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Roleplay versus *Realpolitik*: Societal and Structural Pressures in States' Strategic Posture

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Abstract

How do states' desires to perform an international-societal role interact with the imperative to safeguard their security in an anarchic international system structured by relative power? This paper investigates the tensions between roleplay and *realpolitik* – that is, gaining social recognition as a particular kind of state, driven by both foreign and domestic societal pressures, while doing what it takes to survive. Role-based approaches to international standing set different thresholds on capability than the requirement to undertake survival-essential military missions, independent of potentially unreliable allies' charity – realists' understanding of relative position. The paper thus demonstrates that roleplay and *realpolitik* remain separate incentive structures underlying states' foreign policy choices, pulling against each other in the shaping of strategic posture. It does so through identification and interrogation of four mutual incompatibilities in role-performative and *realpolitik* understandings of "Great Powerness", a core – but conceptually contested – international-systemic ordering principle, thereby demonstrating their necessary logical distinctiveness. The argument is illustrated with reference to Britain and France – two "residual" great powers that show the tensions between the two conceptions in stark relief – as well as a brief counterfactual on the ("non-great") Netherlands. The conclusions have valuable implications for policy: once we recognise that roleplay and *realpolitik* cannot be elided analytically, defenders of ideationally-motivated interventionist grand strategy (particularly in the United States and United Kingdom) can no longer claim that their social role-performative foreign-policy preferences also necessarily serve survival-focused national security needs.

Note to readers: This is a working effort to extend and generalise the theoretical dimensions of my recent work on the tensions between roleplay and *realpolitik* in the specific context of UK strategy (*Foreign Policy Analysis* 2018). Apologies that the references remain both incomplete and inconsistent. Many thanks for your consideration; any comments gratefully received!

Realists on both sides of the Atlantic are united in lamentation that their states are too often motivated by imprudent ideas. In the United States – unambiguously a systemic superpower, and home to the Western world’s most active current community of realist thought – the self-styled “indispensable” nation’s determination to maintain global hegemony and confront ideationally-construed threats wherever they appear consumes US power resources, provokes anti-American blowback, and erodes the very republic that such strategic choices are supposed to protect.¹ In the United Kingdom, meanwhile – a state without the luxury of US relative power, and the place that gave us Thomas Hobbes and E.H. Carr to boot – policymakers pay lip-service to an international environment of dangerous uncertainty, yet those same policymakers display unswerving certainty in their conviction that Britain has a “special” national role to bring order into chaos.² In still other important Western states, realism itself is *logos non grata*; its association with a particular tradition of statecraft at odds with the refashioned self-conception of rich countries striving, under the shadow of their own past, not to act like the major military powers that their relative wealth would permit.³ Such rejection comes despite the lesson of these states’ own histories that a little more attention to the balance of power and a little less ideological crusading results in fewer crushing defeats *and* fewer humanitarian atrocities.

In the face of such evidence of domestic ideas’ ability to shape states’ strategic behaviour in the most fundamental ways, no serious analyst of international relations (IR) would contend that they do not matter – and indeed, realists do not either.⁴ Even the most “structural” of realists – those who privilege the distribution of relative capabilities within an anarchic system over the “contents” of individual states in their explanations of international politics⁵ – still recognise that, in moving from the composition of the system to the behaviour of individual units, those contents have substantial causal effects.⁶ And much of the most insightful recent work, “realist” or otherwise, on the implications of the distribution of relative power in an anarchic international system – i.e., realism’s prime concern – is united by combining, in various ways, the interactions

¹ Porter, 2018, 9-46.

² Blagden, 2018, (OnlineFirst: <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/ory011>), Porter, 2016, 239-60

³ Maull, 1990, 91-106.

⁴ Blagden 2018, 200-02.

⁵ Waltz 1979, Mearsheimer 2001.

⁶ Waltz 1967, Mearsheimer and Walt 2007. For this reason, structural realists wishing and lobbying for superior foreign-policy choices in their states does not amount to the contradiction of their own IR theory that some have suggested: Oren, 2009, 283-301, Van Rythoven, 2016, 487-501.

of both domestic and international politics to identify consequences for both individual states and that very system.⁷

If everyone knows that both power and ideas matter – that ideas hold their own power, but that power conditions the ideas held – can we just leave it at that? This paper will argue not. The desire to fulfil the foreign-policy expectations created by human ideas can be understood as the desire to play a *social role*. And more precisely than merely “social”, such pressures are *societal*; they follow from both domestic and foreign constituencies’ expectations of appropriate conduct, from which both policymakers and their citizenry – albeit not always in uniform or consistent ways – derive esteem and thus utility. Such role performance is derived from “identity” – but it is more specific, as the international-behavioural expectations that follow – and associated with status, another social concern (since achieving and discharging a role may deliver societal standing). Role is thus necessarily performative; as a theatre metaphor, it is not the unique identity of the underlying “actor” – although identity conditions the “parts” that the actors are cast into, of course – but rather, in terms of tangible behavioural output, it is the part “played” that matters. Just like theatre, an actor can only fulfil a role by acting in a certain way.

The applicability of this concept to the Anglo-American policy pathologies lamented in the opening paragraph is obvious. Both have performative obsessions, internalised and habituated by foreign-policymakers, born of particular societal expectations of conduct.⁸ Likewise, such role conceptions condition the behaviour – but in the opposite direction – of the post-1945 “civilian” powers, such as Germany and Japan, similarly referenced at the start of the paper. Indeed, all states – especially those with sufficient national capabilities to meaningfully affect their external environment – have role concerns, and fraught national debates about those roles. Russia and France share Britain’s second-tier “greatness” obsession, China and India

⁷ For many, this has happened under the aegis of “neoclassical” realism, e.g. Rose, 1998, 144-72, Feaver et al., 2000, 174-82 (Schweller and Taliaferro sections), Schweller 2006, Rathbun, 2008, 294-321, Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, Kitchen, 2010, 117-43, Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016. Others contend that the “neoclassical” paradigm is flawed, but that realism can still systematically incorporate certain domestic variables: Narizny, 2017, 155-90. And while others avoid this exchange altogether, they have nonetheless produced insightful research that draws together structural pressures with domestic-political perceptions, institutions, preferences, and – most basically – ideas, e.g. Mitzen and Schweller, 2011, 2-35, Debs and Monteiro, 2014, 1-31, Edelstein 2017, Shiffrinson 2018, Goddard 2018. Even some of realism’s most prominent critics accept the essential power/ideas/anarchy interface; they simply reason that power and anarchy are indeterminate of interstate relations in the absence of ideas: Wendt 1999.

⁸ Which is not to say, of course, that a majority of the electorate will always be pleased by the specific foreign-policy choices that such roles engender, and nor does it mean that roles go uncontested over time; “societal” pressures, internalised as grand-strategic “common-senses”, are deeper and stickier than current voter preferences.

conceptualise themselves as a different stripe of “non-Western” great power, the likes of Turkey and Brazil face tortured internal debates about their future external identities, and so forth. Indeed, “role” is not only a derivative *of* identity; it is also a shaper *of* identity, through the politics that surround its discursive invocation. And it is also conditioned, inevitably, by relative power; states with superior capabilities can both *choose* more significant roles, and will be *cast into* more significant roles by others.

So far, so English School. Indeed, while Hedley Bull’s seminal work may have been more of an ad hoc assemblage of intuitions and observations than a full causal theory,⁹ his insight that social ideas of societal order affect state conduct within a system characterised by anarchy and structured by the distribution of relative power essentially represents the structural-ideational interface that contemporary neoclassical realism is attempting to specify.

There is more to it than this, however. At the same time as playing their social roles, states also need to *survive* in this anarchic international system. Indeed, a state that does not survive cannot achieve anything else either, including the indulgence of its ideational preferences, the achievement of a particular status/standing, or the enactment of the role-performative behaviours that such pressures may motivate. “Survival” is itself a condition in which conceptual differences are too-readily elided; sometimes, for example, it really may be better to be red than dead (i.e. to sacrifice the political survival of the state to preserve the biological survival of the population). But for the purposes of this paper, it can be understood as a hierarchy of (related) needs in which state survival is generally the best way to preserve the citizenry’s biological survival, and in which some level of economic prosperity is also necessary to achieve the same (with further increments of economic prosperity delivering further increments in welfare, albeit with diminishing marginal returns).¹⁰

The key contribution of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate that roleplay – where “play” is misleading, since such pressures are anything but inconsequential – is an analytically distinct incentive structure from doing what it takes to survive in an anarchic international system (captured here in the notion of “*realpolitik*”).¹¹ Why does such a contribution matter?

⁹ [UPDATE REFS FROM HERE] Bull 1977.

¹⁰ States rarely “die” nowadays, of course, with conventional conquest a seldom-used tool (Fazal). Nonetheless, one of the very reasons that we see so little conventional aggression among major powers is the threat of nuclear destruction, so anything that risks confrontation and escalation is very much a threat to survival.

¹¹ As Stacie Goddard and Daniel Nexon observe (2016), *realpolitik* and *realism* are not identical – *realpolitik*, as a tradition of practical foreign-policy thought, does not “belong” to any one school of IR theory. That said, *realpolitik*

After all, roleplay and realpolitik may point in the same direction much of the time, i.e. discharging particular social-behavioural expectations *also* advances the cause of state survival. And indeed, advocates of the US and UK foreign-policy pathologies lamented above contend the same: that performing a “special” national role is the very thing that delivers national security (as well as upholding moral values, international “rules-based order”, and Various Other Good Things). Certainly, the establishment and (re)fashioning of roles often occurs in conditions of benign confluence, i.e. where the pressure to survive creates performative expectations, which in turn deliver both role-based esteem *and* advance the end of national survival. Witness America’s World War II-derived, Cold War-reinforced notion of global indispensability, Britain’s World War I-/II-inspired notion of bastioning Western order against the odds where others can/will not, and indeed Germany’s post-1945 notion that European security is best served by the wholesale demilitarisation and strategic subordination of itself.

Sometimes, however, roleplay and realpolitik pull in *opposite* directions; the internalised desire to fulfil a set of social-behavioural expectations instead *diminishes* national security and complicates long-term survival prospects. In the United States, certainty in an “indispensable” role and the associated primacist grand strategy expends national power (to the detriment of both domestic goods and future relative standing), provokes balancing by states and non-state terrorists alike (with grave escalatory risks), and consumes American and foreign lives in the ceaseless pursuit of “stabilisation”. In Germany, by contrast, commitment to “civilian” power and the associated absence of meaningful military capability places overweening European demand on Washington’s external balancing commitment, to the detriment of US taxpayers and NATO cohesion, and leaves Russian revisionism under-checked by the principal Continental state with the capacity to do otherwise.¹² And in Britain, the notion of a particular national role – as a “tier-one” upholder of Western order and first-among-equals “special” ally of the US superpower – has driven large-scale embroilment in the American-led Iraq and Afghan

is here treated as the foreign/defence policy prescriptions that follow (non-exclusively) from certain *realist* assumptions about world politics (see Bew (2015:5-7,13-14) for discussion). This appreciates the original nineteenth-century meaning – pursuit of progressive domestic-political goals in the face of a regressive international-political system – while also recognising the broader connotations that the term has taken on (Bew 2015:8-12).

¹² Note that this point neither ascribes nor precludes malign Russian motives; after all, Russia has sound strategic reasons to weaken, roll-back, or ideally break an expansionist alliance designed and still used for its containment: Shifrinson 2016; Mearsheimer 2014. Nonetheless, from the perspective of European NATO members, the substantive consequence of this situation is a revisionist Russia for which net security gains will amount to net security losses for those on the receiving end.

campaigns, the recurrent impulse to “do something” (with ambiguous humanitarian consequences) in Libya and Syria, and now a commitment to the maritime containment of China in East Asia (even while British NATO commitments in the UK’s home region are wafer-thin or wholly gapped). Indeed, Britain provides a particularly rich resource for this argument; its 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) declared that Britain must decide what “role” it wants to “play” in the world, while the 2015 NSS elevated “project our global influence” to be a co-equal “National Security Objective”, alongside “protect our people” (as well as invoking “rules-based” international order no fewer than thirty times!)

The value of parsing roleplay and realpolitik as analytically distinct incentive structures – while recognising that, in practice, most states are motivated by bits of both most of the time¹³ – lies in the implications for strategy and policy. For if policymakers can better recognise when different kinds of pressures are driving their behaviour – and, vitally, the tensions, trade-offs, and downright contradictions that the habits of roleplay versus the diktats of realpolitik can entail – then they should be better placed to create strategic postures that fulfil their ideational foreign-policy preferences as far as possible without also harming their state’s relative power, provoking unnecessary confrontations, and ultimately jeopardising their state’s long-term survival.

The paper achieves this analytical demarcation by scrutinising the ideal-type of “Great Power”. “Great powerness” is a crucial concept in IR, yet it carries quite different meanings in different theoretical paradigms. In particular, role-performative and realpolitik understandings of “Great Power” set different thresholds on both capability and behaviour. Those different thresholds cannot be elided, moreover, because acceptance of either definition precludes the acceptance of the other.¹⁴ This distinction is often obscured in contemplating the behaviour of unambiguous superpowers, such as the United States and (increasingly) China, since they have both vast reserves of relative power *and* an elevated international-societal role; even many years of disastrous US strategy would be unlikely to terminally compromise America’s relative capability to safeguard its own survival against all potential adversaries. It is brought into stark relief, however, by the contemplation of powers whose “greatness” or otherwise is marginal (particularly a status-obsessed “second tier” – France, Britain, Russia, possibly India – that lie somewhere between systemic polarity and systemic triviality).

¹³ On explanatory-IR-as-utilitarian-heuristic, see Humphreys (2011).

¹⁴ At least as ideal-types; there is no reason in practice, of course, that we cannot apply either definition, depending on the puzzle at hand: Sil and Katzenstein 2010.

Identification of the two understandings' non-elidability allows us to identify, in turn, that roleplay and realpolitik cannot be elided either. For if we can show that role-performative and realpolitikal understandings of a crucial international-systemic ordering unit ("Great Power") cannot simultaneously exist analytically, then we can also conclude that the social-ideational desire to perform a particular international role and the material-structural imperative to survive cannot simply mean the same thing (i.e. continuing to survive cannot simply be treated as *part of* role, which would let policymakers who contend that their ideational motivations could never imply hard trade-offs with national security off the hook). So, while role preferences and survival requirements may benignly align, such alignment is neither necessary nor assured, permanent nor irreversible. Realist critics of many states' current strategic choices – America and Britain prominently among them – are therefore not only on firm *inductive* ground (i.e. the empirical observation that primacist interventionism since 1990 has provoked blowback, consumed resources, and killed thousands). Rather, they are *also* on firm *deductive* ground in asserting that ideationally-motivated role-performance is not the same thing as the survival-focused pursuit of national security.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the notion that "Great Powerness" could be understood as a socially constructed role. Second, it lays out the realist rejoinder to such perspectives; a rejoinder in which "great power" simply describes a level of capabilities, and specifically the level of capabilities necessary to balance the system's most capable potential adversaries without recourse to the charity of others, rather than carrying the role-performative perspective's set of behavioural expectations. Note that these first two sections are merely light developments of previous work, insofar as they attempt only to rebuild the necessary theoretical competition for subsequent critique.¹⁵ Third, however, the paper proceeds to an expanded deductive analysis of the necessary logical distinction between role-performative and realpolitikal understandings of "great power", dismantling the case that has been made for the elision of the two by identifying four mutual incompatibilities. The argument is illustrated with reference to two "residual" Great Powers, Britain and France – states that show the two conceptions in stark relief – along with a brief counterfactual on the (non-"Great") Netherlands. The paper concludes with identification of implications for theory and policy.

¹⁵ Blagden 2018.

The Social Construction of “Great Powerness”?

That norms, identities, and the role preferences they engender can shape states’ interests is well established in IR.¹⁶ A role “is the set of expectations attached to the behaviour of an actor in a given *social* situation, like ‘father’ or ‘customer’” (McCourt 2014b:160) [emphasis added]. It is thus related to – but subtly different from – status; the latter is concerned with relative standing and recognition, while the former is concerned with agential performance, although for states seeking to perform a great power role, the two are mutually reinforcing. Thinking of a state’s strategic position as playing a role means that such a role must, necessarily, be a social construction.¹⁷ Put simply, using the role-playing approach, a state is a great power if other states ascribe it the identity of one, in terms of the international-social role that they expect it to perform.¹⁸ States’ attachment to such identities can be powerful, moreover – so much so, in some cases, that they drive themselves into precarious security situations for the sake of ideational affirmation (Mitzen 2006).

“Role” is neither fixed nor singular (Thies 2017). States can play multiple roles (Holsti 1970:277), with certain ones becoming salient at certain times, due to exogenous circumstances and/or intentional mobilization for political effect. Multiple roles often co-exist smoothly, but sometimes generate “inter-role conflict” – “regional order-upholder” versus “active independent” was a key fault-line in the Brexit vote, for example (Blagden 2017:8-9). More powerful states can choose more roles and disregard inconvenient ones, illustrating the relationship between material wherewithal and social standing. Some roles are ascribed: states occupy them at others’ behest. Others are achieved: states choose when to switch them on/off. Role can also operate across different levels of analysis, accounting for individual foreign-policymakers’ preferences, state-level identities, or international-systemic outcomes – and interacts across all three.

Different elements of a state may conceive of its role in quite different ways, of course (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Brummer and Thies 2014). The public may agree that their country is “special” – most countries’ citizens do – but still be less favourable towards military interventionism than the foreign-policy elite, say, since it is the former whose children come

¹⁶ On the former, see Klotz (1995) and Hopf (1998:174-177).

¹⁷ For the claim that the international system as a whole is a social construction, see Wendt (1999). For explicit linkage of role-based foreign policy analysis to constructivist IR, see Thies and Breuning (2012) and McCourt (2014a:1).

¹⁸ On international-social performance/practice as a determinant of state behaviour, see – for example – Hopf (1998:177-180).

home in body bags and whose taxes are consumed by overseas state-building (Helm 2013). The public may be united around the idea of the country performing a special and elevated role in international politics, meanwhile, but disagree among themselves over what that role should be and how it should be discharged (Blagden 2017:8-9). And different elements of a state bureaucracy – the defence ministry versus the overseas development agency, say – could similarly disagree among themselves about what their state’s role should be, or at least over how to discharge it (Crowcroft and Hartley 2012).¹⁹

The special role for “Great Powers” as a category of exceptional states with both the wherewithal – as military powers of the “first rank” – *and* the responsibility to use force to uphold international “order” was advocated by Hedley Bull (1977:201). The realist theory that he sought to critique sees “greatness” solely in terms of relative capabilities, under which only the United States and Soviet Union have qualified as systemic “poles” since 1945 (Waltz 1979:162; Monteiro 2014:3)²⁰ – although note that, unlike both Bull and Waltz, certain contemporary realists identify a category of analytically distinct, structurally-defined second-tier major powers that exists below the “polar” level.²¹ Constructivist – and particularly English School – approaches to international theory, by contrast, have subsequently developed Bull’s argument, suggesting that even under conditions of international anarchy, role-based understandings of interstate hierarchy, legitimate behaviour, and intersubjective recognition may all shape international behaviour in ways that constrain and qualify the “naked” exercise of material power (Clark 1989, 2005, 2009; Lake 1996, 2011; Hopf 1998:174; Hurd 1999). Under such approaches – as in Bull’s original formulation – a state must certainly possess substantial military capability in order to qualify as a great power, so as to make a meaningful contribution to regional order and thus international “society”. Yet while the possession of force is necessary to qualify as a

¹⁹ See also, in another national context, Jones (2017).

²⁰ At most, U.S. structural realists have seen the major post-Cold War European states as potential great powers, with the possible underlying economic wherewithal to generate great-power levels of military force if pressed (Mearsheimer 2001:392). Taking the view that only poles – states capable of independently balancing against the other most powerful state(s) in the international system – are true great powers leads to the conclusion that the likes of Britain and France are *obviously* not among them, although this then opens the question of whether “great” and “major” power are admissibly separate categories (see next footnote).

²¹ Nuno Monteiro’s contention (2014:43-5) that a handful of states (China, India, Russia, France, and Britain) possess sufficient capability to avoid certain defeat by any other state in the system – a condition with potentially significant implications for survival and political independence – suggests that there is indeed an analytically distinct, structurally-identifiable major-power category, above the mere minor powers but below the U.S. unipole, even under unipolarity. Germany and Japan may similarly have the *latent* wherewithal to occupy this category, albeit not the *currently*-manifested military might.

great power, it is not sufficient, since fulfilling the “Great Power” role requires the discharge of certain societal responsibilities to uphold international order. This understanding leads Bull (1977:202) to his striking conclusion that neither Napoleonic France nor Nazi Germany qualified as Great Powers, despite their system-challenging military capabilities, since they sought to destroy the prevailing international order of the time, rather than supporting it.

Building on such approaches, Justin Morris (2011) suggests that even “non-polar” powers – his focus is Britain – retain plausible claims to a “Great Power” role, because they act militarily to uphold international order on a scale greater-than-or-equal-to all bar the United States, plus their policy elites continue to think in such terms. McCourt qualifies this suggestion further, ascribing to Britain (again the focus) and France the label of “residual Great Power” (2014b:160). Both use military force – along with the diplomatic trappings of greatness, such as their veto-wielding permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council – beyond their borders in defence of a conception of international order; hence the “Great Power” role. Their foreign-policy elites are also cognitively and discursively bound by a “Great Power” self-conception (McCourt 2011:145-164). However, this role is “residual” – a cognitive legacy of historical power position and habit (Hopf 2010) – and relational because it is enabled by a close political relationship with the most powerful country in the world, the United States, and because the similarly-residual other (i.e. France and Britain) each attempts to do the same, creating opportunities for burden-sharing. On this reading, the likes of Britain and France may *already* lack the “full-spectrum” military capability to *independently* exercise regional preponderance (part of Bull’s conception). Such relative weakness would not be a terminal obstacle to fulfilment of such role-defined national interests, however, because alliances are *also* part of that role, and they provide the necessary support to order-upholding military activism (McCourt 2014b:160).²² Christopher Hill (2016:394-395) similarly offers a position compatible with McCourt’s phraseology, identifying that post-1945 France and Britain have both sought to act as “powers” less than “super” but more than “middling”, and that the determination to play this role has endured even in the straitened circumstances of the twenty-first century.

Such a conclusion, if accepted, carries implications for force posture. On this view, loss of capability may indeed remove the ability to independently accomplish a particular military

²² Note that for McCourt (2014a:26), role is not simply an identity that states can “choose” to “play” – rather, it is something that states *take on*, when they are cast into it by others.

task, but such role-performative “residual Great Powers” would not *intend* to accomplish such tasks independently *anyway*. Rather, the point is simply to continue to play the role of being the *sort* of country that uses force in support of Western-defined international order, alongside each other and subordinated to the United States. Such social role is unlikely to be lost suddenly, provided that *some* capability – of certain *expeditionary* types – is preserved for essentially symbolic purposes. Contemporary Anglo-French tropes such as “punching above our weight” and “upholding rules-based order” are not, then, the substance-free rhetorical obstacles to effective national strategy that many critics take them to be (Strachan 2009; Porter 2010), on this reading. Rather, they actually *define* international role, and thereby *constitute* strategic interests (McCourt 2014a, 2014b).

Anarchy, Uncertainty, and the Value of Capability

Two realist premises – that states seek to survive and that military power is their only reliable guarantee of doing so, given uncertainty over others’ intentions within an anarchic international system that lacks reliable rule-enforcement – elucidate the tension in role-based conceptions of states’ “greatness” (Copeland 2000, 2003; Mearsheimer 2001:31-36). McCourt, for example, asserts that states’ roles are *not* the same as their interests, ambitions, values, or capabilities (2014b:166). Yet he also asserts (2014b:174) that international-social role *produces* national interests, rather than the other way around: a much more far-reaching social-constructivist argument. These two positions contain potential for contradiction. The former assertion recognizes that states *can* have interests beyond playing a particular role. Yet the latter assertion suggests that the role itself *creates* the interests: and thus that states *cannot* have interests beyond those constructed by playing a particular role.

This ambiguity enables role theory to jump from role mattering as *an* interest of a state – a relatively uncontroversial point, and one amply demonstrated by most major states – to it being *the* paramount interest that subsumes and subordinates all others. The latter claim is more ambitious, yet it is necessary if certain role theorists are to support their argument that great powers are *constituted* and *defined* by playing the social role of Great Power. The less contentious point – that playing any international-societal role is one of multiple interests – opens the way to conceding the possibility of a hierarchy of state interests, among which role may remain subordinate to other concerns. On such a rank-ordered view of states’ concerns, the

most fundamental interest would remain political survival as a sovereign entity with control of its own foreign policy, since a state that does not survive cannot achieve anything else either (Waltz 1979:91-92; Mearsheimer 2001:31).²³ Following a “hierarchy of needs” approach (Maslow 1943), the corollaries to this survival assumption may include human/biological security (the safety from death and harm of the state’s population) and preserving some survival-essential level of economic prosperity. And crucially, realists contend, these hierarchy-topping interests all have a material base, physically and biologically independent of social role construction. That is not to deny that capabilities, conurbations, economies, and indeed states are social constructions, nor that threats to societies are socially construed (Price and Tannenwald 1996; Hopf 1998:177-180).²⁴ Nonetheless, the material effects of kinetic energy on human bodies, delivered via bullets or bombs, place these possibilities – and their avoidance – top of states’ spectrum of concerns (Thayer 2000).

Accepting this hierarchy of interests, alongside realism’s identification of the inherent dangers of an anarchical international system, would in turn incentivize the possession not just of *some* military capability for role-performance, but rather *sufficient* capability to conduct certain perceivedly survival-essential military missions.²⁵ These may include deterring or repelling the conquest of sovereign territory (necessary for political and potentially biological survival), deterring or resisting coercion directed against the state’s population (ditto), safeguarding sea lines of communication (SLOCs) (necessary for baseline prosperity in a trade-dependent island), deterring major power aggression in the state’s own region (lest a hostile regional state accrue enough power to threaten political/biological survival), and so forth. In such a world, the main function of the principal determinant of “greatness” – military power, with its deterrent, coercive, and compulsive effects (Art 1980) – is as a means to an end (security), rather than an end in itself (status).²⁶ And attempting to provide for one’s *own* survival through *independent* military wherewithal – that is, to function as a “great” or “major” power in the realist sense, rather than

²³ For a UK application, see Blagden (2009:63).

²⁴ Of course, states themselves are socio-political constructions to which citizens then form an ideological attachment (nationalism), albeit ones driven by the physical-biological survival needs of human beings (Tilly 1992). Ultimately, resolving the intractable “material-versus-ideational” dispute lies beyond the scope and needs of this paper.

²⁵ On the relationship between the achievement of national objectives and the possession of sufficient capability to accomplish key associated military missions, see Glaser (2010:40-41).

²⁶ A public may still derive utility from “greatness” in its own right, but the *main* purpose of military power is nonetheless to safeguard future security and prosperity (Fearon 2011:436-437).

trusting wholly *to* allies – may require quite a different threshold of national capabilities compared to merely discharging a societal role *alongside* those allies.

Of course, states other than superpowers also both *want* to survive and *succeed* in doing so, even in an anarchic international system. Intelligent alignment with powerful allies, accommodation of others' preferences, and the avoidance of confrontation with powerful potential enemies are all elements of effective, security-maximizing national strategy (Geyer 1986). Over-armament can also be self-defeating, when it provokes counterbalancing (Walt 1985). Part of post-1945 European success has been effective strategy of this kind; the same goes for Washington's Asian allies. Bandwagoning with the United States in order to encourage America to serve as NATO's principal security guarantor, in particular, has enabled the roll-out of a comprehensive suite of public services (such as free-to-access healthcare) in lieu of higher defence spending. Europe's relatively modest *internal* balancing has thereby been offset by another's comprehensive *external* balancing commitment, allowing a favourable "guns/butter" trade-off – to the chagrin of many Americans who lack such a welfare state. Pointing to the major (Western) European and Asian powers' close alliance relationships with the United States is not, therefore, unambiguous evidence of "residual power" weakness; it is also evidence of calculated statecraft.²⁷ Survival is multiply realizable through strategies informed by relative power plus information on others' capabilities and motives (Glaser 2010),²⁸ with close alliance-dependence – even at the expense of strategic autonomy – readily explicable through realpolitik.

Nonetheless, wholesale dependence on external balancing carries risks: of abandonment to the predations of others, of coercion by a capricious patron, and of chain-ganging into allies' wars, among others. All else held equal, there are thus good reasons – on a realist reading – to want to be able to fulfil your military-security requirements through your *own* force-of-arms (Mearsheimer 2001:156-157). It is for this reason that realpolitik counsels states with the economic wherewithal to do so to prioritize retaining the baseline capability suite necessary to discharge survival-essential military missions over capabilities associated with role-performance. Accordingly, both Britain and France – even while weighting their strategic posture around providing "residual power" order-upholding support to US hegemony – have also striven to retain capabilities to safeguard their own security independent of allies' charity (i.e. to hedge

²⁷ Wivel 2008.

²⁸ Friend/enemy identities may condition motives (Wendt 1999), although realists question such relationships' reliability.

against US abandonment), most notably via submarine-based survivable nuclear arsenals that (in their great expense and limited operational utility) carry substantial opportunity-costs vis-à-vis more usefully role-performative capabilities.²⁹ Both Paris and London still strive, in short, to be major powers on “realist” criteria, as well as role-performative “residual” ones. Many states simply lack the latent power potential in terms of economy and population for this to be achievable – yet that does not, in itself, mean that they lack the supreme interest in survival that realists expect.

Fundamentally, then, this is not an argument about “greatness” or its absence. There are roles other than “Great Power” (Gaskarth 2014; McCourt 2014a:19-57), and states other than great powers still have an interest in surviving. It is an argument, rather, about what constitutes state interests: performing an international-*societal* role, or safeguarding a hierarchy of *materially*-underpinned concerns topped by continued existence. It just so happens that, in the case of “marginal” powers such as France and Britain, this tension between roleplay and realpolitik is manifested as an anguished public debate about continuing national “purpose”. Such hand-wringing enabling onlookers to observe the interplay.

Intersubjectivity versus Objectivity:

The Logical Distinction between Role-Performative and Realpolitik “Greatness”

As noted from the outset, this paper accepts the reality that many states’ foreign policy choices are heavily influenced by role conceptions.³⁰ And yet, if role is not – as realists retort – the *sole* source of *all* state interests, but merely one interest among several, this raises questions over how far roleplay and realpolitik can simultaneously coexist in the same state’s strategic posture.

As noted earlier, English School variants of social IR theory always maintained that to be a great power, a state must be a military power “of the first rank”, *as well as* discharging certain international-social responsibilities to sustain international order. Indeed, the very discharging of such a responsibility clearly requires some baseline level of military capability, if a state is to act militarily overseas to uphold order. McCourt’s “residual Great Power” framing accepts this insight, arguing simply that – given its “residual” position, and the associated closeness of their

²⁹ For full explication of this point via three case studies of UK military capability, nuclear posture foremost among them, see Blagden 2018.

³⁰ Note that this section represents a substantially developed and expanded version of the brief discussion of theoretical logic in Blagden 2018, since this section provides the analytical differentiation of conceptions that is key to the argument of this new paper.

US alliances – the force levels required for France and the UK to meet this threshold are not particularly high. Taking this position, the presumed tension between roleplay and realpolitik in approaches to greatness might be seen as a falsely dichotomous straw-man. For if the capability to independently defend one’s own survival, security, and prosperity is *part* of what it *means* to be militarily “first rank”, then they may *also* be part of what it means to be a “Great Power”. Such a framing might imply that “residual” Great Power is a meaningless sub-category, if it implies being a “first-rank power” that is simultaneously *not* a first-rank power. But – returning to the key fault-line of the introduction – it would not necessarily mean that role-based and realist conceptions of greatness are incompatible. After all, in Bull’s conception (1977:213-219), a great power should be capable of unilaterally exercising a local preponderance of power – a position that would exclude “residual” powers (1977:203). Such a rebuttal to the “residual Great Power” thesis would also be consistent with the structural realist view that there have only been two powers great enough to qualify as “poles” in the international system since 1945 – and only one since 1989 (Waltz 1979:162; Monteiro 2014:3).³¹

More broadly, on Holsti’s original framing (1970:262-63), remaining an “active independent” – necessitating sovereign military capability – is *itself* a role, not an *alternative* to role. “Great Power” can also incorporate many of Holsti’s other roles – “regional protector”, “defender of the faith”, “balancer”, and so forth – which similarly privilege military wherewithal. Christer Jönsson and Ulf Westerlund (1982) even identify “protector-of-own-state” as a role, treating realists’ survival assumption as *itself* a role behaviour. And in identifying the tensions between “great power” (giving the U.S. scope to act alone) and “hegemon” (which rewards multilateral leadership), Bruce Cronin (2001) treats *both* as roles, despite the former owing to material wherewithal (unilateral leeway) and the latter (diplomatic leadership) to social choice. Many varieties of realist thought admit a place for role concerns, moreover (Waltz 1993): the possibility of “greedy” states willing to fight for reasons beyond survival may explain security competition resulting from uncertainty over others’ intentions, for example (Schweller 1996).

This attempted incorporation *of* the realist conception *into* the role-based conception – the attempted elision *of* roleplay *with* relative power – is theoretically unsatisfactory, however, for four key reasons. First, the approach to defining great powers as those that discharge certain responsibilities towards international society *as well as* possessing substantial material power

³¹ “Residual pole” would obviously be a nonsensical category.

sets a behavioural threshold on “greatness” that defies common sense. Rolling international-social “responsibility” into the definition means that, as Bull freely admits, the likes of Napoleonic France, Imperial and Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union (at times), and Russia and even China today – that is, all of the potentially “revisionist” states (on an Anglo-American reading) that have launched devastating global war in the modern era, or could threaten to do so today – do not “count” as great powers. If such states fall beyond the purview of the definition then the utility of the definition falls apart, given their capability to launch catastrophic systemic war. Indeed, this order-upholding approach becomes tautologically circular via its Western-centric *status quo*-bias, and thereby incapable of accounting for international-systemic change, because any state that seeks to overthrow the prevailing balance of power leaves the great power “club” by definition. These characteristics of the approach may be acceptable from a normative perspective, of course – launching systemic war may indeed be a “bad” thing to do, and opposing Anglo-American foreign policy is certainly taken as unambiguous evidence of evil character by Washington and London – but they render the definition unhelpful as an analytical tool. For if World War II was not a “great power war”, because Germany and Japan did not behave as “great” powers “should”, then what sorts of competition and conflict between powerful states can the definition hope to cover?

Second, even as it sets a high bar on *behaviour*, a focus on the responsibility and capability to use force in support of international order simultaneously sets a low bar on *capability*. It therefore cannot be said to *necessarily* incorporate realism’s survival concerns, undermining the idea that roleplay and realpolitik could be treated as mere synonyms. Possessing sufficient force to make a meaningful contribution to upholding regional order – however defined – may only require defeating, supporting, or stabilizing minor powers. Indeed, Bull’s “regional preponderance” criterion is wholly dependent on the relative strength of other actors in the region: Australia is better placed to exercise regional preponderance in Australasia than Germany or Russia ever have been in Europe, but no-one could plausibly contend that the former is the greatest power of the three. For this reason, Monteiro’s criterion – sufficient capability to avoid certain defeat by the most powerful state in the system – is integral to any definition focused around survival. Yet it is not necessarily integral to a definition premised on an order-upholding role. Roleplay and realpolitik thus approach this capability threshold question from opposite directions: the former anticipating that survival will follow as a by-product of being an

order-upholder, the latter anticipating that an ability to uphold international order will follow as a by-product of being powerful enough to independently defend one's interests.

Third, as an extension of the previous point, working on the basis that the assumption of survival is embedded in the requirement to be a "first-rank" military power does not specify the *relative* threshold vis-à-vis other states – both in terms of aggregate power, and in terms of specific operational capabilities – required to defend vital state interests. "First-rank", in its lack of a specifically defined set of survival-essential military missions, is thus too vague to tell us whether a state meets the Monteiro criterion of defeat-avoidance. After all, even at the height of Cold War bipolarity, the United States and Soviet Union were still very different "sorts" of "first-rank" military power.³² Role-performance may thus require one military toolkit – enough expeditionary capability to uphold regional order – while survival-defence may require quite another. Again, the two conceptions of interests cannot be automatically elided.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, the argument that greatness is both based on the intersubjective recognition of international-social role *and* rests on meeting a certain set of material-capability prerequisites is self-contradictory; it is an attempt to both have one's theoretical cake, and eat it too. For if there is a material capability threshold to be met, that creates the possibility that a state could *falsely* be perceived by others as "great" – because they had not in fact met the required threshold, as measurable by some objective set of criteria – and thus that performing the social role does not in itself *constitute* greatness. Conversely, if intersubjective recognition of international-social role performance *does* in fact constitute greatness, then there cannot *also* be external material criteria to meet before a state can be considered "great", provided that its fellows regard it as such (although copious relative power may well facilitate the achievement of such recognition, of course).

The internal incompatibility of the role-recognition and capability-threshold approaches – the reason that the distinction between the two cannot be dismissed as a mere straw-man – is well illustrated by a brief counterfactual. While the likes of Britain or France may or may not currently be great powers, it is probably fair to say that nobody still considers the contemporary Netherlands to be one. Yet *why* is the Netherlands not still perceived as a great power? After all,

³² Soviet naval strategy was fundamentally different to NATO strategy, for example, aiming only at sea denial – rather than sea control – in the North Atlantic (Blagden, Levy, and Thompson 2011:194). Indeed, taken to its literal extension, the requirement to be a "first-rank" military power in order to qualify as a great power might suggest that the international system could only ever be unipolar.

it has a proud naval and military tradition still characterized by international activism. It has close relations with “residual” great powers Britain and France – and, via NATO, the US superpower. And crucially, it still possesses and uses *some* power projection capability in defence of a conception of international order.³³ Furthermore, it was *once* seen as a great power. The role-based explanation to account for this change from “major” to “minor” power thus enters problematic circularity: on this logic, the Netherlands is no longer seen as a great power, despite these various attributes, simply because it is no longer seen as a great power.³⁴ Ultimately, a theory based on whether others ascribe the identity of great power status to a state must give way to a theory of relative material capabilities when it attempts to account for changes in that status. Either the role *constitutes* the “greatness” *or* the capabilities do; the two are not identical.³⁵

As Holsti recognized (1970:298), therefore, role does not explain everything. “Defender-of-self” cannot simply be treated as an element of role if role theory is to retain explanatory power. For if merely continuing to exist is defined as role-performance, then role theory’s valuable insights – such as why states behave in ways *not* simply governed by desire for continued existence – risk being subsumed into unfalsifiable, post hoc labelling of *all* possible foreign-policy behaviours. Roleplay and *realpolitik* may thus be complementary, but they are but non-identical.³⁶ Recognising that the two are separate incentive structures, capable of pulling states in different directions, goes a long way to explaining the internal confliction seen in the military postures of “residual-power” France and Britain. And while the logical coherence of neoclassical realism has recently faced critique (Narizny 2017), the interaction of these two incentive structures adds value to neoclassical realists’ investigatory focus: the filtration of international-systemic pressures through domestic-political lenses (e.g. Kitchen 2010).³⁷

³³ It possesses two amphibious assault ships and a highly competent marine corps, for example.

³⁴ The Netherlands was beaten in a succession of wars, of course – but so too was France. The difference was that the latter had the underlying resources, which it then turned into military capability, to return to major powerness. The former did not.

³⁵ This is not to deny that there are other dimensions to national “greatness”, which the Netherlands has in spades: culture, art, history, values, institutions, natural/built landscape, and so forth may all be regarded as making a country “great”, so the argument is not intended to be pejorative. The concern here, however, is necessarily on a more specific meaning of “greatness”: the state’s relative capabilities to advance its interests – via coercion, deterrence, or compellence of necessary – within the international system. Neither is it to disparage the Dutch armed forces, which are professional and highly effective.

³⁶ For an exemplar of pulling together realist and constructivist insights to explain a key foreign-policy outcome, see Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002).

³⁷ E.g. if social role and material power shape states’ behaviour over varying time horizons, this would fit with the latest efforts to construct a cohesive neoclassical realist theory that systematizes the interaction of domestic and international politics (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016:83-88).

Conclusion

In every country, at any point in history, national security strategies and the foreign-policy choices that follow have been a product of both power and ideas. Yet such a conclusion, while obviously true, is also unhelpful. The variance that is actually of interest in explaining the relative success or otherwise of such choices lies, rather, in the variable interactions *between* power and ideas. Realist critics of contemporary Western choices in these domains find much to lament, meanwhile. Whether it is power-squandering, liberty-eroding, blowback-provoking *over*-activism in the likes of the United States and Britain, or free-riding, alliance-straining, revisionism-permitting *under*-activism in the likes of Germany and Japan, stubborn ideas seem to impede prudent attention to the structural pressures of the international system.³⁸ Yet the advocates of prevailing Western postures – of which there are many, hence why such postures continue to prevail – contend that realists identify a false dichotomy. Yes, the story goes, such countries are motivated by enduring conceptions of national “role”, derived from ideationally-based social expectations of appropriate conduct – but fulfilling such “special” national roles, so the response comes, is *also* what delivers national security. Roleplay and realpolitik, in short, are taken to be permanently and benignly aligned; realists lamenting that counter-productive role obsessions “get in the way” of prudent security policy, on this reading, are missing that such roles *are* prudent national security policy.

This paper has demonstrated, however, that roleplay and realpolitik *cannot* be treated as permanently and benignly aligned. Rather, they are analytically distinct, logically separate incentive structures. States are certainly influenced by both, but – far from always pointing in the same, eminently agreeable direction, whereby the imperative to survive is treated as a mere *part* of social role-performance – any ideationally-underpinned role conception that goes beyond the state simply giving itself the best chance of continuing to exist *necessarily* points away from the security-maximising position. For this reason, roleplay and realpolitik – far from the natural bedfellows depicted by ideological advocates of “values-based”, “rule-upholding” national strategy – actually all-too-often pull against each other, leading national strategy in confused, conflicted, and often self-defeating directions. Interrogation of the differences between role-

³⁸ To be fair, Japan is now displaying greater willingness to generate and deploy military capability, under the force of regional circumstances (North Korea’s belligerence but especially China’s rise and associated assertiveness).

performative and realpolitikal conceptions of “great powerness” elucidates this logical distinction. While the torturing of definitions can appear as scholastic hair-splitting, its value here is to elucidate that roleplay and realpolitik are not the same thing, with implications beyond the definitions themselves. Specifically, whereas a role-based conception of “greatness” may incentivize military activism abroad to uphold international order, realpolitikal criteria prioritize the independent means to defend one’s own hierarchy of security interests. These two conceptions cannot be readily elided in theory, moreover, for “greatness” cannot simultaneously be based on inter-*subjective* social role recognition and an *objective* threshold of national power. Of course, in practice, both material and ideational power exist on a spectrum that shapes states’ foreign/defence policies, as both constructivist and realist perspectives recognize. Nonetheless, if policymakers and scholars alike can be more explicit about the different kinds of pressures that are motivating their behaviour – and the trade-offs and tensions that may exist between such motivations – then they will be better placed to make strategic choices that serve their role preferences within the constraints of simultaneously *not* doing major harm to long-term national security.

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