CHAPTER 2

The Politics of Legitimacy

How a Rising Power’s Right Makes Might

How a rising power legitimates its claims—how it justifies its demands to an international audience—significantly shapes how great powers understand its intentions, and thus affects whether great powers will accommodate or confront its increasing might. Power transitions are mired in uncertainty. If a rising power can portray its ambitions as legitimate, if it can argue that its aims and actions are and will remain consistent with existing rules and norms, it can make the case that, far from being a revolutionary power, its growing might will preserve and perhaps even protect the prevailing status quo. In contrast, if a rising power’s claims are illegitimate—if they are inconsistent with prevailing rules and norms—then great powers will see even modest revisionist attempts as threatening, making containment and confrontation likely.

It may seem intuitive that legitimation is core to politics. It is through legitimation, as Weber famously argued, that the practice of power becomes palatable, turning brute coercion into authority and rendering the practice of power seemingly benign.¹ For this reason, scholars from diverse theoretical traditions argue that legitimacy is core to power politics. Constructivists have devoted the most attention to legitimacy in international relations, arguing that norms and rules can constrain states’ pursuit of power and interest.² Martha Finnemore contends that even the most powerful states in the system must legitimate their actions, or else face condemnation and resistance, and Christian Reus-Smit contends that if the United States continues to flout norms of legitimacy, it will find its power gravely restricted as states work to counteract its wanton practice of power abroad. Realists and liberals stress the importance of legitimacy as well. According to Ikenberry, for instance, it was the United States’ appeals to liberalism that made its dominance legitimate and have helped stave off attempts to mobilize against its might. In contrast, a rising power whose strategies appear illegitimate is more likely to provoke a balancing coalition. In a similar vein, Stephen Walt argues that
if the United States continues to behave illegitimately, states will move to balance the once “benign” hegemon and bring an end to the unipolar moment.³

Yet we are left with important puzzles about legitimacy and rising powers. Why does legitimacy matter at all in world politics? Why, under anarchy, do states explain their actions, and why are some attempts to justify actions seen as convincing, while others are dismissed as disingenuous and deceptive? After all, all rising powers are likely to justify their actions to a great power audience. Very rarely do we see powers that admit they are violating existing international rules and institutions, and most states rationalize their behavior by appealing to shared norms and values. We need to understand under what conditions rising powers can successfully legitimate their actions and shape a great power’s choice for confrontation, conflict, or accommodation.

In this chapter, I develop a theory of legitimation and rising power politics, explaining why and under what conditions legitimation can have such a profound effect on a great power’s grand strategy. In the next section, I unpack the concept of legitimation, explaining why it is that legitimation is critical to how great powers come to interpret a rising power’s ambitions. While all states try to justify their policies, rising powers must be particularly attentive to legitimation. Rising powers are likely to engage in behavior that demands legitimation: as their power grows, they will engage in some revisionist behavior. Because actions do not seamlessly reveal intentions, rising powers can shape the interpretation of their actions—and their intentions—through their legitimation strategies. Moreover a rising power—perhaps more than other states—must worry about collective mobilization in response to its behavior: a rising power legitimates its behavior because it understands that its audience, both at home and abroad, will either support or challenge its expansive behavior based in part on the reasons behind them.⁴ By justifying its actions, a rising power hopes to manage its audience’s understanding of its actions and, in the process, shape whether to mobilize against—confront or contain—or allow revisionist behavior.

Legitimation strategies are a vital component in collective mobilization, both at home and abroad. For this reason, they shape images of a rising power’s intentions through three mechanisms. First, legitimation strategies can signal restraint and constraint, a willingness to abide by international norms and secure the status quo. Under these conditions, great powers believe that the rising contender will be bound to the existing normative order, even if they are undertaking revisionist actions. Second, legitimation strategies set rhetorical traps: when rising powers frame expansion as legitimate, they deprive opposing audiences grounds on which to mobilize against them.⁵ Finally, legitimation strategies are likely to be successful when they appeal to a state’s identity: a rising power can mobilize support for its demands by evoking principles and norms fundamental to a threatened state.
But the effects of a rising power’s legitimation are not constant across time and space. The analytical challenge is thus not only to explain why legitimation influences great power strategies, but when legitimation is possible; in other words, the challenge is to identify the conditions necessary for legitimation processes to operate. For rationalist theories, variation in how rising powers legitimate their actions, and the great powers’ response, rests on the inherent material costs of the signal. In these signaling models, it is the cost of a signal that gives it meaning; talk makes sense to the speaker and listener because it is connected to an expensive investment in the behavior or policy. In contrast, I argue that legitimation strategies are effective when they resonate, when they are seen as having “pertinence, relevance, or significance” with a targeted audience. This is possible under two conditions. First, the rising power must have the capacity to use a multivocal legitimation language, rhetoric that appeals to several legitimating principles, and thus appeals to multiple audiences simultaneously. Second, legitimation strategies resonate when the great power audience is institutionally vulnerable, when the great power believes the normative system it favors is under attack. Institutional vulnerability makes a great power more likely to listen to and accept a rising power’s reasons for its aggression, to hear a rising power’s reasons as a credible signal of limited and revolutionary aims. Combining these two conditions, I suggest that there are “four worlds of legitimation,” explaining how vulnerability and multivocality either amplify or mute mechanisms of restraint, coercion, and identification.

The Logic of Legitimation

A state legitimates its actions when it appeals to recognized norms and rules to justify its demands to its audience. All states engage in legitimation, attempting to explain their aims and motives—what they want and why they want it—to their audience. States justify their actions in order to get other nations to accept, if not support, them. If a state appears to have broken the rules, its leaders will hope that by making their actions understandable, they might escape punishment. For this reason, legitimation is particularly important when states adopt seemingly aggressive or expansionist policies: any territorial conquest, economic revision, or demand for a change in political institutions must be accompanied by rhetoric that explains why this change is legitimate.

The fact that states legitimize their actions points to some significant features of international politics. If the international system were purely “anarchic,” operating only through the logics of power and interest, legitimation would be pointless. The fact that states legitimize their actions implies that that the international system contains rules and norms that identify what counts as appropriate behavior, ascribe meaning to action,
and set the boundaries of appropriate action in world politics. While this assumption is most closely associated with constructivist approaches in international relations, liberals and realists both speak of a social international order, an international system governed by “settled rules and arrangements between states that define and guide their interaction.”

Most international systems contain a dominant social system, composed of “legitimizing principles,” core norms that establish what counts as acceptable behavior and allow states to adjudicate the legitimacy of competing claims. “Keeping the balance” was arguably the core legitimating principle of the nineteenth century Concert of Europe; in contrast, some argue that “peaceful hegemony” guided the practices of China up through the late nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, “self-determination” was arguably the dominant legitimating principle, by which territorial contestation and demands would be settled. In contemporary world politics, territorial conquest is strictly illegitimate, yet seizing sovereignty in the name of human rights remains acceptable.

These dominant legitimating principles are socially constructed. Even legitimation strategies that seem natural and timeless—such as aggression justified in the name of “self-defense”—are contingent. States have long justified their expansion as a means to shore up their security and ensure their survival but, as Kratochwil argues, even claims of “self-defense” are not self-evident. These “natural rights, like moral principles in general, are a matter neither of simple intuition or cognition.” They are embedded in a contingent and constructed legal order. Nor are international social orders homogenous; most contain conflicting legitimating principles. During the Concert of Europe, nationalist claims challenged dominant norms of sovereign territoriality and the “balanced” order. Today, norms of sovereignty sit in tension with norms of humanitarian intervention.

Which norms become dominant legitimizing principles is a process inseparable from material power. More often than not, in the international system, it is great powers that are responsible for defining what counts as legitimate behavior in international politics. Often, this moment of definition comes in the wake of major power wars, where the great powers seek to impose a new world order designed to avoid the catastrophes of the recent past and to advance the interests of the victors. One cannot understand the origins of the Concert and the legitimacy of maintaining a “balance” without seeing it, in part, as the pursuit of Austria’s and Britain’s shared interest in maintaining peace on the Continent and preventing revolutionary change. The United States’ support of liberal economic and political norms after World War II clearly reflected its belief that this system would advance its material wealth and military might in the shadow of a Soviet threat.

Because rules are determined by the powerful, some see “legitimacy” as little more than an ideational superstructure imposed on material
resources. If great powers respond when a state challenges the legitimate order, they are simply defending their interests, not the rules themselves. But while dominant legitimating principles may be rooted in power, the rules and norms of international society have a life of their own. At the very least, the great powers see them as instrumental in managing conflict and cooperation in the international system. More profoundly, the great powers often have a deeper connection to the rules and norms of an international order. Kissinger, for example, argued that the rules and norms of the international system are not simply cold abstractions or efficient procedures. They are reflections of a state’s identity, and because of this, “no power will submit to a settlement, however well balanced . . . which seems totally to deny its vision of itself.”

While the rules and norms of the international system set the parameters of legitimate behavior, they do not determine the behavior of states. Within normative structures, there is a great deal of room for agency, both for the rising power to justify its actions, and for the great power audience to listen to a challenger’s claims. This is because norms are not objective structures that neatly define what type of behavior is acceptable. Consider again the example of “self-defense.” What constitutes appropriate self-defense is contested and ever changing. Violations of the rule are never clear, and more often than not, states will argue that their aggression is consistent with the norms of self-defense. Rising powers, therefore, have room to interpret these norms in an attempt to coerce or persuade others that their actions are legitimate. Likewise, great powers have room to interpret the actions of a rising power, to decide whether they accept or reject a challenger’s claims. This is why the focus of this book is not on whether a rising power’s behavior is legitimate, but rather on the process of legitimation: how actors deploy rhetoric to frame their actions with meaning, and how great powers assess those claims.

Not only is there room for agency, there is room for the strategic use of legitimation claims. Rising powers have a choice of how they legitimate their claims. They may appeal to dominant legitimating principles to persuade their international audience that expansion is not threatening, or to silence their opponents. Alternatively, they may appeal to other sources of legitimacy—principles that appeal to their domestic audiences, or to international revisionist coalitions—rejecting dominant norms as just constraints on expansion. Rising powers choose their reasons carefully, in order to strategically manage reactions to their aims, with the ultimate hope of increasing their power without challenge from opposing coalitions.

Legitimation is thus a strategic but simultaneously rule-oriented process of signaling. To focus on a rising power’s legitimation is not to deny the importance of material power or interests in rising power politics. But by imbuing behavior with meaning, rising powers can strategically shape the perceptions of their intentions in world politics. Legitimation is thus
a critical way rising powers attempt to mobilize support for their own expansion and undercut balancing efforts.

**Legitimation and Collective Mobilization: The Dynamics of Rhetorical Politics**

All states attempt to legitimate their behavior, especially when their actions seem to break the “rules of the game.” Legitimation is ubiquitous in world politics, but for rising powers, it is particularly significant. To begin with, when new powers rise, the demand for legitimation is high. Great powers pay a lot of attention to potential challengers, and rising powers are particularly likely to engage in behavior that demands legitimation. As I argued in the first chapter, all rising powers pursue some expansionist aims: they will seek to modify the territorial status quo, ask that economic institutions be reformed in their favor, and challenge those political rules that seem to restrain their growing power. This means that most rising powers—be they relatively benign or fully revolutionary—are going to break the rules.

Moreover the meaning of a rising power’s revisionism is often indeterminate: it is unclear, on the face of it, whether a rising power’s rule-breaking signals limited intentions or revolutionary ambitions. Because actions do not inherently reveal intentions, great powers will demand an explanation from the rising power: they will ask the challenger to give reasons for its troubling behavior. In so doing, great powers seek answers to two complex questions: is the rising power truly “breaking the rules,” and if so, why. All rules have exceptions, and even rule-breaking can be legitimate, provided there is a good excuse. The second question—why is the power breaking the rules—is perhaps even more important because it gives great powers an indication of what the future will hold: if a rising power flouts the rules, it may signal revolutionary expansion is likely coming; if it embraces the rules, it may suggest that it remains contained within the rules and norms of the international system. Great powers, in essence, look to a rising power’s legitimation strategies to decrease their uncertainty about both current and future intentions.

Legitimation matters for rising powers because these states—perhaps more than others—must worry about collective mobilization in response to their behavior: a rising power legitimizes its behavior because it understands that its audiences, both at home and abroad, will either support or challenge its actions based in part on the reasons behind them. More often than not, rising powers cannot afford to go it alone, using brute force to grab what they want. Rising powers, especially those early in their rise, lack the might to confront the existing great powers. Even if they could manage a confrontation, expanding through coercion carries considerable cost. For this reason, rising powers must pay attention—and ideally manage—the collective mobilization of their adversaries.
By justifying its actions, a rising power hopes to manage its audience’s understanding of its actions and, in the process, shape whether to mobilize against or to allow revisionist behavior. If the existing great powers are going to contain or confront a rising power, they have to convince both their domestic and international audiences that the challenger is a significant threat, one worth bearing the cost of containment or confrontation. If the rising power can give reasons that create questions about whether it is a threat or, better yet, assure its audience that its intentions are benign, then this should have significant effects. If a revisionist action looks legitimate, then alliances will become difficult to mobilize. If a revisionist action is justified, then domestic publics will not be willing to bear the costs of mobilizing against the rising power.

How do the justifications an actor offers shape the prospects of mobilization? A rising power’s legitimations affect great power mobilization through three separate mechanisms. First, legitimation strategies can signal a rising power’s restraint and constraint: they signal that the rising power is not mobilizing its own resources to pursue revolutionary demands and, as a consequence, that the great powers need not mobilize to check it. In contrast, illegitimate demands can provoke the great powers to see the rising power’s actions as revolutionary, even if the revisionism is modest, and cause countermobilization. Second, by means of “rhetorical coercion,” legitimation strategies can prevent an adversary’s attempts to mobilize against it. When a rising power’s demands appear legitimate, this shifts the burden of proof onto its opponent and can even silence more hawkish coalitions who support a confrontational policy. When a rising power’s claims are illegitimate, however, opponents can use the challenger’s revolutionary rhetoric as evidence of threat and a need for mobilization. Finally, legitimation strategies affect mobilization through identity politics as well. Whereas legitimate claims can assuage a state’s sense of its own identity, illegitimate claims present an existential threat to a nation’s identity and prompt an aggressive response.

**Signaling Limited Aims: Restraint and Constraint**

When rising powers legitimate their actions to great powers, they hope to signal their limited aims and ambitions. This can, as Stein argues, “minimize the import of aggression” by explaining expansionist behavior in terms of the existing rules of the international system. A rising power might insist that its revisionist behavior is not revisionist at all, but is instead consistent with the existing norms of international society; for example, invading a state is not an act of aggression if it is done in self-defense. Or, a rising power might concede that it has engaged in aggression—in rule-breaking behavior—but explain why this was an exceptional circumstance, one that won’t be repeated in the future. By persuading other states that its aims are limited, a
rising power attempts to increase certainty that it will not threaten its great power rivals. Because of this, there is no need for great powers to undertake costly containment or confrontation strategies; the normative system already serves as an effective constraint on a rising power.

Other scholars have suggested that rhetoric is integral in signaling limited aims, but it often remains unclear why rhetoric—mere talk—would effectively signal restraint, or how the words actors speak would produce such powerfully binding effects. Here I argue that legitimation effectively communicates restraint because of its role in collective mobilization, particularly in its power to mobilize public support. If a rising power intends to pursue revolutionary aims, it must mobilize massive domestic resources to pursue that foreign policy, and this requires a sustained program of legitimation.20 A state may have the military capacity to conquer adjacent lands, but to galvanize the population to engage in conflict, it must justify the use of violence. A state may have the economic resources to pursue a revisionist agenda, but to ramp up and extract those goods, it must make legitimate appeals to its domestic audiences. It is through legitimation that rising powers produce the resources necessary for a revisionist foreign policy. When rising powers adopt the language of the status quo—when they make appeals to the existing normative order—they signal that they are avoiding these pathways of collective mobilization. For these reasons, language is taken as a credible indicator of restraint in the present: if the rising power eschews a revolutionary language at home, then it cannot possibly mobilize the capacity to challenge institutions on a large scale.

Note that the power of this rhetoric lies in its legitimacy, not in any inherent material cost to the rhetoric. Indeed, when a rising power appeals to status quo rules to justify its foreign policy, great powers may even come to see aggressive and expansionist behavior—what we would think of as “costly” signals of revolutionary aims—as limited and benign. The Monroe administration argued that U.S. incursions into Spanish Florida were consistent with both treaty law and international law governing the acceptable use of force. Bismarck argued that Prussia’s invasion of Denmark in 1864 didn’t undermine, but upheld Concert treaties. In both of these cases, the revisionist interests of the rising powers were not in dispute. Yet, the appeals to norms and rules still suggested restraint, that the rising powers recognized the boundaries of appropriate behavior.

Moreover, legitimation strategies are seen as having a constraining effect on rising powers, signaling not only what the rising power wants now, but what it will want in the future. Legitimation does not only signal intentions at the present; when rising powers give reasons about their actions, they also shape the future pathways of collective mobilization. As Elster notes, public legitimation creates consistency constraints, and if leaders appeal to the status quo in the present, future appeals to revolutionary principles become less likely because any attempt to switch rhetoric down the line will
be costly. Legitimation creates concrete structural obstacles to future mobilization. Appeals to the status quo in the present, for example, can marginalize revolutionary coalitions, both at home and abroad, and remove them as a potential support for aggressive action in the future. These legitimations can activate alliances with status quo powers and sever ties with revisionists, thus sidelining these actors as potential partners in future expansion. The restraining and constraining effects of legitimation strategies, in other words, is no chimera. By defining actions as limited, legitimation suppresses collective mobilization at home and places very real constraints on a rising power’s behavior.

DEMOBILIZING THE OPPOSITION: THE POLITICS OF RHETORICAL COERCION

Legitimation strategies work through rhetorical coercion: when rising powers legitimate their actions, they can deprive opposing actors of grounds on which to mobilize the resources for a strategy of confrontation or containment. Rising powers do not legitimate their expansion in a vacuum. As argued in chapter 1, the process of legitimation is dialogical. When a rising power attempts to justify its foreign policies, it will face counterclaims, actors that hope to offer alternative explanations for a rising power’s behavior. When Hitler’s Germany began to rearm, “antiappeasers” desperately tried to undermine Hitler’s arguments that his policies were justified by principles of self-determination, in hopes of mobilizing British support for containment or even confrontation. When the United States expanded into Spanish Florida, it provoked a debate among Europeans about the true reasons behind the aggression. If Spanish leaders could frame American expansion as an illegitimate attack on its territory, it could demand that its Concert allies mobilize against the illegal aggression. Legitimation is a rhetorical battle, and the stakes of the outcome are high. If a rising power’s opponents can portray its aims as illegitimate, they will be more likely to pull together domestic coalitions that supports the cost of containment and confrontation.

When a rising power legitimates its claims, it aims to undercut the mobilization of its potential opponents against its expansion. If a great power hopes to contain or confront a rising challenger, it must muster its forces, both at home and abroad. Containment and confrontation, as Schweller argues, incur large domestic costs. As a result, elites must rationalize a program of containment and confrontation, giving good reasons for why the public must bear the cost of an active foreign policy. If a rising power claims it is acting in ways consistent with long-held policies—if it argues it is upholding the very principles the potential balancer claims to defend—the rising power can undermine domestic support for active balancing behavior. Legitimation strategies undercut international
mobilization as well. Rising powers can use legitimation as a rhetorical “wedge strategy,” using justifications designed to drive apart a potential balancing alliance. Bismarck’s appeals, as described in chapter 4, successfully kept Austria and France from containing Prussia’s growing power. In the early nineteenth century, the United States strategically used language with an eye toward separating Britain from the conservative continental powers. In each of these cases, by portraying their actions as legitimate, they prevented the great powers from mobilizing to constrain their growing might.

Legitimation strategies can thus deprive opponents of the reasons to bear the costs of containment and confrontation. At the very least, a rising power can shift the burden of proof to its opponent; portraying revisionist actions as legitimate removes the reasons for mobilizing against the challenger. In this case, if a rising power claims it is acting in ways consistent with long-held norms—if it argues it is upholding the very principles the potential balancer claims to defend—this invalidates any reason for mobilization against the rising power. At the extreme, rising powers can even silence their opponents, making it impossible to oppose a rising power’s claims—which is key to setting a rhetorical trap.22 This is when a rising power uses its opposition’s rhetoric against it, speaking the same words as their potential adversary, but using them to justify its expansionist policies. Under these conditions, politicians fear that any attempt to contain or confront the rising power will create hypocrisy costs, which Kelly Greenhill defines as “symbolic political costs that can be imposed when there exists a real (or perceived) disparity between a professed commitment to . . . international norms, and demonstrated state actions that contravene such a commitment.”23 Because of this, potential balancers become trapped in their own rhetoric, unable to balance a rising state even if it is in their interests. In sum, by shifting the burden and trapping hawkish voices, rising powers can use legitimation to increase the cost of mobilization by making it difficult, if not impossible, to justify the costs of containment or confrontation to a domestic or international audience.

LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES AND THE MOBILIZATION OF IDENTITY: EXISTENTIAL PARTNERS, EXISTENTIAL THREATS

A rising power’s legitimation strategies can shape collective mobilization by appealing to an existing great power’s core identity, its “schemas that enable an actor to determine ‘who am I/we are’” as it interacts with others.24 Constructivists argue that a state’s choice of strategy is not simply a matter of capabilities or interests. Rather, a state will strive to adopt strategies consistent with its identity, which allow it to project a coherent image both to its own population and to the international community. For this reason, identities are powerful determinants of strategy. Over time they influence not only
what counts as legitimate governance within a state, but they will be transmitted “to the international arena, enshrining them as dominant standards of legitimate sovereignty and rightful state conduct.”25 For this reason, scholars suggest that great powers are less likely to be threatened by states with which they share an identity. For example, liberal democratic states are more likely to accommodate like-minded risers: Britain was inclined to support the United States in its rise as a hegemon, for example.

Like these constructivist accounts, the legitimation theory here argues that identities shape which strategies are viewed as appropriate, and which are inconsistent with a state’s sense of self, as leaders will feel compelled to maintain “ontological security,” to “choose a course of action comfortable with their sense of self-identity.”26 But this is not to say that identities determine behavior. Identities are neither fixed nor given; they are made and transformed through historical narratives and interactions with other states. Nor are identities easily defined. Most state identities contain myriad contradictions (Britain as a “liberal imperialist,” for example) and these contradictions create space for multiple interpretations of a state’s identity. What this means, in practice, is that “identification” is not a simple process whereby states easily discern who is friend and who a foe. It is, instead, a discursive process in which states attempt to persuade, or even manipulate, their image to an audience.

Rising powers are keenly aware of the role of identity in any state’s foreign policy. Thus, they strategically deploy principles and norms fundamental to the existing great powers with an eye toward influencing the choice for confrontation, containment, or accommodation. In doing so, a rising power’s legitimation can have two key effects. First, these identity appeals can be deeply coercive, and indeed operate much like the rhetorical traps described above. If a state identifies itself as a champion of nations, for instance, it will find it difficult to mobilize against a rising power expanding in the name of nationalism. Likewise, a liberal democratic state might find it impossible to mobilize against a challenger when “expansion” is framed as “liberation.” In these cases, the rising power increases the chance that, if a great power adopts confrontation or containment, it would undermine its sense of self. While this mechanism might seem similar to rhetorical coercion, they are in fact different mechanisms. With rhetorical coercion, legitimation increases the political costs of mobilization. In contrast, with identity claims legitimation strategies raise not the rational but the existential costs of mobilization against a rising power. It is not simply that states incur domestic or international costs by acting hypocritically, although this certainly may be part of the problem. Some actions would contradict a state’s reason for existence, creating an unmanageable sense of existential anxiety.27 Under these conditions, accommodation is the only solution.

Identity appeals are not only coercive, however. When a rising power appeals to the identity of another state, the legitimation strategy carries a
promise of partnership as well. By appealing to core principles of a state, the rising power communicates that it is willing to shore up rules and norms that are essential to a state’s identity. By legitimating foreign policy in terms of a shared identity, the rising power suggests that it aspires to become a peer, not only in terms of power, but in terms of principle, and will work with the great powers to preserve and protect the existing content of the international system. The language of identity is thus a potent weapon in a rising power’s rhetorical arsenal. But appeals to identity can have a dangerous side as well. If the model here is correct, then the use of illegitimate rhetoric should do far more than suggest a great power’s material interests are under threat. If legitimate claims assuage a great power’s ontological security, illegitimate claims can provoke an existential crisis among the great powers, a sense that its survival is at stake if the new challenger is allowed to rise. Indeed, if the legitimation process operates as detailed here, illegitimate claims should lead to extraordinary efforts to mobilize against the rising power, pursuing containment and confrontation even when a rising power’s capacity for harm is anemic and its aims are objectively limited. If rising powers fail to legitimate their claims, their aims will be seen as nonnegotiable, aggressive, and insatiable. Under these circumstances, confrontation and containment is likely, even at a devastating cost to all involved.

All of this suggests that talk is not cheap. Rising powers use legitimation strategies to shape the meaning of events. In doing so, they shape the possibility of collective mobilization by signaling their constraint, coercing their opponents into silence, and appealing to identities so as to assuage the status quo powers’ sense of identity. Through each of these pathways, a rising power can define the meaning of its actions as benign, which undercuts processes of mobilization. In contrast, revolutionary claims will signal aggressive aims, buoy opponents, and even give the appearance of an existential threat, and that gives proponents of confrontation cause to mobilize their publics.

Deft Language, Deaf Ears: When Do Rising Powers Win the War of Words?

Legitimation may be common, but not all justifications are equally effective at influencing collective mobilization. Some leaders of rising powers have effortlessly wielded legitimation strategies as a brutal weapon of realpolitik. Otto von Bismarck, in the years leading up to German unification, and John Quincy Adams, in the early years of American expansion have been hailed for their diplomatic acumen—for their ability to assure their friends and foes alike of their country’s legitimate aims, even as their countries rose to positions of regional hegemony. When other rising powers attempt to legitimate their aims, their attempts seem clumsy, even absurd. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, few states
believed that Putin’s appeals to self-determination were sincere. And then there are times that rising powers, even those with limited aims, flaunt international norms of legitimacy, instead adopting a revolutionary rhetoric that provokes international condemnation. Some rising powers seem surprisingly willing to flaunt international norms, justifying their aims with language that seems illegitimate to an international audience. Once a committed member of international institutions, during the 1930s Japan explicitly rejected the norms of a “Western” order as a constraint on expansion in the Asia Pacific.28

Under what conditions will rising powers successfully legitimate their aims? In other words, when does legitimation work? For rationalist theories, the ability of rising powers to legitimate their actions, and the great powers’ response, should rest on the inherent material costs of the signal: talk makes sense to the speaker and listener because it is connected to a “costly” investment or behavior. The legitimation theory here turns this argument on its head: it is not cost that invests signals with meaning; it is the meaning of the signal that imbues it with cost. It was because the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 was framed as a challenge to the Western order that it became costly. It was because the American invasion of Florida in 1819 was justified as self-defense that it was costless. In these cases, talk was costly, but for reasons that conventional signal models do not explain.

I argue that whether legitimation strategies are effective depends not on their inherent material costs, but on their resonance. Resonance is defined as whether the rhetoric is seen as having “pertinence, relevance, or significance” with a targeted audience,29 and it is a critical concept for theories of language and politics, particularly the literature on framing and collective mobilization.30 In order for legitimation to matter, the appeals have to be heard: it is only when legitimation strategies resonate that they can signal constraint and restraint, set rhetorical traps, and appeal to a state’s identity. Despite the concept’s centrality, resonance remains an elusive concept. We know resonant rhetoric when we hear it. Indeed, that’s the point. At times, a state’s leaders attempt to legitimate its actions, but its language falls on deaf ears: the other powers dismiss justifications as ineffective, unimportant, or insincere. For example, the United States never found an effective justification for its intervention in Iraq, one that appeared as more than window-dressing on its interests. At other times, states struggle to cobble together an effective justification, even though everyone understands the rules of the game. It is tempting to establish the resonance of rhetoric after the fact: we know that a rising power’s legitimation strategies “resonated” when they effectively signaled limited aims, or coerced opponents; those that failed were dissonant. Doing so obviously risks tautology.

Key to explaining resonance is treating it as a relational concept.31 Resonance is not simply an attribute of the rhetoric itself. Someone might
attempt to legitimate violence “in the name of God,” but we cannot determine whether that claim resonates by analyzing the invocation of a divine being. Resonance depends, not only on what is said, but also on the characteristics of the speaker and the audience. In particular, whether a rising power’s legitimation strategies resonate with a great power audience depends on two conditions: whether the speaker is multivocal, defined as having the ability to speak with authority across multiple audiences simultaneously; and whether the great power audiences are institutional vulnerable, and thus believe the normative order it favors is fragile and under attack.

THE RISE OF THE SPHINX: MULTIVOCALITY AND THE POWER OF AMBIGUITY

As argued above, rising powers must pay attention to how they legitimate their expansion. Great powers will demand explanations for revisionist behavior; the wrong response might increase their certainty that the emerging challenger is a threat, and mobilize the great powers against it. For this reason, it would seem that any rising power with limited intentions should appeal to international norms and rules to justify their expansion: with no need to mobilize their population, and with an identity that can assimilate easily within the existing normative order, such rising powers should always deploy the language of the status quo. In contrast, when a rising power’s aims are expansive—when they are revolutionary by nature—their rhetoric should reflect these aims. Perhaps such powers might dissemble for a time, but they must ultimately turn to revolutionary language to mobilize the forces necessary to throw off the shackles of the international order. It seems then like there should be a tight link between intentions on the one hand and justifications on the other.

But the early life of a rising power is not so simple. For rising powers, even ones with limited aims, appealing to dominant international norms to legitimate their foreign policy can be a dangerous game. The government of a rising power—democracies and autocracies alike—often faces domestic opposition, factions that are eager to exploit opportunities to challenge, even overturn, the sitting government. These factions might be ideologically opposed to the international order. Both rising Prussia and the rising United States, cases discussed in later chapters, contained revolutionary factions deeply opposed to the international status quo. In interwar Japan, domestic factions charged that their government had bowed to “Western” institutions, forsaking Japan’s history and culture as a source of world order. Other domestic factions might attack the existing normative order instrumentally, as a means to “outbid” the sitting government for domestic support. Regardless of their intent, radical factions will await their moment to challenge a sitting government. Thus, when a rising power’s leaders appeal
to international norms to justify their expansion to great powers, they run the risk of incurring significant costs to their legitimacy at home.

Further complicating matters, rising powers must appeal to a diverse audience abroad as well. Scholars often focus their attention solely on the signaling that occurs between the rising power and “status quo” great powers. But the international landscape is far more complicated than this. In any international order, there are multiple revisionist states, competing to attract allies who can assist them in their bid to upend the status quo. France under Napoleon III was certainly a member of the lingering Concert institutions, but it also hoped to transform this order into a forum for national rights.\textsuperscript{32}

There are important revisionists among “minor” powers as well. Eastern Europe of the 1930s was populated with revisionist states—Hungary, Romania, and Poland among them—eager to press irredentist claims.\textsuperscript{33} Even “benign” or “limited-aims” rising powers will be reluctant to sever ties with these potential revisionist allies. Much has been made about great powers’ uncertainty about a rising power’s intentions, but rising powers are also uncertain about the intentions of their potential adversaries. Rising powers will want to keep potential revisionist allies close at hand, lest the “status quo” powers turn on it in the future. If a rising power’s legitimations bind itself too closely to existing great powers, what started as a strategic asset can become a noose around the rising power’s neck.

How to escape this dilemma? The answer is that rising powers must use legitimations that resonate across diverse and even opposed audiences. Only by doing so can they avoid containment and confrontation abroad without encountering fatal resistance, at home or abroad. To appeal to a broad audience, rising powers must be capable of what Padgett and Ansell call multivocal action: they must be able to speak with authority across multiple audiences simultaneously. Multivocality is a function of two factors: a rhetorical content that appeals to multiple legitimating principles, and a speaker positioned with ties to several ideologically diverse coalitions. On the one hand, multivocal legitimations rely on content that uses multiple and even contradictory legitimating principles at once, and thus “can be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives simultaneously.”\textsuperscript{34}

In the case of rising powers, the most important multivocal legitimations are the ones that appeal to existing international rules and norms, yet combine these appeals with revolutionary language that flaunts the status quo in the international system to its more revisionist factions.

Studies of domestic politics, especially in democracies, have stressed the importance of complex and ambiguous appeals. By appealing to multiple principles simultaneously, leaders attempt to forge winning coalitions among domestic coalitions, something crucial when politicians must craft a majority out of multiple factions with divergent interests. George W. Bush, for example, relied on “coded” phrases—such as “compassionate conservative”—that were designed to resonate across disparate—some
would say almost entirely opposed—political factions. To more secular and moderate audiences, “compassionate” appeared to be a check on “conservative” impulses, a suggestion that any far-right policies would be treated as illegitimate if they harmed the social fabric of the nation. To religious coalitions, his appeals to “compassionate conservatism” suggested a spiritual commitment that transcended politics and promised to bring sectarianism to the White House.

So too did Woodrow Wilson cloak his pleas to intervene in Europe in multivocal language. As Jack Snyder argues, Wilson’s rhetoric—especially his appeals to a “League”—were explicitly designed to be heard differently by republican coalitions (who had first advocated a League to Enforce Peace), and by leftist progressives who heard a plan to fundamentally upend a corrupt international order.

Appealing to multiple principles to legitimate their actions gives rising powers claims that resonate across diverse, even ideologically opposed audiences, both at home and abroad. Otto von Bismarck relied on such strategies to justify Prussia’s territorial demands, appealing both to existing Concert norms and emerging standards of nationalism simultaneously. In doing so, Bismarck built an uneasy coalition between status quo and revolutionary coalitions, and staved off a formidable balancing effort from Russia, Britain, and Austria. Bismarck’s contemporary, Napoleon III, also used multiple legitimating principles to justify France’s revisionist demands. Indeed, so sphinxlike was Napoleon’s rhetoric that an exasperated colleague remarked: “One is not at the same time the Son of the Revolution and the equal and beloved brother of the legitimate monarchs, the nephew of the Conqueror Napoleon I and founder of an ‘empire which is peace,’ the elect of the people and the hero... of a military conspiracy, one of the five guardians of the treaties which guarantee the existence of states and the Don Quixote of national principles which overthrow them. And yet Napoleon possessed something of each.”

Moreover, by resonating across both status quo and revisionist constituencies, rising powers can circumvent the constraints legitimation strategies typically impose. Multivocal legitimation strategies loosen binding effects on the rising power, both in the present and future, by keeping multiple paths of collective mobilization open and viable. By refusing to commit to one set of norms, politicians can circumvent charges of hypocrisy. And by presenting multiple visions of a rising power’s identity, these legitimation strategies can elide the psychological and existential costs of legitimation strategies.

Multivocality is not only about content. Invoking multiple legitimations can be a problematic exercise. Actors who attempt to do so risk being labeled as hypocritical at best and deceptive at worst. To speak multivocally, a rising power must have leaders tied to multiple and ideologically diverse domestic and international coalitions: as Padgett and Ansell succinctly argue, “To act credibly in a multivocal fashion, one’s attributed
interests must themselves be multivocal.”  

From the early 1860s onward, Prussian elites—Bismarck in particular—straddled conservative aristocratic and revolutionary nationalist coalitions. The Hohenzollern dynasty was firmly embedded in dynastic political networks, but at the same time, actors within the Prussian monarchy held strong ties to the nationalist movement, ties Bismarck exploited to fulfill his program of a unified German state. Medvedev’s Russia was a fragmented state, yet he himself (and Putin before him) maintained ties with both democratic-leaning liberals and revisionist nationalists and autocrats, leaving many unclear about on behalf of which faction Russian leaders were likely speaking. China’s ties with core liberal institutions, such as the G20 and WTO, sit in tension with its centrality in institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the newly founded Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Holding a position in multiple coalitions makes a rising power’s legitimation credible. The Medicis were masters of multivocality, using their political resources to develop Florence’s social networks into a nascent centralized city-state. Their multivocality depended on their complex position within coalitions. Embedded in multiple coalitions, the Medicis’ intentions appeared inscrutable to their audience, and indeed most elites (mistakenly) thought the Medicis were acting on their behalf. Hitler’s ability to invoke racist justifications to make territorial claims, and yet marry them to principles of European self-determination, worked precisely because he seemed both to have an interest in working with international coalitions, and an interest in mobilizing extreme, revisionist coalitions.

Moreover occupying a complex position gives a speaker the authority—the social capital—to appeal to different legitimation strategies. For example, a rising power might claim that an intervention in another state’s domestic politics is justified in the name of liberal, democratic values. But if the government rests entirely on the shoulders of illiberal autocrats, its leaders will lack the authority to make these claims. A leader advancing her aims in the language of ethno-national rights faces similar constraints: her authority to invoke nationalist tropes depends on her existing ties with nationalist coalitions. For actors to speak multivocally, they must be already associated with these ideological groups, relationships that give them the social capital to speak on behalf of the principles invoked. Bismarck’s ability to persuade the French that he was a nationalist while also telling the Russians he was a legitimist stemmed from the fact that he actually was both of those things. China’s ability to claim that it is acting both in the name of liberal capitalism and in the name of postcolonial resistance is grounded in the fact that it is positioned to make both of these claims effectively.

Multivocality, in short, is key to a rising power’s ability to form resonant legitimation strategies, justifications that appeal to multiple coalitions at home and abroad. If a rising power cannot speak multivocally, it is left with a difficult choice: it can choose to appeal to status quo audiences
and thus encourage accommodation during its rise, or it can turn to revolutionary rhetoric designed to mobilize its revisionist resources, even at the cost of conflict abroad. In most cases, these rising powers will choose the latter option: they will be forced to pay more attention to a domestic audience, especially if the leader’s position is under fire. Only when a rising power’s leaders face minimal internal opposition will they choose to ignore domestic pressures and appeal solely to international norms.

**Great Powers and Institutional Vulnerability**

Whether a rising power’s legitimation strategy resonates also depends on the characteristics of the great power audience. Legitimation is not a one-way street: it depends not only on what is said and who says it, but on the listener as well. In particular, whether legitimation strategies resonate with a great power depends on institutional vulnerability: whether the great power is likely to believe that the norms and principles of order favored by the great powers are weak, under attack, and vulnerable to being overturned.

A great power’s institutional vulnerability has two components. First, there is the state of the normative system itself, particularly whether that system is “settled” or “unsettled.” As argued earlier, the international system contains a dominant set of rules that defines what constitutes acceptable action, and what will be treated as illegitimate. This order might range from informal understandings of appropriate behavior to more formal organizations of global governance. In a settled system, norms that establish legitimacy are widely accepted by the great powers. There is, as Krebs argues, a “common foundation for legitimation.”

The early Concert was “settled”: it rested on, as Paul Schroeder argues, a “mutual consensus on norms and rules, respect for law, and an overall balance among the various actors in terms of rights, security, status, claims, duties, and satisfactions.”

By 1950, the Cold War consensus was a settled system, with the Western powers holding shared and institutionalized understandings about the nature of the enemy, their shared purpose, and the legitimate boundaries of behavior. In unsettled systems, the standards of legitimacy are deeply contested among the powers, and only loosely, if at all, formalized. In the years after the 1848 revolutions, Concert principles became increasingly unsettled, as actors turned to the principles of both nationalism and socialism to challenge the legitimacy of the dominant order. The early Cold War was an “unsettled” normative order: the liberal rules that would come to dominate the system were weak, the rules and principles of free trade and global democracy were not yet established.

To some extent, dominant norms of legitimacy are always vulnerable: it is difficult to think of any system devoid of some contestation over the “rules of the game.” The measure is relative, and we can point to particular
moments when dominant legitimating principles are more vulnerable. An institutional order in its infancy will be less robust than others: states are still investing in the treaties and organizations that will serve as instruments of global governance, and they are unlikely to have eliminated counternarratives of what counts as a “legitimate” order. Likewise, institutional orders are only as strong as the number of great powers that support it. For two decades after the end of the Cold War, liberal legitimating principles were the only global order in town. As China, Russia, and even the United States waiver on these principles, the system becomes more fragile. The normative order may face an “exogenous” shock that unsettles the rules as well. The 1848 revolutions made clear the weaknesses of the conservative Concert order.

Further, “institutional vulnerability” is a characteristic not only of the system but of the great power. Not all states will see that a system is vulnerable or, if they see it, they may not care. Not surprisingly, the states that care most about dominating legitimating principles are those that believe they depend on these institutions for their own influence and security, states whose power relies in part on the persistence of these norms. As Gilpin and others have argued, the rules and norms of the international system are what give great powers their power, influence beyond what their own internal attributes would allow. In the nineteenth century, Britain cared about preserving norms of liberal trade in part because those standards were in its self-interest. Dominant normative systems both reflect and amplify a state’s power.

Other states care about dominant norms for more ephemeral reasons. For example, the creators of an order may feel compelled to protect a dominant institution of rules and norms. Austria was a major force behind the Concert of Europe, and its leaders often identified its own interests with the persistence of those norms. A state might also become socialized into dominant norms over time, as a great power builds multiple ties to the order: as it joins organizations, signs treaties that cement the order’s core principles, and take on a prominent place within institutional governance. Britain was not the creator of the Versailles order, for example, but in the 1920s it became deeply embedded in its institutions and principles, coming to see itself as the key governor of the system.

The more institutionally vulnerable a great power, the more likely a rising power’s appeals to dominant legitimating principles will resonate. The more a great power is institutionally vulnerable, the more likely these states will see a rising power’s appeals to existing principles as an opening to shore up the status quo. Committed to protecting these institutionalized norms, these great powers are more likely to accept the rising power’s legitimation strategies as significant. Indeed, these dependent states are less likely to recognize the multivocal nature of a rising power’s legitimation strategy. Instead of focusing on the contradictions within the multivocal message,
they instead hear a straightforward appeal to their preferred international norms. In the interwar period, Neville Chamberlain often seemed to focus on Hitler’s appeals to self-determination and European stability, and dismiss his more militant appeals as mere pandering to the German public. Contemporary policymakers and scholars alike point to China’s adherence to liberal economic norms, suggesting that these are more representative of China’s “true” interests than its more nationalist and revisionist appeals.

For sociologists and psychologists, such interpretations are not surprising. Both have suggested that how an actor hears rhetoric depends on their social position. The example of “compassionate conservatism” is a case in point. Even when actors can see the ambiguous nature of the claims, they are likely to discount the dissonant message in favor of the resonant one. Actors have what psychologists would call “motivated bias”: the great power hears what it wants to hear and accommodates demands accordingly. But the institutional account here suggests causal processes that go beyond selective hearing. The resonance of the rising power’s legitimation rests not on cognitive pathologies, but on a great power’s particular relationship with existing institutions.

Indeed, if this logic holds, when a great power feels institutionally vulnerable, illegitimate language is more likely to be dissonant: it will be heard as a wholesale rejection of international norms and rules. When a great power is institutionally secure—when it believes that the norms it favors have broad support from other powers—a rising power’s claims are unlikely to prove troubling. But when great powers are institutionally vulnerable, illegitimate claims provoke significant concerns about the weakness of the normative structure. As described below, strong dissonance will likely provoke containment and confrontation, even when the great power has an interest in accommodation, and when the rising power seems to pose little objective threat to the great power. In these circumstances, rhetorical challenges to the status quo shape the perception of threat, so much so that even limited attacks on the status quo seem revolutionary. A realist might suggest that these dynamics are hardly surprising: of course a great power will act to protect or defend its interests against threats. What is threatened here, however, is not the great power per se, but the normative order the great power supports. While at times there might be direct ties between a state’s material interests and the legitimate order, this connection is not necessary to produce perceptions of existential threat.

In sum, a legitimation strategy’s resonance depends on the characteristics of both the rising power and the great power. Combining these two conditions—the rising power’s capacity for multivocality and the great power’s institutional vulnerability—give us four possible worlds of legitimation: a world of strong resonance; a world of strong dissonance; a world of weak dissonance; and a world of weak resonance. In each of these worlds, legitimation strategies’ causal effects—their ability to signal restraint and
Table 1. Four worlds of rising power legitimation and great power strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rising power’s multivocality</th>
<th>Weak resonance</th>
<th>Strong resonance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Great power believes legitimation unreliable, seeks additional information about intentions.</td>
<td>Great power sees restraint, opposition is silenced, and sees rising power as partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>May lead to infighting, policy paralysis. Hedging results.</td>
<td>Accommodation is preferred strategy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great power’s institutional vulnerability</th>
<th>Weak dissonance</th>
<th>Strong dissonance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Great power reads legitimation strategies as weak signal of type.</td>
<td>Great power sees challenger as revolutionary, hawks are emboldened, likely to see existential threat to normative order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Relies on existing order—institutions and allies—to contain the rising power.</td>
<td>Containment and confrontation are preferred strategies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

constraint, their ability to rhetorically coerce, and their ability to shape identities—can be amplified, dampened, or even nonexistent. Table 1 links these conditions with how great powers should interpret and respond to rising powers’ legitimation strategies.

*High multivocality, high vulnerability.* In this quadrant, the leaders of a rising power are multivocal, and their audience perceives their own institutional position as vulnerable. Here legitimation strategies are strongly resonant: the rising power is in the position to legitimate its claims to a broad audience, and the great power is particularly attentive to what the rising power has to say. It is in this world of power transitions that legitimation strategies have their most significant effects. On the one hand, the rising power can manage cross-pressures on its policies, convincing a wide array of audiences that it is acting legitimately. It can both appeal to norms that sound consistent with the existing dominant order and continue to mobilize domestic support at home and revisionist allies abroad. On the other hand, a great power’s institutional vulnerability amplifies the effects of legitimation strategies, and rhetoric becomes more effective in signaling constraint, coercing opponents, and appealing to a great power’s identity. When great powers are vulnerable, they are more likely to believe a
rising power is signaling constraint, even when its strategies are multivocal. Caught in a “window of gullibility,” these vulnerable states are especially inclined to take on risky gambles, to sate a rising power on the basis of ambiguous rhetoric and not much else. They believe they can constrain the rising power in a web of institutions, even when that power gives only ambiguous signals that it will be bound, and more costly material signals suggest otherwise.

This means that even when rising powers are multivocal, their language ambivalent and contradictory, the great powers are likely to adopt conciliatory policies. Moreover, the more institutionally vulnerable the great power, the more effective a rising power’s rhetorical coercion. When a great power is deeply embedded in the norms and principles of an international system, the more likely these norms are to dominate the security discourse of its politicians. Under these conditions, even disputes over grand strategy must be framed in the language of the dominant discourse: opponents might challenge the particulars of a foreign policy, but they cannot challenge the foundational norms on which they rest. This means that these leaders face higher hypocrisy costs for abandoning these principles. Rising powers, for their part, must cross a lower bar of legitimation in order to silence their opponents. Finally, the more institutionally vulnerable the great power, the more potent the existential effects. As Alexander Wendt and Ian John-ston remind us, institutions are not merely material: they have a profound impact on how the great power defines itself as an actor in world affairs. If a great power identifies with the normative order, even multivocal language will appeal to the state.

Overall, under these conditions, great powers are more likely to respond to a rising power’s claims than other states in the international system. Indeed the great power becomes almost irrationally certain about its rival’s intentions, believing that rhetoric is a clear signal of a commitment to the status quo. For this reason, in this quadrant legitimation strategies are likely to lead to strategies of accommodation, even when more objective factors suggest certainty about a challenger is premature or unwise.

Low multivocality, high vulnerability. In the lower right-hand quadrant, we have rising powers that lack the capacity for multivocal rhetoric and great powers that are institutionally vulnerable. In this world, legitimation strategies are likely to be dissonant: legitimation strategies will have a powerful negative effect on how a great power reads the intentions of the challenger. Here, rising powers are likely to reject the norms and values of the international system. As argued above, when rising powers lack the capacity to speak across multiple audiences, they will likely trend toward more revolutionary language, in order to sate revolutionary factions at home and abroad. Without the capacity to act multivocally, even rising powers with limited intentions might make revolutionary claims in order to appeal to a domestic audience.
Institutionally vulnerable great powers, in turn, are likely to take revolutionary talk seriously, even if the rising power poses little direct material threat to its security or interests. When a great power is institutionally vulnerable, it will be unwilling to risk waiting to see if the rising power has limited aims: it will see talk as an attempt to mobilize and overturn the international order. When a great power is institutionally vulnerable, moreover, there are likely hawkish opponents at home who will point to a rising power’s illegitimate claims as a reason to quickly and fiercely mobilize against the revisionist state. And finally, when great powers are institutionally vulnerable, illegitimate claims appear not only menacing, but as an existential threat, one which must be met at any cost.

When legitimation strategies are dissonant, the outcomes are likely to be dangerous, even tragic. The rising power may not really have revolutionary aims: it may simply be wrestling with the dilemma of holding difficult cross-pressures in check. But vulnerable great powers will mobilize their resources against the challenger nonetheless. Indeed, under these conditions legitimation strategies will lead to containment and confrontation, even when a rising power’s actions seem to pose little material threat to a great power’s interest, and even if accommodation is the prudent choice.

**Low multivocality, low vulnerability.** In the lower-left-hand quadrant, legitimation strategies are weakly dissonant: the great power hears that the rising power’s claims are illegitimate and inconsistent with dominant norms, but it does not take these claims as a significant signal of a rising power’s intentions. As in the quadrant described above, rising powers are likely to turn toward language that seems illegitimate to justify their claims; in rare cases, the power might appeal to the status quo, but only when it is domestically secure. In this quadrant, however, the great powers occupy a secure position: they believe the institutional order is settled, and unlikely to be overturned through a rhetorical challenge.

This is not to say that legitimation strategies do not matter at all in this world. They are weakly dissonant. The great powers will be concerned that the rising power is mobilizing its own population beyond what limited aims will require. Hawkish factions will point to the rising power’s rhetoric as evidence that the state should be on guard against a challenge. The rising power’s attack on a great power’s identity will be seen as evidence that the challenger is unlikely to become a suitable partner in protecting the existing order. Yet in this quadrant, the legitimation process is likely to resemble a more rationalist world of signaling and reassurance. The great power might see a threat, but it will be able to count on the resilience of the dominant order to secure its interests. It will assume that its allies will contain any threat to the order. It will count on international institutions to constrain significant challenges. There is no need, in these circumstances, for rash or costly behavior. Under these conditions, the great powers are likely to turn to strategies of containment, biding their time for other more costly signals of a rising power’s aims.
High multivocality, low vulnerability. In this quadrant, the leaders of a rising power are multivocal, and are thus able to use multiple legitimation strategies simultaneously. But while this ability can appeal across a wide audience, it does not resonate as strongly as when the great power is institutionally vulnerable: although great powers will find some of the content of the legitimation strategies salient, great powers that are secure in their position are unlikely to see the rhetoric as a credible sign of intentions. They may even see the contradictions in the rising power’s legitimation strategy as a sign that the rising power is attempting to sate both a status quo and a revolutionary audience. As in the “low multivocality, low vulnerability” quadrant above, legitimation strategies are not resonant enough to resolve certainty over a challenger’s intentions.

Instead, great powers are likely to see this as a situation of “pooling equilibrium,” where both limited aims and revolutionary rising powers are likely to use similar legitimation strategies, and thus talk is not a good indicator of type. It may be the case that a rising power that uses multivocal language in a threat, attempting to mobilize its population and challenge the status quo while avoiding punishment. It may also be the case that the rising power’s leaders, concerned with their own vulnerability, are attempting to appeal to its own domestic population out of political insecurity. For this reason, in this world, legitimation strategies do little on their own to decrease uncertainty.

This is not to say that legitimation strategies have no effect, however. Even when a great power is secure, multivocality may be enough to maintain a useful uncertainty about a rising power’s intentions. A rising power’s ambiguous rhetoric may be used as evidence by both hawks and doves about the rising power’s aims: those that wish to contain or confront a rising power will point to the revolutionary rhetoric as a sign of threat; others will argue that the rising power’s appeals actually signal restraint. In the midst of this uncertainty, great powers may find it difficult to mobilize their own populations and alliances around a coherent strategy, and instead fall prey to dynamics of “underbalancing.” Domestically, great powers will be unable to galvanize their own publics to counter an ambiguous threat. Internationally, allies will disagree over the intensity of the threat and see the situation as uncertain enough that “buckpassing” becomes the preferred strategy. While legitimation strategies are not completely resonant in this world, a rising power’s multivocality allows it to maintain uncertainty about its intentions and undercut a forceful countercoalition.

**Legitimation in Practice: Testing The Theory**

The chapters that follow present four case studies of rising powers and the legitimation process. Chapter 3 looks at Britain’s decision to accommodate the rise of the United States in the early nineteenth century. As argued in
the chapter, the early nineteenth century, often ignored in international relations scholarship, was a critical moment in Britain’s strategic response to America’s rise. In 1817, Britain had already fought two wars with the nascent republic and had come to see the United States as a potential great power. While British leaders saw gains to be had in engaging the United States, it also feared buoying a revolutionary power on the continent. Whether to accommodate or contain American expansion depended on what type of power the United States would become: whether the rising challenger appeared as a liberal partner in the Western Hemisphere, or an unpredictable revolutionary, intent on spreading republican principles abroad. The chapter argues that it was U.S. leaders’ careful use of multivocal rhetoric—its mix of legal and revolutionary rhetoric—that proved decisive. Because the Monroe administration appealed to norms and rules dear to the British, who were eager to institutionalize these rules in the Western Hemisphere, the rising power convinced its rival to see its expansion as legitimate.

Chapter 4 takes up the accommodation of Prussia in the late nineteenth century. From 1864 to 1871, Prussia mounted a series of wars that fundamentally altered the balance of power in Europe, yet no coalition emerged to check Prussia’s rise. Rather than confront Prussian demands, the great powers allowed Prussia to unify the German states under Prussian rule. Not only did this upset the balance of power; it upended the Concert system, reorganizing the German states around principles of popular nationalism. While some have portrayed German unification as practically inevitable, this study argues that the European powers were poised to check growing Prussian power in 1863, as a crisis escalated over German claims to Schleswig-Holstein. Yet, although states like Austria and France had a profound interest in containing Prussia’s expansion, ultimately they stepped aside, and even aided Prussia’s invasion of Danish territory. Russia and Great Britain, two states that had stymied Prussian expansion in the past, decided to remain on the sidelines as well and not mobilize against the expanding power. Like much of the traditional historiography on German unification, the case focuses on the diplomacy of Prussian minister-president Otto von Bismarck as essential to Prussia’s successful rise, noting particularly his skillful use of rhetoric that appealed to conservatives and nationalists alike. The chapter argues, however, that the power of rhetoric cannot be reduced to Bismarck’s genius: it was the minister-president’s multivocality, combined with the vulnerability of his audience, that made Prussia’s expansion possible.

Chapters 4 and 5 take up failures of legitimation. The third case of the book, Britain’s interwar policy toward Germany, is particularly valuable because it involves a substantial change in grand strategy, and the vast literature on this case makes it ideal for seeing whether legitimation theory adds value to conventional accounts of rising powers and accommodation. No doubt that, before 1938, British foreign policy was a seminal case of
accommodation. Few grand strategies have been more scrutinized than Britain’s decision to appease Nazi Germany. From 1933 to 1938, as Germany grew more belligerent, Britain eschewed confrontation and instead attempted to settle German demands through concession and compromise. But by late 1938 Britain came to the conclusion that accommodation of Nazi Germany was impossible, and that the expanding power must be met by force, even at substantial cost to the British Empire. The chapter here suggests that it was Hitler’s shift from a multivocal strategy—one that combined legal justifications with German nationalism—to more militaristic appeals that rejected the legitimacy of the Versailles order, that drove the change in British strategy.

The final case—the rise of Japan—allows us to explore a case where a great power, the United States, adopted strategies of containment and confrontation. It is a clear case where attempts to legitimate expansion were unsuccessful. Japan, after a period where it had had expanded without much if any reaction from the great powers, found itself facing condemnation when it invaded Manchuria in 1931. An intense effort to legitimate this expansion proved futile, as Japan’s revolutionary rhetoric unnerved the existing great powers, especially the United States. This case allows us to unpack why it is a power would use revolutionary rhetoric, and why the United States would respond so vehemently to Japan’s claims when it arguably faced a more pressing threat in Europe.

These four cases were selected from the universe of all rising powers from 1815 to the present, outlined in table 2. I identified significant rising powers as those states that exhibited a sustained and substantial increase in their share of power relative to the other great powers in the system. The table also identifies the great power’s strategies in response to the emerging challenger, and whether the great power chose to contain, confront, or accommodate the rising power. There are some cases where great powers adopt a mix of strategies toward a rising power. States who choose to accommodate rising powers will not leave themselves entirely vulnerable, and will of course invest considerable resources in ensuring their own security. Containment, likewise, is bound to involve some moments of negotiation and compromise. What the table indicates, then, is a great power’s dominant strategy over the period of a rise. If there are cases of hedging, these are explored in the empirical chapters. In multipolar systems, moreover, there might be multiple and divergent responses to a new power’s emergence. For this reason, in those cases I break down responses dyadically.

The cases represent seminal cases of rising powers in international politics. Not only does this mean these cases are significant in their own right, but it also means that, in each case, the legitimation theory must address a number of specific alternative explanations. Each of the chapters engages with explanations consistent with the politics of harm and the politics of interest. But in each individual case, there are also unique historical
## Table 2. Rising powers and great power strategies, 1815–2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rising power</th>
<th>Period of rise</th>
<th>Great powers (most significant in bold)</th>
<th>Great power strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1783–1822</td>
<td>Britain, Russia, France</td>
<td>Britain: containment and confrontation, 1783–1817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia</td>
<td>1860–71</td>
<td>Britain, Russia, Austria, France</td>
<td>Russia &amp; Austria: accommodation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Britain: mixed strategy (accommodation and containment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1870–1917</td>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>United States: accommodation, 1905–17</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States: containment, 1917–20</td>
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<td>United States: accommodation, 1920–31</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>United States: containment to confrontation, 1931–45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany,</td>
<td>1933–38</td>
<td>Britain, France</td>
<td>1933–38: accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1938–45: confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union</td>
<td>1920–50</td>
<td>United States, Britain</td>
<td>Containment/Confrontation (with the exception of World War II, 1940–45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1950–91</td>
<td>United States, Soviet Union</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1996–2012: accommodation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2012–present: hedging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explanations to contend with as well. Any attempt to explain accommodation of Hitler’s Germany, for example, must wrestle with the argument that Britain simply had no capacity to confront or contain Germany. Any attempt to explain the accommodation of the United States must show that this strategy was not simply determined by economic interests or shared liberal identity. If the legitimation theory can offer insight into these critical cases, then it increases the value-added of its claims.

The cases also allow for significant variation on choice of great power grand strategy, both within and across cases, and variation in the two factors that determine the resonance of legitimation strategies: the characteristics of the rising power (multivocality) and the great power’s institutional vulnerability. As seen in table 2, the book provides cross-case variation on
each of the conditions. There is in-case variation as well. While each of the chapters discusses rhetoric, chapter 5, in particular, contains an in-depth analysis of changing rhetorical strategy, tracing Hitler’s reliance on a multi-vocal strategy in the years before the Munich crisis, to his abrupt shift in rhetoric in the fall of 1938. Likewise, while each of the chapters contains an analysis of institutional vulnerability, chapter 4 compares the different positions of the four great powers—Britain, Austria, Russia, and France—as a means to demonstrate how different positions affect the causal mechanisms of restraint, rhetorical coercion, and identification.

In each of the cases, the goal is to construct as hard of a test of the legitimation theory as possible. This is important because, although we refer to rising powers as unique cases, each historical instance of a rising power provides innumerable instances of legitimation. Indeed in some of these cases, powers are rising from twenty to fifty years. It might be possible to cover the entire course of a rising power’s history in a chapter, but it would not allow for much in-depth analysis of legitimation strategies and their effects. To hone in on the signaling process, I looked at crises that are seen, both by contemporaries and historians, as turning points in the relationship between the great power and emerging challengers. To identify a turning point, I looked for moments where it was apparent that a state was significantly increasing its power, and where both the existing historiography and primary documents suggest that great powers perceived the rising power as a potential threat, but also believed the rising power was weak enough that they could have successfully contained or confronted the emerging challenger.

Table 3. Placing the cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rising power’s multivocality</th>
<th>Great power’s institutional vulnerability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak resonance</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia-Britain (1864)</td>
<td>High (1817–23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany-Britain (1933–38)</td>
<td>Japan-United States (1905–17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia-Austria (1863–64)</td>
<td>Japan-United States (1920–31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia-Russia (1863–64)</td>
<td>Germany-Britain (Autumn 1938–40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In practice, I chose to focus on a specific crisis during each great power’s rise. It shouldn’t be surprising that crises present moments where legitimation efforts are likely to be most intense. It is precisely those moments when norms seem to be violated—in this case, when a rising power commits an act of aggression—that the power will be most likely to justify its actions to a broad audience.\footnote{50} It is also during a crisis when audiences are most likely to be listening to a rising power’s reasons for its expansion. Crises are often difficult and chaotic affairs, where actors are searching for information in any place they can find it. In other words, if legitimation is going to matter, it’s going to matter in a crisis. At the same time, crises also should also be “hard cases” for the theory here. During a crisis, rhetoric operates along-side extremely costly signals of aggressive intentions, such as mobilization and offensive military action. If legitimation shapes policies here—if cheap talk matters even at moments of conquest—then this should be particularly robust evidence of the theory.

No social science concept lends itself to easy operationalization. Yet, the concepts used in the theory here—legitimation, multivocality, and institutional vulnerability—may seem particularly slippery. Some messiness is unavoidable, but each chapter attempts to lay out the causal narrative in two parts: it identifies the rising power’s legitimation strategy and whether or not it resonates, using evidence to establish the key factors of multivocality and institutional vulnerability; and, second, it uses process tracing to demonstrate the causal effects of legitimation, drawing from a variety primary and secondary sources to trace how legitimations restrain great powers, coerce opponents, and affect identities.

To establish a rising power’s legitimation strategies and their resonance, I draw from published and unpublished diplomatic documents, transcripts a rising power’s leaders’ speeches, diaries and memoirs, biographies, and secondary historical sources. Legitimation, of course, cannot just be reduced to “talk.” We are looking specifically at the justifications for action, for the appeals to public rules and norms that leaders deploy. These statements should be relatively public in nature. They need not be announced in front of large audiences, but they should be stated to a particular audience (in other words, statements of reasons that were entered in private entries in diaries, unless they described an instance of public legitimation, were not considered evidence for this theory). Finally, the study here is interested in patterns of legitimation, not one-off justifications of aims. To count as a legitimation, the rhetoric deployed had to occur consistently.\footnote{51}

To establish the resonance of legitimation strategies, I both needed to identify which rising powers had the capacity for multivocal action and to determine which great powers were institutionally vulnerable. To operationalize “multivocality,” I relied on two techniques. First, to measure multivocal content, I drew from the toolkit of qualitative content analysis
outlined above, looking to particular words and phrases to see if a rising power’s legitimation strategies mixed “dominant” international principles with other contradictory reasons for its actions. Second, to establish whether leaders had the capacity to use multivocal legitimation strategies, I relied on methodological techniques drawn from qualitative network theory in order to map actors’ connections with coalitions. Was the leader of a rising power, for example, credibly associated with multiple domestic constituencies? Did the rising power have strong institutional ties—treaties, economic relations, alliances—across multiple states and institutions in world politics? The more a rising power’s leaders had ties to multiple coalitions, the more certain I could be that the actor could speak multivocally.

Institutional vulnerability is designed to capture whether the norms and principles of order favored by the great powers are weak, under attack, and vulnerable to being overturned. For instance, are there “objective” indicators that the dominant normative system was vulnerable? As discussed in an earlier section, an institutional order in its infancy will be less robust than more “settled” others. Likewise, institutional orders are only as strong as the number of great powers that support it. For example, if there was heterogeneity among the great powers in the international system—variation in regime type, or in ideological commitments—then I treated this as evidence that the system was vulnerable. Likewise, I looked to see if there were likely challengers in the great power ranks that could upset the status quo. Moreover, the cases looked for evidence that the great powers believed the order to be vulnerable? In contemporary U.S. politics, the pages of newspapers and journals are filled with speculation about the resilience of the current order. These debates are not unique to the current era: similar debates occurred, both in public and private, over the vulnerability of the Concert system, the Washington Treaty system in the 1930s, the League principles, and so on.

Finally I also needed to measure how legitimation strategies shaped collective mobilization through the three mechanisms of signaling constraint, rhetorical traps, and of existential threats and promises. Is there evidence of “signaling constraint”? Do we see politicians adopting different foreign policies in light of a rising power’s rhetoric? Do politicians—in public debates or in private—refer to a rising power’s rhetoric in justifying balancing or accommodating policies? Is there evidence of “rhetorical traps”? Do we find evidence of politicians saying they are locked into positions because of policies they have articulated in the past? Finally, what evidence is there of threats to a great power’s identity? Do we see examples of politicians avoiding balancing policies, because they are afraid these would contradict deeply held principles and ideologies?

To trace each of these mechanisms, I relied heavily on diplomatic documents and contemporary media reports. Unpublished diplomatic documents proved to be particularly important because, not only did they include descriptions of policies, they often contained discussions and arguments
among the actors in charge of formulating the policy. In these cases, I could look to see what role, if any, a rising power’s rhetoric played in these assessments of the rising power’s intentions. I also traced mechanisms through an analysis of major newspapers, and how they recorded the great power’s response to the crisis. Newspaper editorials, in particular, provide significant insights into the interpretation of a rising power’s intentions, particularly at moments of crisis. Through these sources, then, I could trace the public reaction to what rising powers claim about their demands, and whether these seem to mollify concerns about intentions or raise the specter of existential threat.

Although the research draws on primary documentation, each case is deeply embedded in a secondary historical literature. No project that attempts to compare cases over time and space can completely rely on primary sources, and each of the chapters rests on the shoulders of historians. Where there are departures from the historiography in these cases, I identify them, and give reasons why readers should support my interpretation. Where there are schisms in the historiographical literature, I make note of these as well, and explain where my argument is particularly dependent on a contentious interpretation of events.

If the cases here are successful, they will demonstrate that when a rising power can prove itself right, it is more likely to accumulate might and emerge as a new great power unchecked by potential rivals. How all of this plays out in the real world of rising powers is the subject to which we now turn.