

# Roleplay, realpolitik and ‘great powerness’: the logical distinction between survival and social performance in grand strategy

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## Abstract

States exist in an anarchic international system in which survival is the necessary precursor to fulfilling all of their citizens’ other interests. Yet states’ inhabitants – and the policymakers they empower – also hold social ideas about other ends that the state should value and how it should pursue them: the ‘role’ they expect their state to ‘play’ in international politics. Furthermore, such role-performative impulses can motivate external behaviours inimical to security-maximization – and thus to the state survival necessary for future interest-fulfilment. This article therefore investigates the tensions between roleplay and realpolitik in grand strategy. It does so through interrogation of four mutual incompatibilities in role-performative and realpolitik understandings of ‘Great Powerness’, a core – but conceptually contested – international-systemic ordering unit, thereby demonstrating their necessary logical distinctiveness. The argument is illustrated with brief case studies on the United States, China, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan. Identification of such security-imperilling role motives thus buttresses neoclassical realist theory; specifically, as an account of strategic deviation from the security-maximizing realist baseline. Such conclusions carry important implications for both scholarship and statecraft, meanwhile. For once we recognize that roleplay and realpolitik are necessarily distinct incentive structures, role motives’ advocates can no longer claim that discharging such performative social preferences necessarily bolsters survival prospects too.

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## Keywords

Realism, constructivism, realpolitik, role theory, socialization, power

In realist international thought, there is no higher imperative than safeguarding state survival. State security protects citizens in an anarchic system, and so is the necessary precursor to all other goods. Yet as even avowedly ‘structural’ realists – those who privilege relative capability distributions over individual states’ ‘contents’ in explaining international politics (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979) – recognize, in moving from systemic outcomes to individual units’ behaviour, those contents have substantial causal effects (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007; Waltz, 1967).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, those ‘contents’ – the people making a state’s policies and the (s)electorate empowering them – hold social ideas about what else the state should value and how it should advance those values in international politics: the ‘role’ they want their country to ‘play’ in the world. And sometimes, such role motives drive states towards strategic choices that diminish or imperil their own security: the very precursor to fulfilment of their other interests.

This article therefore presents a role-derived neoclassical realist account of grand-strategic ‘error’ (Schweller, 2004: 168).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it demonstrates that roleplay is an analytically distinct incentive structure from doing what it takes to survive in an anarchic international system (realpolitik)<sup>3</sup> – and that those distinct incentives can produce strategic deviation from a realist baseline of maximizing state survival prospects. Describing such role-motivated choices as ‘error’ is not a pejorative judgement; role-performative pressures can be powerful for good reasons, and such choices are therefore eminently defensible. That said, it acquires normative-prescriptive connotations when role-motivated reduction of the state’s material security itself negatively affects citizens’ welfare.

Why does such a contribution matter? After all, roleplay and realpolitik may align much of the time; discharging particular social-behavioural expectations *can* improve states’ survival prospects under certain mutually reinforcing conditions. Role advocates contend, meanwhile, that the two are actually synonymous: that performing a particular normative role in world politics *delivers* national security.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, however, roleplay and realpolitik pull in *different* directions; the desire to fulfil a set of social-behavioural expectations instead *diminishes* national security and complicates long-term survival prospects. The article illustrates this with the following three case-pairs: the United States/China, the United Kingdom/France and Germany/Japan. For scholars, explaining role-performative impulses’ divergence from realpolitik imperatives illuminates both state behaviour and the systemic outcomes that follow. For practitioners, meanwhile, recognition of different behavioural motivations – and the tensions, trade-offs and contradictions that role-performative impulses versus realpolitik imperatives can entail – may improve prospects for making strategic choices that adequately fulfil ideational preferences without simultaneously harming their state’s relative power, provoking or inviting unnecessary confrontations, and ultimately jeopardizing long-term survival.

The article achieves this analytical demarcation by scrutinizing the ideal-type of ‘Great Power’. Such ‘powerness’ is a crucial concept in International Relations (IR), yet it carries different meanings in different explanatory approaches. ‘Great Power’ is not the only role states want to play, nor is it a role available to all states (Holsti, 1970) – but it has particular analytical value to the roleplay versus realpolitik question. In particular, role-performative and realpolitikal understandings of ‘Great Power’ set different thresholds on both capability and behaviour; they therefore cannot be treated interchangeably. Identifying this dissimilarity shows that roleplay and realpolitik cannot be identical either, meanwhile. For if role-performative and realpolitikal understandings of a crucial international-systemic ordering unit (‘Great Power’) cannot simultaneously apply analytically, then the social-ideational desire to perform a particular international role and the material-structural imperative to survive cannot simply mean the same thing (i.e. continuing to survive cannot simply be treated as *part* of role, thereby exonerating policymakers who contend that ideational motivations never imply hard trade-offs with national security). So, while role preferences and survival requirements *may* align, such alignment is neither necessary nor assured, permanent nor irreversible.

The article first contrasts social-constructivist and structural-realist understandings of ‘Great Power’.<sup>5</sup> Second, it identifies why the two are logically antonymous. Third, it locates role-performative motives as a source of grand-strategic ‘error’ within neoclassical realism, identifying that whether roleplay and realpolitik are complementary or competitive depends on whether their ‘production’ is mutually reinforcing or otherwise.<sup>6</sup> Fourth, it illustrates its argument using the three case-pairs described earlier. It concludes with implications for theory and policy.

## **Social construction versus material condition: what is a ‘great power’?**

Norms, identities, values, culture, and the role preferences they engender are seen motivating state behaviour throughout international politics (Klotz, 1995; Hopf, 1998: 174–177).<sup>7</sup> A role ‘is the set of expectations attached to the behaviour of an actor in a given *social* situation, like “father” or “customer”’ (McCourt, 2014a: 160, emphasis added). Roles are thus derived from identities, but also distinct, as the behavioural expectations that follow. Performing or discharging such social-behavioural expectations begets various kinds of utility; notably esteem, affirmation, and even ideational security (Mitzen, 2006). Role is thus related to – but distinct from – status; the latter prizes relative standing or recognition, while the former is concerned with agential performance (although they can be mutually reinforcing in cases where role performance confers prestige).

This article is not an effort to substantively extend role theory, for insightful findings already exist.<sup>8</sup> Some identify states’ egoistical desire to seek certain roles (Holsti, 1970); others note that – since roles require intersubjective recognition of the ‘part’ being ‘played’ – states only actually achieve them when alter-cast by others (Harnisch, 2011: 7–8; McCourt, 2014b: 26). Either way, role is ideational – and thus socially constructed.<sup>9</sup> The social-behavioural pressures derived from role expectations may be neither fixed nor singular, meanwhile (Thies, 2017 [2010]). States might play multiple roles, with

certain ones salient at certain times, due to exogenous circumstances and/or intentional mobilization (Holsti, 1970: 277). Multiple roles sometimes co-exist smoothly, but might generate domestic contestation (Brummer and Thies, 2015; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012; Jones, 2017) – and such agreed or contested role motives are themselves products of multiple competing pressures.<sup>10</sup> More powerful states may also seek certain roles while disregarding others (Holsti, 1970), highlighting a relationship between material where-withal and social standing.

The central contribution of all such approaches, however – and the salient point for this article – is that states' inhabitants can derive utility (esteem, affirmation, cognitive comfort/security, domestic/international acclaim, and similar 'goods') from fulfilling the international-behavioural expectations produced by social ideas of appropriate conduct, that is, their 'role' in world affairs.<sup>11</sup> This admits a potentially infinite array of roles that states might derive value from performing. But one particular role stands out for those that attempt to provide a preferred order in the system: 'Great Power'. Under role-per-formative approaches, a state is such a 'Power' if other states identify it as one given the ordering role they expect it to perform.

The special role for 'Great Powers' as an exceptional category with both the where-withal – as military powers of the 'first rank' – and the responsibility to use force to uphold international 'order' was advocated by Hedley Bull (1977: 201).<sup>12</sup> Such introduction of a social-behavioural expectation ('responsibility' to uphold 'order') juxtaposes against the simple materialist coding of 'great powerness' utilized by structural realists – that is, relational weighing of the military and latent-military resources that provide the *ultima ratio* of will-enforcement in an anarchic international system – without associated behavioural requirements (Berridge and Young, 1988; Monteiro, 2014: 3; Waltz, 1979: 162).<sup>13</sup> Constructivist international theories, by contrast, embraced and expanded Bull's approach, suggesting that even under international anarchy, social understandings of interstate hierarchy, legitimate behaviour, and intersubjective recognition may shape international behaviour in ways that qualify the exercise of material power (Clark, 1989, 2009; Hopf, 1998; Hurd, 1999; Lake, 1996: 174). Capacity to use force is necessary but not sufficient to qualify as a great power under such approaches, since the 'Great Power' role requires the discharge of certain societal responsibilities to uphold international order (i.e. fulfilment of social-behavioural expectations).

Developing such approaches, Justin Morris (2011) suggests that even 'non-polar' powers – his focus is Britain – retain plausible claims to 'Great Power' role, because they act militarily to uphold international order on a scale greater-than-or-equal-to all bar the United States. David McCourt (2014a: 160) correspondingly dubs France and Britain 'residual' Great Powers. Both use military force – alongside diplomatic trappings of greatness, such as veto-wielding permanent membership of the UN Security Council – abroad in defence of a conception of international order, hence the 'Great Power' role. Their foreign-policy elites and (to an extent) publics are also cognitively and discursively bound by 'Great Power' self-conceptions, despite decline since their relative zeniths. However, this role is 'residual' – a cognitive legacy of historical position and habit (Hopf, 2010) – and relational because it is enabled by particular relationships with the system's greatest power, the United States, and with each other.<sup>14</sup> On this reading, the likes of Britain and France may *already* lack the 'full-spectrum' military capability to

independently enforce regional order (part of Bull's conception), as well as failing Waltz's polarity test. Such relative weakness would not preclude fulfilment of role-defined interests, however, because alliances are *also* part of that role – on this account – and they provide the necessary support to order-upholding military activism (McCourt 2014a: 160).

The flaw in these role-based conceptions of states' 'great powerness' is elucidated by two realist insights: that states (as vehicles for their citizens' security) seek to survive, and that relative power – topped by latent or manifested military capability – is their only reliable means of doing so, given others' potential hostility within an anarchic system lacking reliable rule-enforcement (Copeland, 2000a; Mearsheimer, 2001: 31–36). McCourt, for example, asserts that states' roles are not the same as their interests, ambitions, values, or capabilities (McCourt, 2014a: 166). Yet he also asserts that international-social role *produces* national interests, rather than the other way around (McCourt, 2014a: 174); a further-reaching social-constructivist argument. These two positions expose a tension. The former recognizes that states *can* have interests beyond playing a particular role. Yet the latter suggests that the role itself *creates* the interests; thus, that states *cannot* have interests beyond those constructed by a particular role.

The less contentious point – that playing any international-societal role is one of multiple interests – admits the possibility of a hierarchy of state goals, wherein role remains subordinate to other concerns. On this view, the *most* fundamental interest would remain survival as a sovereign entity with control of its own foreign-policy,<sup>15</sup> since a state that does not survive cannot achieve anything else either (Mearsheimer, 2001: 31; Waltz, 1979: 91–92). Following a 'hierarchy of needs' approach (Maslow, 1943), survival necessitates – as associated interests – human-biological security for the population and some welfare-essential level of economic prosperity. Of course, threats to such hierarchy-topping interests are themselves socially construed – but crucially, all have a material base, physically and biologically independent of social role construction.<sup>16</sup>

Accepting this interest-hierarchy alongside realism's identification of the potential dangers inherent to anarchical international systems would incentivize having not just *some* military capability for role-performance, but *sufficient* capability – where 'sufficiency' is relational, and thus a product of relative power<sup>17</sup> – to conduct survival-essential military missions.<sup>18</sup> And attempting to ensure survival independently – as a 'power' in the realist sense, rather than trusting wholly to allies – may require different national capabilities compared to merely discharging a societal role *alongside* allies.

To be sure, states are freer to indulge preferred social roles when international-systemic pressures are relatively low; they may see fewer security costs weighing against the perceived political benefits of enacting ideational preferences when facing few powerful adversaries, as Washington and its allies have done under US unipolarity (Walt, 2018: 6). Indeed, given that states – especially nuclear-armed or -latent major powers – now rarely 'die' through external aggression (Fazal, 2007), one obvious rejoinder to arguments that roleplay can run contrary to realpolitik is simply that state survival is seldom jeopardized anyway. If true, that would mean that states are free (even emboldened) to fulfil their role preferences without compromising security.

Such rejoinders are flawed, however. Certainly, states enjoying abundant relative power face fewer immediate structural checks on giving rein to ill-thought-through

strategic ideas (Porter, 2018). But the reason that both over- and under-confrontational strategic postures may go unpunished in the post-1945 international system – mutual nuclear threat, and thus deterrence, between major powers (Jervis, 1989) – is the same reason that survival is *always* in *some* degree of jeopardy. Any role-motivated choice that produces even modest additional risk of escalation between states armed with (or capable of generating) nuclear weapons is thus a threat to national security.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, states other than great powers also both want to survive and succeed in doing so. Shrewd alignment with powerful allies, accommodation of others' preferences, and avoidance of confrontation with potential enemies are all elements of effective, security-maximizing national strategy (Geyer, 1986) – especially when doing so allows favourable 'guns/butter' trade-offs (that is, the provision of superior domestic welfare). Over-armament or -assertiveness can also be self-defeating when it provokes counterbalancing (Walt, 1985), as discussed subsequently. In short, survival is multiply realizable through strategies informed by relative power plus information on others' capabilities or motives (Glaser, 2010),<sup>20</sup> with close alliance-dependence – even at the expense of strategic autonomy – readily explicable through *realpolitik*.

Nonetheless, wholesale dependence on external balancing carries risks: of abandonment to others' predations, of coercion by capricious patrons, and of chain-ganging into allies' wars, among others. There are thus good reasons – on realist readings – to want to be able to fulfil your military-security requirements independently (Mearsheimer, 2001: 156–157). Many states simply lack the latent wherewithal to do so, yet that does not mean they lack the supreme interest in survival that realists expect.

Fundamentally, then, this is not an argument about 'greatness' or its absence. There are roles other than 'Great Power' (McCourt, 2014b: 19–57), and states other than great powers also value survival. It is an argument, rather, about what constitutes state interests: performing an international-*societal* role, or safeguarding a hierarchy of *materially* underpinned concerns topped by continued existence. It simply happens that 'Great Power', as a role that both implies certain behaviours *and* carries analytical value as a particular category of systemic ordering unit, illuminates key fault-lines among the ends that states value and the mutual incompatibilities arising between these ends.

## Intersubjectivity or objectivity? Role-performative versus *realpolitik* 'greatness'

This article recognizes that many states' strategic choices are – for better or worse – heavily influenced by social-behavioural expectations, that is, role conceptions. Yet if role is not – as realism demonstrates – the *sole* source of *all* state interests, but merely one subordinate interest among several, this raises questions over how far roleplay and *realpolitik* can simultaneously co-exist in the same state's national strategy.

As noted, 'English School' variants of social IR theory always maintained that great powers must be 'first rank' military powers *and* discharge certain international-social responsibilities to sustain international 'order'. Indeed, enacting such 'responsibility' clearly requires non-trivial armed capability. Taking this position, the presumed tension between roleplay and *realpolitik* in approaches to 'great powerness' might be seen as a



straw-man.<sup>21</sup> For if the capability to independently defend one's own security and prosperity is *part* of what it *means* to be militarily 'first rank' then they may *also* be a part of what it means to be a 'Great Power'. After all, in Bull's conception, great powers are capable of unilaterally exercising local preponderance in their region of concern (Bull, 1977: 213–219), necessarily excluding those without the military wherewithal to do so (Bull, 1977: 203).<sup>22</sup>

More broadly, for Kalevi Holsti (1970: 262–263), remaining an 'active independent' – necessitating sovereign self-defence capability – is *itself* a role. 'Great Power' might also incorporate many of Holsti's other posited roles – 'regional protector', 'defender-of-the-faith', 'balancer' and so forth<sup>23</sup> – which similarly privilege military wherewithal. Christer Jönsson and Ulf Westerlund (1982) even identify 'protector-of-own-state' as a role, thereby coding realism's survival assumption as itself a role behaviour! And in identifying the tensions between 'great power' (giving the United States scope to act alone) and 'hegemon' (which rewards multilateral leadership), Bruce Cronin (2001) treats *both* as roles, despite one (unilateral leeway) owing to material wherewithal and the other (diplomatic leadership) to social choice. Many varieties of realist thought acknowledge behavioural motives beyond mere continued existence, moreover (Waltz, 1993); possible 'greedy' desires *beyond* survival are necessary for there to be doubt over others' intentions and the resulting security dilemmas, for example, as discussed subsequently. Furthermore, role conceptions are often established when and where roleplay and realpolitik align; that is, the pressure to survive creates performative expectations, thereby delivering role-based esteem *and* advancing national survival. Witness the United States' Second World War-derived, Cold War-reinforced notion of global indispensability, Britain's First/Second World War-inspired notion of bastioning Western order where others cannot (preferably by mobilizing US commitment but independently if necessary), and Germany's post-1945 notion that European security is best served by the demilitarization and strategic subordination of itself.

This attempted incorporation of the realist conception *into* the role-based conception and conflation of roleplay *with* relative power is theoretically unsatisfactory, however, for four key reasons. As such, neither the role-based nor realist conception of 'great power' is necessarily wrong; either approach may have explanatory utility, depending on the question (Sil and Katzenstein, 2011).<sup>24</sup> But the two cannot simply be bundled together. This carries fundamental implications for policy, since advocates of role-based motives ('we must do this thing because of who we are') cannot then claim – as per Slaughter (2011) – that their choices are simultaneously motivated by realpolitik ('we must also do this thing for our national security').<sup>25</sup> Role-performative behaviours therefore logically cannot be synonymous with realist national strategy. This does not preclude social preferences and survival requirements happening to align on some given foreign-policy choice. But such happy confluence of *aims* is not the same as identical underlying *motives*.

First, defining great powers as those that discharge certain responsibilities towards international society *and* possess substantial military capabilities sets a behavioural threshold on 'great powerness' that denies international-structural power relations. Rolling international-social 'responsibility' into the definition means that, as Bull admits, the likes of Napoleonic France, Imperial or Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union (at times), and contemporary Russia or China – that is, all of the potentially 'revisionist' states (on an

Anglo-American reading) that have launched devastating global war in the modern era, or could threaten to today – do not behaviourally ‘count’ as great powers. If such states are not great powers, despite their capability to launch catastrophic systemic war, then the definition is useless. Furthermore, this approach cannot account for international-systemic change, because states that seek to overthrow the prevailing balance of power definitionally surrender ‘great powerness’. This may be normatively justifiable when assessing ideational motives – launching systemic war may indeed be reprehensible – but it renders the approach inoperable as an analytical tool of international-structural politics. For if the Second World War was not a ‘great-power war’, because Germany or Japan did not behave as ‘great’ powers ‘should’, then what sorts of competition or conflict between powerful states can the definition cover?

Second, social-performative understandings of ‘great powerness’ focused on the social responsibility (and accompanying means) to use force in support of international order – rather than to actually secure the state against any potential aggressor – put too low a bar on ‘sufficient’ military capability to meet a realpolitikal understanding of ‘great powerness’ because they lack appropriately *relational* thresholds for *relative* power. They therefore do not necessarily incorporate realism’s survival concerns, undermining the idea that roleplay and realpolitik are synonymous. Possessing sufficient force to uphold regional order – however defined – may only require defeating, supporting, or stabilizing minor powers. Indeed, Bull’s ‘regional preponderance’ criterion depends on the relative strength of other regional actors; Australia is better placed to exercise regional preponderance in Australasia than Germany or Russia ever have been in Europe, but Australia is clearly not the greatest power of the three. Monteiro’s criterion – sufficient capability to avoid certain defeat by the system’s most powerful state – is thus integral to any definition focused around survival, but not necessarily integral to definitions premised on order-upholding role. Roleplay expects that survival will follow as a by-product of being an order-upholder; realpolitik anticipates that an ability to uphold international order might follow as a by-product of being powerful enough to independently defend one’s survival. Either might be a useful conceptualization, of course, but they are necessarily non-identical.

Third, the role-performative approach’s assumption that survival is embedded in the requirement to be a ‘first-rank’ military power (Bull’s terminology) does not specify the *relative* threshold vis-à-vis other states – of either aggregate power or specific operational capabilities – required to defend vital state interests. Accordingly, ‘first-rank’ cannot tell us whether a ‘power’ meets the systemic criterion of defeat-avoidance; it is meaningless to discuss states’ ‘capabilities’ without considering what specific missions they must be ‘capable’ of. Even at the height of Cold War bipolarity, the United States and Soviet Union were still very different sorts of military power, yet each was unambiguously ‘great’ (understood as being capable of balancing the other).<sup>26</sup> Role-performance may thus require one military toolkit – enough expeditionary capability to contribute to upholding regional order, say – while survival-defence may require quite another. Again, the two conceptions of interests are not synonymous and therefore neither are the external *policies* motivated by these divergent *understandings* of interest.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, the argument that ‘great powerness’ is based on both the intersubjective recognition of international-social role *and* on meeting certain material-capability prerequisites is self-contradictory. It may be empirically and normatively



tempting to assert that both power *and* behaviour matter, of course, for ‘great powerness’ is often empirically or normatively associated with both abundant capabilities *and* particular international behaviour. But *logically*, the two cannot co-exist in the same definition. For if there is a material-capability threshold to be met, that creates the possibility that a state could falsely be perceived by others as a ‘great power’ – despite not meeting some required capability threshold – because onlookers were simply confused or misled. Performing a social role thus does not in itself *constitute* ‘great powerness’ in the absence of some relational configuration of material capabilities. Conversely, if intersubjective recognition of international-social role performance *does* in fact constitute ‘great powerness’, then there cannot *also* be external material criteria to meet before a state can be considered a ‘great power’, *provided* that its fellows regard it as such.<sup>27</sup>

The internal incompatibility of the role-recognition and capability-threshold approaches can be illustrated by a brief counterfactual. It is probably fair to say that nobody still considers the contemporary Netherlands a great power. Yet *why* is the Netherlands not still perceived as a great power? After all, it has a proud military tradition still characterized by international activism; close relations with ‘residual-power’ Britain and France (plus an unambiguous great power, the United States, through NATO); and, crucially, it still deploys *some* power-projection capability to defend a conception of international order.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it was *once* seen as a great power. The role-based explanation to account for this change from ‘major’ to ‘minor’ power is thus circular; the Netherlands is no longer seen as a great power – despite these various attributes – simply because it is no longer seen as a great power.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, a theory based on whether others ascribe great-power status to a state must give way to a theory of relative material capabilities when it attempts to account for changes in that status. Either the role *constitutes* the ‘great powerness’ *or* the capabilities do; the two cannot be identical.<sup>30</sup>

As even foundational proponents recognized, therefore, role conceptions do not explain everything (Holsti, 1970: 298). Contra Jönsson and Westerlund, ‘defender-of-self’ cannot simply be treated as an element of role if social motives are to retain any explanatory power. For if mere continued existence is defined as role-performance, then the approach’s potential insights – such as why states behave in ways *not* simply governed by desire for continued existence, but by social expectations or prescriptions of appropriate behaviour – risk being subsumed into unfalsifiable, post hoc labelling of *all* possible foreign-policy behaviours. As such, roleplay and realpolitik *may* be complementary, but they are *necessarily* non-identical. Recognizing that they are separate incentive structures, capable of pulling states in different directions, thereby illuminates the internal confliction seen in various major powers’ strategic postures, as discussed subsequently.

## Roleplay and (neoclassical) realism: accounting for strategic ‘error’

The preceding discussion explained roleplay and realpolitik’s logical distinctiveness. This section explicates the implications of that distinctiveness for states’ strategic choices – and theories thereof – along with the international outcomes that follow.

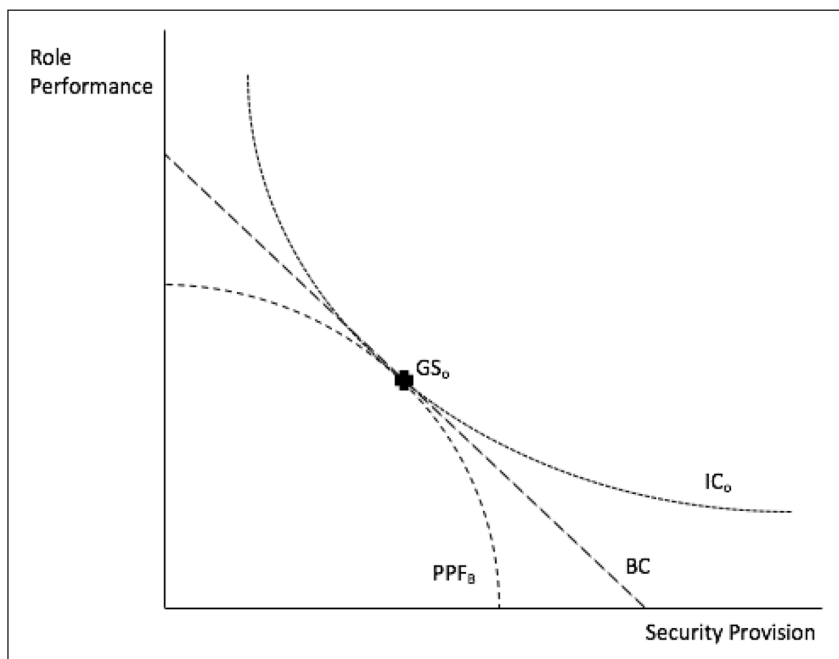
In developing an explanation of states’ failure to adequately balance against mounting external dangers, Randall Schweller (2004) dubbed his neoclassical realism a ‘theory of

mistakes' (p. 168). Such framing captures the insight that superior strategic responses to the pressures of an anarchic international system might be impeded by domestic-political concerns. Nicholas Kitchen (2010) complements this finding, meanwhile, by identifying that domestic strategic ideas are intervening variables between systemic pressures and states' actual grand-strategic responses.<sup>31</sup>

Incorporating states' role-performative motives extends such approaches. Like 'under-balancing' (Schweller's concern),<sup>32</sup> generating or intensifying reciprocal animosity through confrontational behaviour (over-balancing), focusing on trivial concerns while neglecting more severe dangers (misplaced balancing), and squandering resources on costly or unachievable campaigns of political transformation abroad (revisionist 'anti-balancing') are all grand-strategic 'errors' that can be motivated by domestic-ideational role conceptions, as subsequent case analysis illustrates.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, because international politics is an output of powerful states' choices, accounting for such 'errors' does not simply explain occasional strategic failures. Instead, states' preferences *beyond* mere survival – and the behaviours they yield – can explain aspects of international politics itself.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Schweller (1996) identifies, the possibility of greedily motivated revisionism is necessary to generate the doubt over others' benign intent that the security dilemma requires,<sup>35</sup> while (with Jennifer Mitzen, 2011) unwarranted confidence in others' malevolence can intensify security dilemmas towards actual war-initiation (just as unwarranted confidence in their beneficence can leave others' revisionism unchecked). States might even derive ideational utility from antagonism itself (Mitzen, 2006) – or, conversely, accept others' role-justifications as excusing otherwise-antagonistic behaviours (Goddard, 2018). Social role-performative preferences can thus sit on either side of this explanatory ledger, motivating undue belligerence *or* inadequate balancing, as the cases below elucidate.<sup>36</sup>

Obviously, if performing a particular international-societal 'role' in the world was permanently and completely aligned with maximizing national security prospects – as certain advocates imply – there would be no tension. Sometimes, moreover, role-performance and security-maximization *do* recommend identical policy choices. But as the logical demarcation above demonstrated, roleplay and realpolitik are *not* permanently and completely aligned, so they do not *necessarily* recommend identical policy choices. Accordingly, as the cases below highlight, domestic-ideational performative concerns can explain deviation from the realist 'baseline' of security-maximization<sup>37</sup> – and thus explain grand-strategic 'error' (that is, under- or over-confrontational strategies vis-à-vis that security-optimizing baseline).

The sometimes-complementary-yet-sometimes-conflictual interaction between role-performance and security-maximization can be depicted diagrammatically. In Figure 1,  $BC$  represents a state's budget constraint: the amount of resources available to discharge grand strategy.  $IC_o$  represents the optimal-achievable indifference curve – the combinations of security-provision and role-performance among which the state's inhabitants are equally satisfied, and thus indifferent<sup>38</sup> – given such resource constraints.  $PPF_B$  depicts a 'normal' concave production possibilities frontier (PPF), meanwhile, in which 'producing' role-performance *does* have a cost in terms of additional increments of security – but producing more of one does not produce an equal-or-greater reduction in the other, meaning that the northeast-most (i.e. utility-maximizing) point of the PPF is some

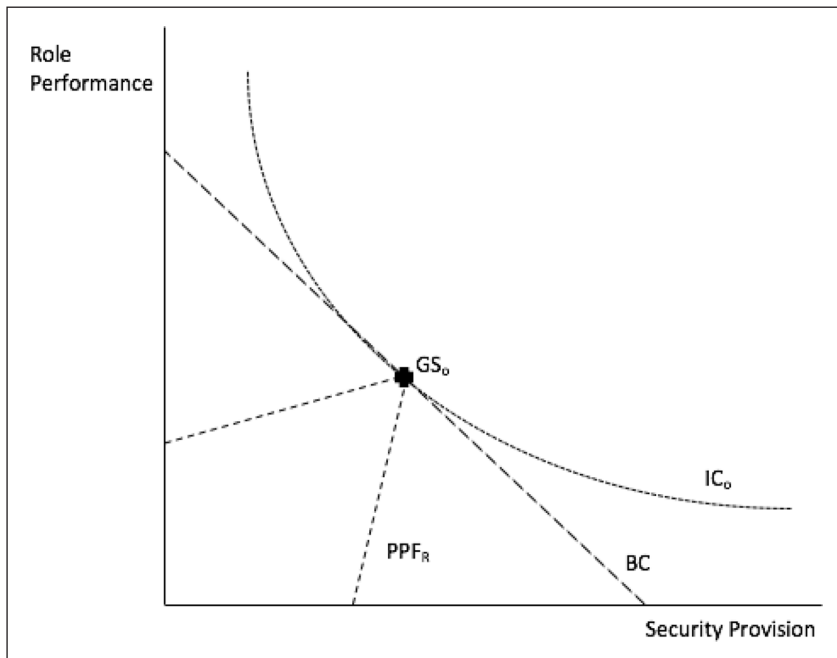


**Figure 1.** Roleplay versus realpolitik with concave (balanced) production possibilities.

adequately balanced combination of the two. The optimal grand strategy ( $GS_o$ ) is then the point at which  $PPF_B$  touches the state's budget constraint, thereby reaching the highest available indifference curve. In practice, moreover, this situation may characterize various real-world strategic trade-offs. For example, many states willingly forego some military spending to fund development aid, eschewing some modest increment of security to achieve gains in esteem-generating humanitarian role without significantly jeopardizing state survival.<sup>39</sup>

Extending this logic, the PPF's shape may permit *more* than simply some acceptable trade-off. If roleplay and realpolitik are not only satisfactorily balanced but mutually reinforcing ( $PPF_R$ ) – such that performing a role offers security, which enhances role, which again reinforces security (etc.) – this will deliver superior security *and* role outputs compared to pursuing either alone. Figure 2 depicts such conditions, wherein the location of  $GS_o$  –  $PPF_R$ 's intersection with  $BC$  – is to the north *and* east of *either* axis intercept. Normative role advocates who argue that fulfilling particular role-performative expectations is the *same* as optimally defending national security consider this situation typical. And indeed, it may sometimes occur (e.g. if performing a 'free-world leader' role also maximized US security during the Cold War, or if West Germany's adoption of a demilitarized 'civilian' role was indeed necessary to the stabilization of post-1945 Europe that ultimately improved German security).

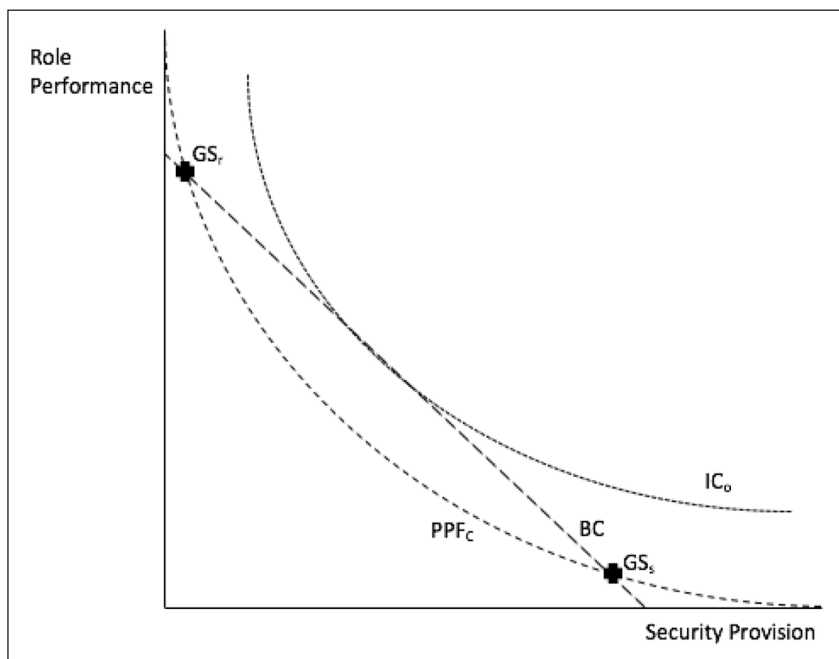
Unfortunately, however, there is no guarantee of a concave PPF. If choices made in pursuit of role-fulfilment positively diminish national security – or vice versa



**Figure 2.** Roleplay versus realpolitik with concave (reinforcing) production possibilities.

– there is instead a convex PPF between competing outputs, as depicted in Figure 3 ( $PPF_C$ ). Here, there are two distinct interceptions with the state's budget constraint – neither permitting the same mutually satisfactory level of utility ( $IC_o$ ) as in the balanced (Figure 1) or reinforcing (Figure 2) models above – which imply alternative, competing grand strategies (role-performative  $GS_r$  or security-maximizing  $GS_s$ , respectively). If performing an 'order-enforcing' military-interventionist role creates security-damaging confrontations *or* performing a demilitarized 'civilian' role jeopardizes a security-enhancing alliance – both real-world possibilities identified below – these would be instances of convex role-versus-security PPFs in which ideational motives have pushed states towards  $GS_r$  at the expense of  $GS_s$  (that is, grand-strategic 'error'). As demonstrated earlier, meanwhile, roleplay and realpolitik are distinct incentive structures, so being sufficiently motivated by the former to make it the basis for such strategic choices is necessarily not the same as being wholly motivated by the latter.

Such role versus realpolitik divergence could be intensified by power shifts, moreover. Expansive role conceptions may preclude the prudent retrenchment of power-squandering peripheral commitments incentivized by relative decline (MacDonald and Parent, 2011). Expanding role-demands might similarly induce imprudent bellicosity in rising powers, provoking otherwise-avoidable containment (Edelstein, 2017; Shiffrinson, 2018). Conversely, of course, anti-confrontational role motives could impede adequate



**Figure 3.** Roleplay versus realpolitik with convex production possibilities.

internal balancing by wealthy-yet-underarmed powers, producing opposite varieties of grand-strategic error. Examples of all three appear below.

### **‘Error’ in action: roleplay versus realpolitik in contemporary powers’ strategy**

The previous sections explained why roleplay and realpolitik are logically distinct incentive structures motivating states’ strategic choices and what that means for the trade-offs they face. This section illustrates how those imperatives can conflict in practice.

Comprehensive empirical testing lies beyond the scope of an article focused on theoretical specification of competing logics. Nonetheless, the applicability of roleplay as an alternative motivation that pushes states into grand-strategic ‘error’ can be elucidated through examples. Three pairs of powers are considered here to highlight how – in different ways – each deviates from the realpolitik baseline and jeopardizes its security by following role-performative social-ideational motivations (that is, each manifests at least some behaviours consistent with  $GS_r$  in Figure 3 above). The pairs are grouped into categories, which themselves represent heuristic ideal-types. A single article cannot construct original foreign-policy histories for six disparate countries, naturally, but it *can* identify performative concerns influencing strategic choices with security consequences.

### *The (unambiguous) great powers: China and the United States*

The post-Cold War US has enjoyed unprecedented relative power (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008). China, meanwhile, has experienced sufficient developmental convergence since the Cold War – combined with its massive population – to render it capable of balancing US power and asserting its own preferences in a strategically vital region (Tunsjø, 2018). In short, while China is still not an American ‘equal’ in terms of net projectable power resources (Beckley, 2018), both are now unambiguous great powers on both role-performative *and* realpolitikal understandings. As noted earlier, moreover, the greater a state’s relative power, the more it can indulge other preferences before its security becomes meaningfully threatened (Walt, 2018). Accordingly, such ‘unambiguous’ great powers pose a stern test for the argument that role-motivated behaviours can conflict with survival imperatives. Nonetheless, both the United States and China can be observed pursuing ideational performances that jeopardize their net security.

In 1996, Clinton Administration aides coined the term ‘indispensable nation’ to describe America’s post-Cold War world role, thereby justifying not only coercive diplomacy and military intervention to enforce US-preferred international order, but also ambitious claims of unique American prescience (Zenko, 2014). During the Cold War, meanwhile, there may indeed have been a benign confluence between the United States’ performative role as leader of the Western bloc and its national security, insofar as the United States’ self-protection required assembling capable allies, supporting a mutually enriching commercial zone, and preventing the USSR establishing hegemony over major Eurasian industrial centres (Mearsheimer, 2001: 256–257).

Since the Cold War’s end, however, this belief in ‘indispensable’ role and associated commitment to extending US primacy beyond the Western bloc to establish a global hegemonic order has squandered American power and the security that it offers (Porter, 2018). Of course, under-balancing brings its own perils, while abandonment of useful allies to ascendant adversaries’ predation can be doubly self-defeating (Brooks et al., 2012–2013), so the US choice to extend and consolidate alliance networks in East Asia as China rises (for example) is explicable through security-seeking. *If* it could be achieved, moreover, permanent global hegemony *would* guarantee security (Mearsheimer, 2001: 40–41), since no other state could ever challenge the hegemon (the system would effectively cease to be anarchic). But since no unipolar moment is assuredly timeless – and especially when faced by the most economically potent rising peer-competitor since its own great-power emergence (Layne, 2012) – realpolitik prescribes prudent husbandry of national capabilities, avoidance of gainless escalation, and retrenchment of commitments peripheral to the great-power balance (MacDonald and Parent, 2011). Instead, the United States has spent the last two decades wasting lives, treasure, and materiel on blowback-provoking, escalation-risking military efforts to police strategically peripheral regions – undermining domestic cohesion and thus strategic effectiveness in the process (Blagden and Porter, 2021) – motivated by notions of its indispensable ordering role. In short, despite its still-unmatched wherewithal, the United States is observably conflicted between realpolitikal imperatives to *concentrate* its power on balancing an ascendant peer-competitor (e.g. Silove, 2016) and role-performative impulses to *disperse* its power in service of a particular world-ordering imagined self (e.g. Dueck, 2006; Porter, 2020).



China, meanwhile, is not an established power attempting to maintain a dominant position, but rather a rising power seeking to better secure and advance its interests as its capabilities grow. Accordingly, it knows that the passage of time improves its relative position (Copeland, 2000b) and that it may minimize others' balancing reaction, facilitating continued rise, by eschewing manifestations of revisionist hostility (Edelstein, 2017; Shiffrinson, 2018). In the United States, it also faces a potential adversary with enduring advantages and wherewithal to retard its ascent (Beckley, 2018). Accordingly, Beijing faces compelling realpolitikal reasons to (a) eschew unnecessary predations that push others into joining with the United States and (b) focus its still-scarce military resources on denying US forces access to its interior and littoral.

Are such behaviours observed? In fact, China is devoting non-trivial proportions of its still-not-US-matching military expenditures to capabilities suited for extra-regional power-projection – notably aircraft carriers – motivated largely by the ideational pursuit of standing (Ross, 2009). Furthermore, from its border with India to its influence in the Koreas and its claims in the South China Sea, Beijing is now embracing confrontations that incentivize balancing by other regional powers – both internal (build-ups of independent capabilities) and external (closer alignment with the United States) – explicitly citing expanding national interests and desire for a lead role in reshaping the hitherto-US-led international order (Jiangtao, 2019), consistent with expansive conceptions of 'great-power' identity (Shin, 2018).<sup>40</sup> In short, while China clearly *does* grasp the realpolitikal imperative to focus on defending its core territory or littoral (Fravel, 2019) and faces compelling balance-of-power incentives to eschew confrontation (Shiffrinson, 2020), the ideational performance of newfound 'greatness' (i.e. roleplay) also motivates more assertive behaviours (Liu, 2020).

### *The 'residual' great powers? France and the United Kingdom*

The United States and China are crucial cases: any study of contemporary great-power behaviour that aspires to generalizable utility *must* cover the system's two most powerful countries. But they are also cases of finite analytical value. Both possess vast concentrations of power-enabling resources *and* elevated international-societal roles, thereby obscuring the distinction between role-performative or realpolitikal understandings of 'great powerness' and their separate incentive structures, as brought into stark relief by the contemplation of powers whose 'greatness' or otherwise is contestable. This subsection therefore analyses France and Britain, as particular exemplars of 'residual' great powers afflicted by the competing logics (McCourt, 2014a).<sup>41</sup>

France has the most independently capable armed forces in Western Europe on several metrics. Unlike reunified post-1990 Germany – the only European economy larger than France and the United Kingdom – it has the ultimate backstop of independent national survival, a submarine-based (and thus secure second-strike) nuclear deterrent. Its forces' command-and-control (C2) configuration and doctrine also displays an operational independence from allies that their post-1945 German counterparts never regained (albeit with increasing US alignment in the post-Cold War era). Unlike the United Kingdom, meanwhile – a state of similar capability and orientation – France has eschewed cost-saving reliance on US enablers; for example, by developing its own submarine-launched ballistic

missiles to support a logistically independent nuclear deterrent and its own satellite-reconnaissance capability. Its forces are also larger than UK counterparts, albeit not as well equipped in certain areas (Blagden, 2015: 343). In short, while its post-1945 relative wherewithal never recovered to pre-1939 levels, France has striven to retain a 'great-power' strategic posture in a realpolitikal sense (as well as a merely role-performative one). Nonetheless – like Britain – 'residual-power' France's material base for resourcing great-power strategy is stretched by diminished relative economic position and 'guns-versus-butter' tensions (i.e. the funding of domestic goods and services). Moreover, as a second-tier member of US-dominated alliance networks, France – like the UK, German, and Japanese cases below – has not been the sole provider of its own security since 1945, further reducing incentives to fund foreign and defence policy at the expense of domestic welfare (Olson and Zeckhauser, 1966). Yet despite this, French ideational commitment to performing an 'order-upholding' world role has remained intact (Hill, 2016), manifesting itself as resource-intensive military interventionism.<sup>42</sup>

How, then, do roleplay and realpolitik manifest themselves as tension within 'residual-power' France's grand strategy? Naval posture provides an exemplar. Since the decommissioning of FS *Clemenceau* in 1997, the Marine Nationale has operated only a single aircraft carrier (*Clemenceau*'s sister ship, *Foch*, was decommissioned in 2000, shortly before the maiden deployment of the current carrier, *Charles de Gaulle*). A single hull is adequate for role-performance (Blagden, 2019b: 482–483); it allows France to remain the 'sort' of country that operates aircraft carriers – a marker of status, as observed in the Chinese context (Ross, 2009) – and to fulfil the performative role of dispatching such a platform to lead order-enforcing military missions within or beyond the Euro-Atlantic region. For security-essential missions, however, a single carrier is a net liability (Blagden, 2019b: 483); an adversary could simply time hostile action to coincide with the ship's maintenance-, refit-, training-, or defect-induced unavailability. Given the opportunity-costs, equivalent resources would thus be better allocated to alternative military assets providing full-time availability.<sup>43</sup> Fleet balance is therefore a notable instance where realpolitikal imperatives are countered by role-performative motives in French strategy.

What of Britain, the other Western European 'residual' power that – like France – possesses a submarine-based nuclear arsenal, significant force-projection capabilities, and permanent membership of the UN Security Council? Many of the impulses and pressures are the same (Hill, 2016).<sup>44</sup> The UK has poured military, economic, and human resources into several professedly 'order-enforcing' expeditionary campaigns so far this century, and is now running significant escalatory risks vis-à-vis China to 'uphold order' in East Asia (Blagden, 2019a: 217). More than France, Britain has embraced dependence on the United States to sustain such activism on the cheap (it concedes that it 'continues to look to (America) to shape global stability') – but like France, it maintains the ultimate hedge against US abandonment, an operationally independent nuclear deterrent, while pledging to retain the 'ability to undertake war-fighting independently' (HM Government, 2015: 51). And like France, the interaction of role-performative and realpolitikal pressures under tight fiscal constraints pulls UK strategy in conflicted directions.

While such tensions have already been interrogated elsewhere (Blagden, 2019b), a brief example is illuminating. Unlike France, Britain has concluded that a minimum of

two aircraft carriers is required if seeking the assured availability required to fulfil security-essential – as opposed to merely role-performative – missions. Indeed, such full-time availability is the explicit UK rationale for bearing the opportunity-costs of its second hull (Blagden, 2019b: 482–483). But also unlike France, with its logistically independent and robustly defended atomic arsenal, UK nuclear posture betrays elements of role-performative ‘tokenism’ (Blagden, 2019b: 480–482). Notably, between 2010 and 2020, Britain operated no maritime patrol aircraft with which to protect its nuclear-armed submarines, relying instead on allies – particularly the United States – to provide such coverage. Accordingly, even while spending on the ultimate supposed hedge against alliance-abandonment – operationally independent nuclear deterrence – Britain also relied on such allies to protect that deterrent itself.

### *The ‘civilian’ (great?) powers: Germany and Japan*

Despite lacking the means and will to function as systemic poles, Britain and France nevertheless strive after residual ‘great powerness’ on two axes: independent ability to defend their own existence, manifested most obviously in their nuclear arsenals, and performative role, manifested as their willingness or capacity to project military power in defence of particular conceptions of international order. As noted, moreover, those two axes can stand in tension, for the impulse to fulfil the latter within austere resource constraints jeopardizes the former. But there are other comparably positioned states – economically developed and technologically advanced, with substantial net power resources – that manifest quite different strategic postures to the Anglo-French model. Specifically, Germany and Japan have pursued strategic postures of both conscious US alliance-subordination – without the hedge provided by, say, independent nuclear arsenals – and avoidance of militarily-interventionist ‘order-imposing’ roles under the shadow of their militarist-belligerent pasts.<sup>45</sup>

Although both states have significant latent-potential to act as great(er) powers, both have pursued security through close alignment with – and subordination to – a hegemonic pole incentivized to protect them by its own primacist preferences and structural position, thereby enabling their domestically favourable ‘guns/butter’ trade-offs. As noted earlier, survival is multiply realizable. However, this has not been a disavowal of power altogether; both have pursued – and obtained – international ‘civilian’ roles (Maull, 1990) of persuasive influence (backed by economic wherewithal and the inducements that it provides).<sup>46</sup> Such a role meets aspects of an international-societal ‘great-power’ definition when it extends to forms of regional-hegemonic ordering – consider Germany’s centrality to the EU/Eurozone – albeit not others (specifically, militarily-activist order-enforcement). Even for these conscious pursuers of ‘civilian’ role, moreover, the survival imperatives of an anarchic system continue to exert pressure towards strategic ‘normalization’ as major military powers.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, just as performative conceptions lead the great and ‘residually-great’ powers discussed earlier into security-diminishing *over*-activism, so too ideational attachment to ‘civilian’ role can lead states towards security-imperilling *under*-activism – an opposite (but potentially no-less-damaging) variety of grand-strategic ‘error’.

No twentieth-century great power has undergone more comprehensive demilitarization than Germany. Occupied and partitioned after defeat in 1945, even reunified and 'normalized' post-1990 Germany has continued to forego military connotations of 'great powerness' – such as nuclear weapons, unilateral doctrine, or long-range power-projection assets (e.g. aircraft carriers, amphibious-assault ships, heavy-lift aircraft, etc) – reflecting embedded social mores (Berger, 1998; Maliki, 2006). Moreover, while the German armed forces are modern and sizable by Euro-NATO standards – and have been used abroad on various multilateral 'stabilization' missions since the Cold War's end (Maull, 2010; Noetzel and Schreer, 2008), 're-normalizing' military force as a policy lever compared to post-1945 West Germany's non-interventionism – they remain small and under-developed vis-à-vis Germany's economic wherewithal. Contemporary Germany thereby combines massive industrial and financial wherewithal, as the EU's principal manufacturer, exporter, and monetary-fiscal backstop – alongside the regional-hegemonic politico-economic role that this brings (Bulmer, 2014) – with military subordination as a NATO (and thus US) protectorate. It is therefore both a 'power' and yet 'civilian' in its operationalization of power (Maull, 1990, 2018; Tewes, 1997).

How might such role preferences conflict with security imperatives? After all, German *under*-militarization is a relatively novel concern. Nonetheless, Germany's low post-1990 proportional defence spending (Depetris, 2019), force readiness, and deployability levels (Clark, 2019; Kluth, 2020) impose two costs on NATO. It leaves external hostility under-checked by the principal Continental European member-state with the wherewithal to do something about it.<sup>48</sup> And as a corollary, it places overweening demand for European security on US taxpayers who understandably resent subsidizing the economies and public services of major states that do little to defend their own locale (Bennhold, 2019), thereby jeopardizing the Alliance's future and thus the whole regional security system from which Germany benefits. In short, contemporary Germany provides a present-day case of role-motivated 'under-balancing', as per earlier theoretical discussion (Schweller, 2004).

What of Japan, the other 'civilian' power identified by Maull (1990) at the post-Cold War era's dawn? Unlike Germany, Japanese policy elites do not comprehensively reject the pre-1945 regime's every symbol.<sup>49</sup> And unlike Germany, contemporary Japan's military forces have already reacquired significant power-projection capabilities.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless – like Germany – Japan has continued to embrace US alliance-subordination and eschew independent great-power military posture, including avoidance of nuclear weapons, offensive operations, and unilateral doctrinal concepts under a continuing post-1945 constitutional renunciation of belligerency with a domestic-ideational base (Berger, 1998).<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, while Japan already acts as a 'power' in regional affairs through its economic or diplomatic heft (Hagström, 2009) – and has taken major steps towards military 'normalization' (Hughes, 2006) that could stretch further if Tokyo felt sufficient pressure – it remains broadly 'civilian' in its exercise of regional influence.

Do such ideationally motivated role conceptions produce tensions with *realpolitik* in the Japanese case? After all, as noted, Japan has more potent conventional forces than Germany, despite its constitutional restrictions, along with the latent capacity to nuclearize quickly (Fitzpatrick, 2016). Nonetheless, the domestic-ideational prohibition on

offensive operations has significant defensive implications. Specifically, if Japan found itself facing a conflict with its most powerful potential adversary, China, the only way to protect its own defensive assets – warships, airfields, C2 nodes and so on – along with valued civilian centres might be to target the weapons or forces that could be used against them.<sup>52</sup> Yet as rivals' capabilities improve, such targeting increasingly requires long-range standoff weaponry – the sorts of forces that Japan's prohibition of 'offensive' weaponry currently precludes (Reynolds and Calonzo, 2019).<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that roleplay and realpolitik are neither permanently nor benignly aligned. Continuing to perform some ideational role may be a reason that states *want* to survive, of course, alongside prerequisite concerns such as the physical wellbeing of the population. Having some sense of national purpose may also facilitate coherent national strategy formation, to state survival prospects' ultimate betterment. Nonetheless, roleplay and realpolitik remain analytically distinct, logically separate incentive structures. States are certainly influenced by both, but – far from natural alignment, whereby survival imperatives are a mere component of social role-performance – any ideationally underpinned role conception that goes beyond the state simply giving itself the best chance of continued existence *necessarily* points away from the security-maximizing position. Consequently, roleplay and realpolitik – far from the natural bedfellows depicted by ideological advocates of 'values-based' grand strategy – often pull against each other, leading policy in confused, conflicted, and sometimes self-defeating directions. Accounting for role-performative impulses is thus an important component of explaining state behaviour that extends neoclassical realist theories of grand-strategic 'error', understood as deviation from a security-maximizing realist baseline. The security-maximizing strategy may not always be obvious or unambiguous, of course – so this 'realist baseline' may not be straightforward to operationalize in practice – but, crucially, it is not simply synonymous with fulfilling social preferences.

Interrogating the differences between role-performative and realpolitical conceptions of 'great powerness' elucidates this logical distinction – especially with policymakers around the world now proclaiming a new era of 'great power competition' (Blagden, 2019a), illustrating such concerns' enduring salience (both rhetorical and substantive). While such conceptual interrogation can appear as mere scholastic hair-splitting, its value here is to clarify that roleplay and realpolitik are non-identical, with implications beyond the definitions themselves. Specifically, whereas role-based conceptions of 'powerness' incentivize some socially expected international performance, realpolitical criteria prioritize the independent means to defend one's own interest-hierarchy. These two conceptions cannot be readily elided in theory, moreover, for 'great powerness' cannot simultaneously be based on intersubjective social role recognition and an *objective* threshold of national capabilities. Of course, in practice, both material and ideational concerns shape states' foreign or defence policies, as both constructivist and realist perspectives recognize, and as case studies of six contemporary 'powers' – of varying levels and understandings of 'greatness' – demonstrated. Nonetheless, if policymakers and scholars alike can be more explicit about the different kinds of pressures that motivate

state behaviour – and trade-offs that may exist between such motivations – they will be better placed to make strategic choices that serve their various ideational preferences without doing major harm to long-term national security in the process.

Such conclusions point to several potentially fruitful avenues of future research. First, since roles often arise through benign coincidence with security optimization – yet remain habitual even as strategic circumstances shift, producing role-performative and realpolitik divergence – what ‘shocks’ are necessary and/or sufficient to produce realignment? Second, since states clearly *do* tolerate costs – including expenditure of national power, which safeguards their security – to fulfil preferred roles, what are the components and weightings of their particular utility functions in this area? Third, what other role-versus-security conflicted national contexts may benefit from the approach’s application, beyond states concerned with ‘powerness’ (great/otherwise)? Finally, as Figures 1 to 3 illustrated, whether roleplay or realpolitik are competitive or complementary ultimately depends on PPF curvature (that is, whether ‘producing’ role-performance reinforces or undermines security, and vice versa). Yet such PPFs are not wholly exogenous; they are shaped by states’ own choices. Accordingly, how can states select ends to ensure concave PPFs (that is, pursue security-optimal policies consistent with social preferences *and* fashion role-performative ambitions that do not undermine net security)? Satisfactorily answering this last question will determine the wisdom or otherwise of many countries’ grand-strategic choices as the unipolar moment wanes.

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## Notes

1. See Blagden (2018: 200–202). Accordingly, structural realists’ lobbying for superior foreign-policy choices does not – as Oren (2009) suggests – contradict their own theory.



2. For discussion of what ‘grand strategy’ actually *is*, see Silove (2018). This article employs a derivative of Posen’s (1984: 13) parsimonious framing, namely that it is a state’s notion(s) of how to maximize utility for itself in an anarchic international system.
3. ‘Roleplay’ is flippant, of course, since such pressures are hardly inconsequential. *Realpolitik* and *realism* are non-identical, meanwhile; *realpolitik*, as a tradition of strategic thought, does not ‘belong’ to any one theoretical paradigm (Goddard and Nexon, 2016). That said, *realpolitik* is here treated as the strategic prescriptions that follow (non-exclusively) from certain *realist* assumptions about world politics (Bew, 2016: 5–7, 13–14).
4. Anne-Marie Slaughter (2011), for example – a prominent advocate of power-sapping, blowback-provoking Western military activism – argues explicitly that ‘values-based’ (i.e. ideationally motivated) and ‘interest-based’ (i.e. self-preserving) US strategy should be understood as the same thing. See similarly Haass (2017); in another national context, Seely and Rogers (2019).
5. This and the subsequent section develop arguments already introduced in a country-specific context (Blagden, 2019b: 473–479).
6. This piece thus answers the call to elaborate structurally-based realisms’ micro-foundations (Freyberg-Inan et al., 2009).
7. Even prominent contemporary users of structural realism expound this position (Wohlforth et al., 2018).
8. For foundational contributions, see Holsti (1970), Jönsson and Westerlund (1982), Walker (1987). For contemporary developments, see for example, Thies (2017 [2010]), Harnisch (2011), Thies and Breuning (2012), Cantir and Kaarbo (2012), and Brummer and Thies (2015).
9. Theorizing the international system as itself a social construction, see Wendt (1999). For explicit linkage of role-based foreign-policy analysis to constructivist theory, see Thies and Breuning (2012), McCourt (2014b: 1).
10. Competing ideologies, sectoral or class interests, (sub-)national culture(s), partisan or factional contestation or coalitions, regime-type and -composition, historical position or grievance, and civil-military or bureaucratic dynamics all contribute to societal expectations of international role – as do material security and prosperity pressures, the very imperatives that are sometimes violated by role-performative impulses. Since theorizing all such variables lies beyond a single article’s scope, however, the salient point here is that they sum to produce role-performative motives.
11. Although such social ideas may have a connection to material security and/or prosperity imperatives, as discussed subsequently.
12. Although Holsti’s (1970) article preceded Bull’s (1977) book, Bull does not cite Holsti, seemingly drawing related inferences through different channels.
13. Under this approach, only the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) have qualified as systemic ‘poles’ – states capable of independently balancing against the other most powerful state(s) in the system – since 1945, and only the former since 1990 (although China is arguably now ascending to polarity, as discussed subsequently). At most, structural realists saw major post-Cold War European or Asian states as latent-potential great powers (Mearsheimer, 2001: 392). Assessing that only poles are true great powers means that the likes of Britain or France – that is, the socially performative ‘powers’ discussed subsequently – are *obviously* not among them. That said, refined structural understandings (e.g. Monteiro, 2014: 42–48) identify ‘major’ powers as non-polar powers that nevertheless possess sufficient capacity to have significant prospects for defending their own survival-essential local interests – with non-trivial systemic consequences – even against polar ‘great’ powers

(identified by their capability to threaten others' interests throughout the system). Further understandings recognize that the global system comprises regional sub-systems, each containing 'powers' of varying capability, the relational position of which differs between their intra- and extra-regional interactions (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Of course, such great-versus-major, global-versus-regional demarcations – while reintroducing recognition of particular structural significance for consequential-but-non-polar states, such as China, Russia, India, France, and the United Kingdom under post-1990 US unipolarity – themselves admit further complexity or ambiguity, not least because change and/or uncertainty in relative power may be the very dynamic incentivizing states towards competition. To bypass such intractable debates, therefore, this article adopts a contextual-systemic approach to structural 'power-ness', that is, states pursue or achieve such structural position – irrespective of adjectival qualifier – when they have non-trivial prospects of defending their welfare-essential interests against their most potent possible adversary in the context salient to them.

14. That is, the 'similarly-residual' other attempts to do the same, creating opportunities for burden-sharing and mutual recognition.
15. Or at least a willing *part* of such an entity, since politics can choose to merge with another polity, state, or bloc(s) to further their population's welfare (indeed, this explains contemporary nation-states' very formation).
16. Human assessments of interest – and danger thereto – are perceptual, and thus ultimately ideational. But those ideas cannot exist independently of human bodies' material base. Accordingly, threats may indeed be socially construed – but physical survival is the necessary precursor to such construal, hence its *ceteris paribus* motivational primacy (and states are the most potent organizational collectives yet created for population protection, hence why state survival *ceteris paribus* supports population survival). On power-sensitive behaviour's evolutionary-survivalist basis, see Thayer (2000); on material scarcity's centrality in necessitating competitive inter-communal politics, see Hamilton and Rathbun (2013).
17. Accordingly, Geoff Berridge and John Young (1988) explicitly reject arguments that 'great powerness' has an intersubjective or performative base, linking it rather to reputation for sufficient latent or manifested power to balance any other state.
18. On the necessity of sufficient capability to accomplish associated military missions in achieving national objectives, see Glaser (2010: 40–41). Of course, such essentialness is perceptual, albeit with a material base underpinning those perceptions.
19. On how lower-level conventional confrontation could lead to survival-jeopardizing nuclear catastrophe, see Posen (1991).
20. Friend and/or enemy identities may condition motives, although realists question such relationships' reliability (Copeland, 2000a; Blagden, 2018).
21. Contemporary debates display such conflation, with polarity – understood by structural realists as an *objective* capability distribution – used discursively to invoke *subjective* status recognition (Zala, 2017). On the resultant confusion in states' strategy debates, see Blagden (2019a).
22. This may imply that 'residual Great Power' is a nonsensical category, suggesting a 'first-rank' military power that is simultaneously *not* first-rank.
23. Such 'laundry-listing', à la Holsti, is a fundamental weakness of early role theory, since it permits unfalsifiable, post hoc rationalization of all possible foreign-policy behaviours through idiosyncratic nomenclature (as contemporary role theorists themselves contend; McCourt, 2014b: 26). This article therefore merely reports such arguments, rather than endorsing them. For its advocates, however, the 'Great Power' role is different; as a set of social-performative expectations linked to specific international ordering functions, it permits binary classification.
24. That is, the former may account for states' social behaviours while the latter accounts for their structural imperatives. On explanatory-theory-as-utilitarian-heuristic, see Humphreys (2011).

25. Where 'who we are' functions as shorthand for identity, values, norms, status, and preferences, which produce social role-performative expectations.
26. Soviet naval strategy differed fundamentally from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strategy, for example, pursuing mere sea denial – rather than assured control or projection – in the North Atlantic (Blagden et al., 2011: 194). Indeed, the requirement to be a 'first-rank' military power to qualify as 'great' might suggest that international systems could only ever be unipolar (since only one player can be 'first') – yet this would obviously be both analytically unhelpful and substantively absurd.
27. Although material capabilities may facilitate such recognition's attainment, obviously.
28. It possesses amphibious-assault ships and a competent marine corps, for example. Substantial Dutch contingents were also active in the post-9/11 Iraq/Afghan campaigns.
29. The Netherlands lost certain wars, obviously, but so did France. The difference was that France had the underlying resources to return to military major powerness; the Netherlands did not.
30. This does not preclude other dimensions to national prowess that the Netherlands has in abundance – culture, art, history, values, institutions, commerce, natural and built landscape, exemplary public servants, and so on – so the argument is not pejorative. The concern here, rather, is simply relative power in the system.
31. Gideon Rose (1998) introduced realism's 'neoclassical' qualifier, contending that such approaches productively combine anarchic systems' structural constraints (*à la* neorealism) with pre-neorealist 'classical' realism's domestic-political motivations, thereby making a 'new-classical' realism. Extending this, Brian Rathbun (2008) identifies that neorealism *requires* the possibility of domestically sourced policy variation to explain the behaviours (such as conflict-initiation) endemic in anarchic international systems – but equally, that such anarchic structure still then accounts for the prevalence of conflict. Of course, neoclassical realism has recently faced charges of incorporating domestic-level factors that violate realist assumptions (Narizny, 2017) – yet others counter that only by incorporating state-level variance can we achieve satisfactory realist explanations (Fiammenghi et al., 2018; see also Sterling-Folker, 1997).
32. Note that Lobell (2018) questions whether an oft-cited instance of 'under-balancing' invoked by Schweller – late 1930s Britain – actually did represent balancing failure, or rather whether London was simply focused (prudently) on balancing German and Italian power's most threatening components. Adjudicating historical cases is beyond the needs of this article, however; key is simply that under-balancing is possible in principle.
33. As noted, this is not normative-pejorative judgement on such preferences' moral worth(/otherwise), which might be considerable; 'error' is simply vis-à-vis the structural-realist 'baseline' (Mearsheimer, 2009: 242–244) of maximizing survival prospects. On the value of theorizing non-security motives in explaining divergence from security imperatives, see Glaser (2003: 408).
34. Recent neoclassical realist innovations highlight how domestic ideas provide not only a "transmission belt" for systemic pressures, but also how powerful states' choices themselves shape the system (Ripsman et al., 2016).
35. See also Glaser (2010) for developed discussion.
36. Explicitly linking state socialization to behavioural variation in structural–realist explanations, see Thies (2010).
37. Foundational realist works recognize that – though states face 'rational' imperatives to security-maximize (Mearsheimer, 2001: 31) – other motives can pull them in divergent directions (Morgenthau, 1973: 7). Indeed, Waltz (1979: 92, 118) explicitly rejected a security-maximizing rationality assumption, given other goals that states manifestly can and do pursue – sometimes to survival prospects' detriment – arguing instead simply that imprudent states will be

competed out of existence (his theory arguably thus descends from positive-explanatory to normative-prescriptive, since it is then a theory not of how states *do* behave but of how they *should* behave: Mearsheimer, 2009). Role-performative impulses fit among these non-security motives. Even rationality-assuming structural realists recognize, meanwhile, that states have a goal-hierarchy topped by survival while admitting other interests (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2001: 46–48). Yet because such parsimonious structural theories do not explain situations in which those other interests themselves motivate security-jeopardization, such theorists are left lamenting their states' insufficiently 'realist' behaviour, as in Mearsheimer's US policy analyses (Rathbun, 2008: 320–321), rather than incorporating systematic account of such non-survival motives into their theoretical frameworks. Of course, this may be justified sacrifice of coverage for parsimony; conversely, sacrificing such parsimony for further explanatory coverage is also defensible (Glaser, 2003: 408).

38. In practice, the state's inhabitants may disagree among themselves – but heuristically, some compound of their preferences can be taken as the state-level preference.
39. Of course, aid programmes may themselves be thought to enhance giving states' own safety by reducing future instability; whether the respective 'goods' for the giver are esteem-based or security-based – and the costs or benefits of aid spending versus military spending for each – can therefore vary by case.
40. Such role conceptions may be contested internally (Jones, 2017), but expansionist conceptions of 'great-power' performance are manifestly influential.
41. Russia and India are also important cases, but further from this particular ideal-type. Russia is clearly not China or the United States' equal in economic or technological potential, and shares Anglo-French status anxiety. But its vast nuclear arsenal, large conventional forces, and commitment to strategic independence set it apart from richer and more advanced – yet smaller and alliance-constrained – France or Britain. India, meanwhile, still lacks capabilities that France, Britain, *and* Russia all possess. But conversely, given its population size and developmental trajectory, it has better prospects than any of those three for becoming a true 'pole' capable of independently balancing US/Chinese power. The fact that important countries do not fit neatly into the three ideal-typical 'categories' framed here does not undermine the exercise's utility, for its purpose is not to construct some perfect taxonomy of state-types. Its value, rather, lies in highlighting how roleplay and realpolitik pull against each other within different sorts of strategic posture.
42. For valuable discussion of continuity and change in French strategic priorities and capabilities, see Pannier (2017) and Pannier and Schmitt (2019).
43. Naturally, France can never be so maritime in strategic orientation as Britain, since it shares a landmass with other major powers – but correspondingly, there is even less rationale for a single carrier, given opportunity-costs vis-à-vis permanently available alternative capabilities.
44. Albeit with some stark Anglo-French differences (for example, over whether the European Union (EU) is an obstacle to – or vehicle for – sovereign influence).
45. Other states may fit the ideal-type too, although Germany and Japan are particular exemplars.
46. On the interaction of relative power, institutional leverage, and normative mobilization in achieving such persuasion, see Keohane (2013).
47. During the Cold War, both Japan and West Germany were occupied, quasi-sovereign vassals of their conquerors. Yet even then, the security imperative towards (for example) nuclear deterrence was strong, requiring a concerted package of US carrots (extended-deterrent guarantees) and sticks (alliance-abandonment threats) to dissuade proliferation (Gerzhoy, 2017). Since 1990, contrastingly, their principal ally has enjoyed an era of unipolar primacy – but as US rivals rise, Washington's ability to shoulder its many allies' defence burdens simultaneously may wane (Blagden, 2015). Accordingly, pressure for military 'normalization' in

- Germany and Japan – especially now they are no longer so controlled by occupying conquerors – has resurged to weigh against ‘civilian’ role conceptions, a continuing preference for multilateralism and alliance-subordination notwithstanding (e.g. Crawford and Olsen, 2017; Hughes, 2006).
48. This is not to accuse Russia of malign motives (although neither are they precluded); rather, Moscow has understandable strategic reasons to wish to balance, weaken, and ideally break an expansionist alliance created for its containment (Shiffrinson, 2016). Nonetheless, from NATO’s perspective, the effective consequence is Russian hostility.
  49. Various prime ministers have visited the controversial Yasukuni shrine, for example, which commemorates Japan’s war dead (including convicted war criminals) – although they have articulated anti-war rationales for doing so (BBC 2013) – while certain public-school textbooks are accused of propagating nationalist views of pre-1945 history that downplay Japanese atrocities (Ryall, 2017).
  50. Its *Izumo*/*Hyūga*/*Ōsumi*-class warships are *de-facto* aircraft carriers and amphibious-assault platforms, respectively – although given Japan’s archipelagic territorial composition (unlike Germany), the ability to protect or reinforce threatened territories by sea is an obvious imperative.
  51. This prohibition has subsequently been reinterpreted as permitting assistance to allies’ defence, but remains in place as a general constraint on offensive operations as foreign-policy instruments (Sieg, 2019).
  52. Even *defensive* strategy can require *offensive* tactics, operations, and capabilities (and vice versa; Lieber, 2005).
  53. Accordingly, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had been pushing for another constitutional ‘re-interpretation’ to permit such weapon-types prior to relinquishing office – but whether his successor(s) will sustain such efforts in the face of domestic opposition generated by such ‘civilian-power’ role conceptions remains to be seen (Kelly and Takenaka, 2020; Sieg, 2019).

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### Author biography

David Blagden is Senior Lecturer in International Security at the University of Exeter. His scholarship has been published in *International Security*, *Security Studies*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *International Affairs*, *Survival*, and *International Studies Review*, among other outlets; he is also co-editor (with Mark de Rond) of *Games: Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). He obtained his DPhil at the University of Oxford, and has won the Royal United Services Institute's Trench Gascoigne Prize for original writing on defence and security. His research focuses on the causes and consequences of relative power shifts, technological and geographical determinants of strategic stability, and UK security policy.