

# **Authority, Status, and the End of the American Century**

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Draft 1.0, Oct. 3, 2010  
Please do not cite or quote without permission.  
Word Count: 9779

Prepared for the Conference on *Beyond American Hegemony: Rising Powers, Status and the World Order*, Dickey Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, October 22-23, 2010.

## Authority, Status, and the End of the American Century

David A. Lake

Status and authority are both social constructs that depend on intersubjective understandings by actors on both sides of any hierarchy. Status is a claim by major powers and a recognition by “ordinary” states of the special roles and influence of a limited number of key states with the ability to project coercive force over greater than normal distances. Authority is a claim by dominant states and a recognition by subordinate states that the former have the legitimate *right* to issue certain limited commands. In short, status is a recognition of coercive ability that confers unusual influence in world politics, whereas authority is *legitimate* power. States can hold high status and authority at the same time, although the two concepts are often confused in both theory and practice. In the nineteenth century, select European states were recognized as major powers in their relations with each other, while simultaneously exercising authority over formal and informal empires in the developing world. In the twentieth century, the United States and Soviet Union were accepted as superpowers, especially in relations with one another, and in turn wielded authority over states within their respective spheres-of-influence. Today, the United States is recognized as the sole superpower but continues to exercise authority over Europe and Latin America. Since the end of the Cold War, via the New World Order, the United States has also attempted to extend new authority over states in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, with as yet mixed success. The key question for the future of international politics is whether the United

States can accommodate China's rise as both a superpower and dominant, authoritative state in East Asia and possibly beyond.

Status is a club good that, to some limit, can be held equally by some number of states. Although a club to which everyone belongs confers no special recognition, membership below some threshold is not necessarily zero-sum in nature. Major power status has varied over time from five or more states to two, to now one. History suggests that the United States and others can accord China superpower status without fundamental disruptions to international order. Authority, on the other hand, is typically exclusive, held by one state or a supranational body but rarely by two actors at the same time. Two drivers cannot steer as effectively as one, and the right to issue commands is commonly accorded to only one actor in any given issue area. It was the exclusive nature of the nineteenth century empires that drove competition between the great powers in Europe, not the desire for status. Similarly, it was the struggle over exclusive spheres of influence in Europe that ignited the Cold War and broke the continent into Western and Eastern halves, not the question of whether the Soviet Union would be accorded a status equal to that of the United States. The likely problems of "transition" with China will hinge not on status but rights to command subordinate states in different geographic regions and over different issues. As David Kang (2003; 2003/04; 2007) has argued, China has long maintained aspirations to authority through an East Asian hierarchy. Fortunately, from the viewpoint of future relations, the United States has not claimed any exclusive spheres in Asia, with the exceptions of Japan and South Korea. This suggests the possibility of a peaceful accommodation between the two high status states in the

years ahead. Nonetheless, tensions over who wields authority over who and what will likely determine the course of great power politics in the twentieth-first century.

This essay will, first, distinguish between status and authority as forms of hierarchy in international relations and develop more fully than the existing literature their club and exclusive features, respectively. This distinction will then be applied briefly to explain the nature and tensions within modern world orders, as previewed above. The third part of the essay will probe current patterns of United States-Chinese relations for signs of status and authority competition with an eye toward the future relations between these two great and authoritative powers.

### **I. Authority and Status**

Status and authority hierarchies are inherently social concepts.<sup>1</sup> As social concepts, they are first and foremost *relational*. That is, the relevant attributes of states are defined only by comparison to other states. Just as master implies slave, and one cannot exist without the other, great powers imply non-great powers. This is similar to neorealism's focus on systemic attributes or how the units stand in relationship to one another (e.g., the *distribution* of capabilities rather than capabilities per se).<sup>2</sup> They are also *intersubjective* in which the relevant (relational) attributes of states derive from a shared understanding of those attributes. In other words, attributes are neither possessed

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the relational and intersubjective dimensions emphasized here, Reus-Smith (2004, 43) also requires that a social theory be *primarily ideational* or interpretive. That is, in his view, for a theory to be fully social power must be constituted not just by material conditions but "more fundamentally by social institutions, broadly construed as complexes of norms, rules, principles, and decision-making procedures." To put this another way, all attributes, both physical and relational, are mediated and, indeed, constituted by shared ideas and cultural frames. On social forms of power in international relations, see Barnett and Duvall (2005). Although both status and authority can be understood as primarily ideational in nature, I do not impose this requirement for the purpose of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, neorealism is relational, but it is neither intersubjective nor primarily ideational. See Waltz (1979).

by an actor nor rest on self-proclaimed assertions of dominance, rights, or other traits, but gain meaning and effect only from their mutual recognition.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, neorealism is a purely subjective theory in which material capabilities carry their own meaning.

Although norms may vary on the appropriate use of coercion, violence still hurts regardless of whether the user and the target agree on the meaning of that violence.

Prestige or status has long been considered to be a key goal of states and a critical attribute of the international system (see Galtung 1964; Morgenthau 1978, Chapter 6; Gilpin 1981, 28). Interest in status hierarchy as an analytic concept waned with the end of the Cold War but has returned in recent years with new vigor in an attempt to explain and predict the responses of near-great and other great powers to American hegemony. It is this interest in status that motivates this conference (and possible volume).

Although dependent on material capabilities, status is ultimately conferred on a state by others who recognize its position in the system. Although it may be necessary for states to assert a claim to status (Sylvan et al. 1998), status itself is attributed to a state by the community of states as a whole or by the club of already high status members the state seeks to join (Volgy et al. 2010, 8). It is this relational and intersubjective element of status that renders the concept different from international structure as defined in neorealism.

Status shapes the behavior of states with great powers expected to act differently from others and, especially, to be involved in more alliances, more conflicts, and more

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<sup>3</sup> But note, mutual *acceptance* or *approval* is not necessary. A state can recognize another as a great power without approving or condoning that status.

conflicts further from their home territories.<sup>4</sup> As suggested by power transition theory, status inconsistency—including both overachievers who have greater status than their capabilities suggest and underachievers who have more capabilities than status—may also affect the policies of states (Wallance 1971; East 1972; Volgy and Mayhall 1995; Wohlforth 2009). More recently, social identity theory suggests that the striving for status may lead states to select strategies for social mobility, in which states imitate the norms and practices of high-status groups to gain acceptance, social competition, in which states acquire attributes of high-status states (e.g., large navies) or seek to defeat or humiliate the dominant power, and social creativity, in which states redefine the meaning of status in ways that enhance their standing. The choice of strategy, in turn, is partly a function of the permeability of the club to which a state aspires and the legitimacy of the existing status hierarchy (Larson and Shevchenko 2009).

Status approximates a “club good” that is excludable and at least partially rival in consumption.<sup>5</sup> That is, status has little value if it is automatically available to all, but the high status accorded to one member of a club does not necessarily diminish the prestige of other members. Although the difference between worlds of one, two, and several high status states may be consequential, the difference between three, four, or even seven is usually not expected to be significant in international relations (Waltz 1979).<sup>6</sup> Status is, to

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<sup>4</sup> For the unique behaviors of great powers, see among others Levy (1983), Gochman and Maoz (1984), Siverson and Starr (1991), Siverson and Emmons (1991), Bremer (1992), Huth (1998), Lemke and Reed (2001).

<sup>5</sup> On club goods, see Sandler (1992, 64).

<sup>6</sup> Note that the number of high status states may vary depending on the size of the population. Being the fifth member of a club in a population of ten is very different from being the fifth member of a club in a population of one million. As the international system has expanded from approximately 35 states in the nineteenth century to nearly 200 today, the number of states that might be accorded high status may have increased as well, although this point has not been examined explicitly to my knowledge in the literature.

some extent, expansive or elastic. This has significant implications for status competitions, rendering it a multisum good which several can “win” simultaneously.

In an authority hierarchy one state exercises *legitimate* power over many or fewer aspects of another’s foreign security and economic policies.<sup>7</sup> Like status hierarchies, authority hierarchies are both relational and intersubjective but go further in emphasizing legitimacy, which implies that subordinates not only recognize the different status and roles of states but accept those differences as rightful. To put this another way, where status hierarchies examine the intersubjective nature of the distribution of capabilities, Waltz’s (1979) third dimension of international structure, authority hierarchies focus on socially-created variations in the ordering principle, his first dimension. Although many analysts reference legitimacy as an important component of great power relations (for example, Walt 2005), only authority hierarchies place legitimacy at the core of analysis and begin to theorize its effects.

Authority is, simply put, rightful rule.<sup>8</sup> As a bundle of rights and obligations, authority entails a) the right by a ruler, in this case a dominant state, to issue certain limited commands, b) the duty by the ruled, here a collective of individuals organized into a subordinate state, to comply with these rules to the extent they are able, and c) the right of the ruler or dominant state to enforce its commands in the event of non-compliance. Although authority can rest on many sources, including charisma, tradition, religion, and formal-legal institutions, in international relations authority hierarchies mostly rest on social contracts in which dominant states provide political orders to

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<sup>7</sup> On authority hierarchies, see Lake (2009). See also Cooley (2005), Cooley and Spruyt (2009), Donnelly (2006), Hancock (2009), Hobson and Sharmon (2005), and Weber (2000).

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of authority and its behavioral manifestations in international relations described in this paragraph, see Lake (2009).

subordinate states of sufficient value to offset their loss of autonomy.<sup>9</sup> Both dominant and subordinate states are better off than they would be in their next best alternative, reasonably assumed in international relations to be a Hobbesian state-of-nature. The gains from entering an international civil society are unlikely to be distributed evenly or even fairly between dominant and subordinate states – after all, the ability to write the rules of international order is an awesome power that few states would fail to exploit for their own benefit. The “glue” that holds authority relationships together is not equity but rather the gains relative to each state’s next best alternative.

These political orders, in turn, condition the behavior of dominant and subordinate states alike. Dominant states must produce the promised order, even when it is costly to do so. One manifestation of this responsibility is that dominant states are significantly more likely to join crises in which a subordinate state is involved. Dominant states must also credibly commit not to abuse their authority over subordinates, a task made more difficult in unipolarity and, thus, possibly driving the United States today to tie its hands more firmly through multilateralism than past dominant states.<sup>10</sup> Enjoying the fruits of the political order, subordinate states spend less on defense and engage in higher levels of international trade, especially with others tied to the same dominant state, than non-subordinate states. Legitimizing the policies of their protector, subordinates are also more likely to follow dominant states in wars and, especially, to join coalitions of the willing, even though they often contribute little beyond their verbal support and could

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<sup>9</sup> For a critique of this materialist (as opposed to ideational) conception of order and the social contract in international relations, see Finnemore (2003, Chapter 4) and Pouliot (2010).

<sup>10</sup> As one indicator of this turn to multilateralism, every international use of force by the United States after its invasion of Panama in 1989 and before the Iraq War in 2003 was approved by some multilateral body. The Iraq War is, of course, the great exception, and elicited a predictable reaction in which the United States was condemned as an “imperialist” state and most other major powers, including its erstwhile subordinate Germany, refused to participate in the war and reconstruction.

easily free ride on the efforts of others. Finally, dominant states discipline subordinates who violate their commands both by intervening to replace local leaders -- their agents -- and ostracizing them from normal political intercourse through sanctions or other barriers to exchange (e.g., North Korea or Iran today). This syndrome of behaviors by both dominant and subordinate states is not predicted by nor easily explained by other approaches.

Unlike status, authority is excludable and rival and, thus, a zero-sum attribute. In any given issue area, there is an authority – a ruler – who has the right to issue commands. Thus, a subordinate country may retain rights to set policy over a host of “domestic” issues while ceding rights over foreign policy to another state. By its very nature, authority is ultimately vested in a single “site,” although it can be disaggregated by issue area. In principle, a country might be subordinate to two different dominant states in two or more different issue areas. Such “mixed” systems may exist in the remaining European colonies in the Caribbean, which are subject to laws formulated in their respective metropolises but are also under restraints on their foreign relations imposed by the United States. In practice, however, states are typically subordinate to only one dominant state, especially in the area of foreign policy.

This more exclusive quality renders competition between states for authority more fraught. Although relations between dominant and subordinate states may be mutually beneficial relative to the next most likely alternative, competition between states for dominance over others is usually zero-sum. If a state is subordinate to one dominant power, it is rarely subordinate to a second as well. States compete for exclusive zones of authority in which one dominant state’s gain comes at the expense of its rivals for

control. As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century “scramble” for Africa, the desire for authority may create preemptive demands for expansion, especially as the number of possible competitors increases, and possibly conflict as states wrestle over this limited quality.

## **II. Status and Authority in Historical Perspective**

The pursuit of status and authority have interacted in non-obvious ways in different historical periods. Often blurred in analyses, these two concepts clarify the meaning and effects of status in international relations. Most important, in each case it appears that most tensions between Great Powers were driven not by concerns over status but by the pursuit of exclusive zones of authority.

### **Multipolarity in the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

From the end of the Napoleonic wars to World War II, status was accorded to, variously, five great powers: Great Britain, France, Russia, Prussia (later Germany), and the Austria-Hungarian Empire. Italy, sometimes Spain, and sometimes Turkey – the sick man of Europe – occupied lower rungs in the status hierarchy. The Concert of Europe gave special status and privileges to, at first, Britain and the Holy Alliance, and then later to France as well (Ikenberry 2001, chap. 4). Even after the demise of the formal concert system, these five great powers shared special responsibilities for managing the European political order. German unification (Calleo 1978) and, alternatively, Russia’s nascent economic development (Copeland 2000) ultimately drove Europe into the Triple Alliance and Triple Entente, again dominated by these five great powers plus Italy. The League of Nations, in turn, envisioned five permanent members of the Council—Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the United States, the latter of which, of course, opted not to join

the nascent collective security organization. Germany, defeated by the allies, and Russia, in the throes of revolution, were excluded from the ranks of the great powers. Although the denial of its great power status likely contributed to German revanchism in the Interwar period,<sup>11</sup> by and large status concerns appear to have played a relatively minor role in the conflicts that occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even in the World Wars that brought about the eventual denouement of multipolarity.

Throughout this period, however, it was the pursuit of authority that clashed with the international order the great powers sought to create and preserve. The pursuit of authority unfolded at two levels. Within Europe, states and especially the great powers themselves sought to consolidate and extend their sovereignty over even greater territories. In France's thwarted empire under Napoleon, Russia's steady eastward expansion (consolidating a continental empire that it had long claimed but only loosely ruled), Germany's unification under Bismarck, Italy's unification in *il Risorgimento*, Russia and Austria's imperial competition in the Balkans over the decaying hulk of the Ottoman empire, and ultimately Germany's empire under the Third Reich, the already great powers sought authoritative control over territories contiguous to their political heartlands in massive imperialist projects. These successful and unsuccessful attempts to extend the authority of the metropolitan state over adjacent territories were, of course, major challenges to the European status quo.

Outside of Europe, many states but especially the great powers also sought to build exclusive spheres of influence and, when necessary because of local opportunism or the ambitions of others in the same region, formal empires (Doyle 1986). The liberation

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<sup>11</sup> Hitler's opposition to the European order, such as it was, is over-determined. Moreover, to the extent that the other Great Powers denied Germany status after World War I, it was not because status was inherently limited or fixed in quantity but because they chose not to recognize it as equal partner.

of Latin America from Spain and Portugal in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century created an opportunity for Britain to create a sphere of influence in the region, and then to jealously guard its authority over its subordinate states against “outsiders” until eventually ceding the hemisphere to the United States in the 1890s (Gallagher and Robinson 1953). Britain also expanded into the Middle East and Central Asia to safeguard India and its routes to this jewel in the imperial crown, famously clashing with France at Fashoda, where the latter’s capitulation at the headwaters of the Nile eventually led to the Entente, and with Russia in the “great game” in present-day Afghanistan. Most important, Germany’s entry into the imperial game after unification ignited the so-called scramble for Africa through which the continent was divided up almost overnight, divisions codified at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 (Cain and Hopkins 1993). Although each of these possible clashes between states seeking exclusive zones of authority was resolved more or less peacefully, more states seeking control over a fixed set of territories is perceived by many – most famously Hobson (1965) – as the principle cause of World War I.<sup>12</sup>

Both inside and outside of Europe it was not the pursuit of status per se but the desire for authority that ultimately led to the world wars and the collapse of multipolarity. Most proximately, the issue was not whether Germany would earn the status of a great power, already accorded Prussia in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and never seriously doubted except in the draconian restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, but who would ultimately exercise authority where both inside and outside of Europe.

### **Bipolarity in the Short 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

After 1945, status was accorded to two superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union, and a handful of other great powers, codified in the permanent membership of the

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<sup>12</sup> See also the lateral pressure theory of Choucri and North (1975).

United Nations Security Council. During the war, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt originally envisioned a “four policemen” model of great power control through which the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and China would together produce and oversee international order. This vision soon gave way to a recognition of extraordinary status for the United States and the Soviet Union and lesser but still not inconsequential status for the other wartime allies. This status hierarchy largely remained unchanged throughout the Cold War, although the Nationalist Chinese regime on Taiwan was eventually displaced by the Communist regime on the mainland. The special status of the United States and Soviet Union, and the privileges this accorded, was generally recognized as a fact of world politics by all states, even as it’s political overlay on the rest of the world was disavowed in principle by the (largely ineffective) non-aligned movement.

As with multipolarity, it was the pursuit of authority by the superpowers that rendered the Cold War so tense. As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century empires, it was the movement to form exclusive zones of authority in Germany and then Europe more generally that led to the breakdown in relations between the United States and Soviet Union. Establishing who “moved first” and is primarily responsible for the Cold War remains contested (Jervis 2010). But Stalin’s demand at Yalta for an exclusive sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, Washington’s consolidation of “bizonia” in Germany, the introduction of the Marshal Plan in the Western areas, and the introduction of the Deutschmark, and then Stalin’s imposition of communist regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and other countries under its control all fed fears on both sides that each was trying to impose its authority

over areas it liberated during the war.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1947 and certainly by 1949, each superpower's attempt to consolidate its authority over an exclusive zone of jurisdiction had led to acute suspicion and the breakdown of cooperation between the two highest-status states.

Similarly, the United States and Soviet Union clashed repeatedly over the pursuit of authority over states outside of Europe. Two anti-colonial powers, due to their own histories and ideologies, both the United States and the Soviet Union eschewed formal empires. They also championed decolonization as a way of undercutting and weakening their other great power rivals (Hager and Lake 2000). Nonetheless, both -- and especially the United States -- still sought spheres of influence in the developing world and, just as important, sought to undermine the spheres of the other (Triska 1986). Many of the great crises of the Cold War revolved around precisely where the boundaries of these exclusive spheres were drawn and what rights might be exercised within them. For instance, the United States had long maintained an informal empire in the Caribbean and Central America. After American hostility to the largely autonomous revolution in Cuba drove Fidel Castro to seek the support of the Soviet Union, Moscow used this opportunity to seek to break Washington's hegemony in the region and to offset the U.S. nuclear advantage by placing medium and intermediate range missiles on the island. What Moscow saw in larger terms as the "Caribbean crisis," Washington saw more narrowly as the Cuban missile crisis. But regardless, it was one of the most dangerous confrontations of the Cold War. Similarly, the Soviet Union attempted to take advantage of autonomous revolts against U.S. supported dictators in Central America, especially Nicaragua after the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, to further weaken Washington's authority in its

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<sup>13</sup> For a balanced account of this period, see Leffler (1992).

own “backyard” (LaFeber 1983). A similar dynamic played out in various post-colonial struggles in Southeast Asia, principally in Vietnam. Conversely, Soviet adventurism in Africa during the 1970s (including through its subordinate Cuba) and especially its attempt to consolidate its authority in Afghanistan after 1979 led directly to the breakdown of détente and the “second Cold War” under U.S. President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

That each was a superpower with special responsibilities and privileges was never at issue in relations between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Even while each might have preferred to be the sole superpower, both Washington and Moscow largely recognized and accepted the capabilities and importantly the status of the other. As with multipolarity, however, it was the competition for authority over other countries and territories that provoked greater competition and sometimes conflict.

### **Unipolarity in the American Moment**

The end of the Cold War left the United States as the sole superpower or “hyperpower,” a unique status in modern international relations. This status has puzzled some observers of world politics who expected a greater backlash or balancing against U.S. power.<sup>14</sup> Unipolarity appears not to have come at the expense of others, however, perhaps accounting for the lack of any significant reaction in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> As a permanent

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<sup>14</sup> See Waltz (1993), Mearsheimer (1990), Layne (Layne 1993). On the debate over “soft balancing” against the United States, see Pape (2005), Paul (2005), Brooks and Wohlforth (2005), and Lieber and Alexander (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Status hierarchy offers several different explanations for the absence of balancing against the United States since the end of the Cold War. Wohlforth (2009) argues that more highly stratified distributions of capability generate less status competition and, in turn, less balancing. Larson and Shevchenko (2009) maintain that, having tried social mobility, only to be rebuffed by the United States, and social competition, without success, China and Russia are now trying social creativity to reconstruct their images as more responsible powers, a strategy likely to be more successful for Beijing than Moscow but at least temporarily obviating the need for balancing by either. Paul and Shankar (2009) suggest that India is enjoying social mobility, and may also be integrated eventually into the American-led club to which it

member of the UNSC and still the second largest nuclear power, Russia continues to receive perhaps more status than its imploded national economy warrants. As a rapidly growing power, China's status is also rising. Great Britain and France, already diminished in status by the 1970s, are now increasingly lodged within the massive, not yet coherent, but increasingly high status European Union. As in other historical periods, the elasticity of status – infrequently recognized in the literature -- appears to mitigate the imputed effects of unipolarity.

The United States has also used its new and unprecedented status, however, to extend its authority into new regions, producing new possibilities for conflict.<sup>16</sup> Forming a new “empire by invitation,” a phrase coined by Gier Lundestad (1990) to describe U.S. relations with Western Europe after 1945, the United States has surged into Central Europe to fill the authority vacuum left in security relations by the demise of the Soviet Union (Goldgeier 1999). Through NATO expansion the United States has created new fears of encirclement in Russia and displaced on a seemingly permanent basis the authority Moscow used to wield in the region. This is a major thorn in Russia's side, and a source of continuing tension in U.S.-Russia relations. But its role in Central Europe has been eagerly welcomed by its potential new subordinates.

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desires to belong, also undercutting incentives to balance. As these examples suggest, it will be the interaction between the quest for status by rising powers and the granting of status, largely by the United States, that will determine whether states are integrated into the existing order or choose to challenge it. This is a promising direction for future research.

<sup>16</sup> Authority hierarchies explain the absence of balancing against the United States today by the legitimacy of its rule over others. It is not that the United States is simply coercive, with other states bridling under its control awaiting the moment when they can escape its hegemony. Rather, benefiting from the political order and recognizing the legitimacy of American rule, subordinate states buy into the American-led international order. Although non-subordinate states might potentially balance against the United States, enough states today remain in American hierarchies, including other ostensibly great powers (e.g., Germany, Japan), that their combined weight is greatly diminished and the collective action problems they face are greatly enhanced. Like Britain in the nineteenth century, this approach expects American authority to endure long after the country's material capabilities have waned.

More important, through the so-called New World Order, the United States has also attempted to expand its authority over states in the Persian Gulf and Middle East (Lake 1999, chap. 6). The United States has long had a presence in the Persian Gulf region, courting Saudi Arabia from the Interwar period on. It first achieved a measure of authority over the area through the Nixon Doctrine and its ties with the Shah of Iran, which precipitated a backlash against the United States in the Iranian revolution of 1979. Shifting its attention back to Saudi Arabia, the United States deepened relations and began constructing military bases to its own specifications in the Saudi desert during the 1980s. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, President George H. W. Bush seized the opportunity to consolidate American authority over Saudi Arabia by convincing the king to “invite” over 500,000 U.S. troops into his country. During the war, Saudi Arabia became a virtual protectorate of the United States, ceding its ability to conduct an interdependent foreign policy to Washington. The authority wielded by the United States, expanded to include Kuwait and increasingly Qatar and other members of the UAE, remains vibrant. In the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the United States acquired two additional dependencies and a considerably larger role in the Persian Gulf region. These later two subordinates remain contested, however, as the local populations have failed to recognize the role of the United States in their affairs as legitimate. It remains to be seen whether the United States can successfully build states in Iraq and Afghanistan that are both legitimate in the eyes of their people and subordinate to Washington in the conduct of their economic and foreign policies (Lake 2010).

Ironically, it is this expansion of its authority into the Persian Gulf that poses the most immediate security threat to the United States today. Political Islam has been

gaining strength for decades as the primary vehicle for mobilizing popular discontent with the autocratic and often corrupt regimes in the Middle East. As measure of hostility was always directed toward the United States for its backing of Israel, perceived as an outpost of European imperialism in an Arab world, and its support for autocrats in the region. With the expanded authority of the United States in the Persian Gulf after 1991, political Islam has increasingly turned its focus from the “near enemy,” as Osama bin Laden refers to the apostate regimes in the Gulf, to the “far enemy” of the United States, which exercises authority directly over the foreign policies of the regimes in the region and indirectly over domestic policies by keeping the loyal autocrats in power (Gerges 2009). Along with expanded American authority in the region comes the recognition by regime opponents that the road to Riyadh runs through Washington.

As in past historical periods, it appears that the struggle for status – more open-ended and elastic – is less likely to lead to conflict today than is the pursuit of authority. Even though no other state today can rival the United States and challenge its authority, new non-state opponents have arisen and employ new forms of resistance that threaten the American empire.

### **III. Status, Authority, and the Future of International Relations**

China’s rapidly growing economy and increased investment in military capabilities implies that unipolarity is likely to evolve into a new bipolarity within the lifetimes of most current readers. With its vast population, large territory, and rapidly growing economy, China’s aggregate GDP will likely surpass that of the United States sometime in the second quarter of the twenty-first century (Bergsten et al. 2009).

Although it will still be a “poor” superpower with an average per capita income far below that in developed countries, its sheer economic size will permit it to be a major player on the world scene and to deploy a global military reach equal to that of the United States if it chooses to do so (Tammen et al. 2000; Mearsheimer 2001).

This increase in Chinese power will almost certainly give rise to new demands for increased status. Although the United States might prefer to retain its current favored status, there is little it can do to arrest this future shift. Fortunately, the elastic nature of status implies an ability to accommodate the status expectations of a rising China. Indeed, the United States and other states are already according Beijing a special status almost in anticipation of its supposedly inevitable and inexorable rise. The real question, it appears, is the future competition for authority in East Asia and, perhaps later, the rest of the globe.

### **Regional Competition for Authority**

With its traditional spheres of influence concentrated in Latin America and Europe, the United States currently has few subordinates in East Asia. Indeed, the only countries in the region over which the United States now wields significant authority are Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, all of which are dependent for security on the United States and have ceded some degree of legitimate control over their own foreign policies to Washington (Lake 2009, chap. 3). This limited range and number of subordinates suggests that the United States has few historical claims to political dominance in the region. This further implies that the United States may be able to accommodate an expansion of China’s authority in the region without significant loss to its own current authority. Yet, to the extent that new Chinese authority allows Beijing to control

subordinate states more effectively, this will tip further the balance of power against the United States and may be opposed for this reason.

China has not, to date, asserted new claims to authority in East Asia.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, it has used its rising power to defend more aggressively its historic claims to authority over a) Tibet and b) Taiwan, long claimed as part of the territory of China, as well as c) the South China Sea, recently declared a “core interest” of China equivalent to Tibet and Taiwan and the site of potentially massive oil and gas reserves, d) the East China Sea, especially the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands, the recent scene of a tough diplomatic dispute with Japan after a Chinese fishing trawler rammed two Japanese coast guard ships, and e) the Yellow Sea, which China has declared an exclusive military zone but in which the United States and South Korea plan to hold joint naval exercises in response to North Korea’s sinking of a South Korean naval ship (Wong 2010). This new assertiveness carries ambiguous meaning. It could indicate that China has limited objectives and merely wants to consolidate authority over areas of traditional concern. It might also mean that China has grander ambitions for regional hegemony and is starting a course toward that end by challenging its neighbors first over historic claims.

How regional competition for authority in East Asia plays out depends not just on the intentions and actions of the United States and China but also on the responses other regional states. One view sees China’s regional hegemony as sufficiently “natural” and culturally ingrained – forged through centuries of prior dominance – that its neighbors will almost inevitably be drawn into Beijing’s imperial orbit (Kang 2007). China’s dynamic economy will reinforce this centripetal force. A second view, possibly informing the policy of the Obama administration, sees China’s assertiveness as a threat

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<sup>17</sup> On China as a fundamentally status quo power, see Johnston (2003).

to its neighbors that will drive them into closer relations with the United States (Wong 2010). This centrifugal force may result in ad hoc alliances of convenience or, perhaps, more enduring security hierarchies, depending on how much the United States trusts its new Asian partners and what price it can extract for its commitment to their security. This opening for greater U.S. authority in East Asia, however, creates new potential for competition between Washington and Beijing that does not now exist.

Together, the outcome of this competition for authority in East Asia will depend on the aggressiveness with which China pursues its traditional claims in the region and any new rights it may assert in the future, whether the Chinese economy exerts a centripetal or centrifugal force, and whether the United States responds by “soft balancing” in Asia or attempts to expand its authority over the region by capitalizing on the fears of potential new subordinates. History suggests that the United States is likely to seek to expand its authority if the opportunity arises. Even though it has few historic claims to authority in East Asia, great powers rarely forego the opportunity to expand their authority when given the opportunity. The United States will likely tread a risky and, perhaps, dangerous path into the future. The key unknown, then, is China’s regional policy and how it will be perceived by its neighbors.

### **Global Competition for Authority**

As acknowledged above, if current trends continue there is little doubt that China will eventually overtake the United States in certain hard power indicators. The key question is whether the US can maintain its authority within the global system over the long term.

Authority is a substitute for coercive capabilities (Lake 2009). Investing in and using authority rather than coercion creates the possibility of integrating potential competitors, including China, into an American-led international order. By embedding China into an American-led international order that protects the territorial integrity and national interests of its members and generates prosperity for all from secure property rights, monetary stability, and trade openness, the benefits to Beijing from living within this system may exceed the benefits of a Chinese-led alternative obtained only by challenging the United States; if so, the benefits of consenting to American authority might be greater than the prospects of a costly confrontation.

The analogy here is to the Western system created by the United States after World War II. By providing a political order that benefited both itself and its subordinates in Western Europe and Northeast Asia, the United States earned substantial authority and legitimacy to lead that community of states, including major powers such as Britain and Germany and rising economic powerhouses such as Japan and South Korea. This system created both security against the Soviet Union and tremendous economic prosperity for America's subordinates (Calleo and Rowland 1973; Gilpin 1981; Gilpin 2001; Ikenberry 2001; Mandelbaum 2005). The "buy-in" of these states to the American-led order masks the alternative possibilities that might have evolved for a more multipolar world with a tier of antagonistic rather than compliant middle powers or a united Europe that challenged rather than supported the United States in world affairs. Even after the European states recovered from the war and Japan and South Korea industrialized and joined the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – the rich nation's club -- the vested interests that benefited from their American-led

orders helped preserve the hierarchical relations formed earlier. The pluralistic security community that emerged locked these states into a set of American hierarchies that promoted peace and economic growth for all. Despite its lack of a common foreign and security policy, the aggregate power resources of the European Union are greater than those of the United States. Yet, because Europe has remained subordinate to the United States and consents to remain within an American-led international order, few in Washington worry about conflict with the continent.<sup>18</sup>

Even though China's position today is quite different from the war-torn economies of Europe and Northeast Asia that facilitated the construction of American hierarchies out of the ashes of World War II, a similar outcome is possible in the future. Following the path of Japan, South Korea, and the other Asian "tigers," China is pursuing a strategy of export-led growth that depends on the continued openness and health of the open world economy dominated by the United States and its subordinates and governed by rules agreed upon by those same countries. Although China is not a "small country" in absolute terms, it is still both a "price taker" in world markets and a "policy taker" in international institutions. To date, it is largely conforming to the existing system as it develops (Johnston 2003; Drezner 2007). In turn, it is also accumulating important domestic interests that are vested in the current international order and who may, in the years ahead, become an important political force that backs living within rather than challenging the American order (Moore and Yang 2001; but see Shirk 2007). This is the analytic foundation of the strategy of cooperation rather than confrontation with China, often left implicit and seldom linked to issues of authority by its proponents. The more deeply China is integrated into the current world order, the less likely it will be to

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<sup>18</sup> For a more pessimistic view on US-European relations, see Kupchan (2002).

challenge America's authority in the future, even as its coercive capabilities grow. The hope is that China can be like France in the Western system: a difficult but ultimately loyal ally. As a unitary state, China would, of course, be a more formidable foe and would likely insist upon greater autonomy for itself than Europe, but the benefits of the security and economic order produced through American authority could nonetheless mitigate the extent and depth of a new "superpower" competition across the globe.

If a strategy of integrating China proves impossible, investing in and enhancing its international authority over others will still allow the United States to confront Beijing with a phalanx of loyal subordinates who remain vested in their American-led orders. Authority has traditionally served to enhance the raw power resources of the United States. By establishing regional hegemonies, the United States has not only protected its "flanks," so to speak, by ensuring that enemies cannot challenge it from within its spheres-of-influence, but it has also enhanced the contributions of its partners to the collective defense, secured stable forward bases from which to project its own power, and earned the greater freedom of international action that comes from the consent of other states. In short, its subordinates have served as force multipliers for America's own military capabilities. If the United States can maintain and, possibly, even enhance its regional hegemonies in the Western hemisphere, Europe, and Northeast Asia, and expand its authority into other areas of Asia, it can then compete more effectively even with a materially stronger and politically antagonistic China.

Even though the economies of the United States and China and their coercive capabilities may become more equal, the American-dominated block may remain larger and, in the aggregate, more powerful than China. The analogy again is to the Western

bloc during the Cold War. In 1985, for instance, the GDP of the United States alone outdistanced the Soviet Union's by a ratio of 1.8:1. But the combined GDP of NATO members was even larger than that of Warsaw Pact states by a ratio of 2.9:1, and the combined total of all "Western" states relative to the Eastern bloc was a startling 3.3:1.<sup>19</sup> The network of subordinates constructed by the United States significantly augmented its power relative to the Soviet Union. If the United States maintains its authority over its current subordinates in Europe, Northeast Asia, and Latin America, and perhaps extends this authority over new subordinates in South and Southeast Asia, the combined resources of its hierarchies will continue to be larger than China's far into the future. Examined on this scale, China -- like the Soviet Union during the Cold War -- may well turn out to be simply another failed challenger to the United States and the political orders it leads.

To build and maintain authority, however, there are two necessary requirements: To provide a social order that benefits subordinates, and thereby binds them into that order; and to commit credibly not to exploit subordinates once they have consented to one's authority. To lead, one must have followers, and other states will not follow the United States (or anyone else) unless they expect to benefit from the social order both collectively and individually. This suggests that even in an authoritative order, there will be hard bargaining between the United States and others over the division of the costs and benefits of an American-led regional order. Nonetheless, if the United States invests in authority and works to maintain the legitimacy of its policies, it can build a community of states that will continue to follow its lead even as its hard power wanes.

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<sup>19</sup> All ratios calculated from Walt (1987, 289-291).

The great mistake of United States foreign policy over the last decade is to believe that the country lives and acts in a world in which only “hard power” or coercive capabilities matter, rather than recognizing that it actually inhabits a political world in which authority plays an important role in governing relations between states. Having demonstrated in the 2003 Iraq War that it is willing to act in ways Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan called “illegal,”<sup>20</sup> it is not clear how the United States can once again convince others that it will not abuse any future authority they might confer upon it. Nor is it likely that the American public is willing to pay the now higher costs of a credible signal of their willingness to work within the limits of international consent. But the future of East-West relations will be colored deeply not just by aggregate power trends but also by how the United States conducts itself in the world -- and especially by whether the nation leads through brute force or invests in regaining and renewing its international authority.

### **Conclusion**

Status and authority are often confused in international relations. Status carries special privileges and responsibilities, but not necessarily the ability to wield legitimate power. Conversely, authority often yields status, but the latter is neither necessary nor sufficient for the former. Nonetheless, there is likely a correlation between states that have status and authority. Yet, assuming that all relations between states are anarchic and that authority plays little to no role in international relations, scholars unwittingly

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<sup>20</sup> Lessons of Iraq war underscore importance of UN Charter – Annan.” September 16, 2004. UN News Centre, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/storyAr.asp?NewsID=11953&Cr=iraq&Cr1=>. Accessed May 6, 2005.

attribute to status some qualities of authority, leading to ambiguous theoretical predictions and flawed empirical tests of its effects.

Perhaps most important, although it cannot be a universal good, status is, within limits, a multisum good that can be granted to a (flexible) number of great powers without significant loss to other high status states. Ultimately, status does decline in value as it is accorded to ever more states, but it is not clear how steep is the gradient. States compete for status, but it is a race that more than one can win, creating a more open, multisum game over some range of great powers. Authority, on the other hand, is in practice a strictly zero sum social attribute. In relations between states in any given issue area, legitimate power is ultimately located in a single “ultimate” authority. As states compete for authority, the potential for conflict is much greater. Most of the major conflicts in the last two centuries appear to be rooted more in competitions for authority than status.

The future of U.S.-Chinese relations turns less on the competition for status and more on the competition for authority. The United States has few historic claims to authority in Asia, but it may take advantage of China’s threats to its neighbors to try to build new authority relationships in the region. This is likely to foment conflict between the two future superpowers. Conversely, if China remains an essentially status quo power, it will drive few states into the arms of the United States, Washington will be restrained in its ability to acquire new subordinates, and the potential for conflict will be reduced. The more aggressive China is within the region, the worse relations will be with the United States as each seeks greater authority over potential subordinates.

Future relations, however, will also be conditioned on whether China can be locked into the existing American-led international order. We may not know this for a decade or more, but the potential payoffs seem sufficiently high that it is worth running some risk that trade now will enhance the wealth and power of an autonomous and antagonistic China in the future. Future relations will also depend on whether the United States can restrain its tendencies toward opportunism in the relatively permissive condition of unipolarity and retain its current spheres of influence. The larger, more vibrant, and more prosperous the American system, the larger the incentives for China to join this order. But even if it does not, willing followers will significantly bolster Washington's lead in containing and competing with China in the decades ahead.

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