

## Does Prestige Matter in International Politics?\*

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*This article examines the role of prestige as an important intersubjective element of power in international relations which has been largely ignored by neorealist approaches to the field. The article provides the etymological origins of the concept of prestige and distinguishes between its negative and positive sources such as brutality and self-restraint. Two case studies of American intervention and rollback in the Korean War are presented. This article argues that so long as neorealism fails to show that intersubjective understandings and expectations that give brute material capabilities meaning are caused by deep material structure, its analysis must be supplemented by intersubjective elements of power such as prestige.*

**Keywords:** *Neorealism, constructivism, prestige, Korean War, classical realism, rollback*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The debate between neorealism and constructivism has emerged as a major axis of dispute in international relations theory (Wendt 1999; Waltz 1979; Onuf 1989; Wendt 1992: 391-425; Mearsheimer 1994/95: 37-47; Wendt 1995: 71-81; Mearsheimer 1995: 82-93). In the past Waltz's spare structural definition of international system in terms of material capabilities was criticized as too static to explain change in the international system (Markey 1999: 130; Nye 1988: 241-45; Waltz 1979: ch. 5). The fact that Soviet military capabilities remained the same before and after the end of the Cold War casts doubt on Waltz's theory (Kratochwil 1993: 63). This anomaly led theorists to search for an alternative theory which could supplement the neorealist net. Constructivism seeks to replace Waltz's material structure with social structure (Wendt 1999; Wendt 1995: 73). There is also a growing body of empirical research associated with constructivism (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986: 735-75; Wendt 1994: 384-96; Koslowski and Kratochwil 1994: 217; Wendt and Friedheim 1995: 689-722; Mercer 1995: 229-52; Bukovansky 1997: 209-44).

The essence of constructivism is to redefine the concept of structure by incorporating such intersubjective elements as shared understandings and common knowledge arising historically from recurrent patterns of practices among states (Wendt 1995: 73-4). These social elements help us to explain the behavior of states which cannot be captured by material structure of neorealism. Stephen Walt provides a compelling case by showing that it is not always true that the greater the capabilities of a state, the more threatening it are to other states (Walt 1987: 21-8). The level of threat is often in inverse proportion to the size of capabilities of a state. Thus Waltz's material structure cannot adequately explain alliance formation among states. Although Walt does not frame his alliance theory in explicitly constructivist terms, the impact of social factors such as threat perception is clear. Constructivism is a conscious theoretical attempt to incorporate these social elements and recapture international political reality by means of the concept of social structure.

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This article accepts Wendt's argument that the effects of material capabilities presuppose intersubjective structure which is not reducible to capabilities.<sup>1</sup> I argue that one of intersubjective elements of power is the notion of prestige, an idea that can be found in practitioners of international politics and some classical realists, but has been relatively ignored by structural materialism. Constructivism provides a theoretical framework for revisiting this neglected intersubjective element of power.

Practitioners such as Richelieu (Church 1972: 500), Bismarck,<sup>2</sup> Stalin,<sup>3</sup> Kennan (1947: 575), and Acheson (1969: 405) take prestige seriously. Acheson, for example, defines prestige as the "shadow cast by power." Theorists in the realist tradition also take questions of prestige seriously (Thucydides 1972: bk 1, 55, 88; Machiavelli 1961: ch. XXI, 119-24; Machiavelli 1970: bk 2, 304-5; Hobbes 1968: 150-60; Weber 1958: 160; Carr 1964: 132-45; Nicolson 1937; Aron 1966: 69, 73; Gilpin 1981: 13-4, 30-4). Reinhold Niebuhr (1942: 4) conceives of prestige as an "indispensable source of power." Martin Wight (1978: 97) calls it the "halo round power." Morgenthau (1985: 86-100) criticizes theorists' tendency to reduce power to material capabilities to the neglect of prestige. While these examples show that prestige matters as an intersubjective element of power in international politics, they cannot be used as evidence of the causal influence of prestige, as opposed to material capabilities, on the behavior of states.

This article presents two case studies to show that prestige matters even at times when material capabilities are stretched (Eckstein 1975: 79-138). If these crucial cases can be demonstrated in circumstances where Waltz's neorealism considers such behavior the least likely, they support the constructivist argument that intersubjective elements give brute physical capabilities meaning.

This article begins by discussing the etymological outline of the concept of prestige. This etymological analysis throughout history will enable us to define the concept and to distinguish between the negative and positive sources of prestige such as brutality and self-restraint, respectively. Based on this analysis, we choose as two case studies American intervention and rollback in the Korean War to demonstrate the causal influence of prestige on US foreign policies by examining US and Soviet documents on the war. The US Korean policies were guided by its concern about prestige even when the US lacked military capabilities before and after the outbreak of the Korean War. And when US military capabilities greatly suffered as a result of Chinese intervention in the pursuit of the rollback policy, the US was determined to continue to fight on the peninsula until it was forced to be expelled because of its concern about prestige. I conclude by considering how the study of intersubjective elements of power can contribute to achieving moderation in international politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendt uses the terms "social structure" and "intersubjective structure" interchangeably (Wendt 1994: 389).

<sup>2</sup> Bismarck makes a clear distinction between "a policy of interest" and "a policy of prestige." (Langer 1950: 452-3; Donelan 1990: 34).

<sup>3</sup> Stalin to Kim Il Sung, October 8(7), 1950 (Mansourov 1995/96: 116).

## 2. ETYMOLOGY OF PRESTIGE

The word *prestige* originates from the Latin substantive *praestigiae* (Simpson and Weiner 1991).<sup>4</sup> *Praestigiae*, the plural form of *praestigium*, is made up of *praesto* and *digitus*. *Praesto* means “quick” and *digitus* means “finger.” Thus *praestigiae* means “juggler’s tricks” which deceive people with the quick movement of the hands. The Latin verb *praestringere*, as used in the phrase *praestringere oculus*, means “to blindfold and dazzle the eyes.” The juggler is called *praestigator*, which is today found in the French *prestigiateur*.

The etymological study of the word *prestige* shows that Latin authors used the term to mean “deceptive juggling tricks” (Leopold 1913: 16-7). The *praestigator* throws coins on a table, then puts them into a small box, moves the latter about quickly and adroitly, until finally, when we think that they are in a certain place, the coins turn up somewhere else. Juggler’s sleight of hand was considered a magic art. The term also had a supernatural connotation as employed in the phrase *praestigiae verborum*, “the delusive spell of words.” The Latin *praestigiae* has both negative and supernatural connotations.

The term *prestige* first appeared in the French language in the sixteenth century while retaining the original meanings, *praestigiae*. In other words, *praestigiae* became *prestige* in French, from which it was borrowed by the English language. During this transfiguration, the term experienced significant changes. “The use of the word was not restricted to the prestige of prophets, conjurers, and demon, but was transferred by analogy to delusions the cause of which is not regarded any longer as supernatural” (Leopold 1913: 17). This transfiguration of the meaning of prestige is closely related to the emergence of the modern era.

One of the characteristics of the modern era is a shift of emphasis from the supernatural to the human. Thus Rousseau began to refer to “the prestige of our passions, which dazzles the intellect and deceives wisdom” (Leopold 1913: 18).<sup>5</sup> In international relations the concept of *raison d’état* emerged as a principle to regulate relations among the emerging nation-states in Europe: “*Raison d’état* asserted that the wellbeing of the state justified whatever means were employed to further it; the national interest supplanted the medieval notion of a universal morality” (Kissinger 1994: 58). Cardinal Richelieu in France adopted and practiced the principle of *raison d’état*. He put great emphasis on the importance of reputation in international politics, saying that “reputation is so very necessary to a prince that he of whom one has a good opinion does more with his mere name than those who are not esteemed do with their armies” (Church 1972: 500).

The French *prestige* in the sixteenth century began to comprise reputation in its meaning. We often hear that a political scientist gains prestige by his or her achievements in the discipline’s literature. In addition to the emphasis on human causes of prestige, the positive aspects of prestige were added to the meaning in this transfiguration. To the negative connotation of prestige was added the positive meaning, namely, “reputation derived from previous character, achievements, or associations, or especially past success” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This positive meaning of prestige was lacking in the Latin *praestigiae*. Yet the meaning of “illusion or deception” found in the Latin *praestigiae* still remains as part of the meaning of prestige.

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<sup>4</sup> The following etymological explanation of the word *prestige*, if not specified otherwise, comes from *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbes (1968: 242) makes a similar point: “The understanding is by the flame of the passions never enlightened, but dazzled.”

### 3. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SOURCES OF PRESTIGE

The etymological study of prestige shows us that there are both positive and negative sources of prestige. The positive ones include past achievements or successes. By contrast, the negative sources of prestige involve deception and trickery. It should be emphasized that prestige is enhanced regardless of its source.

We are interested of course not merely in the etymological analysis of prestige, but in how prestige appears as one of intersubjective elements of international relations, that is, shared understandings, expectations, and common knowledge between states. The role of General MacArthur during the Korean War provides a good example by which to understand the positive sources of prestige. His brilliant military success at Inchon and its recognition by others resulted in the development of a cult of his infallibility (Ridgway 1967: 42).

New Soviet documents show that MacArthur did not only defeat the North Koreans, but also Soviet advisors to the North and Stalin who directed day-to-day operations in Korea through these advisors.<sup>6</sup> MacArthur's *dazzling* performance heightened his own prestige. Acheson noted that even President Truman made a "pilgrimage" to Wake Island to show his respect for the General (Acheson 1969: 456). This intersubjective understandings on MacArthur's performance and the expectations on his infallibility were a determining factor in the US pursuit of marching to the thirty-eighth parallel and rolling back the North.

Another important positive source of prestige is the successful use of power in war.<sup>7</sup> Prestige as reputation for strength may even forestall war (Hawtrey 1930: 96). After the victory in World War II, the US emerged as the most prestigious state in the world. Before the war, the US did not vigorously pursue prestige. It was satisfied with "a reputation for power which is inferior to the actual power possessed" (Morgenthau 1985: 99). Morgenthau calls the US policy in the interwar period "the negative policy of prestige." The prestige of the US belatedly caught up with its actual power after the victory in World War II.

The opposite of the negative policy of prestige is "the policy of bluff." A nation pursues the policy of bluff "when it paints an exaggerated picture of its power and thus attempts to gain a reputation for power which exceeds the power it actually possesses" (Morgenthau 1985: 97). In doing so, it builds its prestige on the appearance rather than the substance of power. Here we find one of the deceptive connotations of prestige. Machiavelli counsels the prince that "it is not a wise course to make an alliance with a ruler whose reputation is greater than his strength" (Machiavelli 1970: 304). The policy of Mussolini from the Ethiopian war of 1935 to the African campaign of 1942 is a good example of the policy of bluff.

The analysis of the differences between the negative policy of prestige and the policy of bluff demonstrates that prestige is not simply something recognized by others, but also something a nation asserts (Wight 1978: 98). As a state's sovereignty exists only in virtue of the recognition by other states of intersubjective understandings and expectations that a state has an exclusive right to its existence, territory, and population, so does prestige have such an intersubjective element since no state can gain prestige without others' recognition (Bull 1977: 40-52; Buzan 1991: 174-81; Wendt 1992: 412-8). What is more important to illustrate the sources of prestige is another intersubjective element that prestige can be deliberately created and manipulated to advance a state's interests.

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<sup>6</sup> Stalin to Matveev and Shtykov, September 1950 (undated) (Weathersby 1993: 450-2).

<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli (1961: 119) makes a similar point when he argues that "nothing brings a prince more prestige than great campaigns and striking demonstrations of his personal abilities."

One of intersubjective elements of prestige is to influence and manipulate how other states define their interests. Neorealism can tell us that material structure may always affect states' calculations. Yet the fact that states' conception of interests depends on the intersubjective understandings and expectations arising from recurrent patterns of practices among states cannot be captured by neorealism's coarse material definition of structure. Constructivism's emphasis on interaction and process provides a theoretical framework for identifying the sources of prestige such as self-restraint and brutality. These two examples are illustrative, not exhaustive.

Victory in war can be used to create and manipulate prestige through self-restraint. A case in point is the British policy at the end of the Napoleonic Wars where Britain exercised its preponderant power with careful regard for self-restraint. Harold Nicolson (1937: 32) succinctly captures the policy of Foreign Secretary Castlereagh:

Although at the time we [the British] might have acquired half the world, we were content with a quite modest booty. We abandoned Martinique, Senegal and Gambia to our former enemy; and we gave the East Indian islands to somebody else. Nor were these surrenders dictated by lassitude or repletion. They were deliberately made in order to cement our prestige with something deeper and more durable than power alone.

Thus Castlereagh announced that "I am sure our reputation on the Continent, as a feature of strength, power, and confidence, is of more real moment to us than an acquisition thus made" (Wight 1978: 98). Castlereagh's pursuit of British national interests with due regard for prestige resulted not from benign intentions, but from recognition of the importance of self-restraint as a positive source of prestige.

Kennan's objection to crossing the thirty-eighth parallel after the victory at Inchon provides another example for creating prestige through self-restraint. With the development of a cult of MacArthur's infallibility, there emerged a tendency to pursue American rollback by military means. Truman's "pilgrimage" to Wake Island epitomized a tempting desire to remove North Korea from the Soviet sphere of influence by using a military genius. It was Kennan who warned against the rollback because he regarded the crossing of the parallel as entering into the realm of uncertainty and detrimental to American prestige.<sup>8</sup>

For Kennan, stopping at the parallel after the victory at Inchon and pursuing the political settlements of the Korean problem would have been more favorable to US prestige than flexing military muscles through American rollback. In Kennan's view, the defeat of Stalin's objective to incorporate South Korea into the Soviet orbit was already the prestige gain for the US which played the dominant role in the creation of South Korea. Moreover, the US demonstration of self-restraint through the proposal of a political settlement at the moment of imminent military victory would likewise contribute to the enhancement of US prestige. Kennan's policy resulted from his recognition of the importance of self-restraint as a positive source of prestige. Yet self-restraint was marred by the pursuit of a greater margin of victory through American rollback which resulted in a disaster after direct Chinese intervention.

Prestige is not created and manipulated from the positive sources alone. Brutality, for example, can also become a source of prestige in the negative sense. Thucydides provides a stark example for gaining prestige through the naked use of force. In the Melian dialogue

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<sup>8</sup> Kennan to Acheson, August 21, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 625).

Thucydides (1972: 402) explains why the Athenians refused to accept the neutrality of Melos, a former colony of Sparta:

Because it is not so much your hostility that injures us; it is rather the case that, if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness in us, whereas your hatred is evidence of power.

When the Melians eventually surrendered after a siege, the Athenians adopted brutality as “evidence of power”: they murdered all the Melian men of military age and enslaved women and children. For the Athenians prestige gained from brutality became “evidence of power” to the colonies of Athens. The choice of this murderous policy resulted from their calculation of interests because other allies of Athens would follow the Melian’s suit by seceding from the Empire if the Athenians were not harsh on the attempted defectors. The similar policy was adopted by the Soviet Union when it brutally cracked down on the revolts in Eastern European countries.

Regardless of the nature of sources states employ to gain prestige, they seek to influence how other states define their interests. Castlereagh sought to lower the level of threat perception for Britain by tempering British preponderant power with self-restraint. His policy prevented states on the continent from forming alliances against Britain. The Athenian and Soviet pursuit of prestige through negative sources were also efforts to manipulate client states not to define their interests in the ways detrimental to Athenian and Soviet interests. These self-restraining and brutal policies can be construed as states’ attempts to influence and change shared understandings and expectations in terms of which other states define their interests. These sources of prestige demonstrate that states can gain prestige regardless of whether material capabilities are used or not. This intersubjective element of prestige also shows that capabilities-based structural materialism cannot adequately explain state behavior. Based on the etymological analysis of prestige and its sources, we will develop two case studies to provide evidence for the causal influence of prestige for the behavior of states.

#### 4. TWO CASE STUDIES FROM THE KOREAN WAR

The analysis of the etymology of prestige and the distinction between its positive and negative sources suggest that the role of prestige as an important intersubjective element of power has been largely ignored by neorealism’s material definition of structure. The analysis also suggests that while prestige is not the ultimate determinant of the behavior of states, it does matter. Two case studies from the Korean War are presented to demonstrate that prestige matters even given the absence or decline of material capabilities of a state.

The first case explains why the US intervened in the Korean War to save South Korea although before and after the outbreak of the war enough military capabilities were not available for the defense of South Korea. This article argues that one of the reasons for American intervention can be found in US concern with prestige. The second case seeks to test the hypothesis that when US military capabilities greatly suffered in the pursuit of the rollback policy after direct Chinese intervention, the US was determined to continue to fight until it was forced to be expelled and, if possible, to hold a line on the peninsula because of its concern with prestige. If these cases can be proved in circumstances in which neorealism considers such US policies the least likely, we can demonstrate that prestige played an

important causal role in the behavior of states. Thus material structure of neorealism must be supplemented with social structure which takes into account intersubjective elements of power like prestige.

#### 4.1. Case I: American Intervention in the Korean War

The US "General Order No. 1" proposed the thirty-eighth parallel as the dividing line to receive the surrender of Japanese forces with the Soviet Union. Stalin agreed to the US proposal on Korea although he demanded changes in the areas of Soviet military operations like the Kurile Islands and Japan (Slavinsky 1993: 98-100). The two superpowers failed to reach an agreement on the establishment of a unified Korea despite 62 secret meetings of the Joint Commission held in accordance with the resolution of the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in December 1945. The US submitted the Korean problem to the UN which decided to hold elections only in the South when the Soviet occupation command denied entry to the UN delegation to supervise the elections in the North.

Before the US decided to transfer the Korean issue to the UN, the US organized the State-War Interdepartmental Committee to assess the strategic significance of Korea.<sup>9</sup> The interdepartmental committee concluded that the US had little strategic interest in maintaining troops or bases in Korea.<sup>10</sup> These troops would constitute a military liability in the event of a war in the Far East since they could not be defended without substantial reinforcement. The Committee's emphasis on the low strategic priority of Korea reflected the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) which prepared the emergency war plan for the Far East.

The JCS emergency war planning proceeded under strict budgetary restrictions since Truman had ordered that a "military structure" could not expend more than \$15 billion (Condit 1979: 213-4). As a member of the JCS noted of the budgetary constraints, "we will always be able to see, clearly, the bottom of the barrel."<sup>11</sup> Thus the JCS sought to pursue what Walter Lippmann called "solvency" in its planning, to balance commitments and capabilities (Lippmann 1943: 8). The lack of capabilities made it essential to set priorities. On June 16, 1947, the emergency war plan in the Far East, code-named MOONRISE, was complete.<sup>12</sup> The plan was designed to cope with a general war involving the US, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies three years thence.

MOONRISE estimated that if the Soviet Union provoked a general war, the entire Korean peninsula would be overrun within twenty days (D+20). The Soviet advance could not be halted by numerically inferior US forces in South Korea. Although US forces could be reinforced from Japan in an attempt to defend the South, the ultimate defeat or withdrawal of US troops from Korea would be inevitable. Any reinforcement from Japan would dangerously weaken the defense of Japan. The Korean peninsula would be bypassed and

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<sup>9</sup> Martin to Bunce, January 24, 1947, box 3825, 740.00119 Control (Korea), Record Group(RG) 59, National Archives II, Maryland, USA.

<sup>10</sup> Report of Special Interdepartmental Committee on Korea, February 25, 1947, 334.0, Records of Interdepartmental and Intradepartmental Committees, RG 335.

<sup>11</sup> Address to the National War College by Major General R. C. Lindsay, January 12, 1950, box 135, 350.00 (7-6-48), sec. 1, RG 218.

<sup>12</sup> "The Soviet Threat in the Far East and the Means Required to Oppose it (MOONRISE)," JWPC 476/1, June 16, 1947, box 71, CCS 381 USSR (3-2-46) sec. 5, RG 218.

remain undefended. Thus MOONRISE concluded that the troops in Korea should withdraw to Japan immediately after the outbreak of war.

The emphasis on the low strategic priority of Korea in MOONRISE was repeated whenever the JCS was asked to present its view of the strategic importance of Korea: the 1947 State-War Interdepartmental Report, the NSC 8 series on Korea (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 969-78), and the NSC 48/2 (Etzold and Gaddis 1978: 274-5). The basic strategic idea of MOONRISE in relation to Korea did not change in the emergency war plan known as OFFTACKLE, the approved emergency war plan in case a general war occurs prior to July 1, 1951.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that MOONRISE failed to consider a limited conflict short of a general war like the Korean War, we can recognize that the US lacked military capabilities to defend South Korea before the outbreak of the Korean War. Thus the reasons for American intervention must be sought in political considerations other than the availability of military capabilities.

The interdepartmental report of 1947 argued that despite the negative military interest in maintaining troops, the loss of Korea would be politically damaging to the interests of the US. The transfer of Korea to Soviet control would have a direct effect on the Cold War struggle between the two countries:

The loss of US prestige and influence, and the consequent increase in Soviet influence and power, would have prejudicial repercussions not only on US interest in the Far East but on the entire US world position.<sup>14</sup>

Secretary of State George Marshall agreed to the analysis of the special report on the importance of prestige.<sup>15</sup> Thus the tension between the lack of military capabilities and the concern about prestige arising from the loss of Korea was manifest since the peninsula was the only area where the two superpowers stood face to face alone. To resolve this tension the US decided to transfer the Korean problem to the UN as a means of withdrawing US forces from Korea without considerable loss of prestige.<sup>16</sup>

Before the elections were held to establish a separate government in the South under the supervision of the UN, Truman approved NSC 8, one of the NSC 8 series, which would guide US policy toward Korea until the outbreak of the war.<sup>17</sup> The document stipulated that the abandonment of South Korea was unacceptable from the standpoint of view of US prestige.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, a firm guarantee of the territorial integrity of Korea in the form of the alliance treaty would risk involving the US in a general war with the Soviet Union in an area where, as JCS emergency war plans concluded, must be bypassed when the Soviets in

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<sup>13</sup> Joint Outline Emergency War Plan, JCS 1844/46, November 8, 1949, box 81, CCS 381 (3-2-46) sec. 41, RG 218.

<sup>14</sup> Report of Special Interdepartmental Committee on Korea, February 25, 1947, 334.0, Records of Interdepartmental and Intradepartmental Committees, RG 335.

<sup>15</sup> Meeting of Secretaries of State, War, and Navy, March 19, 1947, P & O 337 TS, RG 319.

<sup>16</sup> Memo by Butterworth, October 1, 1947 (Department of State 1972: Vol. VI, 821).

<sup>17</sup> Charles L. Bolte, Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3, asked NSC 8/2 for reference when he assumed his duty after the outbreak of the Korean War. See G-3 Log, June 25, 1950, box 33, 091 Korea TS, Army Operations, RG 319.

<sup>18</sup> NSC 8, 'The Position of the United States with Respect to Korea', April 2, 1948 (Department of State, 1974: Vol. VI, 1164-9).



collaboration with the North attacked the South. Thus America's Korea policy would not commit the US irrevocably because of the lack of military capabilities. Whether concerns about prestige as seen in US policy decisions on Korea before the outbreak of the Korean War would justify American intervention would depend on the state of affairs when an emergency arose on the Korean peninsula.

The Korean War occurred when Stalin decided to give assent to Kim Il Sung's irredentistic zeal and to provide the necessary hardware for the invasion (Tucker 1997: 277; Ulam 1994: 21). Cumings's civil war theory, which finds the causes of the war as an extension of a series of border clashes, cannot be substantiated against recently released Soviet documents. These new materials make clear that Stalin sought to curtail border conflicts that might flare up into a general war between the North and South at a time before Stalin considered the invasion to be in the best interests of the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> According to the Soviet archival evidence, Kim sent as many as forty-eight telegrams to Stalin to receive the permission for the invasion. Weathersby (1993b: 14), for this reason, claims that it was Kim's war. Yet she cannot explain the timing of the invasion, that is, why June 1950 rather than earlier since Kim always wanted to reunify the country by force?<sup>20</sup> The constant nature of Kim's irredentistic zeal cannot be regarded as the efficient cause of the war despite the fact that his belligerent policies provided a permissive environment for Stalin's decision. Stalin was the only one with enough power and prestige to either give Kim the go-ahead or to make him wait.<sup>21</sup>

US policymakers at a series of the NSC meetings perceived that Stalin approved and supported the war.<sup>22</sup> Thus the most important task was to analyze whether the Soviet move in Korea was the opening salvo of general war or a campaign limited to the Korean peninsula. If the North Korean attack were part of Stalin's general war plan, an emergency war plan, that is, OFFTACKLE, should be implemented. The implementation of OFFTACKLE would mean that the remaining US advisors in Korea should be evacuated to Japan and no US reinforcement would be made to save the South. In contrast, if the attack were a limited war

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<sup>19</sup> For Cumings's civil war theory, see Cumings (1990: 568-621). Stalin prohibited the North from provoking a major border incident, which means involving battalions or regiments and is different from minor patrol skirmishes, in the Soviet Politbureau decision on September 24, 1949 (Weathersby 1995: 7-8). When the North provoked a major border conflict in which Soviet advisors actively participated against Stalin's order on the Ongjin peninsula on October 14, 1950, the Politbureau warned T.F. Shtykov, Soviet Ambassador to the North, of the possibility that he might be punished for the violation of the order. After this warning, no major border fighting along the thirty-eighth parallel occurred until the outbreak of the war in June 1950. For the lack of major border incidents from late October 1949 to February 1950, see Intelligence Summaries Nos. 2611, 2618, 2625, 2632, 2646, 2652, 2655, 2659, 2674, 2681, 2688, 2694, 2710, and 2715, Far East Command (FEC), RG 338.

<sup>20</sup> Kim sought Stalin's approval of the invasion in March and August 1949, and January 1950. Stalin eventually approved the plan on January 30, 1950 (For the related documents, see Weathersby 1995: 4-5, 8-9).

<sup>21</sup> The emphasis on Stalin's dominant role makes it incumbent on us to explain what political objectives Stalin expected to achieve in the Korea decision. Yet the analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>22</sup> Memo by Philip Jessup, June 25, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp.157-161; Meeting of the NSC, June 28, 1950, 795.00, RG 59.

to capture the South, American response to the Korean crisis would be *ad hoc*, without the help of prior war planning.

Truman ordered a survey of further danger spots along the periphery of the Soviet Union at the first NSC meeting after he returned from the trip to Independence.<sup>23</sup> The analysis culminated in the NSC 73 series.<sup>24</sup> The document argued that the direct Soviet attacks on American territories or any country covered by the North Atlantic Treaty should be construed as Soviet intentions to start a general war. In contrast, the isolated attacks on Iran, Turkey, Yugoslavia would not warrant the execution of emergency war plans. Yet the Soviet Union did not provoke a war at any of these anticipated danger spots. Without simultaneous and immediate Soviet moves around the Soviet periphery, Truman insisted that the North Korean attack should be defeated inside the Korean peninsula to prevent the expansion of the area of hostilities.<sup>25</sup>

Kennan estimated that the probable aim of the Soviet Union was simply to gain control of the entire Korean peninsula by using a satellite country.<sup>26</sup> The use of North Korean forces was construed as calculated Soviet moves with a view to keeping the Soviet Union diplomatically aloof and militarily uncommitted. Thus the attack represented an isolated and piecemeal attack against local and limited objectives rather than the first phase of a general Soviet plan for global war.

In Kennan's view, the incorporation of the South into the Soviet orbit would severely damage US prestige despite the limited nature of the Soviet move in Korea since the US played the dominant role in creating the state in the South in close cooperation with the UN.<sup>27</sup> Acheson also asserted that the US must intervene in the war to defeat Stalin's design since "to back away from this challenge... would be highly destructive to the power and prestige of the United States" (Acheson 1969: 405).

The definition of US political objective in terms of prestige for American intervention in the war was also repeated in the intelligence estimate of the Office of Intelligence Research(OIR) of the State Department:

A severe blow would be dealt to the US prestige throughout Asia and the encouragement which has been felt in widely scattered areas in consequence of the promise of more active American support of anti-Communist forces would be reversed. Equally important, the feeling would grow among South East Asian peoples that the USSR is advancing invincibly, and there would be a greatly increased impulse to "get on the bandwagon."<sup>28</sup>

The OIR report recommended the "effective intervention" in the war which would prevent the suffering of American prestige. The examples of Kennan, Acheson and the OIR

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<sup>23</sup> Memo by Jessup, June 25, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 160).

<sup>24</sup> NSC 73/4, 'The Position and Actions of the United States with Respect to Possible Further Soviet Moves in the Light of the Korean Situation', August 25, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. I, 375-389).

<sup>25</sup> Meeting of the NSC, June 28, 1950, 795.00, RG 59.

<sup>26</sup> The meeting note of the Policy Planning Staff (PPS) of June 27 reads as follows: "11:00 A.M., GFK [George F. Kennan] – Success must be overriding factor. Don't directly link closely to USSR." See Notes of Meeting, June 27, 1950, box 78, Records of the PPS, RG 59.

<sup>27</sup> Kennan to Acheson, August 21, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 625).

<sup>28</sup> Intelligence Estimate by OIR, June 25, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 150).

report demonstrate that the US intervened in the war out of concern with its prestige despite the lack of available military capabilities before and after the outbreak of the war. Thus the analysis of American intervention provides a crucial case which demonstrates that prestige matters even when a state lacked military capabilities for achieving its political objectives.

#### 4.2. Case II: American Rollback during the Korean War

At the outbreak of the war, Truman approved the air and naval cover for the evacuation of US dependents and the support for South Korean forces.<sup>29</sup> Yet these operations were confined to south of the parallel. Faced with the imminent loss of Seoul to the enemy, Truman permitted MacArthur to conduct air operations into North Korea with strict conditions that the Manchurian and Soviet frontiers should not be violated.<sup>30</sup> US air and naval forces could not stem the tide of Soviet T-34 medium tanks of the North. Thus Truman decided to send US ground forces to Korea in the early morning of June 30, 1950.<sup>31</sup>

Still the reinforcement of US combat troops failed to stop the rapid southward thrust of the North. The establishment of a beachhead was essential to prepare for a counter-offensive after enough UN forces were mobilized. The idea of a beachhead was first presented after the fall of Seoul to see if there was any possibility that Korea would be another Dunkirk.<sup>32</sup> The JCS reported that the chances of Korea becoming a Dunkirk were remote if only North Korean forces were involved in the war. Russian involvement with air and naval forces or massive Chinese intervention could fuel a Dunkirk-like scenario, but US air and naval superiority would still favor successful UN withdrawal by using port facilities at Pusan. Thus the JCS recommended the establishment of a beachhead which emerged in the form of the "Pusan perimeter" around August 2. UN forces held this defense position until MacArthur's successful Inchon landings which deceived Soviet advisors as well as the North.<sup>33</sup> Stalin sharply criticized Soviet advisors for the failure to mine the Inchon areas. After Inchon, Stalin ordered them to plant more than 2,000 mines at the port of Wonsan, thus causing a delay of UN forces for ten days.<sup>34</sup> Yet the belated mining could not compensate for the dismal failure at Inchon.

After Inchon, Stalin instructed Soviet advisors to tackle the question of whether UN forces would advance north of the thirty-eighth parallel (Weathersby 1993a: 439). This "worst case" scenario for Stalin meant American rollback which would expand the political objectives of American intervention. The Defense Department justified the rollback in terms of the military necessity to destroy North Korean troops anywhere in Korea.<sup>35</sup> Yet the more important objective of the rollback was to deal a blow to the prestige of the Soviet Union by removing North Korea from the Soviet orbit.<sup>36</sup> It was Kennan who strongly objected to crossing the parallel since "the Kremlin will not wait for us to reach the thirty-eighth parallel

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<sup>29</sup> Memo by Jessup, June 26, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 179).

<sup>30</sup> JCS to MacArthur, June 29, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 241).

<sup>31</sup> JCS to MacArthur, June 29, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 263).

<sup>32</sup> Meeting of the NSC, June 29, 1950, 795.00, RG 59; JSPC 853/5, 'Military Estimate of the Present Korean Situation', box 38, 383.21 Korea (2-19-45) sec. 21, RG 218.

<sup>33</sup> Stalin to Matveev, September 1950 [undated] (Weathersby, 1993: 451).

<sup>34</sup> Stalin to Shtykov and Matveev, October 1, 1950 (Weathersby 1993: 456).

<sup>35</sup> Draft Memo of NSC 81, July 31, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 502).

<sup>36</sup> CIA Memo, August 18, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 601).

before taking action.”<sup>37</sup> Yet Kennan’s counsel was not taken seriously by Acheson who later recognized his responsibility in the ensuing dismal defeat of UN forces after the Chinese intervention (Acheson 1969: 466).

Kennan’s warning against American rollback proves prescient because new Soviet documents demonstrate that Stalin agreed to Mao’s suggestion that nine divisions of the People’s Liberation Army(PLA) be deployed along the Yalu River, ready to be dispatched into Korea as soon as the UN forces crossed the parallel.<sup>38</sup> Stalin also promised Soviet air cover for these Chinese troops. Thus even before the UN forces crossed the parallel, Stalin prepared himself for the counterattack by using Chinese forces. Twelve army divisions and three artillery divisions started across the Yalu River on the night of October 19, using hastily constructed wooden bridges in the night and leaving behind twenty-four divisions as a reserve force in Manchuria. These forces were deployed in mountainous regions of North Korea to repel UN troops when MacArthur ordered UN forces to proceed to the Korean-Manchurian border on October 24.

The first Chinese offensive began on October 25 by concentrating five army corps on the western front and ended around November 6 (Chen 1992: 25-6). As a result of the offensive, ROK II Corps had ceased to be an organizing fighting forces, and the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 1<sup>st</sup> US Cavalry Division was nearly destroyed (Appleman 1961: 690). The second Chinese offensive began when MacArthur launched a general attack on November 24 involving all available UN forces. ROK II Corps was swept aside to a depth of 5 to 25 miles at the initial stage of the Chinese offensive. Its disorganization created a 30-mile gap between the Eighth Army in the western front and the X Corps boundary.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese offensive forced the withdrawal of UN troops, representing what Jonathan Pollack has called “the most infamous retreat in American military history” (Pollack 1989: 224). On December 5, Pyongyang, the capital city of the North, was recaptured by Chinese forces. As a result of the third Chinese offensive which began on December 31, 1950, Seoul was retaken by the Communist forces on January 4, 1951. By January 8, the front line had moved southward to the 37<sup>th</sup> parallel.

To accelerate war preparations, Acheson asked Truman to announce a state of emergency which was eventually declared on December 16, 1950. Yet the measure could not compensate for UN losses after the Chinese intervention. The only unit available in the US was the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division.<sup>40</sup> The first newly recruited divisions would be sent to Korea on March 1, 1951. Despite orderly withdrawal of X Corps from the port of Wonsan, the military situations looked grim for the US. Hence the JCS instructed MacArthur that the preservation of US forces should be his primary concern.<sup>41</sup> Yet insuring the security of UN forces could not be an end in itself. The definition of political objectives had to dominate any consideration of means in the war. Nonetheless, the dominance of concern about the preservation of military capabilities reflected the seriousness of the military situations in the face of massive Chinese intervention.

With the defeat of UN forces looming, MacArthur demanded the activation of Chinese nationalist forces and direct air attacks on Manchuria. Truman rejected MacArthur’s proposals out of concern that they might spark a general war with the PRC. Truman’s

<sup>37</sup> Kennan to Acheson, August 21, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 625).

<sup>38</sup> Stalin to Mao, July 5, 1950 (Weathersby 1995/1996: 43).

<sup>39</sup> Daily Intelligence Summary No. 3003, FEC, RG 338.

<sup>40</sup> Memo of Conversation by Jessup, November 25, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 1244).

<sup>41</sup> JCS, ‘Records of the Actions Taken by the JCS’, April 30, 1950, box 15, Korea Project, RG 59.

position after the defeat of MacArthur's offensive can be summarized as follows: limit the war and hold the line somewhere inside Korea despite the suffering and lack of UN war-making capabilities.<sup>42</sup> Localizing the war had been Truman's consistent strategy ever since the initial American intervention. Truman also refused to withdraw from Korea following the UN's military misfortunes. He had ordered MacArthur to continue resistance from off-shore islands of Korea, particularly from Cheju Island, if it became impossible to hold an important portion on the mainland.<sup>43</sup>

Truman insisted that the withdrawal from Korea must be forced on the US by military necessity in the worst case. He declared that he should not accept the result politically and militarily until the aggression was rectified since the loss of South Korea would deal a severe damage to the prestige of the U.S. Secretary of Defense Marshall shared Truman's view:

There is danger of our becoming the greatest appeaser of all time if we abandon the Koreans and they are slaughtered; if there is a Dunkirk and we are forced out it is a disaster but not a disgraceful one.<sup>44</sup>

Truman and Marshall were determined to continue to fight on the peninsula until it was forced out because of its concern about prestige even when UN military capabilities greatly suffered after a series of Chinese offensive.

The voluntary withdrawal of the US from Korea would greatly enhance the prestige of the PRC for having defeated the US. Truman offered another reason: "To deflate the dangerously exaggerated political and military prestige of Communist China which now threatens to undermine the resistance of non-Communist Asia."<sup>45</sup> Thus the real challenge to Truman was to hold the line and deflate Chinese prestige without spreading the war into Manchuria and incurring further serious losses of US forces in Korea. Fortunately, the overextension of Chinese forces to the south made their line of communications long enough for UN air forces to cause them serious logistic troubles. The increase in the effectiveness of UN air attacks on Chinese forces within Korean made it unnecessary to directly strike Chinese territories in order to halt Communist advances. The US gradually seized the opportunity to hold and stabilize a line in Korea without widening the area of hostilities.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of American intervention and rollback suggests that prestige not only matters, but is also an important causal factor in international relations. In the cases examined here, the lack and suffering of US capabilities did not outweigh its concerns about prestige. These "hard" case studies suggest that an even stronger causal role of prestige can be demonstrated in other cases in international politics. A case in point is Stalin's emphasis on

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<sup>42</sup> Minutes of the First Meeting of Truman and Atlee, December 4, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 1369-71).

<sup>43</sup> JCS to MacArthur, January 13, 1951 (Department of State 1983: Vol. VII, 78).

<sup>44</sup> Memo by Jessup, December 3, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 1324); also Memo by Battle, December 2, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 1311).

<sup>45</sup> JCS to MacArthur, December 29, 1950 (Department of State 1976: Vol. VII, 1625); also National Intelligence Estimate, January 11, 1951 (Department of State 1983: Vol. VII, 62-3).

the importance of prestige.<sup>46</sup> Stalin expected that the *dazzling* victory on Korea would make the Communist forces look like advancing invincibly in the Far East. Thus the strong case can be made that the enhancement of Soviet prestige was one of the most important political effects Stalin sought to achieve by approving and supporting the North Korean attack.

Despite the fact that two hard cases are used to support the theoretical arguments of this article, the problem remains that the two cases are drawn from the Korean War. This makes it difficult to evaluate other rival explanatory variables such as international power configurations and domestic politics of the United States. Additional case studies from the Vietnam War or the Cuban missile crisis will help to clarify the theoretical implications of this article. Despite the limits in the selection process of relevant cases, this article can be a useful starting point for further studies drawing from other cases in international politics.

The causal role of intersubjective elements on state is altogether neglected in neorealist theory, which defines structure solely in terms of material capabilities. So long as neorealism fails to show that intersubjective understandings and expectations that give brute material capabilities meaning are caused by deep material structure, intersubjective elements of power such as prestige must be taken into account to supplement structural materialism (Wendt 1995: 79). Our identification of the sources of prestige such as brutality and self-restraint also undermine neorealism's treatment of state interests as given. States' concerns about prestige derive from their efforts to influence and change shared understandings and knowledge in terms of which other states define their interests. These effects cast doubt on the explanatory power of neorealism.

The more serious problem of neorealism arises when we consider to what extent moral opportunities exist in international politics. Mearsheimer asserts the moral superiority of the neorealist discourse over a "fascistic discourse" like that of Zhirinovsky (Mearsheimer 1995: 92). Yet he fails to explain how material structure becomes the sources of ethical actions of policymakers. This kind of failure is not new in neorealism since Waltz reverts to the states, not to his structure, to find moral dimensions in the form of system management (Waltz 1979: 194-5). The fact that Waltz calls upon the state to manage and save the system reveals attempt to simply assert neorealism's moral superiority is not persuasive since he does not explain how moral opportunities can be found within the theoretical framework of neorealism.

The distinction between the positive and negative sources of prestige helps us to explain when moral opportunities arise in international politics. The pursuit of prestige through self-restraint can contribute to moderation. A case in point is Kennan's objection to American rollback, which he deemed to be a naked abuse of force. The US failure to adopt a self-restraining policy after the success at Inchon led to the escalation of violence with the intervention of Chinese Communist forces. The primary responsibility for this escalation should be placed on Stalin's cynical shoulders. Yet Truman and Acheson's rollback decision also contributed to the failure to moderate the use of force. The defeat of UN forces after Chinese intervention sparked a vicious spiral of violence which persisted for more than two years. One of the reasons why classical realists like Niebuhr and Morgenthau and practitioners like Castlereagh, Bismarck, Nicolson, and Kennan emphasized non-material elements of power such as prestige can be seen in their conscious efforts to moderate the struggle for power in international politics. Our study of prestige demonstrates that the influence of

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<sup>46</sup> Stalin to Mao, October 8(7), 1950 (Mansourov 1995/96: 116).

classical realism still reverberates behind the recent debate between neorealism and constructivism.

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