Conclusion

Legitimacy, Power, and Strategy in World Politics

There is perhaps no more uncertain time in international politics than when new powers rise.¹ If a potential challenger harbors revolutionary ambitions, it must be contained or confronted before it has the power to challenge territorial boundaries, upend economic systems, and overturn the existing political and normative order. A challenger with limited aims, in contrast, should be accommodated. A benign rising power could provide a bulwark against other threats in the international system. Aiding an emerging power in economic development could result in a stable state with a vibrant population and market. A like-minded emerging power could shore up existing norms, and guarantee the stability of an international order. Elucidating the intentions of an adversary might be a difficult task, but it is an essential one: only by reducing uncertainty over intentions can great powers formulate a prudent response to a challenger’s rise.

The cases in this book provide extensive evidence that much of rising power politics involves the search for certainty, with great powers seeking enough information about the rising power’s ambitions to form a coherent and reasonable response to its rise.² At the same time, the cases here reveal significant silences in existing explanations about how great powers resolve this uncertainty—and resolve it they do, because the great powers in this story do not remain in a constant state of paralysis, unsure as to what strategy they should deploy. Because the meaning of most revisionist behavior is indeterminate—because actions do not speak for themselves—even expansionist behavior is not a clear and objective signal of a rising challenger’s ambitions. For this reason, I have argued that rising powers have the ability to shape the meaning of their behavior through their legitimation strategies. Rising challengers will try to persuade the great powers that, even if they increase their might, their ambitions will remain within the boundaries of what is right.
Legitimation strategies are important, I have argued, because they are a crucial component of collective mobilization, both at home and abroad. For this reason they shape perceptions 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. Second, legitimation strategies set rhetorical traps: when rising powers frame expansion as legitimate, they deprive opposing audiences of grounds on which to mobilize against them. And 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.

As argued throughout this book, however, the effects of a rising power’s legitimation are not constant across time and space. I argue that legitimation strategies only influence outcomes when they resonate, when they are seen as having “pertinence, relevance, or significance” with a targeted audience. This resonance occurs under two conditions: when the rising power uses a multivocal legitimation language, rhetoric that appeals to several legitimating principles, and thus appeals to multiple audiences simultaneously; and when the great power audience is institutionally vulnerable, when the great power believes the normative system it favors is under attack. 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 politics of legitimation do not diminish the importance of the politics of harm and interest. The argument here accepts that great powers respond to rising challengers based on whether they think that state will undercut its security or interests. Examining the politics of legitimation, however, allows us to explain why and how it is great powers decide that a rising challenger is a reformer or revolutionary: it cuts to that long-standing question of why some states are seen as threats in international politics. A focus on legitimation, moreover, highlights three additional paradoxes of rising power politics. First, the theory here suggests that rising powers might find strength in their fragmentation. It seems intuitive that fragmented states—states divided by party, class, and ideology—would be weak risers, torn apart by conflicting aims. Yet the cases in this book demonstrate that rising powers are most successful when they can make multivocal claims that resonate across multiple audiences. This capacity to speak multivocally lies in fragmentation, in a leader’s capacity to speak to multiple and even contradictory interests: Bismarck, for example, used the proliferation of German national and conservative coalitions to create a sphinxlike appearance to his audience, moving back and forth between revolutionary nationalist and dynastic-conservative language. Fragmentation may also be the foundation of a democracy’s successful rise. Indeed while conventional theories point to the importance of transparency in a democracy’s foreign policy,
the theory here suggests that it might be a democracy’s capacity to make ambiguous claims that give it the power to undercut mobilization.

Second, legitimation theory suggests that it might be the most powerful actors in the international system that will be most vulnerable to a rising power’s claims. As argued throughout this book, a rising power’s appeals are likely to resonate when existing great powers are institutionally vulnerable, when they are both embedded within the existing normative structure of the international system, and when they believe that normative system is unsettled. Ironically, the power to create institutional orders might be what makes these states more vulnerable to a rising power’s rhetorical claims. It is the powerful that construct these institutional orders. When great powers construct institutions, they may see, or come to see, their own security as inherently connected to the persistence of that institutional order, even when more “material” factors—military might, economic wealth—suggest that a state should be secure. For these reasons, great powers may be more inclined to respond to attacks on legitimacy than weaker powers in the international system.

Finally, my argument suggests that the path to conflict during power transitions might not lie in uncertainty about intentions—which is the conventional wisdom—but in the certainty, however rational, that one’s opponent is a revolutionary state. As seen throughout the empirical chapters, great powers struggle to manage rising powers because they are uncertain about what these states will do with their newfound might, either in the present or in the future. But in each of these cases studied here, this uncertainty did not lead to overwhelming fear, or a sense that the great power must adopt “worst case scenario” reasoning and stop a potential adversary’s rise at any cost. To the contrary, great powers want to avoid the costs of confrontation when possible and, in the face of uncertainty, will adopt a “wait and see” approach a rising challenger. It is only when states become certain that a rising power is a revolutionary state, that it cannot be contained within existing rules and norms, that confrontation and containment are likely. Whereas uncertainty induces caution, certainty pushes great powers toward action, even at the cost of war.

And focusing on the politics of legitimation allows us to explain why and how great powers become certain that a rising challenger is a reformer or revolutionary: it cuts to that long-standing question of why some states are seen as threats. This approach has implications for our understanding, not only of past and current power transitions, but also for how scholars approach rhetoric and strategic interaction in international politics more generally. In the remainder of this chapter, I take up three implications of my argument: how a focus on legitimacy highlights the role of contingency and path-dependency in power transitions; the implications of this book for U.S.-China relations, especially American understandings of a rising China’s “assertiveness;” and finally, what insights legitimation theory bring to our conventional understandings of strategic signaling and power politics.
The Weight of History: Contingency, Path Dependence, and the Myth of the Thucydides Trap

To begin with, my argument challenges narratives that see the outcomes of power transitions as all but determined. This book clearly departs from theories that suggest that when new powers rise, conflict is likely, and only in rare cases can states escape this “Thucydides Trap” where “misunderstandings about each other’s actions and intentions” push states toward war. Here I suggest that great powers, far from being inclined to contain or confront a rising power, are sometimes willing if not eager to incorporate new powers into the international order. Indeed, great powers are often seeking partners to shore up their preferred system of governance. In the United States, Britain saw a like-minded power that was capable of upholding rules and norms in the Atlantic. Austria and Russia saw Prussia as a bulwark against a rising tide of revolutionary nationalism. Both the United States and Britain hoped that Japan would act as a force for order in a region where China and Russia threatened to disrupt the system. In all of these cases, the status quo and rising powers were not heading toward an inevitable clash; there was ample room for cooperation and space for the emerging power to shape the outcomes of its rise.

The argument that great powers may cooperate with rising powers is not new. Scholars across a wide array of theoretical traditions argue that there is plenty of room for cooperation between a rising and status quo power. But even in these accounts, the fate of the rising power often seems all but determined, driven by factors outside its control. For some, a rising power’s path is determined by geography, or by whether it rises in an offense- or defense-dominant world. A rising power has little control over the timing of its development, its regime type, its strategic and cultural narratives, all of which shape both the intentions of the emerging power and the reactions to its rise. Put these factors together, and rising powers seem to have little control over the world around them. This is a theoretical world where the United States is favored by the gods. It is born blessed, with a liberal, democratic government, an open economic system, and well-timed industrial development. As it consolidated its power, it was protected by oceans, isolated from potential competitors, able to bide its time before it engaged with the world as a great power in its own right. Japan, by contrast, was cursed from birth. It began its rise as a regime wracked by domestic instability and revolution. It developed too quickly, with an industrial revolution left stunted by a lack of natural resources. Its racial status as an “other” meant that it would stand outside of normal Western diplomatic relations. And its rise into a great power occurred, not in isolation, but within a system of suspicious and hostile states. A clash with one of them was inevitable.

The cases in this book instead suggest that the dynamics of rising power politics are both contingent and path-dependent. To take the American ex-
ample, the argument here is not that hegemonic war was likely between the two powers. But it is not difficult to imagine a counterfactual world where an “enduring rivalry” was likely, where the two powers would have struggled over influence in South America, in Canada, and throughout the Western Hemisphere. Likewise, it is not impossible to imagine a world in which the United States, worried about disorder in China, faced with a potential hegemonic power in Europe, would have bargained with Japan over Manchuria in 1931. Indeed, in drawing attention to contingency, this book suggests that rising powers have considerable agency to influence and manipulate the strategic reactions to their own rise. Without Bismarck’s rhetorical management, balancing was a possible, perhaps even probable, outcome. Likewise, without the Monroe administration’s commitment to the legal order, it was not determined that the United States would move westward rapidly and without resistance, or secure the Western Hemisphere as its own neighborhood. Had Japan continued to frame Manchuria as an issue within the Washington order, it may have avoided American ire.

This appreciation of contingency has sparked a growing recent interest in diplomacy, negotiation, and leadership in international politics. Brian Rathbun, for example, argues leaders can adopt different diplomatic styles, ranging from coercive statecraft to more cooperative dialogues, and variation in these diplomatic styles ultimately create or destroy space for peaceful negotiation in world politics. Keren Yahri-Milo focuses on the cognitive processing of individuals to explain how they perceive the intentions of their adversaries. Elizabeth Saunders looks to the preexisting beliefs of American presidents to explain why it is some are more likely to intervene than others.11 Diplomatic historians, too, have brought individuals back into power politics, whether it is the acumen of John Quincy Adams and Otto von Bismarck in managing their countries’ expansion, or the naiveté of a Chamberlain in accepting Hitler’s appeals.

This book joins these scholars in putting diplomacy back in the center of great power politics. At the same time, it cautions against theories conceiving of world politics as the arena of unfettered agency and individual skill. As noted throughout the chapters, while it might be tempting to read these histories as determined by the speeches of great men or the decisions of fools, each of these individuals worked with the resources at hand. Adams certainly did not get by on his charisma; it was his position that gave him the resources to make resonant claims. Chamberlain’s blinders were not his own; they were a function of Britain’s vulnerable position in the international system. To put it another way, the theory here is one of structured agency: leaders are important, but they do not operate in worlds of their own making. Contingency is not mere chance, but the outcome of a particular configuration of rules, position, and rhetoric.

And legitimation strategies have path dependent effects as well. When legitimation strategies resonate, they can become institutionalized
knowledge, narratives that continue to shape the interpretation of events long after they are first uttered. Once the United States “understood” that Japan was an insatiable revisionist, signals that it might be willing to negotiate or restrain its actions were discounted. Once the British saw the United States as benign, its saber rattling over Oregon was muted. As legitimation strategies become institutionalized knowledge, costly signals inconsistent with the narrative are discounted, and cheap talk that reinforces the dominant story of the power is amplified. Legitimation strategies, though strategic, become settled discursive filters through which events are perceived.

China and the Puzzle of Assertiveness: The Construction of a Social Fact

As argued in chapter 1, while there is near consensus among scholars and policymakers that China is a rising power, there is considerable debate about China’s revisionist ambitions. For some, China has, and will continue to pursue, only limited revisionist aims. Yes, China has territorial ambitions, especially in the South and East China seas and toward Taiwan, but these can be contained. China will seek economic institutional reform, but not revolution: it will exert greater influence in existing trade and financial relations, but will not seek to overturn them. Even if China’s ambitions grow, its position within the international system will constrain its actions. China’s export-oriented economy relies heavily on foreign investment, which while “no guarantee against war,” is “still a major force for peace.”

There may be tensions in the South and East China seas, but these hardly amount to the sovereign claims that drove major wars in the past. And if all else fails, the threat of nuclear war would induce caution in any rising power. Others suggest China’s revisionist ambitions have and will continue to grow with its power. They point to signs that China seeks to replace the United States as the preeminent economic power, not merely reforming but overturning economic institutions. In 2015, China’s formed the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank whose membership spans the globe. China’s leaders have pursued the One Belt, One Road initiative to invest in infrastructure projects on the land route from China through Central Asia, as well on the southerly maritime routes from China through Southeast Asia and on to South Asia, Africa, and Europe. China has demonstrated its willingness to use its growing military might to coerce smaller powers in the region to cede territorial claims in the South China Sea, and one need only look at China’s modernization of its military—its development of power projection capabilities and precision technology capable of disabling American military force—to see its revisionist aims.
As with other cases in this book, China’s intentions are likely to remain uncertain, even to its own leaders. What is clear is that, since 2009, United States’ perceptions of China’s intentions are changing: over the last decade the United States has started to see China as a more ambitious, revisionist power. From the late 1990s on, United States leaders treated China as though it harbored largely benign ambitions: while the United States understood China would likely pursue limited revisionist aims, it believed that those aims could be accommodated within the American-led liberal international order. These beliefs about China’s intentions drove an American commitment to accommodation, or engagement, as the best means to manage China’s rise. The United States wagered that a China integrated into and strengthened by global institutions would be, and will continue to act, as a sated, status quo state.

But beginning in 2009, as Ian Johnston writes, it became “increasingly common in U.S. media, pundit, and academic circles to describe the diplomacy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as newly or increasingly assertive.” That China held more assertive ambitions need not mean the rising challenger had become a threat. Thomas Christensen, for example, argued that China’s new assertiveness was a good thing: better a China that was taking responsibility for world order than one that shirked its duties as a great power. More often than not, however, “assertive” was used to suggest China was increasingly acting as a revisionist power. Analysts used a number of synonyms along with assertive: “truculent, arrogant, belligerent, hard-line, tough, bullying, militant, and even revolutionary. The implication is that China’s diplomacy was notably more threatening, exhibited more hostile preferences, and expressed these preferences in more conflictual language than at any other time after the end of the Cold War.” As an Atlantic Monthly article noted, mentions of an “assertive China” increased significantly from 2000 to 2014, from only 9 mentions in the U.S. media in 2000, to 573 mentions in 2014.

Why is it that the United States so quickly came to see China as more assertive in its revisionist aims? One answer would be that China’s behavior provided a costly signal of both its ability and willingness to use its power to undercut American interests. China’s most assertive actions were in the South and East China seas, where China’s claims to various islands and reefs clash with competing claims from Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Beijing maintains it owns any land or features within the “Nine-Dash Line,” which extends as far as two thousand kilometers from the Chinese mainland. From 2009 onward, China appeared more willing to use force to aggressively pursue its claims. In early 2012, for example, China engaged in a maritime standoff with the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal, leading that country to file an arbitration case with the UN. In 2014, China kicked off what one media outlet called an “artificial-island building spree” a move that signaled “more aggressive territorial claims by China in the region.”
On the face of it, then, perceptions of China’s assertiveness seem driven by the straightforward politics of harm and interests: China’s more aggressive behavior provided a costly signal that it has both the capacity and interest in revising the international order. But analysts of U.S.-China relations argue the picture is far more complicated than what appears at first glance. To begin with, it is not clear that China was significantly more “assertive” in the period after 2009 than it was before. As Johnston summarizes, “Much of China’s diplomacy in 2010 fell within the range in foreign policy preferences, diplomatic rhetoric, and foreign policy behavior established in the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras.” Moreover, the signals of China’s assertiveness are less straightforward than often portrayed. In the South and East China seas, China often undertakes assertive actions in response to the moves of other claimants, raising questions as to whether China sees its own actions as defensive, what Beijing might see “as a logical and necessary response . . . to defend its policies and prevent an adverse change in the status quo.” If this is the case, China’s motivations are not offensive but defensive and “China’s primary motivation in recent South China Sea military activities, then, is to defend what it sees as its island territories which neighboring countries have attempted to usurp.” China may have been aggressive in some instances, but has also demonstrated constraint and even a willingness to compromise. China has sought agreements to jointly develop resources in the South and East China seas and has tamped back on domestic fervor over territorial claims.

In other words, China’s behavior provides a mixed signal, at best, of increasingly revisionist intentions. Despite this, scholars argue that the dominant narrative in the United States about China’s intentions has changed: whether China has become objectively more “assertive” and revisionist may be in question, but U.S. perceptions of China’s assertiveness has become a “social fact.” Scholars suggest that this narrative might stem from new communication technology—blogs, social media—which has proven integral in spreading the narrative of China’s assertiveness. Other suggest that there was already in place a “folk realism” that made the “assertive China” narrative resonate: the “assertiveness narrative fulfilled popular predictions of behavioural change by rapidly rising powers in general and China in particular. The narrative was ‘cognitively congruent’ with the background knowledge of many people, that is, it was a close fit with what they ‘believed and ‘knew’ before they heard it.’

The theory developed in this book suggests another pathway toward a narrative of assertiveness, one that was shaped by legitimation politics. On the one hand, China’s own rhetoric has pushed the United States toward a new interpretation of its ambitions, especially its shift to the language “core interests” to justify claims in the South China Seas. From the mid-1990s onward China has relied a strategy of reassurance to manage existing great power’s reaction to its rise. In the wake of the Cold War, China’s lead-
ers realized that the great powers eyed their increasing might with suspicion, worried that China would use its increasing economic and military might to challenge the existing liberal international order. Beijing reassured the United States and its regional neighbors that it harbored no revisionist aims. Its increasing power, after all, depended on a peaceful international order; China would do little to challenge the existing international order. In turn, China’s rise to a great power would contribute to international peace, security, and prosperity. China in essence was engaged in “peaceful rise” and “peaceful development.”

China’s grand strategy of reassurance was not only rhetorical—it also involved significant economic instruments—but it has involved significant rhetorical effort on the part of Beijing. Beijing was particularly careful to appeal to liberal rules and norms when justifying what other powers might see as revisionist behavior in territorial conflicts in the East and South China seas. Beijing’s diplomatic rhetoric seemed light-years away from its language of the 1970s, when appeals to legal norms were dismissed as kowtowing to “bourgeois international law.” From the 1990s onward, China claimed that it both understood and would abide “by the rules of the international community.” Much of this rhetoric was deployed strategically. In territorial disputes with Japan and the ASEAN states, for example, Beijing coopted concepts found in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—concepts like “straight baseline” or “archipelago baseline” to legitimate their territorial claims. As noted by one legal scholar, Beijing had purposively sought to “weaponize” international law, to legitimate “activities conducted by using the law as the weapon and through measures and methods such as legal deterrence, legal attack, legal counterattack, legal restraint, legal sanctions, and legal protections.”

Scholars suggest that China’s appeals to international law were largely successful in staving off a balancing coalition. Both the United States and regional powers saw China’s appeals to international law as “self-binding,” and thus it had “a constitutive effect on its Asian policy by establishing a positive image, shaping the baseline expectation from its neighbors, and laying the foundation for debates in the SCS territorial disputes.” By appealing to international law, and particularly framing its claims as consistent with UNCLOS, China undercut collective mobilization against its expansion: if China was willing to act within the confines of institutions, then there was no need for aggressive action on the part of other claimants. This rhetoric reinforced what Fravel has referred to as China’s “delaying strategy,” helping keep possible challengers demobilized as Beijing pursued territorial claims. China’s rhetoric also seemed to provide further evidence that it was becoming socialized into international norms and rules.

From 2009 onward, however, China has shifted its rhetoric, justifying its claims in the South and East China seas as necessary to protect its “core
interests.” The language of “core interests” is not new: it has long been central to China’s legitimation on what it saw as “critical issues on which there is very little room, if any, for negotiation.” But it was only in 2010 that this language of “core interests” was applied to the South China Seas. In March 2010, the New York Times reported that Chinese officials suggested China’s territorial claims to the South China Sea was a “core interest” in a private meeting with two senior U.S. officials.

It’s worth noting that, as Swaine argues, there is no corroborating evidence that Chinese officials actually used “core interests” to justify their actions in the South China Seas during this meeting. Yet Beijing took little public action to clarify its stance on “core interests.” As both Johnston and Swaine argue, while China feared its reported rhetoric would provoke concern among American officials, it also faced a domestic dilemma back home. Johnston reports that “a senior Chinese foreign policy” explained that “once the story was out, the MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] could not publicly say that the South China Sea was not a core interest—China does not want to preempt the possibility of making such a declaration. Nor could it state publicly that no senior official had said the South China Sea was a core interest, that the New York Times source was wrong. This, too, might have raised the ire of nationalists within the population and the elite.” However suspect the initial report, after 2010 the legitimation of core interest became tied to China’s claims in the South and East China seas. Observers note that references to “core interests” as the justification for China’s foreign policy went from being almost nonexistent in the first decade of the 2000s to appearing consistently in Beijing’s defense of its claims. In 2015, China officially linked its claims in the South China Seas as a “core interest” in an official security law.

To sum up, China’s own rhetoric provides some explanation for why “assertiveness” has become a social fact. But as argued throughout this book, the resonance of legitimation strategy depends, not only on who is speaking, but the audience. China’s rhetorical shift provoked a quick response in the United States. As Kai He and Huiyun Feng explained, “If China lists the South China Sea issues as core interests, it means that China is prepared to use force against other claimants in the South China Sea. It will not only deepen regional concerns about China’s rise, but also limit possible resolution of the disputes between China and other claimants.” The claims of “core interest” spread quickly through American media and were portrayed as a concerning shift in China’s foreign policy and a signal of growing assertiveness. “China’s aggressive posture toward the South China Sea has been stirring tensions in the region, and a new national security law suggests that Beijing is just getting started,” one media outlet argued. A Christian Science Monitor story likewise reported that China “speaks of a ‘peaceful rise’ in Asia and of binding the region with liberal markets,” but that its policy in the South China Sea now raised “doubts about its inten-
A report from the Department of Defense noted that Xi had pronounced China’s commitment to defending “its core interests and territorial sovereignty” and warned that Beijing’s “assertive efforts to advance its sovereignty and territorial claims, its forceful rhetoric, and lack of transparency about its growing military capabilities” was of growing concern to both the United States and its allies in the Asia-Pacific.46

Some suggest that the U.S. response to perceptions China’s assertiveness was overly aggressive.47 The administration did “pivot” military resources toward the region and formulated “Air Sea Battle” as an operational doctrine in response to China’s growing military capabilities.48 The Obama administration worked to strengthen its economic ties with allies in the Asia-Pacific, strengthening its partnerships through outlets like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, with Obama arguing that “TPP allows America—and not countries like China—to write the rules of the road in the 21st century.”49 In the South China Sea, the United States also responded by increasing its Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOP).50

Yet arguably the Obama administration’s response was fairly restrained. Compared to other cases of confrontation and containment in this book, the Obama administration’s response to revisionist intentions amounts to a fairly conservative “hedging” strategy, one that continued to pursue engagement and accommodation, while at the same time protesting what it saw as overly ambitious claims. This reaction is consistent with a situation in which the claims of a rising challenger are illegitimate—they flout international norms and rules—but the existing great power believes it is institutionally secure. Under these conditions, legitimation strategies are weakly dissonant: the great power hears that the rising power’s claims are illegitimate but sees these claims as only an ambiguous signal of a rising power’s intentions. As argued in chapter 2, under these conditions, the great power might see the rising challenger as a revisionist 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.

From this perspective, the Obama administration’s choice of strategies makes sense: as described above, in response to China’s assertiveness, the U.S. government chose to double down on the international order. Alliance relations were strengthened, both through an increase in multilateral economic partnerships and through a strengthening of bilateral alliances in the region. And as discussed earlier, the United States has stated consistently that its FONOPs are not designed as military operations but as attempts by a neutral party to reinforce international law. While the United States may have aimed to stem China’s ambitions, then, it also attempted to do so in a way that suggested its goal was not to coerce or threaten Beijing, and that China could continue to pursue its interests, provided it did so within the limits of international order.
CONCLUSION

But this raises the question as to whether changes in U.S. institutional vulnerability might prompt a different strategy, a turn toward more radical containment and even confrontation in the South China Seas. The United States, arguably, is becoming more institutionally vulnerable. The 2008 financial crisis continues to reverberate, destabilizing economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the G8, and the World Bank, among others, that have regulated financial and trade relations since 1945.\textsuperscript{51} Security institutions, such as NATO and the bilateral alliance system in Asia, have allowed the United States to project power globally. And there is evidence that the United States sees these institutions as increasingly unsettled. Populist movements in the United States and abroad threaten commitments to collective security institutions. Transnational terrorist groups explicitly challenge the legitimacy of the sovereign state. Revisionist states, such as Russia, seem to flaunt norms of sovereignty. Nuclear proliferation in North Korea places the key U.S. allies of Japan and South Korea under the weight of an existential threat.

The concern here, then, is that, caught in an institutionally vulnerable position, the United States might not only react, but overreact, to China’s rhetoric in the South China Seas. Shoring up institutions in the Asia-Pacific, working to reassure existing allies of its commitments, and seeking more robust partnerships with states like Vietnam and Malaysia might be prudent. But there are calls for stronger strategies of containment and confrontation against China’s claims. Many applauded when in May 2017, the first FONOP of the Trump administration saw the USS Dewey transiting within twelve nautical miles of Mischief Reef, a feature in the South China Sea occupied by China.\textsuperscript{52} Calls for mobilization within the American government have grown louder. In 2016, for example, Senator Marco Rubio introduced a bill in the Senate Foreign Relations committee that calling for sanction against Chinese individuals and entities “that participate in Beijing’s illegitimate operations in the South China Sea and East China Sea.”\textsuperscript{53}

If the legitimation theory here is correct, the more vulnerable the United States sees its international order, the more likely it is to respond to China’s rhetoric and language like its claims of “core interest” with containment and confrontation. This is not to say conflict is set in stone. China, arguably, still has the flexibility to walk back its rhetoric, and its language on initiatives like the AIIB and One Belt, One Road has arguably remained consistent with liberal international norms. In the United States, the current administration has shown less interest in the liberal international order and might prove less likely to react to illiberal claims. Regardless, the shifting dynamics between the United States and China demonstrate the continued relevance of legitimation strategies in rising power politics.
Legitimacy, Strategic Signaling, and Power Politics

The focus of this book has been on legitimation during power transitions, explaining how great powers look to legitimation strategies as signals of a challenger’s ambitions. But the theoretical approach developed here is not limited to rising power politics. The question of how states assess each other’s intentions is a foundational question of international politics. The capacity to tell whether a state’s aggressive behavior is driven by insecurity or greed is essential for deciding whether to reassure or deter an opponent. The ability to distinguish friend from foe is necessary for sustained cooperation. Deciphering intentions, in other words, lies at the root of war and peace in international politics.

This suggests that a social constructivist approach to signaling should provide insights, not only for cases of power transitions, but in any instance in which a state attempts to divine the intentions of others. As argued in chapter 1, the legitimation theory here accepts, like rationalist accounts, that communication is a strategic process, that actors will signal their intentions in ways designed to best achieve their own interests. At the same time, the process of signaling is deeply social and revolves around formulating and contesting the resonance of particular frames. For this reason, the legitimation theory here has at least three implications for the broader study of signaling and world politics: it questions the centrality of costly information to signaling approaches; it challenges the meaning of “uncertainty” in strategic interactions; and it suggests an endogenous relationship between signaling and an actor’s type.

The first and most obvious implication of the legitimation theory here is that a focus on costly signals only gets scholars so far. Throughout this book we see cases where cheap talk is treated as if it were costly signals, as well as ample evidence that leaders often discount, even ignore, costly signals of their opponents’ aims. The legitimation theory here suggests signals reduce uncertainty, not only because they are costly, but because they are resonant, and depend on the content and interpretation of legitimation strategies. But the legitimation theory here is only one approach to the question of why certain signals might prove more salient than others. For example, international relations theorists could pay more attention to literature about the cognitive and psychological foundations of resonance to determine why some signals are recognized as significant sources of information and others are ignored. Likewise, theorists could invest more in the study of emotion and salient signals. The point here is not that there is only one approach to the thorny problem of “resonance” and strategic signaling. It is that the reduction of uncertainty cannot be bounded only by the exchange of costly information in international politics; it depends on a host of intersubjective and subjective meanings that have no objective cost.
Second, the legitimation here pushes scholars to unpack their definitions of “uncertainty” in theories of international politics. As Rathbun has argued, the concept of uncertainty is central to every major theoretical tradition in international relations and “is arguably the most important factor in explaining the often unique dynamics of international as opposed to domestic politics.”\(^{57}\) But there are significant differences in how rationalists and constructivists treat “uncertainty.” For rationalists, uncertainty is a condition of ignorance—it is a lack of knowledge about the “true” state of the world. To manage uncertainty in the international system thus means acquiring more and better information about the state of the world, so that actors may more efficiently and effectively engage in “updating” about others’ intentions. Following from this, if we want to make cooperation more likely, we need to improve the volume and credibility of information in the international system. This could be achieved through international institutions, which establish routine channels of communication, increase transparency, and can independently verify the quality of information.\(^{58}\)

For rationalists, then, uncertainty is “epistemological”: there is an objective, stable, and “knowable” world out there, but human beings have difficulty perceiving it. For the legitimation theory here, in contrast, uncertainty is more fundamental: the world is “‘unknowable’ given the complexity of the world.”\(^{59}\) This may sound esoteric, but the implications of this understanding of uncertainty for signaling, and international relations theorizing more generally, are substantial. If uncertainty is ontological, we cannot simply gather information from the world around us, because the state of that world is not fixed and stable. If uncertainty is about indeterminacy, we cannot read intentions off of behavior, because the meaning of that behavior is mutable.

All of this suggests that managing uncertainty in the international system involves, not merely providing information about an objective world, but also constructing and fixing the meaning of events. As with the study of resonant signals, the legitimation theory is only one take on how actors might define the meaning of their social environment. Myriad constructivists have argued that institutions might reduce conflict, not only by communicating information but by establishing “rules of the game” that guide interaction—in other words, by stabilizing meanings and creating shared understandings, institutions manage uncertainty.\(^{60}\) Others have suggested how existing narratives shape the interpretation of national interests, threats, and grand strategy.\(^{61}\) In all of these cases, the focus moves beyond the revealing of information about the “state of the world” to the production and creation of that world itself.

Finally, this book calls into question how rationalists have portrayed the relationship between signaling, intentions, and “type” in international politics. For rationalists, signals are almost naturally intertwined with an actor’s type. To return to rising power politics, it is unlikely that, over time,
limited-aims revisionists will consistently send revolutionary signals or vice versa. Limited-aims revisionists can send costly signals that they will behave: they have no need to mobilize their populations for expansionist aims; they have no need to build offensive forces; they are willing and able to bind themselves to the existing order. Revolutionary states might dissemble for a while but must eventually reveal their true aims: they will mobilize their populations, build offensive forces, and take action to overthrow the international order. At the very least, the cases in this book suggest that the link between type and signals is not so reliable, that while states may seek to discover the type of challenger they face, the answers they find are not as closely linked to signals as the conventional literature suggests.

But I suggest an even more profound departure from rationalist literature: it may be that the signaling process itself that shapes the type a rising power will become. This reinforces the constructivist argument that actors themselves, their identities and intentions, are not stable or fixed, but are created and transformed through the legitimation process. In other words, type itself is a rhetorical construct. We can see evidence for this throughout the cases in this book. In chapter 4, for example, we saw how Bismarck combined nationalist and conservative legitimations together in an attempt to appeal across these coalitions. Bismarck’s goal was instrumental and strategic, to mobilize support for Prussia’s expansion at home and diminish resistance abroad. But the effects of his appeals were far reaching, even unanticipated. This moment of legitimation set the foundations for the conservative, romantic, militaristic nationalism that would underpin the nascent German national state. It was an identity, moreover, that would eventually reject Bismarck and his limited vision for the German nation. Bismarck’s rhetoric, in essence, did not reflect a type; it constituted German identity itself. These effects are also evident in the case of Japan. As argued above, Japan was a limited-aims revisionist engaged in revolutionary rhetoric. But this process of legitimation would work to construct Japan as a revolutionary type. The language of renovation empowered actors who had long positioned themselves as the vanguard of a new order in Asia. Socially, the legitimation of the new order pervaded the public: Japan’s leaders engaged in far reaching propaganda campaigns that would reconstitute society’s vision of itself in international politics. All of this suggests that it is not simply that signaling reveals intentions; through the signaling process, intentions may be constructed, and thus actors identities are indeed endogenous to strategic interaction itself.

In sum, the legitimation theory here has implications beyond rising power politics; it challenges conventional understandings of costs, uncertainty, and identity in international politics. To be clear, rationalist theories have much to say about signaling in international politics. But it would be productive to push the field to think about when and under what conditions rationalist theories might be most useful, and where their insights might be
more limited. Rational choice theorists themselves have argued that Bayesian approaches are most useful in situations where a “properly understood institutional framework is present,” and thus we can reasonably treat the strategic interaction as occurring in a fixed environment.\(^{63}\) We can imagine moments in which rules, interests, and events are relatively stable and understood. Even where formal institutions are not present, there may be relatively stable and understood meanings, actors, and strategies. There is very little in the way of formal institutions governing nuclear deterrence, for instance, yet agents have developed common knowledge of the relevant actors, the rules of the game, and the issues involved, allowing theorists to fruitfully explain these interactions as “rational deterrence.” But at the same time, international politics—and social life in general—is often a complex system.\(^{64}\) Interactions are not structured, and unexpected and contingent states of the world are likely. If this is the case, then we need to take seriously constructivist insights into strategic signaling in international politics.

Talk matters. Great powers listen to what rising powers say they are going to do, and why they are going to do it. Rising powers understand this and attempt to shape patterns of mobilization against their actions through their legitimation strategies. This book is certainly not the first to call for a rhetorical turn in international politics.\(^{65}\) But the argument here aims to push those that study power politics—often considered the theoretical stomping grounds of realism—to take rhetoric seriously. Legitimation is power politics. Legitimation draws together coalitions, mobilizing the resources necessary for expansion. Rhetoric wedges apart opposition and silences opponents.\(^{66}\) Earlier realists such as Morgenthau, Carr, and Aron understood this connection between rhetoric, legitimacy, and power, and for that reason treated these factors as significant in their own studies of international politics.\(^{67}\) Rather than turning away from power, this book calls for a return to a richer understanding of the instruments and mechanisms of power politics in our theories of international relations, one in which battles over rights are essential in the struggle over might.