Identity, Role Conception, and Status Dilemma

A Socio-Psychological Account of
China-U.S. Relations

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Abstract: This article examines the status politics in Chinese foreign policy and its implications on China-U.S. relations. The analysis of status recognition and the role it plays in Chinese diplomacy reveals the motivating factors behind China's quest for respect in the international arena and the centrality of national identity in China's status aspiration. Viewed from the socio-psychological perspective, China's tenacious struggle to gain a prominent international status is a social action aimed at forging its identity security, whereby the Chinese "self" will interact on equal terms with the foreign "other." Based on the argument, this paper compares Chinese and American role conceptions and dissects the status dilemma between the two powers by exploring the dynamics of disrespect in their status relations. The two nations' distinctive self-role conceptions and their

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© 2019 World Century Publishing Corporation and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies
China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies, Vol. 5, No. 3, 343–372
DOI: [10.1142/S2377740019500180](https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740019500180)

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role expectations of the interacting parties have led to a widening gap between China's international status that entitles it to equal treatment and the one accorded by the United States. The disquieting condition of this status dissonance has motivated Beijing to disrupt the asymmetric hierarchy wherein it used to exhibit deference to Washington. The effort of the established hegemon in upending the defiance of the status contestant has exacerbated the status dilemma, which has given rise to the current China-U.S. malaise.

Keywords: National identity; status; role conception; hierarchy; China-U.S. relations.

Over the past decade, a lively debate has developed between both scholars and practitioners of international relations (IR) as to whether the international order can be modified to incorporate a greater role for rising powers. Because of its heightened profile in international politics, China has not only garnered much attention and admiration, but also fostered growing apprehension on the world stage. In the scholarly community, much of the ongoing discussion and policy debate on the interactions between the United States, the established hegemon, and its emerging counterparts has taken place within the framework of traditional approaches to IR. Conventional analyses yield a lesser appreciation of whether the social recognition that a state actor attains from the interacting parties in the international arena matches its own sense of worth. This neglect leads to a seldom-asked question that drives to the heart of emerging powers' foreign analysis behaviors: to what extent will their quest for greater international status generate status conflicts with the reigning hegemon?

In terms of the status relations between emerging powers and the established hegemon, nowhere are the impacts of China's resurgence felt more acutely and close to home than the Asia-Pacific region, where China's emergence presents a formidable challenge to the U.S. primacy. The mutually perceived threats derived from China-U.S. status conflicts are so pervasive that their strategic distrust is trumping their common interests in the economic and cultural realms; the most complex and consequential bilateral relationship in international politics is now more strained than at any point since its normalization. An intuitive and fundamental puzzle to unravel is how China-U.S. relations have arrived at this critical juncture.

Sub-questions may include, among others, under what conditions and through what kind of underlying processes has Washington's engagement of Beijing been disrupted? To what extent is the United States lashing out at China as a scapegoat? And, is the current malaise between the two powers a rite of passage, as described by the latest iteration of the "Thucydides Trap" marking the evolution of the American century into a Chinese one in the process of power transition?¹ To answer these questions, it is of vital importance to understand the underlying identity and status dynamics that drive the relationship between the two titans.

Guided by such research orientation, this article investigates the status politics in Chinese foreign policy behavior and its impact on China-U.S. relations. The first section traces the origin of the Chinese national identity and explores how China's status quest has constituted a social action of seeking its identity security in the interaction between Chinese "self" and foreign "other." Shifting the focus to China-U.S. relations, the second section dissects the distinctive self-role conceptions of the two nations and their divergent role expectations vis-à-vis one another; it also explains why the social rank that entitles Beijing to equal treatment is not accorded by Washington. The third section unpacks the formation of China-U.S. status dilemma, illustrating how the disruption of the reciprocity forging a deference pattern in the bilateral relationship has enlisted China's defiance of U.S. authority, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis. To explicate the ramification of the status dilemma in the issue areas where China is most exposed to U.S. interference, the fourth section probes the status conflicts revolving around Beijing's defense of its "core national interests." Given the high stakes of status in the bilateral relationship, examining the status dilemma provides an identity lens to understand the strategic distrust that is breeding the current China-U.S. stalemate.

National Humiliation and Rejuvenation: Identity Motives Behind China's Status Quest

A fundamental issue in the status politics within the relations between an emerging power and an established hegemon is the motives of the former's

¹Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2017).

status quest. This, in turn, is causally related to the social recognition granted by the latter. With regard to China, why does its expanding prowess induce its demand for a desirable international status and authority in the international arena that matches that status? Exploring this question requires an in-depth understanding of how Chinese foreign policy behavior is driven by its national identity. A basic assumption of this research, which is put within the analytic framework of political sociology, is that a state's international status is not only premised on its material position in the international system, but that status is also a product of social construction.² Along this line of logic, affirming the subjective sense of importance of China as a social actor in the international community is contingent upon the perceptual judgment of the Chinese "self" and the foreign "other." Thus, the entry point of this research is to examine how China's sense of worth and its concomitant request for other social actors' respect are forged in the cultural-institutional environment where Chinese national identity is constructed.

In retrospect, the cultural supremacy ingrained in the Chinese national identity was an outgrowth of China's international status in the Sino-centric system developed in ancient East Asia. The exceptionalist identity of imperial China was envisioned in the Sino-centric worldview that was largely based on the dichotomy of self and other in the interstate system of the *tianxia* (all-under-heaven) order.

Since entities at the fringe of China as the Middle Kingdom were regarded as less-favored groups, the international status of primordial China was epitomized in this hierarchical model, in which the world was perceived as a civilization family and presided over by the Chinese Son of Heaven. An archetypal example of this Sino-centric cosmology is the tribute system.³ Within this institutional mechanism, China, the most powerful state in East

Deeply ingrained
cultural supremacy
drives China to seek
higher international
status.

²Anne L. Clunan, "Why Status Matters in World Politics," in T.V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 273.

³John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Asia in the moral, material, and cultural sense, was held accountable for the actions of those states over which it claimed suzerainty. In return, Chinese emperors received confirmation of their leadership from their vassal states, whose rulers or envoys would perform rituals and present gifts to show deference and submissiveness in their periodic missions to the Celestial Empire. The affective sense of superiority derived from this cultural-institutional construct and represented the ideal identity of China as a prominent power in international society.

It should be noted that the external and domestic environment that shapes national identity is not monolithic. Variation in the cultural-institutional context can dramatically impact national identity. The position of the Chinese actor in the self–other dialectic remains in flux. When the two Opium Wars (1840–1842 and 1856–1860) broke out, China's prominent status and cultural supremacy in the *tianxia* order came to an abrupt end. The wars ushered in the toe-to-toe contest between the Westphalian international system and the Sino-centric tribute system, and raised the curtain on China's "century of national humiliation." As a consequence of military debacles by the Qing court at the hands of foreign aggressors and the surrender of its sovereignty, swaths of Chinese territory were "carved up like a melon" (*guafen*) by foreign predators. Correspondingly, the tribute system was severely attacked and gave way to the treaty system, destroying the institutional mechanism of the *tianxia* order.⁴ In the harsh clash of the two cultural institutions, the innate confidence of the Qing Empire in the validity and viability of Sino-centrism was shattered. Its fatal defeat in the inter-systemic contest signaled the decisive shift in the Chinese national identity from superiority to a new inferiority dimension.

The qualitative conversion in the Chinese national identity aroused the self-reflection by Chinese political elites regarding "why China [was] weak and how it [could] be strong, about lost territory, and about reclaiming a leading position in the world."⁵ The continued

⁴Samuel S. Kim, *China, the United Nations, and World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 30–37; Mark Mancall, "The Ch'ing Tribute System: An Interpretive Essay," in John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁵Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 34.

experience of national humiliation inflicted by Western and Japanese imperialism inspired numerous social movements, such as the student protest in May 1919 and the 1911 Revolution. In the perilous moment when China was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder, the insecurity of the Chinese nation-state was not only evinced in the physical threat from foreign "others," but also demonstrated in the ontological desecration of China's "sacred" image in the self-other interaction. The enduring national trauma presented an extreme form of Chinese identity insecurity, wherein its sense of superiority was relentlessly ruptured in the inter-group rivalry. This insecurity in the struggle to maintain Chinese cultural supremacy, derived from the Sino-centric civilization and achievement of the Middle Kingdom, gave ground to the expectation of how China should be treated by other social actors in the international arena.

Seen from the perspective of the Chinese "victimized self," the restless search of Chinese intelligentsia for a less-aggrieved persona in their encounter with foreign "other" after the Opium Wars is a social action affirming the Chinese ontological security. Central to the "consistent self-concepts" that have been built in this identity security is China's social status as a powerful and respectful state on the international scene.⁶ In regaining the lost international status and rejuvenating a respected Chinese "self," reconstructing a powerful modern state thus constitutes the foundation of the status concept of the Chinese nation-state. To the extent that these elements of the Chinese national identity point to the purpose of Chinese diplomacy, the envisioned Chinese state is expected to sustain the identity of the ideal "China," which was dismantled in the cultural-institutional transformation, and to regain the social recognition conferred to the pre-modern Middle Kingdom. It is this visceral desire of effective rehabilitation of China's social status that has been motivating the unremitting efforts of Chinese "national rejuvenation" (*minzu fuxing*). The unflinching quest for the historically-informed status on the world stage actually reflects the instrumental character of the Chinese national

⁶Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), pp. 2-3.

identity, which entails lifting the Chinese nation back into the ranks of the world's greatest powers.

Rebuilding a powerful modern state lies at the core of the "China Dream."

In this sense, it would be oversimplistic to reduce the dissemination of the "China dream" (*zhongguomeng*) — a catch phrase reinvigorated by Xi Jinping soon after he was elected as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012 — to a propaganda campaign launched by an authoritarian regime.⁷ That this slogan has been sublimated into Xi's signature

ideologies is largely due to the narrative power of this patriotic motto, which fits squarely into the social norms rooted in the Chinese national identity. As analyzed above, China's status loss from being the leading center of East Asian civilization to becoming a subaltern actor dominated and humiliated by foreign invaders looms large in the Chinese national identity, motivating its contemporary status aspiration. The quest for the Chinese ontological security in conserving a superior "historical self" has become a powerful identity driver, sustaining the tenacious struggle of the Chinese nation-state in elevating its international standing to a level commensurate with that of the Middle Kingdom. This thus explains the nostalgia in the Chinese national community of its pre-modern powerful status and the party-state's nationalist summon to revive China's past glory. The shared identity need infuses a persistent and ongoing social action taken both by the Chinese state and the nation.

This line of logic accounts for the discursive preference of the CPC in its construction of nationalist discourse. The rejuvenation narrative, for instance, is exemplified by China's impressive achievements since the opening-up of its economy in the late 1970s, which is related to the rose-colored picture of China's powerful status on the world stage. Yet, unlike the diplomatic rhetoric of China's "rise" (*jueqi*), the CPC opts for the phrase "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) to narrate its historical mission to the domestic

⁷See, for example, William A. Callahan, "China 2035: From the China Dream to the World Dream," *Global Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2016), pp. 247–258.

audience.⁸ Using the word “rejuvenation,” instead of “rise,” illustrates a Chinese perspective that is different from those held by outsiders. As mentioned in the previous discussion, the traumatic memory of national defeat and the resultant humiliation has given rise to the social norms encoded in the Chinese national identity. Steered by these memory-encoded norms, “national rejuvenation” underscores China’s quest for the social recognition necessary to redeem its lost power status. As China “is returning to the position of regional preeminence that it once held and which is [what] leaders and many of its people still regard as natural and appropriate,”⁹ the social recognition granted to China in the international society has become a linchpin to judge the performance of the Chinese state on the stage of Chinese diplomacy.

Therefore, undertaking the social action of restoring China’s rightful place in the international scene certifies the CPC’s credibility of fulfilling its role as the sole guardian of Chinese civilization and national savior. To what extent China attains the visible deference of the foreign “other” is crucial to justifying the CPC’s grip on power, since it has long professed itself in the official nationalist discourse as the steward of Chinese “national rejuvenation.” The external legitimacy of the authoritarian regime, as evinced in China’s international status attained on the world stage, is thus closely connected to its internal legitimacy. The social action entailed by the Chinese national identity has given ground to the ethical agenda of Beijing’s foreign policy making and behavior and the normative criteria with which the Chinese populace assess the CPC’s conduct of foreign affairs. Falling short of the requirements inherent in the self-proclaimed role identity threatens to erode the party-state’s regime legitimacy.

Distinctive Role Conceptions: Sources of Status Mis-Recognition in China-U.S. Relations

In seeking recognized international status to sustain China’s identity security, Beijing must secure all possible affirmation of its recovered eminence

⁸Wang Zheng, “The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2014), p. 6.

⁹Aaron L. Friedberg, “Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics,” *National Interest*, No. 114 (2011), p. 20, emphasis in original.

from the originator of the modern international system — the West, particularly the incumbent hegemon. This excessive attention to its outward appearance and the approbation of its status lends support to the role theory in the intellectual enterprise of IR. As observed by K. J. Holsti, the social position of a state on the world stage is not only determined by the ego's role conception, but is also "influenced or restrained by the international counterpart of the social alter."¹⁰ Since the interactive environment of the international society where a state attains its status does not completely reside in the firm control of the "self," China's quest for a position of prominence is destined to be an arduous journey.

In the context of China-U.S. relations, the foremost variable to explore in their status relations is the role conceptions of the two interacting parties, which include two elements: the self-perceptions of these two nations about their appropriate role in the international society and their expectations of other states' role playing. Comparing the social and historical sources of these role conceptions and how they are unfolding in the self-other interactions reveals the way in which the United States and China acquire the particular status traits in their conduct of foreign affairs. The contrast of the distinctive role playing styles of the two powers that are shaped by their role conceptions provides an analytic path to unpack America's social recognition of China's international status. On the part of the reigning hegemon, which can shape the world opinion of China's status, American role expectation guides its judgment about whether or not China possesses the status traits that demonstrate the legitimacy of its membership in the power club of global affairs and to what extent China meets such socially constructed standards.

The U.S. can largely shape global opinion on China's status.

To begin with, the role played by the United States in its foreign relations is derived from the conviction that it is a natural liberal land, endowed with the superior ideals of democracy and freedom. In the liberal world, the United States is widely viewed as a prototypical actor that exemplifies the fundamental traits of democratic states and thus distinguishes itself from any salient out-group

¹⁰K. J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1970), p. 243.

members. Due to the recognized superior prestige, the United States, as a “democratic core” in the Westphalian international system, has enacted deference from most members of the democratic social group, who are open to U.S. influence and more inclined to accept it as their charismatic leader.¹¹ This is evidenced in its role playing after World War II. The United States has established its global leadership position through a global framework of economic relations and security that has brought democracies and market societies close together. This kind of “natural authority,” which resembles Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power in international relations, can work without any intentional arrangements or explicit commands.¹²

This pattern of deference is closely associated with America’s conceptualization of the interacting parties’ role in the international arena. As the most powerful democracy and market economy, the United States has the capacity and willingness to maintain the rules and institutions that have prevented great-power wars and promoted stable and free international trade. In shaping and reinforcing the liberal world order, disseminating the values embedded in either liberalism or the hegemonic stability of the post-WWII international system has become enshrined as a missionary aspect of America’s foreign policy approach. The self-righteous persona of such a prestigious actor has undergirded a “manifest destiny” and duty to expand the liberal institutions and beliefs. It has helped established democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and capitalism that the United States and its partners have crafted over the 20th century.¹³ In its interaction with those countries where non-democratic rule prevails, the United States did not shy away from crusading militarism and isolationism. As was the case of the Iraq War, the U.S. foreign policy approach was guided by its role expectation of the interacting parties and the universal principles of the liberal

¹¹Michael A. Hogg, “A Social Identity Theory of Leadership,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2011), pp. 184–200; and Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2004).

¹²Reinhard Wolf, “Taking Interaction Seriously: Asymmetrical Roles and the Behavioral Foundations of Status,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2019), p. 1195; and “Dominance, Deference, and Defiance: Asymmetrical Roles and Status Disputes,” in *The Annual Convention of the International Studies Association* (San Francisco, CA, 2018).

¹³Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 10.

order, rather than the specific conditions of those countries. Thus, U.S. security concerns are assessed and maneuvered in a way that a potentially threatening out-group is transformed to fit into a world order that befits American value and its liberal identity.¹⁴

In this conversion process, the “natural authority” that the United States enjoyed with its democratic in-groups is replaced by a pattern of deference that is unilaterally imposed. Correspondingly, the foreign policy approach stemming from such imposed deference is basically self-referential. The U.S. self-centric role conception — either as treaty enforcer after World War II or a globalizer after the Cold War¹⁵ — is basically context-free. America’s identity of a liberal hegemon serves as the sole reference to evaluate the role play by the interacting parties. Those actors assimilating or supporting liberalism or the related norms — for example, competitive election, free trade, and market openness — are categorized as U.S. allies, while those who resist or even sabotage these liberal ideas are treated as foes that are to be converted to the “right” order. This self-perceived supreme capacity and a high degree of civilization of the United States, as observed by some IR scholars, have allowed it to “reduce the world into contrasting national orders according to their convertibility and their capacity” relative to the U.S. self-role.¹⁶

Judging from this identity-based role conception, China’s handling of a dizzying array of domestic and external affairs, such as human rights, media freedom, as well as the Xinjiang and Tibet issues, which are anathema to the American political credo, is a powerful indicator of the “non-democratic” nature of the Beijing regime. In light of the U.S.’ context-free role expectation, the debate over what to do about China’s rise and status aspiration is not just about the military and economic prowess of an emerging power. The role attributed to a primary challenge of U.S. identity

¹⁴Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-chiu, “China’s Quest for Grand Strategy: Power, National Interest, or Relational Security?,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014), p. 6.

¹⁵For a detailed analysis of the evolving image of the U.S. from World War I to the post-Cold-War era, see Martha L. Cottam, *Foreign Policy Decision Making: The Influence of Cognition* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986).

¹⁶Shih and Huang, “China’s Quest for Grand Strategy: Power, National Interest, or Relational Security?,” p. 9.

security, which is grounded on the internally determined value of the United States, is a decisive factor that determines the likelihood of status mis-recognition in the bilateral relations. An autocratic regime “responsible for crushing the Tiananmen Square protest, denying religious freedom, suppressing political dissent, and oppressing minorities,” to use Hugh White’s words, is not a government that the United States can treat as a political equal and show respect to.¹⁷ The mismatch between China’s self-attributed position, as illustrated in the first section, and the social rank assigned by the American alter often makes it notoriously difficult for the latter to grant the former the international stature, acceptance, and respect it desires.

On the part of China, its role conception on the international scene is derived from a distinctive political culture that is apathetic to universal norms. Chinese leadership construes its national role and those of the interacting parties as “mutually constituted” and hence places a premium on the adaptation to the specific contexts of the self-other interactions.¹⁸ In stark contrast to the American style of role playing that often leads to an imposed pattern of deference, the Chinese role-play, without an aim of reshaping the international system based on its own value system, emphasizes that the differences in national conditions should be fully respected in mutual relations.¹⁹ Instead of converting the potentially threatening actors in the international interaction to an accepting one, China prefers to convince the foreign “other” of its trustworthy partnership by adapting to global realities.

¹⁷Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power* (Victoria, Australia: Black Inc., 2012), p. 167.

¹⁸Shih and Huang, “China’s Quest for Grand Strategy: Power, National Interest, or Relational Security?,” p. 2, 5.

¹⁹Qin Yaqing, “Relationality and Process Construction: Embedding Chinese Ideas in International Relations Theory [关系本位与过程建构: 将中国理念植入国际关系理论],” *Social Sciences in China*, Issue 3 (2009), pp. 69–86.

core tenet that China adamantly adheres to in its relational role conception,²⁰ Beijing also expects Washington's due respect for the distinctions between the two socio-political systems.

A compelling historical case of this reciprocal approach of role conception is the above-mentioned Sino-centric *tianxia* order, in which the prestige of the Middle Kingdom and the legitimacy of this ranking order is collectively accepted by those "secondary" states. The moral authority of China's preponderant position that the Chinese empire attained in the hierarchical order was largely founded on the credible commitment it made to avoid exploiting the "secondary" states in the tribute system.²¹ As the primary state, China did not aim at the subjugation or conversion of the vassal, but subscribed to "relational reciprocity," whereby its benevolence shown to the "secondary" states helped achieve the stability of the regional order in the long run.

In the Chinese political culture, such role conception originated from the ethical tenets of Confucianism guiding the hierarchical relationship in traditional Chinese society. In the social philosophy of Confucianism, two interrelated notions centering on the concept of harmony (*he*), among others, are held up as an exemplar for contemporary China's role playing on the foreign relations front. One is "harmony is most precious" (*he wei gui*), a dictum historicizing Beijing's conduct of foreign affairs in the time-honored tradition of "Confucian pacifism."²² Such harmony-centered Confucian discourse visualizes an amiable China with a peace-loving heritage on the foreign relations front. The international system it envisages is encapsulated in another Confucian adage, "harmony but without uniformity" (*he er bu tong*). In contrast to American role playing that can bring the imposed deference pattern to exert U.S. authority, the Confucian notion of harmony points to the feasibility of peace that can be achieved in a diverse and pluralistic global community through the "adaptation, reconciliation and

²⁰Shih and Huang, "China's Quest for Grand Strategy: Power, National Interest, or Relational Security?," p. 5, 18.

²¹David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2010), p. 592.

²²Cao Qing, "Confucian Vision of a New World Order? Culturalist Discourse, Foreign Policy and the Press in Contemporary China," *The International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 69, No. 5 (2007), p. 437.

mutual tolerance" of its constituencies.²³ Facing off against the negative identification of China's dispositional traits, this ideal vision of a world order, which casts its formulator as a humanitarian actor in the Confucian virtuous relationship, helps assuage the apprehension and distrust of China's rise.

Such conciliatory role playing has been manifested in Chinese foreign policy behavior since the early 1990s, when the beleaguered CPC leadership was preoccupied with enacting the role of a "responsible power." The fulfillment of this role, Beijing was aware, could not be completed without reassuring the United States, given the centrality of its recognition of China's social rank, that China was a trustworthy stakeholder. At a time when China's international reputation was under siege, building a benign external image was imperative to shore up the CPC's regime legitimacy in the international arena. The self-restrained role playing was also necessary to protect China's national differences, most notably its non-democratic political system. In addition, China's drawn-out bid for the membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) made it clear to Beijing that the fate of Chinese export-driven economy, and hence the stability of its domestic politics, was profoundly tied with its relationship with the United States. Following U.S. role expectation, China's decentralizing reforms of its national economy in adherence to requirements of the WTO membership was reciprocated with America's accommodation for its integration into the global trade regime. As such, embracing the notion of international responsibility was a rational choice in accordance with the "relational reciprocity" principle central to its role playing. China's avid participation in international organizations functioned as Beijing complied with America's dominant position in the international system — in return for the benefits it received from the U.S.-led global institutions.

Nevertheless, China's integration into the world economy did not lead to its democratization as the U.S. expected. Indeed, the catalyzing Tiananmen Incident, along with the Soviet meltdown and the democratization of the East European communist bloc, served as a

China's integration into world economy has not led to its democratization as the U.S. expected.

²³Ibid., p. 438.

poignant reminder that the perennial threats to its political survival could only be resolved through preserving an authoritarian hierarchical order at home.²⁴ In the face of the unrivaled power of the triumphant victor of the Cold War, the best formula for the CPC to buttress the legitimacy of that hierarchy was to opt for Washington's engagement in exchange for China's state-controlled integration into the open international economy, so as to ensure domestic economic growth and justify monopolistic rule. The fusion into the global economy, however, gave no license for any international interference that would undercut the CPC's determined hold onto power in perpetuity. The relative liberalization witnessed in China's economic transition was less a harbinger of its democratization, as highlighted in America's role expectation, than a social contract, whereby public acquiescence to authoritarian regime was compensated by rising popular welfare and a modicum of expanded personal freedom.²⁵

As such, Washington's identity-based role playing in expanding the liberal international order was anathema to Chinese role conception. Despite Beijing's deference to Washington in its deliberate effort of fusing into the global economic order, in regard to China's self-role conception, Beijing had not internalized a genuine role script from America's role expectations that went beyond its *ad hoc* international compliance. Given the two sides' contrasting self-role conceptions and their role expectations vis-à-vis one another, the "glue" holding their reciprocal relationship was inherently low adhesive, which did not bode well for their status relations.

From "Responsibility" to "Positive Distinctiveness": China's Defiance of U.S. Authority

Within a diplomatic theater, China's relational identity and its role playing has cemented its conviction that in their interactions, the United States

²⁴See, for instance, Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2000); David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

²⁵Ashley J. Tellis, "China's Grand Strategy: The Quest for Comprehensive National Power and Its Consequences," in Gary J. Schmitt, ed., *The Rise of China: Essays on the Future Competition* (New York, NY: Encounter Books, 2009), p. 30.

should equally honor the principle of equitable reciprocity. A prominent case of this role conception and expectation is the evolution of China's profession of international responsibility. Beijing's self-retraining role as a "responsible power" played in the mid-1990s largely stemmed from America's pressure in Washington's engagement of Beijing — a strategy aimed at socializing China into the liberal international order and casting it into a new role that befits the U.S.' identity-based value system. In a reciprocal manner, U.S. engagement was also leveraged by pragmatic Chinese leaders as an external stimulant in their endeavor to align domestic institutions with the liberal norms embedded in international open economy.²⁶ A decade later, however, the reciprocity between Washington's engagement and Beijing's symbolic deference behavior started to dissipate.

One of the most popularized sources illuminating America's call for China to take on international responsibility is the well-cited speech of former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, in which he urged China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in global affairs.²⁷ Notwithstanding its strategic implication of securing Beijing's contribution in the combat against the transnational security challenges in the post 9/11 era, Zoellick's sermon was perceived by mainstream Chinese commentators as an offense against what they saw as "proper status" of their nation. The creed of "relational reciprocity" intrinsic to China's role expectation herein lent credence to their interrogation of the moral authority of U.S. demands. Some policy elites in Chinese government-sponsored think tanks even went so far as to say that "China, for its part, does not base its notion to international responsibility on U.S. expectations."²⁸

Across the Pacific, as Washington's overreach in the global "war on terror" came under increasing strain, a domestic public disenchanted with what the foreign policy establishment was preaching began to question

²⁶Deng Yong, "China: The Post-Responsible Power," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2015), p. 122.

²⁷Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility," Remarks to the National Committee on US-China Relations, New York City, September 21, 2005, https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter-spring.pdf.

²⁸Nina Hachigian and Peng Yuan, "The U.S.-China Expectations Gap: An Exchange," *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (2010), p. 82.

America's costly global order-building project. A natural outgrowth of this public disillusionment was the strategic emphasis on burden-sharing in America's foreign policy agenda. Given the speed and magnitude of China's emergence, Washington was also alert to a prospective challenger to its primacy in the Asia Pacific.²⁹ Bearing in mind these tenets, the standards for the U.S.' evaluation of China's social importance and the conditions it set for accepting Beijing's enhanced international stature were subject to its national interests and role expectation of a rising power. In introducing the China paradigm of the first Obama administration, James Steinberg, Zoellick's successor, explicitly declared that "as a prosperous and successful power, China must reassure the rest of the world that its development and growing global role will not come at the expense of security and well-being of others."³⁰ In light of Beijing's augmented global profile, Washington's "productive and constructive relationship" with Beijing proposed by the Obama administration in its second term was contingent — then U.S. National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon made it clear — upon China's assumption of international responsibilities that were "commensurate with its growing global economic impact and its national capabilities."³¹

China has been urged to take on more international responsibilities as the U.S. defines them.

Evidently, China, a dedicated status seeker, and the United States, the incumbent hegemon that was supposed to show its respect for the former's international standing, profoundly disagreed on what should be regarded as "adequate consideration of [China's] social importance and worth."³² It is hardly surprising then that Beijing's

²⁹Yang Jiemian, "China and US Strategies and Measures in Response to the Transition of International System," *International Review*, No. 45 (2006), p. 45.

³⁰James Steinberg, "[Obama] Administration's Vision of the U.S.-China Relationship," USC US-China Institute, <https://china.usc.edu/james-steinberg-obama-administrations-vision-us-china-relationship-september-24-2009>.

³¹Thomas Donilon, "The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013," The White House, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisor-president-united-states-an>.

³²Reinhard Wolf, "Treating Asian Nations with Respect: Promises and Pitfalls of Status Recognition," *Global Discourse*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2014), p. 464.

earnest quest for Washington's gestures that would serve to convey greater respect for China's international contribution encountered the latter's outright criticism or blank rejection. For instance, China's self-perceived positive role in the post-war Iraqi reconstruction was not acknowledged by President Obama, who instead (ungratefully) labeled Beijing as "a free rider" of the sanction on Iraq.³³ With China having replaced the United States as the top trading partner for most countries in East Asia in the 2000s, the Obama administration spared no effort to reassert the U.S. economic leadership in the Asia Pacific. Among various projects, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was the central piece of regional institution-building, in which Washington took on a leadership role while excluding China. In his appeal to U.S. lawmakers to approve the 12-nation Pacific Rim trade deal, Obama made the point starkly: the TPP was important to the United States, because it was America, not China, that should "write the rules" and "lead the way on global trade."³⁴

Judging from China's relational approach to its role conception whereby the nation's authority ranking remains central to the public face it attains in the diplomatic theater, Washington's insufficient status recognition was tantamount to a violation of the idiosyncratic norms prevalent in the status-centric Confucian culture. This sort of "public shaming," described by David Shambaugh as "a tactic Chinese reserve only to scold and deter deviant behavior,"³⁵ was thus experienced as an under-served infringement upon the sense of self-worth ingrained in the Chinese national identity.

To be sure, China's strong sense of self-as-relational has rendered it especially susceptible to view America's contempt or denigration of its national role as highly offensive to its cultural ethos about face, which attaches great importance to China's status and reputation attained from the interacting parties in its foreign relations. Under such circumstances, forceful reactions to blatant humiliation, according to the observation of some IR scholars and behavioral scientists on status acquirement, are the

³³"Obama Labeling China as 'Free Rider' in Iraq Issue," *China Daily*, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-09/04/content_18543889.htm.

³⁴Barack Obama, "The TPP Would Let America, Not China, Lead the Way on Global Trade," *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2016.

³⁵David Shambaugh, "Tangled Titans: Conceptualizing the U.S.-China Relationship," in David Shambaugh, ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), p. 9.

most powerful indicator of regaining social respect.³⁶ In the endeavor to maintain its self-esteem, the mere act of openly resisting the alleged affront of Chinese “face,” which put the very foundation of its dignity into question, forced the transgressor to take the disrespected actor seriously as an equal opponent. Failure to respond to the breach of face, however, would be treated as a signal that China consented to the demotion to a lower status by the domineering power.³⁷ American slight of the international status sought by China thus serves as a catalyst for it to undo the deference pattern in their asymmetric relationship. Insofar as U.S. authority has amounted to Washington’s role expectation about Beijing’s continued acquiescence to its dominant position, China has strong incentive to thwart such expectation. By no means will Beijing allow this dominance/deference pattern to prefigure the trajectory of the bilateral relationship, since it goes against the “relational reciprocity” creed in its role conception. Only by acting defiantly before Washington’s expectation materializes, therefore, can Beijing visibly indicate that it is no longer willing to continue its subordination.

As such, if the invocation of “responsibility” on the heels of the end of the Cold War was a remedy to assure the West, particularly the United States, of China’s “peaceful rise,”³⁸ when status-seeking came to the forefront of Chinese foreign policy ecology, the implications of international responsibility became more fluid, and even contested, in China’s interaction with the incumbent hegemon. This has been vividly illustrated since the 2008 global financial crisis, which was indeed a “status-altering event,”³⁹ signaling the fracture of the deference pattern embedded in China-U.S. relations for about three decades. China’s stunning economic performance at the crunch time of great recession was in stark contrast to America’s

³⁶Thomas Lindermann, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2010); Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Dale T. Miller, “Disrespect and the Experience of Justice,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2001).

³⁷Wolf, “Treating Asian Nations with Respect: Promises and Pitfalls of Status Recognition,” p. 466; “Taking Interaction Seriously: Asymmetrical Roles and the Behavioral Foundations of Status,” p. 1196.

³⁸Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, “The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China: The Ascension and Demise,” *China Quarterly*, No. 190 (2007), pp. 291–310.

³⁹Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 256.

flagging ability to act as the leader of the international economy. The growing esteem accorded to China and the dramatic decline in U.S. authority buoyed up Beijing's belief that the asymmetric deference pattern in its relationship with Washington was not "appropriate" any more. In the U.S. engagement of China, the fundamental policy prescriptions offered by Washington were free markets, free trade, and political democracy. These liberal notions, formed within the U.S.-centric, identity-based framework and sublimated into the so-called "Washington consensus,"⁴⁰ proved decisively hollow in the financial meltdown. Now that these "role scripts" — used by Washington to make China become "more like us" in its engagement — were discredited, China's identity-driven desire of renouncing the submissive role in the status relations with the United States dictated Beijing's departure from the profession of its expected international responsibility, which was incompatible with its determined defiance of U.S. authority.

Along with the slipping U.S. grip on global economic leadership, China's burgeoning prestige during the financial crisis and thereafter conferred confidence in its leadership about the virtue of its distinctive path of domestic political economy — the national difference that it deems deserves to be taken seriously in its interaction with the "democratic core." Even as Beijing viewed itself as part of the great-power group, China was committed to retaining its own "positive distinctiveness" within that group.⁴¹ In its attempt to distinguish itself from the United States and warrant the mutation of hierarchical role differentiation, China's emerging role in global economy offered a valuable opportunity to transform some of its attributes perceived by the West as negative into a new dimension wherein it could stress its preeminent position as compared with that of the United States. This strategy of asserting a desirable international status ushered in the triumphalist claim that the "Beijing consensus," which advocated incremental reforms, export-led growth, and

Beijing strives for equal status with Washington with the plummet of U.S. authority since 2008.

⁴⁰John Williamson, "The Washington Consensus as Policy Prescription for Development," Peterson Institute for International Economics, <https://www.piie.com/publications/papers/williamson0204.pdf>.

⁴¹Clunan, "Why Status Matters in World Politics," p. 281.

circumscribed external openness shepherded by an authoritarian political regime,⁴² was an appealing alternative to the American model.⁴³

Indeed, in the first three decades of its reform and opening up, China principally learned from the West, especially from the United States, which gave rise to the asymmetric roles of “student” and “teacher” in its immersion into global economy. But the financial crisis, a symbolic milestone event in the international economy allowed China to interact with the United States on an equal footing. To this extent, the hierarchical role constellation of “student” and “teacher” became defunct. In refuting the charge of “China threat” that could be handily drawn on the challenges that Beijing posed in the disruption of hierarchical roles, China was increasingly disinclined to ramp up the notion of international responsibility, which it was aware would be seen by an external audience as contradictory with its ambitious status-seeking. By highlighting its “positive distinctiveness,” Beijing reframed its position in the great-power club as one derived from its socialist identity and the unique “market economy with Chinese characteristics,” rather than the self-restrained role playing of a “responsible power.” It was based on the passionate defense of these national differences that Beijing’s role playing shifted to destabilizing the reciprocal relationship with Washington, the bedrock of its deference to America’s authority. In its endeavor of “de-Americanization” to enact its positive distinctive position in the power club, China started to demand that its former “teacher” grant it more international influence and more respect for its enhanced status.

Unsurprisingly, China’s status aspiration was not greeted with sufficient respectful treatment from the United States. The 2008 global financial crisis did accelerate the ebbing of U.S. primacy, the evidence of which has become too numerous to ignore over the ensuing decade. China’s flexing of its economic muscle, along with its sprouting military prowess in East Asia and its perceived challenges to the U.S.-led international order, has brought

⁴²Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London, UK: Foreign Policy Center, 2004).

⁴³See, for example, Shaun Breslin, “The ‘China Model’ and the Global Crisis: From Friedrich List to a Chinese Model of Governance,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (2011), pp. 1323–43; Joseph Fewsmith, “Debating ‘the China Model,’” Hoover Institution, <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM35JF.pdf>; and Pan Wei, “Western System Versus Chinese System,” China Policy Institute, The University of Nottingham, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/iaps/documents/cpi/briefings/briefing-61-chinese-western-system.pdf>.

about major shifts in the China-U.S. geopolitical balance, putting U.S. standing in the status hierarchy at risk. Status diminution, as prospect theory suggests, could be resented more severely than status advancement. Thus, the United States, as the dominant actor experiencing “status anxiety,” is especially prone to block any effort from the next-in-line power in claiming equal treatment and so as to prevent itself from being demoted to a lower rank.⁴⁴ To the degree that America’s hegemonic position was whittled away in various dimensions of Pax Americana,⁴⁵ Washington’s “status anxiety,” which grappled furiously with the U.S. identity-based role conception, was particularly pronounced in the delivery of the social respect requested by the upcoming power.

This accounts for America’s intransigence in delegitimizing China’s economic model. The exaltation of “Beijing consensus,” Washington chided, was spurious because China’s immunity to the financial crisis was at best a blessing from its state-orchestrated global integration.⁴⁶ As many observe, China’s “state-capitalist economy,” which christened the government as the nodal institution for the management of national economy, permitted China to neutralize the threats incurred by the great recession with its investment-propelled growth that was enabled by the gigantic fiscal stimulus and its huge foreign exchange reserve.⁴⁷ Harboring

⁴⁴Tudor A. Onea, “Between Dominance and Decline: Status Anxiety and Great Power Rivalry,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2014), p. 135. See also Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, pp. 365–368.

⁴⁵Christopher Layne, “The US-Chinese Power Shift and the End of the Pax Americana,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 94–101.

⁴⁶Pieter Bottelier, “China and the International Financial Crisis,” in Ashley J. Tellis, Andrew Marble and Travis Tanner, eds., *Strategic Asia 2009–10: Economic Meltdown and Geopolitical Stability* (Seattle and Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2009), pp. 71–104.

⁴⁷For example, see Ashley J. Tellis, “Pursuing Global Reach: China’s Not So Long March toward Preeminence,” in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski and Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2019: China’s Expanding Strategic Ambitions* (Seattle and Washington, D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), p. 25. Also see Evan A. Feigenbaum, “A Chinese Puzzle: Why Economic ‘Reform’ in Xi’s China Has More Meanings Than Market Liberalization,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/26/chinese-puzzle-why-economic-reform-in-xi-s-china-has-more-meanings-than-market-liberalization-pub-75668>.

increasing skepticism about the motives of Beijing's social upward mobility in the international society, Washington registered growing angst over China's economic policy approaches, since it was no longer under the illusion that China could be transformed into the American free-market capitalism.⁴⁸ China's self-proclaimed status as a developing country ironically unmatched with the reality that it had emerged as an economic powerhouse. The striking disconnect, to the chagrin of many U.S. foreign policy elites, implies China's lack of reciprocity with the U.S. engagement.⁴⁹ For Beijing allegedly toyed with the "developing country" moniker as its shield and buckler for the persistent barriers against foreign products and investments in key sectors of national economy, which helped it tilt the playing field of global economic exchange to advantage domestic firms.

China's insistence on its developing country status runs against its endeavor to become a recognized great power.

Hence, China's state-dominated economic model, from the perspective of the incumbent hegemon, was tantamount to a heresy to the U.S.-advocated liberal approach that quarantines economic activities from political interference. The fault line between these two distinctive economic identities, encapsulated in the U.S. disparagement of China's economic performance, galvanized the dissonance in their role concep-

tions and respective role playing. The glaring discrepancy, in turn, shattered the reciprocal bond holding China's deference and U.S. authority. Since their asymmetric roles rested on a "mismatched bargain" reached in the post-Cold War era,⁵⁰ the asymmetric deference pattern underlying the bilateral relationship was bound to be fluent and ambiguous.

⁴⁸Suisheng Zhao, "Engagement on the Defensive: From the Mismatched Grand Bargain to the Emerging US-China Rivalry," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 118 (2019), p. 506.

⁴⁹Penny Pritzker, "Commentary: The Great Disconnect between China the 'Developing Country' and China the Great Power," CNA, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/trade-war-donald-trump-resentment-behind-tariffs-10620880>.

⁵⁰Zhao, "Engagement on the Defensive: From the Mismatched Grand Bargain to the Emerging US-China Rivalry," pp. 502–506.

The resultant status dilemma, as evidenced in the conflicting claims about the validity of China's economic model, has generated mounting strategic distrust, which has seriously wrecked the prospect for cooperation that was based on the reciprocal "grand bargain." America's open resistance of China's efforts to match or surpass its status was construed by Beijing as the illegitimate denial of respect for its status advancement. The perceived disrespectful behavior that the status aspirant viewed as humiliating encounters was thus interpreted as a conspicuous signal that China could only remain the "second class actor" in its interaction with the extant hegemon. As both parties feel entitled to deference from each other, the China-U.S. status dilemma is actually a dyadic contest over self-perceived proper status roles. Such contest, according to some social psychologists, tend to kindle emotional and violent conflicts.⁵¹ In the case of China, given the socio-historical norms that have made tremendous inroads into its national identity, its reaction to the status infringement from the U.S. is prone to trigger the national psyche and hence is particularly intense.

Defending "Core National Interests" in the Status Dilemma

The key bone of contention here is that the competition for dominance in the power-club is a zero-sum game.⁵² In light of America's identity-based role conception, it is certainly infeasible for the United States to oblige China's demand for "co-equal treatment." The U.S. abnegation of surrendering its supremacy, viewed through the identity lens of an emerging power engaged in its "national rejuvenation," is an utterly domineering act transgressing the status prerogative that has been embedded in its national

⁵¹For example, see Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai, *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships* (Cambridge, UI: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012); and Lonnie Athens, "Violent Encounters: Violent Engagements, Skirmishes, and Tiffs," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (2005), pp. 631–678.

⁵²Khong Yuen Foong, "Power as Prestige in World Politics," *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2019), p. 139.

identity. Guided by these honor codes, Beijing tends to equate U.S. efforts to preempt China's defiance of its top-seat status as part of Washington's self-serving scheme of thwarting China's ascension to global prominence. In this respect, China's esteem is derided by America's disrespectful behavior, as was in the case of the TPP where China was deliberately ostracized from the U.S.-led "exclusive economic zones."⁵³ The infringement by the status detractor thus constitutes the source of insubordination on the part of status defender. In its attempt to break free, the victim of status infringement needs to send out clear messages to the arrogant status detractor about its defiance acts through discursive construction. It is in this sense that China's principled stand attesting to its commitment to status aspiration becomes manifest and stabilized in Beijing's public discourse. In the meantime, the U.S. belittling of these status-driven narratives reinforces the cognitive consistency in China's diplomatic thinking whereby America's overbearing violation of the social norms that are deeply rooted in the Chinese national identity is equated as part of its malign attempt to perpetuate the asymmetric feature of China-U.S. relations. Under these situations, the identity role of the CPC — as the sole guardian of Chinese sovereignty — mandates Beijing's resolute defense of China's national interests.

China has adopted an unyielding stance in resisting U.S. interference in its core interests.

In disposing of the undignified position of a subordinate player, Beijing is sparing no efforts to reaffirm its hardline position with regard to warding off U.S. intervention in China's domestic practices and its conduct of foreign affairs. China's "core national interests," including the regime security of the party-state, Chinese sovereignty and territoriality, and its sus-

tained economic growth,⁵⁴ are consequently brought to the central front of the status contest. These thematic issues, which are the major targets of

⁵³David A. Lake, "Economic Openness and Great Power Competition: Lessons for China and the United States," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 7 (2018), pp. 242–248.

⁵⁴Dai Bingguo, "Stick to the Path of Peaceful Development," *Beijing Review*, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/document/txt/2010-12/24/content_320851.htm.

U.S. intervention, are precisely the national differences that Beijing requests Washington to respect. A powerful narrative substantiating Beijing's tough stance in coping with hegemonic intervention is what Xi Jinping proposed as "bottom-line thinking" (*dixian siwei*).⁵⁵ Since the 18th CPC National Congress, as elaborated by Yang Jiechi, Xi's chief diplomat, "[w]e have drawn a clear line of what is unacceptable, and acted forcefully to defend our core interests as well as legitimate rights."⁵⁶ Implemented in the China-U.S. status disputes, this diplomatic thinking actually empowers China to directly undercut the displeasing pattern of deference. When applied to China's issues that are concerned with China's "core national interests," the red lines drawn by Beijing clearly indicate under what circumstances it will staunchly defend these interests — as the legitimate rights that will never be waived by a status aspirant. Beyond these self-defined boundaries, under no circumstances will China condone U.S. interference, although Beijing used to acquiesce to Washington's dominant position in these issue areas to reciprocate U.S. engagement. This may well explain why China's foreign policy behavior under Xi has appeared more "assertive" than before. In the context of China-U.S. relations, Beijing's "assertiveness," largely driven by external hostile stimuli involving its "core national interests," is a discernible gesture of the subaltern actor who has effectively withdrawn its deference to the superior actor.

In terms of sovereignty and territorial integrity, a knotty issue that has fallen within Beijing's defiance of U.S. long-term interference is the maritime disputes in the South China Sea. In order to play a larger role in the security landscape of the Asia Pacific, the United States re-energized its military deployment and upgraded its alliance system in the region. The "freedom of navigation (FON) operation" by the U.S. navy in the South

⁵⁵Wang Jianwei, "Xi Jinping's 'Major Country Diplomacy': A Paradigm Shift?," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 115 (2018), p. 25.

⁵⁶Yang Jiechi, "Study and Implement General Secretary Xi Jinping's Thought on Diplomacy in a Deep-Going Way and Keep Writing New Chapters of Major-Country Diplomacy with Distinctive Chinese Features," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjyh_665391/t1478497.shtml.

China Sea signified Washington's position as an external arbiter of the maritime disputes, driving a wedge between China and Southeast Asian claimant states. To China, this displayed the U.S.' attempt to reestablish a U.S.-led regional system in order to manage China's behavior through its "diplomatic maneuvering at China's periphery."⁵⁷ Defining the South China Sea as China's major national interest thus provides a game changer for Beijing to counter U.S. authority that was imposed through its readjustment of strategic focus. Under the rubric of Xi's "bottom-line thinking," China had little room to compromise vis-à-vis the U.S.' undue interference in the South China Sea where Beijing enforced its claims. In adherence to the "red-line" principle, China responded to the U.S. effort to squeeze its strategic space in the region with its own preemptive strategies. Its large-scale land reclamation in the contested waters to consolidate its effective control of the South China Sea sufficed to mount an open defiance to America's deterrence capacity.

To ensure the credibility of the defiance strategy, Xi has gone so far as to relate China's "core national interests" to the conditions of its peaceful rise (or development),⁵⁸ a narrative intended to reassure the external audience about China's benign intentions. According to his "bottom-line" principle, China cannot attain the social recognition of its standing, centrality, and power from Western powers, particularly the United States, without their due respect for its "core national interests." In the case of U.S. infringement of these core interests, the international image evinced in China's "peaceful rise" is secondary to the identity need of avowedly breaking the asymmetric pattern of deference. Thus, in his New Year speech in 2017, Xi affirmed: "We have adhered to the peaceful development while resolutely safeguarding the territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests of China. We will never

⁵⁷Hu Weixing, "China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific: Toward a New Model or New Normal or Major Power Relations?," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2017), p. 70, 75.

⁵⁸Yang Jiemian, "China's 'New Diplomacy' under Xi Jinping Administration," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2015), p. 15; also see Wang, "Xi Jinping's 'Major Country Diplomacy': A Paradigm Shift?," pp. 25–26.

tolerate any act that undermines our territorial sovereignty and maritime rights.”⁵⁹

Framed in China-U.S. relations, the principle respecting each other’s “core interests and major concerns” is highlighted as one of three pillars of the “new type of major-country relations,” a concept Xi unveiled in 2013 to “jump-start” the troubled China-U.S. relations.⁶⁰ Not unexpectedly, due to the status mis-recognition, the United States was apathetic to this trendy notion. The U.S.’ abiding skepticism about China’s intention in its status-seeking brought forth its belief that Beijing conjured up this concept in order to secure Washington’s *de facto* unilateral concessions in contentious issues, such as the South China Sea. The new model, as some American policy analysts critiqued, “appears to require Washington to accommodate China’s interests and to do so largely on Beijing’s terms — apparently without reciprocal adjustments.”⁶¹ Heightening the respect for “core interests,” in the eye of the dominant actor, imbued China’s defiance of U.S. interference in the South China Sea with a talismanic quality. Once Beijing received Washington’s assurance, either explicit or tacit, according to China scholar Andrew Nathan, China could use “this code for the U.S. pre-emptively yielding to what China views as its legitimate security interests.”⁶²

The China-U.S.
status contest may
cause violent
conflicts.

⁵⁹“Chinese President Xi Jinping Delivers 2017 New Year Message,” GBTIMES: Bringing China Closer, <https://gbtimes.com/chinese-president-xi-jinping-delivers-2017-new-year-message>.

⁶⁰Caitlin Campbell and Craig Murray, “China Seeks a ‘New Type of Major-Country Relationship’ with the United States,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20Seeks%20New%20Type%20of%20Major-Country%20Relationship%20with%20United%20States_Staff%20Research%20Background.pdf.

⁶¹Michael Chase, “New Type of Great Power Relationship,” *China Brief*, Vol. 12, No. 17 (2012), pp. 12–16; Stephen Hadley and Paul Haenle, “The Catch-22 in U.S.-China Relations,” *Foreign Affairs* (February 22, 2015).

⁶²Andrew J. Nathan, “Conversation on ‘What Should Obama and Xi Accomplish at Their California Summit,’” *ChinaFile*, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/what-should-obama-and-xi-accomplish-their-california-summit>.

On the part of China, Beijing's initiative of listing respect for core interest as a principal guideline for China-U.S. relations is actually a manifestation of its adherence to "relational reciprocity" that it consistently follows in its role playing. In China-U.S. relations, as pinpointed by Peter Gries, "[unilateral] American policies are often insufficiently attentive to Chinese opinion. Chinese elites, for their part, often...[demand] that America petition China for approval before setting its Asia policies."⁶³ A prime example of America's antipathy to Beijing's request is Washington's support of the Philippines and other claimants in filing the maritime disputes with China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), a case in point of Washington's high-handed meddling in the South China Sea.⁶⁴ Despite Beijing's warning to the Philippines and Vietnam not to "play with fire," Manila and Hanoi turned out to be more hostile on these issues. During the China-U.S. status contest, the provocative moves of the third parties against China, which China naturally connected to U.S. backup, was a significant status set-back for Beijing. The U.S. encroachment of China's national interests brought it the deference from other claimant states of the South China Sea, which further buttressed Washington's desire to preserve its primacy in the region. Such obstruction of China's status aspiration apparently crossed Beijing's red-line and could only be countered by its forthright defiance.

Accompanying the Chinese government's resolute dismissal of the PCA's ruling, which nullified China's claims to the territories, Chinese media lambasted U.S. interference by linking such behavior with the U.S.' military presence in the South China Sea.⁶⁵ Beijing went out of its way to expose America's hypocritical attitude toward international rules, in an attempt to challenge the moral authority of the United States as an extra-regional power — while Washington frequently justifies its FON

⁶³Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 29.

⁶⁴Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2012), p. 105; Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012), p. 14, 18.

⁶⁵Hu, "China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific: Toward a New Model or New Normal or Major Power Relations?," p. 80.

operations with the rules of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the U.S. Congress has not yet ratified the law. In this respect, China's rejection to participate in the international tribunal over the South China Sea issues, as some China scholars and analysts point out, simply followed the U.S. example of non-submission to those international rules that it hoped to bind others.⁶⁶ Facing off against the U.S.' stepped-up criticism about China's land reclamation in disputed waters, Beijing castigated Washington for being "selectively mute" about the construction activities carried out by other claimants.⁶⁷

From the view of the status defender, the use of double standards allows Washington to apply the rules and norms embedded in the U.S.-led international institutions in a discriminatory manner to China who actually deserves equivalent treatment. The status infringement herein makes China more steadfast in ceasing its tolerance of the inferior role assigned by the dominant actor, despite the social cost forfeiting the international approbation of its status credentials. On the part of the United States, which is plagued with acute "status anxiety," its role playing of consistently maintaining its identity as a global hegemon gives rise to America's penchant for assessing its relationship with China in terms of the challenges Beijing poses to the international order it leads. In this light, the most consequential result of China's open defiance of U.S. authority is that Beijing may elbow Washington out of Asia in an effort to establish its own deference pattern. It is in this context where both sides foresee the interacting party's motive to enforce an asymmetric relationship that the status dilemma in China-U.S. relations tends to provoke the most severe form of status conflicts. To arrest the downward spiraling trend of this dilemma and dissuade the overt aggression of a frustrated "under-achiever," some mechanisms of status adjustment and accommodation for both sides are sorely needed.

⁶⁶Zhao Suisheng, "A Revisionist Stakeholder-China and the Post-World War II World Order," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 113 (2018), pp. 648–649.

⁶⁷Chen Te-Ping and Laurie Burkitt, "Beijing Accuses U.S. of Stoking South China Sea Tensions," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2015.