relations between the two countries were restored with the exchange of ambassadors in 1970.\textsuperscript{56} In 1971, the United Nations (UN) admitted the PRC as a member state with a permanent seat on the Security Council (UNSC), and the UN concurrently voted to expel Taiwan.\textsuperscript{57} The visits of U.S. Presidents Nixon and Ford in 1972 and 1975, respectively, allowed for numerous public declarations about the positive state of the U.S.-China relationship during this period, and opened the door for the eventual establishment of full diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the PRC on 1 January 1979. Finally, while the U.S.’ November 1978 offer of providing fighter jets for the Taiwanese military made clear it would continue its previous policy of selling arms to Taiwan, the U.S. assuaged China’s ascribed status by indicating it would no longer discourage its NATO allies from selling arms to the PRC. Each of the above factors further increased China’s ascribed status, resulting in a corresponding decrease in status discrepancy, which, according to status-inconsistency theory, should have reduced the likelihood of the PRC engaging in conflict.

The shrinking of China’s status discrepancy throughout the 1970s failed to prevent China from using force to achieve its foreign policy goals in Southeast Asia. Using the expanded definition of ascribed status described above, there appears to be a

\textsuperscript{56} Jones and Kevill, \textit{China and the Soviet Union}, 38, 99.
\textsuperscript{57} This and the following description of PRC diplomatic relations in the 1970s is a paraphrase of \textit{Ibid.}, 112-120.
decreasing status discrepancy during this period that should result in a corresponding decline in Chinese conflict; however, this hypothesis does not stand in the case of the Sino-Vietnamese War. Sinologists such as Deng and Wang who study the effects of status on Chinese foreign policy decision-making do not use this case as an example to support their findings, and realists such as Thomas Christensen deal status-inconsistency theory a further blow with their argument that the establishment of Chinese diplomatic relations with the U.S. may have even emboldened them to choose conflict as a rational course of action to maintain a favorable balance of power in Southeast Asia. In the end, while providing an interesting perspective, the status-inconsistency theory does not adequately explain China’s decision to use force in the Sino-Vietnamese War.

*Mischief Reef Seizure*

On the morning of 8 February 1995, the world noticed eight Chinese naval vessels and the PRC flag flying over Mischief Reef, a Philippine-claimed outcrop roughly two hundred miles from the Philippines belonging to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. This action marked the first time the PRC had used force to seize territory claimed by a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Philippine President Fidel Ramos vehemently protested China’s seizure of this territory, and sought

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60 This and the following description of the Philippine response are a paraphrase of details found in, Ralf Emmers, “The De-escalation of the Spratly Dispute in Sino-Southeast Asian Relations,” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Working Paper Series no. 129 (June 2007), 7-8; Meyer, “Incident at Mischief Reef,” 6-7.
international support for his country’s claim to Mischief Reef. Additionally, in March and April of 1995, Philippine authorities destroyed additional Chinese territorial markers discovered on other islands and reefs claimed by the Philippines and arrested 62 Chinese fishermen for possession of “protected species of sea turtles and materials intended to mark contested territory as Chinese.” Although the PRC and the Philippines signed a bilateral agreement in August 1995 that rejected the use of force in the South China Sea and sought a peaceful resolution of this dispute, the PRC seizure of Mischief Reef remained a fait accompli, and China further consolidated its hold on this territory with an expansion of its structures in 1998.61 While this example represents a relatively minor use of force by China to attain its foreign policy objectives, it offers a compelling case where status-inconsistency theory provides a fully satisfying explanation for China’s actions.

Although classical realist arguments about states in an anarchic system pursuing resources and territory to maximize their power appear congruous with the PRC’s aggressive seizure of Mischief Reef in 1995, they do not adequately explain China’s behavior throughout this period. These realist arguments rest on three key points. First, by expanding and consolidating its hold over a larger amount of the South China Sea, the PRC increased its potential natural resource holdings. A UN seismology report published in 1969 judged the area surrounding Mischief Reef possibly rich in oil and gas deposits, and this region also boasts rich fishery resources.62 Increased control over these natural resources...

resources would translate into greater economic wealth, a key goal of the PRC in the 1990s, and could also finance further improvement and modernization of China’s military. Second, greater control over the Spratly Islands would increase the PRC’s strategic position in the South China Sea. Establishing domain over this region would give China both increased influence over the countries of Southeast Asia and the ability to have a major impact on the vital sea lines of communication that Japan, the U.S., and other maritime countries rely on for commerce. Finally, the timing of China’s push can be explained as a way to enhance its role in the region by filling the Southeast Asian power vacuum created by the 1992 withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Philippines. With the lack of a U.S. deterrent in the area, the PRC may have been emboldened to use force to accomplish the above goals.

In spite of these arguably compelling reasons, classical realism does not fully explain China’s decision making in the Mischief Reef incident. First, while the projection of Chinese power further cemented the PRC’s claim on the Spratly Islands, China’s belligerent action arguably decreased its security by causing ASEAN-member states to increase their balancing against China. After the seizure of Mischief Reef, the Philippines raised its defense spending in response to perceived Chinese aggression, Singapore and the Philippines strengthened their security ties to the U.S. as a guard.

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63 This and the following description of the strategic position of the South China Sea are a paraphrase of details found in, Emmers, “The De-escalation of the Spratly Dispute,” 4-5.
64 Ibid., 7.
65 Although Beijing has not provided a full-scale legal justification, China views the entire South China Sea as an exclusive Chinese area, and claims nearly the entire sea. China’s passage of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Territorial Waters and Contiguous Areas reiterated its claim on the South China Sea and highlighted its right to use force to defend these claims, Ibid., 3, 6.
against Chinese expansion, and ASEAN’s members, as well as the U.S., Japan, and Australia, confronted China over its increasingly assertive drive for power.66 While the PRC may be willing to pay this price for concrete territorial gains, this trade does not appear to fully meet the realist ideal that states base their actions on rational calculations designed to maximize their power.67 While states do not always pursue rational actions, such as cases of security dilemmas, classical realism predicts the rational course of action will minimize risks and maximize benefits, i.e. state power.68 Second, if classical realism adequately explains China’s seizure of Mischief Reef, one must ask why the PRC suddenly changed its behavior after such a foreign policy had successfully increased Chinese power. In August 1995, China and the Philippines signed a bilateral agreement that rejected the use of force and sought a peaceful solution to this incident.69 China’s realist behavior experienced a further dramatic change when the Chinese Foreign Minister agreed to explore multilateral solutions to the Spratly Islands dispute with ASEAN. Prior to this, the PRC had continuously sought bilateral solutions that enabled China to fully maximize its leverage over a single country, rather than risk limiting its power and options by working with multilateral organizations.70 Finally, China has made no additional seizures of territory in the Spratlys since 1995. If realist concerns justified the forcible seizure of Mischief Reef, why not any further claims? Because classical

67 Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 10.
68 Ibid.
69 This and the following description of changes to China’s behavior are a paraphrase of details found in, Emmers, “The De-escalation of the Spratly Dispute,” 7-8, 13.
70 Sutter, China’s Rise in Asia, 179.
realism cannot fully explain these changes in Chinese decision-making, another factor must be at work, and an examination considering status discrepancy helps to understand China’s actions in the South China Sea.

Status-inconsistency theory offers an alternate explanation for China’s 1995 annexation of Mischief Reef and the subsequent changes in its behavior after the international outcry that arose from this action. After a decade of economic growth fueled by Deng’s reforms, China’s rising military and economic power fueled a marked increase in its self-conception. By 1993, China’s trade with ASEAN members was fifteen times greater than in 1975, and ASEAN had become the PRC’s fifth-largest trading partner.71 During this same period, China’s ascribed status also benefited from significant improvements in its relations with ASEAN members.72 In 1975, the PRC established bilateral relations with the Philippines, and improved relations with Malaysia through Chinese Premier Li Peng’s December 1990 trip to Kuala Lumpur to discuss economic growth opportunities. In 1990 the PRC also resumed diplomatic relations with Indonesia, which had been suspended since 1965. Finally, for the first time in the 25-year history of the organization, in 1992 China attended the ASEAN foreign minister’s meeting, which gave high priority to resolving lingering South China Sea issues.73 While China, as a nonmember state, did not sign the resulting “Manila Declaration on the South

71 Ibid., 181-182.
72 This and the following description of changes to China’s relations with ASEAN members are a paraphrase of details found in, Emmers, “The De-escalation of the Spratly Dispute,” 7-8, 13.
73 This and the following sentence is a paraphrase of details found in, Meyer, “Incident at Mischief Reef,” 14-15.
China Seas” that called for the peaceful settlement of South China Sea territorial disputes, the PRC issued a formal diplomatic statement of support for the Manila Declaration.

In spite of this record of improved relations in the 1980s and early 1990s, the 4 June 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on student demonstrators devastated China’s ascribed status. Immediately after the PRC used military force to quell domestic protests in Beijing, Western nations, led by the U.S., issued strong condemnations against China’s acts, and imposed embargos forbidding the sale of all arms to China.\textsuperscript{74} While only a small number of countries, such as France, Holland, and Sweden, actually froze their diplomatic relations with China, the public rebukes, arms embargos, and loan freezes imposed on the PRC by the U.S., the U.K., Switzerland, and others wiped away the benefits of an increasingly high Chinese ascribed status generated by a decade’s worth of economic and political progress, causing a major increase in status discrepancy.\textsuperscript{75} Yong Deng has described the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen Square as “presumably the worst…international crisis it [China] had ever faced.”\textsuperscript{76} The world’s reaction to Tiananmen marked a watershed event for China, and the rebuke the PRC endured for its actions devastated its ascribed status, and generated a massive sense of frustration that influenced its foreign policy throughout the following decade.

Status-inconsistency theory adequately explains China’s decision to forcefully seize Mischief Reef, and it also neatly bridges the gaps in Chinese behavior during this


\textsuperscript{76} Deng, \textit{China's Struggle for Status}, 1, 41, 55.
period that classical realism fails to explain. By greatly decreasing China’s ascribed status, the Tiananmen Square incident resulted in a major increase in status discrepancy. Demonstrating just how far the PRC’s image had fallen in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident, in 1993 the U.S. National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, publicly labeled the PRC as a “backlash state” in the company of Iran, Iraq, Burma, and North Korea. Status-inconsistency theory predicts that such an increase in status discrepancy would greatly raise the likelihood of a state engaging in conflict, and China’s decision to use force in the Spratly Islands offers a telling example of this theory at work.

Using status-inconsistency to explain the reasons why China so quickly changed its foreign policies after successfully increasing its power by seizing Mischief Reef offers an even more interesting application of this theory. In the wake of its post-Tiananmen isolation, the PRC sought to improve its relations with its neighbors in the developing world, and specifically showed an increased willingness to cultivate ties with ASEAN members. China’s seizure of Mischief Reef led to the united ASEAN condemnation of this action, and placed immediate strain on China’s political relations with these countries. Rabinovitch has argued that improving its image drove Chinese foreign policy in the post-Tiananmen period. Based on this understanding, China’s sudden willingness to peacefully resolve the Spratly Island disputes with its ASEAN neighbors through

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78 Sutter, China’s Rise in Asia, 178-179.
multilateral solutions can be explained by recognizing that while China realized its previous strategy had won power, it had also severely damaged its ascribed status.

### 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis
Throughout the summer of 1995 and spring 1996, the PRC, U.S. and Taiwan engaged in a dangerous series of political brinksmanship that brought China and the U.S. closer to war in the Taiwan Strait than they had been since the 1960s.\(^8^0\) The decision by the Clinton administration to grant Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui a visa to visit the U.S. to attend his graduate school reunion provided the spark that triggered an escalating spiral of military demonstrations by the PRC, the U.S., and Taiwan. In July 1995, the PRC announced its intention to conduct surface-to-surface missile tests and military exercises in waters approximately 100 miles off Taiwan.\(^8^1\) When these maneuvers failed to generate a firm commitment by the U.S. to its “One China Policy,” the PRC conducted three additional rounds of missile testing, which culminated in the March 1996 firing of four missiles to within twenty miles of Taiwan’s two largest ports.\(^8^2\) These tests were both a demonstration of Chinese resolve and an attempt to dissuade Taiwanese voters from endorsing pro-independence candidates in upcoming Presidential elections.\(^8^3\) Further air and naval exercises in close proximity to Taiwan continued throughout this period, and the PLA also massed over 100,000 troops in Fujian Province as a deterrent to

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\(^8^1\) *Ibid.*, 94-95.
\(^8^3\) *Ibid.*
a Taiwanese declaration of independence. Responding to China’s deliberate ignoring of American warnings to cease its provocative behavior, the U.S. deployed two carrier battle groups to the waters outside Taiwan in an attempt to bring the situation under control and ensure stability in the western Pacific. In the end, Taiwan did not unilaterally declare independence; war did not break out between the U.S. and the PRC; and all three sides eventually returned to the bargaining table to seek political solutions to the Taiwan crisis.

While classical realism offers compelling explanations for China’s decision to use force and risk all out war during the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits Crisis, this theory cannot fully account for Chinese decision-making during this period. Grounding his findings in a realist foundation, Robert Ross has argued that China pursued a policy of “coercive diplomacy” to coerce both the U.S. and Taiwan by using force to threaten their interests until they committed to firm policy changes in line with Chinese foreign policy goals. Ross identifies two main Chinese goals that drove China’s decision-making in this period. First, force the U.S. to end its seemingly increasing support for Taiwanese independence by formally committing to its stated “One China Policy,” which had been in place since Nixon first visited Beijing in 1972. Second, the PRC also sought to coerce Taiwan’s President Lee from pursuing his efforts to increase international support for an independent Taiwan. Ross concludes that the PRC successfully used this strategy

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84 Ibid., 97, 102, 106, 110.
85 Ibid., 110-111.
86 Ibid., 88.
87 Ibid., 89, 94, 96.
88 Ibid., 89.
of coercive diplomacy to achieve its objectives vis-à-vis both Taiwan and the U.S. Chinese leaders adroitly applied steady force via military and political pressure in such a manner that they caused the U.S. to conduct a cost-benefit calculation to determine its interests were better served by recognizing China’s concerns with Taiwanese independence than by allowing a full-scale war to break out in the Taiwan Straits.

In spite of Ross’ explanation for Chinese foreign policy decision-making during the 1995 – 1996 Taiwan crisis, classical realism does not adequately explain China’s behavior during this period. First, China’s decision to engage in a contest of military brinksmanship with the United States must be considered highly risky. Given China’s absolute military inferiority to the U.S. at the time, the PRC’s apparent willingness to engage in war over a Taiwanese declaration of independence cannot be explained by the realist logic of states conducting rational calculations to determine what courses of action will minimize risks and maximize benefits, i.e. power. Although China considered the question of its sovereignty over Taiwan a major interest not subject to compromise, choosing to coerce the United States towards a desired action through the use of force arguably decreased China’s security. Even though this strategy ultimately proved successful, status-inconsistency theory compliments classical realism by providing a richer explanation for Chinese behavior during this period.

Status-inconsistency theory offers a highly satisfactory explanation for the Chinese decision to use force in the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits crisis, and successfully answers the question of why the PRC would risk a military confrontation with the U.S. 

89 This, and the following, discussion of Ross’ conclusions is a paraphrase of, Ibid., 113-115.
that it would almost certainly lose in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives. From this perspective, three factors explain how a potential increase in status discrepancy could lead the PRC to conclude that the use of force, even at the risk of war with the U.S., would be the best course of action to achieve its objectives. First, the dramatic decrease in China’s ascribed status caused by the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, discussed at length above, generated massive frustration in the PRC, and caused the country to become hyper-sensitive to further potential blows to its ascribed status. This set the stage for an extreme reaction to the events that led up to the 1995-96 crisis.

Second, apparent changes in the U.S.’ China policy gave the appearance of growing support for Taiwanese independence, which threatened to reduce the PRC’s ascribed status. The Bush administration’s 1992 decision to sell Taiwan 150 modern F-16 fighter aircraft violated the 1982 U.S-China Communiqué that called for reductions in arms sales to Taiwan, and proved to be the first of several actions the PRC interpreted as major changes to the U.S.’ Taiwan policy. In 1994, the Clinton administration further strained China relations by raising the level of protocol ascribed to Taiwanese diplomats; this changed a policy that had governed the U.S-Taiwan relationship since 1981. Next, the 1995 Congressional pressure that led the decision to grant Lee’s visa to visit the United States reversed more than twenty-five years of precedent in U.S.-Taiwan policy. Finally, the cessation of official head-of-state visits between China and the U.S. in the wake of Tiananmen further decreased the PRC’s ascribed status; no head-of-state

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90 The following description of changes to U.S. Taiwan policy is a paraphrase of details found in, Ross, “The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation,” 87, 92.
meetings with Chinese leadership were held from June 1989 until October 1995.\textsuperscript{91} From the Chinese perspective, this policy evolution signaled a change in America’s relations with both Taiwan and the PRC, and the Chinese fear of the U.S. shifting its diplomatic relations from the PRC to an independent Taiwan, threatened to deal a further blow to China’s ascribed status that the Chinese leadership simply refused to allow.

Finally, President Lee’s continued threat of a unilateral declaration of independence posed further risk to Chinese ascribed status, and resulted in the eventual use of force in the Taiwan Strait. China’s foreign policy goals sought to coerce Taiwan to abandon its drive to change the “one China” policy that defined the existing trilateral relationship between the U.S., the PRC, and Taiwan, and to signal that the PRC would not tolerate continued attempts by Lee and his pro-independence supporters to change the existing status quo.\textsuperscript{92} Chinese analysts have further concluded that the PRC’s policy of using force to achieve its objectives was designed to prove its resolve on this issue to the U.S.\textsuperscript{93} Finally, Chinese Premier Li Peng demonstrated the seriousness with which China treated this issue with his boast after the conclusion of the crisis that, “[Americans] have come to realize the importance of China. They thought that…China was no longer important…but facts have negated these ideas.”\textsuperscript{94} Although the desire to be viewed as a responsible and legitimate power drives Chinese foreign policy, by viewing the decision


\textsuperscript{92} Levine, “Sino-American Relations: Practicing Damage Control,” 89, 95.

\textsuperscript{93} Deng, \textit{China’s Struggle for Status}, 249.

to risk war with the U.S. over Taiwanese independence as a result of increased status
discrepancy one can adequately understand the PRC’s decision-making process in the
1995-96 Taiwan Straits Crisis.

Status-inconsistency theory also explains the spiraling escalation in the use of
force and the peaceful conclusion of this conflict. After the first two rounds of missile
tests and military exercises around Taiwan during the summer of 1995, the PRC sought
to engage the U.S. in an all-out, head of state summit to reaffirm America’s Taiwan
policy. After a series of negotiations, the two sides finally agreed to an October 1995
summit between Presidents Clinton and Jiang. Although the PRC desired U.S.
assurances on the One China policy, the American delegation focused mainly on issues
such as Chinese weapons proliferation, human rights, and trade disputes. Furthermore,
the U.S. denied the Chinese request for a follow-on state visit with full honors in
Washington, and agreed only to hold an unofficial summit that it said, “most
appropriately reflects the current standing of U.S.-China relations.” After this blow to its
ascribed status, the PRC upped the ante in the Straits crisis, and used increasingly
threatening force to demonstrate its resolve to prevent Taiwanese independence.

On the other hand, a similar examination of status discrepancy can explain the
peaceful conclusion of this confrontation and the relatively stable state that has existed in
cross-strait relations since 1997. Following the March 1996 missile tests, the U.S.
recognized the severity of the damage that had been done to its relations with the PRC,

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95 The following description of China’s desire for a summit with the U.S. is a paraphrase of details found in,
Ross, “The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation,” 98-100, 102.
and in July 1996, U.S. National Security Advisor Lake suggested a series of summits between the American and Chinese leaders.\textsuperscript{96} Presidents Clinton and Jiang agreed to exchange official state visits in 1997 and 1998, and the U.S. administration further mollified Chinese concerns with Clinton’s public announcement that the United States did not support Taiwanese independence. These head-of-state visits and positive public diplomatic statements increased China’s ascribed status, which narrowed the PRC’s status discrepancy, and resulted in reduced Chinese use of force to achieve its international objectives since the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits Crisis.

CONCLUSION

The study of status as a driver of Chinese foreign policy has become increasingly prevalent among Sinologists, but because many realists consider status a residual effect of more traditional measures of power, the study of status discrepancy’s effects on China’s decision-making remains a relatively minor field.\textsuperscript{97} After examining three cases where the PRC used force to achieve its policy objectives, one can conclude that while status-inconsistency theory cannot totally replace realism as an explanation for Chinese belligerence, it should be considered as a tool that can augment the explanatory power of realist theory in understanding China’s use of force in the international system.

Status-inconsistency theory offers two major advantages to classical realism. First, both the Mischief Reef incident and the 1995-96 Taiwan Crisis demonstrate this theory’s ability to predict both pre- and post-conflict behavior. Understanding the value

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 113.

\textsuperscript{97} Morgenthau, \textit{Politics Among Nation}, 83; Robert Sutter, discussion with the author, January 29, 2010.
states like the PRC place on their ascribed status enables scholars and policymakers to not only understand the factors that can drive a state to conflict, but also enables them to create more tailored policies designed specifically to reduce the target state’s willingness to continue its belligerent actions.

Second, in an era of instantaneous, global communication, when a state’s behavior, regardless of domestic versus international, can be broadcast around the world in a matter of minutes, understanding the effects of ascribed status becomes even more important. While the notion of sovereignty protects a state’s domestic actions from international intervention, this norm does not shield states from the global court of public opinion. As demonstrated by the ability of protestors to generate massive international outrage by broadcasting images and near-live reporting of the PRC’s crackdowns on dissidents in both Tibet and Xinjiang in 2009, the explosion of real-time Internet communications will make status-inconsistency theory increasingly important in international relations. Considering this fact, policymakers would do well to understand the potential effects of creating policies that decrease a state’s ascribed status.

**Challenges With Status-Inconsistency Theory**

The difficulty in determining how best to quantify and measure a variable as vague as status must be considered a critical challenge in using the status-inconsistency theory to explain Chinese use of force. Even major proponents of status theory, such as Deng, acknowledge this difficulty. While his work focuses on highlighting the importance the PRC places on its status, Deng freely recognizes that the lack of any clear
Chinese definition of the term creates a sense of analytical ambiguity in this field. For his purposes, Deng defines status as, “a function of the international power and normative arrangement, the predominant patterns of great-power politics, and China’s self-definition of identity and interests in world politics.” While comprehensive, such an all-encompassing notion contrasts with several other more workable definitions that can be found in scholarly literature.

First, as mentioned above, status-inconsistency theorists who have attempted rigorous statistical analyses of this problem have been forced to create much more quantifiable definitions of status. Previous studies have focused mainly on a state’s economic and military power and the number of its formal diplomatic relations with other countries as the key indicators of power, and they have simply translated these variables into measures of self-conception and ascribed status. In their determination to quantify a state’s status, earlier theorists have concluded they must drop vague factors such as identity, social recognition, respect and frustration; unfortunately, these are all measures that Deng argues must be included in any comprehensive understanding of China’s preoccupation with status.

An examination of Chinese analytical writings on calculating national power yields similar problems. Although Chinese scholars adamantly complain that traditional Western measures do not adequately account for the many various features of a state’s power, several different studies conducted within the PRC during the 1990s also fail to

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98 Deng, *China’s Struggle for Status*, 8, 12.
produce a measure of status that can be easily applied to status-inconsistency theory.\textsuperscript{101} In a recent study of comprehensive national power (CNP), two Chinese scholars argue, “The status (or position) of a country in the international community is in essence associated with the rise and fall of its national power.”\textsuperscript{102} Their method of calculating CNP differs from traditional Western techniques, which they argue focus mainly on strategic capabilities such as economic, military, political, and technical powers.\textsuperscript{103} Their calculation includes a more comprehensive set of variables such as “material strength, ideational ethos, and international influence.”\textsuperscript{104} With a complex methodology consisting of eight different categories of strategic resources measured by 23 different indicators, Hu and Men use CNP to produce rankings of the world’s states, and they find that China’s world power ranking has risen from fourth in 1980 to number two in 1998.\textsuperscript{105}

Other studies done by Chinese research institutes, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Academy of Military Sciences, during the 1990s created other comprehensive measures of national power that led to similar conclusions about rises in Chinese power.\textsuperscript{106}

Although such techniques for calculating CNP produce excellent measures of self-conception that can be applied to proven methods for determining status discrepancy,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}, 2.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid.}, 20, 23}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{106} For a fuller set of details on these two studies and their findings see Pillsbury, \textit{China Debates the Future Security Environment}, 218-258.}
the problem of how to adequately measure ascribed status remains. East and Wallace’s use of diplomatic relations to calculate this variable remains subject to scholarly debate about whether or not this is an appropriate measure. The cases of Mischief Reef and the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis both demonstrate how simply counting the number of state’s diplomatic relations cannot fully capture the nature of ascribed status. In both of these cases, the mere potential for losses in diplomatic relations appeared to drive Chinese decision-making, and East’s and Wallace’s methodology does not account for the impact of such potential change. This suggests that either the variable used to determine ascribed status in previous studies is insufficient or earlier methods require revision to account for potential, rather than just actual, changes.

While Sinologists such as Deng and Rabinovitch successfully demonstrate the value China places on its status and the importance for considering this factor in relations with the PRC, their inability to bring quantitative rigor to this field has relegated status to an understudied branch of political science. Although Deng explicitly acknowledges that he does not seek to create a new IR theory with his study of status, the continued lack of analysis in this field has limited the debate and understanding of China’s rise in American scholarly and policy circles to mainly traditional IR theories initially created to explain the behavior of Western great powers in the 20th century. David Kang has written about how Western scholars need to create new analytical frameworks to better explain the interstate behavior currently exhibited by Asian states that theories such as realism do not adequately explain. For example, Kang highlights how classical realism fails to explain why China’s rise over the past twenty years has not generated balancing among Asian
This current gap in theoretical frameworks has opened the door for further application of status-inconsistency theory in international relations.

Recommendations for Improving Status-Inconsistency Theory

Although scholars such as Kang have identified the need for new, or at least modified, IR theories to explain the current state of the international system, status-inconsistency theory, in spite of its applicability at both the system and state levels, has thus far failed to fill this gap. One recommendation for increasing the parsimony of status-inconsistency theory would be to graft its recognition of the importance of status onto existing realist theories. Slightly modifying classical realism to describe a state’s quest for power as a way to increase its ascribed status would create a new flavor of realism. This revised theory would use the insights of status-inconsistency theory to explain existing gaps in realist thinking that fail to account for why a state, such as the PRC, would choose to place its security at risk in order to increase its ascribed status.

In order to successfully merge status-inconsistency with more traditional IR theories, Sinologists and political scientists need to pursue further work in three key areas. First, scholars in the status field, such as Deng, Vertzberger, and Rabinovitch, must reach a consensus on a universal definition of “status,” including such sub-categories as self-conception, ascribed status, and status discrepancy. While a plethora of definitions for status persists among scholars around the globe, identifying a single one would create a common language for academics and policymakers alike, and would

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reduce the potential for miscalculations that currently exists when states pursue policies and analysts write recommendations based on different notions of “status.”

Second, in line with standardizing definitions in the status field, scholars need to identify universal variables to measure each of these factors. Since status-inconsistency theory relies on various forms of power to determine a state’s self-conception, agreeing on one universal technique to calculate this variable must become a priority for future work in this field. One potential solution to the problem of relying on military and economic power as the key measurements of self-conception, would be to use the Chinese method of calculating comprehensive national power (CNP) described above. Although this measure of CNP generates a literal ranking of a state’s relative power in the international system, one problem remains. Because Chinese scholars created this methodology, it places weighted importance on those factors considered most important to Chinese analysts, thus potentially making it less useful for determining accurate measurements of self-conception in other countries. In order to avoid creating individualized methodologies for each country in the world, further work needs to be done to create a more universal measurement of self-conception.

Finding an acceptable way to measure ascribed status will likely prove much more difficult, but applying a similar methodology as that used to determine CNP again offers a possible solution. Using such a scheme, the number of a state’s diplomatic relations would be just one of several measures of ascribed status that would be weighted and combined to produce a comprehensive measure of ascribed status. As demonstrated by my analysis of the three above cases of Chinese conflict, such a solution can generate
positive results. While further work may be required to create fuller and more universal measures, future efforts to identify a more sophisticated measure of ascribed status will increase the explanatory power and applicability of status-inconsistency theory to states beyond China.

Finally, a standardized methodology for actually calculating status discrepancy must be the final area where scholars should focus. Existing methodologies for measuring status discrepancy, such as those created by Wallace and East, have been designed to calculate this variable at the macro level, and cannot, in their current form, be applied to cases of individual states. Developing a methodology to measure a single state’s status discrepancy over time must be the next step in the increasing the applicability of status-inconsistency theory at the state level. While offering such a technique is outside the scope of this work, this goal should become a primary objective of scholars focusing on status.

In the end, the utility of status-inconsistency theory remains largely unrecognized, mainly due to the newness of status study in IR thinking. While status-inconsistency theory alone does not offer a single comprehensive solution to existing gaps in the explanation of why some states choose to use force to achieve their foreign policy objectives, the above studies of Chinese belligerence offer compelling evidence that the study of status-inconsistency should be considered in more mainstream scholarly discussions. As Yong Deng and David Kang both correctly point out, current IR thinking has been designed largely to explain last century’s conflicts between great powers, and political science requires new approaches and mindsets in order to understand and predict
the international system of the 21st century. Without recognizing the need to tweak and modernize IR theory, scholars, analysts, and policymakers all run the risk of growing stale and failing to understand the true drivers of today’s major power relationships. In the end, status-inconsistency’s greatest attraction is its ability to offer a way for IR scholars to compliment existing mainstream theories by applying lenses of analysis that have become increasingly important to rising powers such as the PRC.
WORKS CITED