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Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition Before the First World War

MICHELLE MURRAY

Why did Germany pursue naval expansion at the turn of the twentieth century? This question has long puzzled scholars of international security, who consider German naval ambition to be an instance of suboptimal arming—a decision that decreased Germany’s overall security and risked the survival of the German state. This article argues that the social desire to be recognized as a world power guided Germany’s decision to challenge British naval hegemony. From the beginning of its naval planning, Germany had one clear aim: a powerful fleet of battleships stationed in the North Sea would alter the political relationship with Britain in such a way that it could no longer ignore Germany’s claim to world power status. Reconceptualizing Germany’s naval ambition as a struggle for recognition elucidates the contradictions at the center of German naval strategy, explaining how the doomed policy could proceed despite its certain failure. The article concludes that the power-maximizing practices of great powers should be seen as an important component of identity construction and an understudied dimension of contemporary security practice.

Since the end of the Cold War the United States has enjoyed a virtually unchallenged position as the system’s preeminent superpower. The collapse

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of the Soviet Union gave way to a “unipolar moment” where U.S. military, diplomatic and economic power, and influence could not be rivaled.¹ As history teaches us, however, this unipolar moment will inevitably come to an end as new powers rise and challenge the prevailing international order. Thus, one of the key challenges facing the United States in the coming years concerns the economic and military rise of China. China’s economy has grown at unprecedented levels since the launch of market reforms, and some analysts predict over the next fifty years it could become the world’s largest economy.² Concomitantly, China has used its stunning economic growth to increase significantly its military spending, enabling it to acquire the technology necessary to project power beyond its borders. In short, China is emerging as both an economic and military rival of the United States; a “late-blooming great power” set on obtaining its rightful place in the international order.³

For students of international security, China’s rise to great power status is eerily reminiscent of Imperial Germany.⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century, Germany emerged as the leading power on the European continent and engaged in a bid for its “place in the sun” among the established world powers. To do this, Germany reoriented its foreign policy away from a conservative focus on the continent toward the more aggressive *Weltpolitik*. *Weltpolitik* was a full-scale challenge to British world dominance, which included building a large fleet of battleships stationed in the North Sea. In building a powerful navy, Germany thought it could alter its political relationship with Britain by creating a display of military force so great that Britain simply could not ignore it and therefore assume its place among the world powers.

Germany’s naval program, however, was a strategic disaster from its inception. Britain posed little threat to Germany; and if anything, Germany’s aggressive naval policy contributed to its growing insecurity by signaling revisionist intentions to Britain, France, and Russia, making war with these states more likely. But perhaps most importantly, naval expansion involved a significant tradeoff with Germany’s continental security. As a European land power, the greatest challenges to German security were on the continent, and therefore it had to devote the largest part of its military spending to the

¹ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/1991): 23–33.

² Nicholas Kristof, “The Rise of China,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (November/December 1993): 59–74; and John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (January/February 2008): 23–37.

³ Richard K. Betts and Thomas J. Christensen, “China: Getting the Questions Right,” *National Interest* 62 (Winter 2000/2001): 23.

⁴ See *ibid.*; and Edward Friedman, “The Challenge of a Rising China: Another Germany?,” in *Eagle Adrift: American Foreign Policy at the End of the Century*, ed. Robert J. Lieber (New York: Longman Publishers, 1997), 215–45; and Kristof, “The Rise of China.”

army.⁵ The German economy never possessed the strength to sustain such a naval program and maintain its continental defense commitments. With each battleship that Germany constructed, it directed precious resources away from the army, upon which the survival of the German state rested. This decision presents rational International Relations (IR) theory with a genuine puzzle: if Germany's naval program had no clear strategic rationale, why did Germany pursue naval expansion at the turn of the twentieth century?

I argue that Germany's naval program was designed not for strategic reasons, but to secure recognition of its identity as a world power. To do this I develop a social theory of great power politics that argues that in addition to physical security states also want recognition. States need a stable identity in order to be an actor in world politics, so securing identity is an important objective of foreign policy. When a state is recognized, its identity is brought into existence, its meaning stabilized, and its status in the social order secured. In anarchy, however, the process of securing an identity is wrought with insecurity because state identity is formed through social interaction and therefore is dependent upon the unpredictable responses of other states. In response to this social uncertainty, states ground their aspirant identities in material practices. Within this context, power maximization is a strategy that great powers pursue in order to obtain recognition and stabilize the insecurity inherent to identity formation in anarchy.

The claim that states want recognition is not new.⁶ Liberal constructivists contend that the struggle for recognition generates collective identities among states, thereby producing stabilizing effects on international politics. Alexander Wendt, for example, has applied recognition to international politics to argue for the inevitability of a world state, where relations of mutual recognition provide the foundation for sustained security cooperation among states in anarchy.⁷ In this view, recognition ameliorates the uncertainty that realists identify at the center of the security dilemma.⁸ My argument, in contrast, suggests that the intersubjective world can have significant destabilizing effects on interstate relations, and in this way, is part of

⁵ Charles L. Glaser, "When Are Arms Races Dangerous?: Rational versus Suboptimal Arming," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 62.

⁶ Erik Ringmar, "The Recognition Game: Soviet Russia Against the West," *Cooperation and Conflict* 37, no. 2 (June 2002): 115–36; Alexander Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable: Teleology and the Logic of Anarchy," *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 4 (2003): 491–542; and Brian Greenhill, "Recognition and Collective Identity Formation in International Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 2 (June 2008): 343–68.

⁷ Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable," 507.

⁸ Wendt glosses over the difficulty of this process when discussing the importance of struggles for "thick recognition," which involve claims to particular identities. For Wendt world state formation proceeds as long as struggles for thick recognition are "domesticated" so that they do not take the form of violence. See *ibid.*, 511. My argument will suggest that one such struggle for thick recognition—for great power status—cannot be domesticated because it takes the form of material competition, and thus undermines the formation of community at the international level.

an emerging constructivist research program that places struggles over identity at the center of power politics.⁹ Thus, in what follows, the competitive arming practices traditionally associated with the security dilemma take on a new dimension—social uncertainty, as well as material uncertainty, is at the heart of the “tragedy of great power politics.”

This argument also highlights the difficulty of distinguishing a social logic for great power behavior from the traditional strategic logic. Strategic approaches claim that the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to maximize power to ensure their security, whereas I argue the same behavior can be motivated by a social desire for recognition. To disentangle this social logic from the strategic one, I have chosen a case where the pursuit of material power defies a strategic rationale: building a naval capability designed to challenge Britain involved a tradeoff with Germany’s continental security requirements that a traditional strategic approach simply would not predict.¹⁰ Absent a compelling strategic motive, Germany’s naval buildup could be considered an easy case for my theory, which would undermine its general implications. The purpose of a detailed examination of a deviant case like Germany’s naval buildup, however, is to develop a historical explanation that may be generalizable to other events, and therefore is an important tool of theory development. Understanding a case such as this may specify “a new concept, variable, or theory regarding a causal mechanism that affects more than one type of case,” leading to the development of a better and more explanatory theory.¹¹ Therefore, while more general claims about the nature of international politics cannot be conclusively sustained on one case, the value of a careful process-trace of a single historical episode is that it can provide strong support for the plausibility of a theory. Moreover, the pre-1914 world is often considered the paradigmatic case for realist explanations because it featured rapacious states anticipating war.¹² Therefore, one could argue that any evidence in support of the causal impact of these social factors on Germany’s arming decision provides sufficient support for the plausibility of the theory.

The article proceeds in four parts. The first section outlines the theoretical argument, which shows how material competition among great powers can be the outgrowth of social insecurity. In the second section I consider

⁹ J. Samuel Barkin, “Realist Constructivism,” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 3 (September 2003): 325–42; Michael C. Williams, “Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism and the Moral Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 633–65; and Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 2006): 341–70.

¹⁰ Glaser, “When Arms Races Dangerous?” 61–64.

¹¹ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 114. See also, John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹² Keir A. Lieber, “The New History of World War I and What it Means for IR Theory,” *International Security* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 155–91.

alternative arguments and argue that the decision to pursue a naval program was poorly matched to Germany's security environment and, hence, was an instance of suboptimal arming. The third section shows how German naval strategy reflected the social desire to be recognized as a world power. The article concludes with implications of the struggle for recognition for contemporary security policy.

THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Most of IR theory begins with the assumption that physical survival—or security—is the primary motivation of states and then theorizes how material and social structures condition how they pursue this goal. Research in a number of related disciplines, however, has shown that individuals are also importantly motivated by social desires related to identity and status, and that the pursuit of these objectives structures the way in which subjects interact with the material world.¹³ One such motivation is to be recognized, which secures the meaning of identity and establishes the status of an actor in the social order. Recognition refers to a social act in which another actor is constituted as a subject with legitimate social standing. When a state is recognized, its identity is brought into existence, its meaning stabilized, and its status as a political actor secured. The struggle for recognition is the process through which states attempt to gain the recognition of their significant others to secure a particular identity in the international order. In what follows I develop a constructivist theory of great power politics that links the competitive arming practices of states to the social insecurity associated with the struggle for recognition. Specifically, I argue that in addition to physical security, states also want recognition, and this process of securing an identity can give rise to an array of material risks that have traditionally characterized great power politics.

Recognition and State Identity

All states require a stable identity to be an actor in international politics. An identity is an attribute of "intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions" and is formed from the interplay of both internal and external factors.¹⁴ The most basic element of state identity is self-understanding—an internally generated, domestic property of the state

¹³ William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition and Great Power War," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): 28–57; and Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 63–95.

¹⁴ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 224.

that arises from domestic discourses and historical experiences—and which represents the state's own conception of who or what it is.¹⁵ While these self-understandings refer to a domestic conception of state identity, this sense of self also takes into account the state's broader social context and thus denotes where a state believes it is located in the social structure of the international system and what interests and actions are appropriate to that subject position.¹⁶ Identity formation, however, is not only a domestic process. Regardless of a state's private aspiration for a particular identity, its social meaning “depends on whether other states represent [it] in a similar way,” and thus identity is, importantly, formed through a state's external relations with others.¹⁷ Simply put, state identities are formed intersubjectively; who or what a state becomes is the outcome of many intersecting and overlapping sequences of action and response.¹⁸ Therefore, it is through social interaction with other actors that state identities are contested, made, and reproduced.

Because states are dependent on each other to produce their identities, the state's basic ontological condition is relational. That is, the status of a state is not “in any sense attributable to [its] inherent qualities or possessions”: but rather, “the power and status of an actor depends on and is limited by the conditions of its *recognition* within the community as a whole.”¹⁹ When a state's self-understanding corresponds to an existing position in the social structure—for example, great power—and is recognized as such by the international community, that self-understanding is brought into being as the state's identity. If the international community does not recognize a state's self-understanding, then it will struggle to obtain the recognition it needs to secure that identity, sometimes at the expense of other goals, like security. Identity formation, in short, is dependent on the experience of recognition.

Russia's ongoing struggle to become a European great power illustrates the importance of recognition to identity formation. From its founding Russia considered itself to be a superior member of international society and a European great power. The problem for Russia was that the great powers of the time did not share its self-understanding, thus producing considerable

¹⁵ For a theorization of domestic sources of identities, see Ted Hopf, *The Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); and Caroline F. Ziemke, “The National Myth and Strategic Personality of Iran: A Counterproliferation Perspective,” in *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests and World Order*, ed. Victor A. Utgoff (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 87–122.

¹⁶ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond Identity,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2000): 17.

¹⁷ Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” 358.

¹⁸ Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 13.

¹⁹ Richard K. Ashley, “The Poverty of Neorealism,” in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 291 (emphasis in original).

anxiety and insecurity within Russia about the status of its identity.²⁰ In the eighteenth century this insecurity was ameliorated at the Peace of Nystadt (1721) when Russia's counterparts recognized it as a great power, therefore securing its place in the international order. As a great power, Russia was now seen as a "worthwhile ally, a power entitled to participation in peace settlements and a power mentioned in treaties as a guarantor of the peace."²¹ Chancellor Gavriil Ivanovich Golovkin expressed the significance of recognition for Russia's identity in a speech on behalf of the Senate: "We, your faithful subjects, have been taken from the darkness of ignorance to the limelight of worldwide fame, *from nonexistence to existence* . . . and admitted to the community of political nations."²² In acknowledgement of his role in securing this recognition, Peter I was honored with the titles "Emperor" and "the Great," which reflected Russia's new status in the European political order.²³ Thus, while Russia had historically understood itself to be a great power, that identity only became "real" once it was recognized.

Recognition and Great Power Competition

The ideas presented above suggest that the process of establishing and maintaining an identity in international politics is wrought with insecurity because identities are formed through social interaction and therefore are subject to the unpredictable responses of other states.²⁴ Because self-certainty relies on this experience of intersubjectivity, interaction makes states very socially insecure, for through interaction a state's own understanding of its identity becomes vulnerable to the unpredictable responses of other states. Interaction always holds the possibility that a state's self-understanding will not be recognized, and as a result the security of its identity will be called into question.

In response to this vulnerability, states attempt to become independent, self-determining agents, the sole authors of their identity. This desire for sovereignty over the meaning of identity gives rise to two behaviors among states. First, states demand recognition of their self-understandings from a

²⁰ Iver B. Neumann, "Russia's Standing as a Great Power, 1494–1815," in *Russia's European Choice*, ed. Ted Hopf (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 23. Neumann indicates that the European great powers noted, but did not take seriously, Russia's claims to great power status. This was because, in part, Russia did not conform to the traditional diplomatic rituals of the time, nor did it possess significant power projection capabilities that would cause the European great powers to take notice of it.

²¹ Iver B. Neumann, "Russia's Quest for Recognition as a Great Power, 1489–2007," (working paper, Institute of European Studies and International Relations, Faculty of the Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University, Bratislava, 2007), 32.

²² As quoted in Hans Bagger, "The Role of the Baltic in Russian Foreign Policy, 1721–1773," in *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*, eds., Hugh Ragsdale and V. N. Ponomarev (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 37 (emphasis mine).

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 14.

self-constructed peer group of other states. Successful acts of recognition secure the state's identity and provide self-certainty because they transform a state's self-understanding into its identity, thereby reflecting back to the state an image of what it already understands itself to be. This secures the meaning of identity for the state and mitigates the uncertainty inherent to state interaction. Recognition, however, does not have to be successful in order to minimize the uncertainty related to identity formation and thus even unmet recognition demands can provide the state with a fleeting sense of social security. This is because a state's recognition claims present identity as a *fait accompli*, demanding that other states recognize it as it already really is. As a *fait accompli*, a state's recognition claim does two things: first, it represents a bid by the state to secure its identity by forcing other states to recognize its self-understanding; and second, it represents an attempt by the state to assert the meaning of this identity outside of social interaction. Both of these have the temporary effect of isolating the state from the uncertainty and social insecurity associated with intersubjective identity formation.

By invoking identity as a *fait accompli* in the course of a risky social interaction, however, the state "at once acknowledges and refuses to acknowledge [its] basic condition of intersubjective vulnerability," thus revealing the constitutive contradiction that animates the struggle for recognition.²⁵ Remember, identities are formed through interaction and only come into being intersubjectively. Consequently, the pursuit of sovereign identity is ontologically impossible and represents a desire unable to be fulfilled. Yet despite this contradiction this social form does not collapse under the weight of its own incoherence. Rather, the contradiction at the heart of the struggle for recognition is given "room to move" because state identity is mediated through its relationship with the material world.²⁶ This leads to the second behavior associated with the struggle for recognition: states ground their aspirant identities in concrete material practices.

Material practices are an effective expression of an identity because the material world gives substance to the recognition-seeking state's aspiring social identity and allows the state to experience its social status as a brute fact, rather than as the uncertain effect of an ongoing political practice of social construction.²⁷ Practices are socially recognized forms of activity that are repeated over time and done on the basis of what states learn from others, which in turn reproduce an intersubjective reality that gives meaning to particular identities.²⁸ The practices coupled with an identity are defined

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁶ The language of giving a contradiction "room to move" is drawn from *ibid.*, 108–13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁸ Barry Barnes, "Practice as Collective Action," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds., Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (New York: Routledge, 2001), 27; and Lisa Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2002): 720.

by constitutive norms that specify “the actions that will cause [other states] to recognize that identity and respond to it appropriately.”²⁹ For this reason it is always by way of performance to collectively known generative schemes that actors are empowered and gain the social status they desire.³⁰

Sociologists, for example, have explored how modern weaponry is constitutive of state identity.³¹ One of the criteria necessary to be recognized as a sovereign state by the international community is being able to maintain territorial integrity and political independence. Militaries and modern weaponry—ranging from the organization of armed forces to specific weapons systems—are understood to categorically symbolize such competence and have become an important dimension of the state-building process.³² Consequently, “nation-states are ‘born arming,’ with militaries springing forth fully formed regardless of the state’s ‘need’ for such organizations.”³³ To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to look at their symbolic meaning as emblems of the modern state, which overshadows their functional utility. For instance, many developing countries invest precious resources in their militaries, yet maintain “only a single squadron of four or five fighter aircraft—too few to offer many strategic benefits, but enough to constitute a respectable air show.”³⁴ In these cases, states arm not because weapons perform a particular security function—they are effectively useless as instruments of national defense—but rather because such practices are constitutively linked to the maintenance of sovereignty and state identity. Becoming a state necessitates that others recognize you as such, and this is accomplished in part through conformity to a ritualized set of material practices.³⁵ Being a state means, among other things, having a modern military.³⁶

As this example illustrates, state identities are instantiated in practices. By grounding the state’s aspirant identity in the material practices known to constitute that identity, it once again appears to the state as if its identity

²⁹ Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998): 173.

³⁰ Ashley, “The Poverty of Neorealism,” 292.

³¹ See esp., Dana P. Eyre, and Marc C. Suchman, “Status, Norms and Proliferation of Conventional Weapons: An Institutional Theory Approach,” in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Marc C. Suchman and Dana P. Eyre, “Military Procurement as Rational Myth: Notes on the Social Construction of Weapons Proliferation,” *Sociological Forum* 7, no. 1 (March 1992): 137–61; and Connie L. McNeely, *Constructing the Nation-State: International Organization and Prescriptive Action* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 63.

³² Thomas Ohlson, *Arms Transfer Limitations and Third World Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 49.

³³ Suchman and Eyre, “Military Procurement as Rational Myth,” 150.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁵ Ann Swidler, “What Anchors Cultural Practices,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds., Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny (New York: Routledge, 2001), 89.

³⁶ Eyre and Suchman, “Status, Norms and Proliferation of Conventional Weapons,” 92.

preexists social interaction, thereby isolating it from the insecurity related to intersubjective identity formation. The material world reflects back to the state the identity it seeks, and lends relative stability to the intersubjective world by reducing social uncertainty. This argument is cast in general terms because anarchy contains a potentially infinite number of possible social structures within which states will struggle to establish and maintain their identities. Moreover, just as with individuals, every state has multiple identities that only become salient in certain contexts, so at any given time a single state may be engaged in multiple struggles for recognition. The particular form that these struggles take will crucially depend on the particular identity that the state aspires to and what the performative production of that identity requires.

Great power status is one such identity—and like all identities, it is dependent on a social structure of shared knowledge that exists among states for its meaning. Taking a social definition of great power means that “great power identity is a reciprocal construction composed of the interplay between a state’s view of itself and the view of it held by other members of international society,” and therefore is subject to the social uncertainty associated with identity formation in anarchy described above.³⁷ When two views of a state’s identity coincide, the state is recognized as a great power and will be secure in this identity. If these views do not correspond and its identity is not recognized, then the struggle for recognition suggests that the aspiring great power will ground its identity in the material practices constitutive of that status. Because the accumulation of material power is one of the practices constitutive of great power status, all great powers possess some level of material preponderance that sets them apart from other states in the system. But beyond this, great powers have historically grounded their identity in particular capabilities—battleships, aircraft carriers, nuclear weapons—that were understood at the time to be emblematic of great power status. It is these specific practices that are constitutively linked to the establishment and maintenance of great power identity and are at the center of great power identity construction.

When Imperial Germany sought to establish itself as a world power, the battleship was the predominant capability constitutive of great power status. Large navies, embodied in world-class battle fleets, were powerful symbols of both the nation and the power of that nation vis-à-vis other states in the system.³⁸ Central to this understanding of sea power were the writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan, which offered the foundation for a unified

³⁷ Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 61.

³⁸ Jan Rieger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

vision of the links between the state, naval power, and world power status.³⁹ According to this perspective, the hierarchy of states was always in flux, and competition would lead to the rise of some states and the decline of others.⁴⁰ These social Darwinist images of struggle and conflict shaped how states understood the demands of the international system, and imposed a corresponding set of actions necessary to survive in this environment. Naval power, it was understood, had always been and would be the decisive factor in these struggles and, therefore, was the prerequisite for world power status.

The centerpiece of naval strategy was the battleship. They were the unit on which command of the sea rested and around which the rest of the fleet had to be planned—floating symbols of power designed to “demonstrate superiority to domestic and foreign audiences.”⁴¹ It is in this context that the battleship came to signify the political power of the state and embodiment of the nation: “the possession of such instruments of destruction made a country count for something in the world, and the ability to build them at home, with domestic engineers and workers, from domestic resources, was the hallmark of great power status.”⁴² Over time these features of sea power became constitutive of state identity, a sort of cultural symbol that represented the material embodiment of both world power status and the strength of the nation in world affairs. The possession of a significant battle fleet was a prerequisite to becoming a world power.

In this formulation the traditional relationship between the material and social forces acting upon states in anarchy is inverted, so that the accumulation of material capability is not an act “of conscious obedience to something external”—like the balance of power meant to secure physical survival—but rather, an act of self-realization that secures identity.⁴³ Thus, it is important to emphasize that I am not arguing that states acquire material power to coerce other states into recognizing their identities. To do so would be to simply reproduce the standard realist argument that identities are a pure reflection of material power. Instead, I am arguing that recognition is a social, not a material, desire, and the material competition that characterizes great

³⁹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890). This is not to say, of course, that Germany’s naval program reflected Mahan’s ideas perfectly, or that there was a direct causal link between Mahanism and *Weltpolitik*. For a discussion of how German naval planning deviated from Mahan’s ideas, see Holger H. Herwig, “The Failure of German Sea Power, 1914–1945: Mahan, Tirpitz and Raeder Reconsidered,” *The International History Review* 10, no. 1 (February 1988): 68–105; Holger H. Herwig, “The Influence of A. T. Mahan Upon German Sea Power,” in *The Influence of History on Mahan*, ed. John Hattendorf (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1991), 67–80.

⁴⁰ Donald Kagan, *The Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1995), 135.

⁴¹ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 208.

⁴² Lawrence Sondhaus, *Naval Warfare, 1815–1914* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 228.

⁴³ Ashley, “The Poverty of Neorealism,” 294.

power politics is a manifestation of a larger social struggle. That is, power maximization is a constituent part of identity construction.

THE PUZZLE: BATTLESHIP CONSTRUCTION AS SUBOPTIMAL

The strongest strategic argument for Germany's naval program is made by offensive realists, who argue it was one dimension of a power-maximizing foreign policy designed to increase Germany's relative power in the system.⁴⁴ Although this decision led to a costly arms race with Britain that undermined Germany's security, this outcome reflected the tragic nature of international politics rather than a poor strategic choice. States in the international system must provide for their own survival, so states are "disposed to think offensively toward other states," constantly looking for ways to maximize their relative power in order to ensure their security.⁴⁵ While an immediate economic or military threat did not force naval expansion, Germany took a "calculated risk" to forestall future threats by developing a countervailing naval capability. In short, in "an anarchic world Germany had little choice but to emulate Britain by building a powerful navy," and consequently German naval expansion was driven primarily by security concerns.⁴⁶

This argument reflects the tendency of offensive realists to attribute any act of power maximization to a strategic logic.⁴⁷ As a theory, however, offensive realism does not argue that great powers are mindless aggressors that attempt to acquire power at any cost. Rather, as John Mearsheimer argues, states "think carefully about the balance of power and about how other states will react to their moves" and would not provoke an arms race that was unlikely to improve their position in the system.⁴⁸ While all great powers may have offensive intentions, great power behavior is conditioned by their ability to realize these desires. Therefore, any act of power maximization must be evaluated in light of information about the state's total power, the probability that other great powers would respond in kind, and whether or not the security benefits of arming outweigh the risks. I will argue that Germany's naval program was suboptimal from this strategic perspective because the benefits of naval expansion did not outweigh the risks related to an arms

⁴⁴ Defensive realists argue that German naval expansion was suboptimal from a strategic perspective and reflects distortions generated by domestic politics. See Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 70–90; and Glaser, "When Are Arms Races Dangerous?" 61–64.

⁴⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 34.

⁴⁶ Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): 23.

⁴⁷ Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 76.

⁴⁸ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 37.

race with Britain. Central to my argument is the tradeoff with Germany's continental security requirements that naval expansion necessitated.

Christopher Layne suggests that naval expansion was structurally driven: the stunning growth of German power and the increasingly global interests that this power generated meant that Germany was forced into a policy of colonial, and therefore naval, expansion in order to compete with Britain. The growth of German power, however, was not zero-sum and Britain was not an inevitable competitor for Germany. Britain's economic interests at the time were, on the whole, complementary to Germany's, and Germany actually stood to profit from maintaining a favorable trading relationship with Britain.⁴⁹ Moreover, if the goals of the German navy were to defend the commerce, colonial possessions, and foreign investment that its power demanded, then a fleet of battleships stationed in the North Sea would do little to protect such global interests. The ships that perform the protective functions of empire were not battleships, but cruisers and gunboats, which were precisely the type of vessels that Alfred von Tirpitz abandoned when doubling the battle fleet.⁵⁰ As such, by investing heavily in the construction of battleships, Tirpitz had essentially abandoned the functional capacity of the fleet.

To be fair, Tirpitz recognized this strategic disadvantage and reasoned that by stationing the fleet in the North Sea Germany could exert global influence without needing to have substantial forces at any single trouble spot.⁵¹ This is because the proximity of the German fleet to England would effectively neutralize Britain by embodying an ever-present threat against the Royal Navy should it attempt to check German expansion. In order to use this lever effectively Germany would have to pass through the danger zone—the time period where the German fleet would be vulnerable to preventive attack. But once through, Germany would have a “fleet in being” and could pursue *Weltpolitik* unhindered. The problem with this strategy is that it failed to anticipate Britain's reaction to Germany's naval buildup, assuming that Britain would not respond in kind.⁵² Consequently, Tirpitz designed his naval strategy in the context of “normal political conditions,” failing to appreciate “that war does not break out under normal political conditions, but in time of stress, and that the period before actual hostilities would be used by the British to summon home its Channel and Mediterranean fleets.”⁵³ This is

⁴⁹ Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, 71–73.

⁵⁰ Paul Kennedy, “Tirpitz, England and the Second Navy Law of 1900,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 2 (1970): 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵² James R. Holmes, “Mahan, a ‘Place in the Sun,’ and Germany's Quest for Sea Power,” *Comparative Strategy* 23, no. 1 (January 2002): 48; and Paul Kennedy, “Strategic Aspects of the Anglo-German Naval Race,” in *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870–1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983): 151.

⁵³ Kennedy, “Tirpitz, England and the Second Navy Law of 1900,” 48; and E. L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 36.

especially problematic from a strategic perspective because Germany's naval program genuinely threatened British interests, and therefore the stronger the German fleet grew the more likely was the presence of British reinforcements in the North Sea. Thus, German planning did not consider how Britain's response could render its fleet ineffective as an instrument of *Weltpolitik*.

The German fleet also had little military utility should naval warfare break out. The military utility of sea power was determined by the navy's projected effectiveness, which was a "function of fleet size, the geographical position of the two opposing parties relative to each other . . . and the operational doctrines that defined the conditions under which a navy could carry out its assigned tasks."⁵⁴ When Germany shifted its naval strategy away from continental politics toward a focus on Britain, it dramatically altered its strategic environment, trading a favorable geographical position with an unfavorable one: in a war with Britain the weaker German fleet would undeniably be crippled by a British blockade. To break a close blockade in the North Sea, the German navy needed a battle fleet with superiority of at least one-third and fortified bases across the world to maintain open communications.⁵⁵ The need for superiority is amplified when we consider that Britain would probably not undertake the risks associated with a close blockade, meaning that Germany would have to take to the offense by attacking the Royal Navy directly. In addition to the power asymmetry, this offensive task was complicated by the logistical difficulties of re-coaling near an enemy's coast and the lack of German coaling stations in the North Sea. Given its numerical inferiority, breaking a close blockade would be nothing more than "a death ride into the Thames," leading to Germany's certain destruction as a naval power.⁵⁶

The more likely scenario Germany would face was a wide blockade in the English Channel. Britain could easily achieve a wide blockade with cruisers and destroyers, which would ensure German maritime trade ceased with the outbreak of war. Yet even in this context, more battleships would not improve Germany's situation as long as its fleet remained inferior; and thus, German resources should have gone to the construction of submarines and torpedo boats, which would have rendered the German threat to Britain more effective.⁵⁷ That is, as long as the German fleet remained numerically inferior it stood little chance of breaking a British wide blockade, thereby diminishing its utility in war. German naval strategy was at odds with its strategic needs should war break out.

⁵⁴ Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 260.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 262; and Kennedy, "Tirpitz, England and the Second Navy Law of 1900," 48.

⁵⁶ Ivo Nikolai Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 143.

⁵⁷ Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, 272.

TABLE 1 Military Expenditure Estimates of Germany and Great Britain (in millions of £)

	1890	1900	1910	1914
<i>Army Estimates</i>				
Germany	24.2 (84%)	33.6 (82%)	40.8 (66%)	88.4 (80%)
Great Britain	17.6 (56%)	21.4 (42%)	27.6 (40%)	29.4 (38%)
<i>Naval Estimates</i>				
Germany	4.6 (16%)	7.4 (18%)	20.6 (34%)	22.4 (20%)
Great Britain	13.8 (44%)	29.2 (58%)	40.4 (60%)	47.4 (62%)

Source: A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), xxvii.

Thus, the only circumstance under which the German battle fleet could be given a strategic rationale was if Germany was able to construct a fleet larger than the Royal Navy. This objective, however, was impossible given the nature of the threats Germany faced on the continent. The German economy did not possess the strength to sustain a naval program on par with Britain and maintain its continental defense commitments, and consequently Germany could not commit the resources necessary to outbuild Britain in a naval arms race.⁵⁸ Although Germany's total power was more than adequate to keep pace with Britain, its most pressing security challenges were on the continent, and therefore it had to devote the majority of its military spending to the army.⁵⁹ Germany spent 20 percent of its total military budget on the fleet and 80 percent on the army, whereas Britain spent 61 percent on its fleet and 39 percent on the army (see Table 1). By simple virtue of its geography as a European continental power, the army had to be at the center of Germany's security planning. France and Russia invested significant portions of their overall military expenditures on their armies, meaning Germany would have to invest similarly in its army in order to maintain its position in the balance of power (see Table 2). For that reason, unless Germany abandoned its continental security commitments—which were anchored in the army—it had no chance of acquiring even naval parity with Britain.

Combined, these factors suggest that from a rational strategic perspective Germany's decision to launch a naval buildup against Britain is a case of suboptimal arming: not only was German naval strategy poorly conceived to protect German vital interests, but it also never possessed sufficient total power, given its defense commitments on the continent, to mount the necessary challenge to British naval hegemony. To be clear, I am not arguing that Germany should have abandoned its naval program altogether. Rather, faced with a precarious security situation on the continent, German military

⁵⁸ Holger H. Herwig, "The German Reaction to the *Dreadnought* Revolution," *The International History Review* 13, no. 2 (May 1991): 221–83.

⁵⁹ Glaser, "When Are Arms Races Dangerous?" 62.

TABLE 2 Army Expenditures Estimates of Germany, France and Russia (in millions of £)

	1890	1900	1910	1914
Germany	24.2 (84%)	33.6 (82%)	40.8 (66%)	88.4 (80%)
France	28.4 (76%)	27.8 (66%)	37.6 (72%)	39.4 (69%)
Russia	24.6 (85%)	32.1 (79%)	53.4 (85%)	64.8 (73%)

Source: A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), xxvii.

spending should have been focused almost exclusively on the army, building a limited naval capability that would be effective in combating a British wide blockade should war break out.⁶⁰ A large fleet of battleships was peripheral to Germany's genuine security concerns.

Realizing that German naval ambition exceeds rational explanation, IR theory has looked to individual-level and domestic-politics explanations to show why Germany adopted this suboptimal foreign policy. Each of these alternatives will be dealt with below.

Individuals and Foreign Policy

Individual-level explanations argue that leaders' personality traits and governing styles inform foreign policy decisions.⁶¹ The effects of individual personalities matter more when power is concentrated in the hands of a few because a small group of individuals is able to exercise disproportionate control over the foreign policy-making apparatus.⁶² In the case of Imperial Germany, it is argued that Kaiser Wilhelm's personal obsession with the navy, and the power he had within the German state to turn this obsession into a reality, drove Germany's naval expansion. The year 1890 is seen as a distinct turning point, when Otto von Bismarck was dismissed as chancellor and replaced by political allies that shared the Kaiser's interest in naval expansion. The confluence of these men in positions of power within the state made the German naval program possible, even if it was to the detriment of Germany's overall security interests.

To evaluate this approach against the historical record, we would need to find evidence that individual decisions transcended other domestic and systemic factors. It is not clear, however, that the German leadership under Wilhelm hijacked the foreign policy-making apparatus in this way. In terms of the naval philosophy that underpinned expansion, 1890 was not a critical

⁶⁰ Robert Ross notes that Germany's preoccupation with battleships prevented it from adequately developing its submarine force. Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects and the U.S. Response," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 51.

⁶¹ Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesmen Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 109.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 133–43.

turning point in the development of German naval policy. Several historians have documented the evolution of Germany's naval strategy, arguing that while Tirpitz did give purpose and direction to naval expansion, the idea of German sea power had a long history that transcended this particular leadership group and thus was not the causal effect of Wilhelm's foreign policy elite.⁶³ Moreover, an exclusive focus on leadership diminishes the appeal of sea power among the German people, where support for naval expansion was widespread and indeed became part of the cultural fabric of German society. As such, the program was not just the capricious preference of particular individuals, but rather a more encompassing domestic movement within German society.

Likewise, navalism was a widespread international movement at the turn of the twentieth century. Large navies were the *sin qua non* of great power status, and nearly every powerful state pursued naval expansion and colonial conquest of some sort, suggesting there were significant international pressures—material or ideational—for naval expansion.⁶⁴ Consequently, it is not possible to isolate the causal impact of individuals on foreign policy because broader trends in both the material and ideational structure of the system were unambiguous, making it unclear whether systemic or individual-level forces determined foreign policy decisions.⁶⁵

Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

Domestic politics explanations argue that foreign policy cannot be understood without considering the influence of domestic political factors on these decisions.⁶⁶ Self-interested groups within the state are able to capture the foreign policy-making process and push an agenda that serves private interests. In Imperial Germany, it is argued, naval expansion served the particular interests of heavy industry and shipbuilding. Naval proponents saw expansion as a strong remedy to the pressures of Social Democrats and as a way to divert attention away from the problems of German society.⁶⁷ Thus,

⁶³ Lawrence Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik: German Sea Power before the Tirpitz Era* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997); and Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*.

⁶⁴ For a comparative discussion of naval strategic thought with reference to Imperial Germany, see Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*; for a discussion of the U.S. naval program at the time, see Kevin Narizny, "The New Debate: International Relations Theory and American Strategic Adjustment in the 1890s," *Security Studies* 11, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 151–70.

⁶⁵ Andrew Parasiliti, Daniel L. Byman, and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Correspondence: The First Image Revisited," *International Security* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 166.

⁶⁶ Eckart Kehr, *Battleship Building and Party Politics in Germany, 1894–1901*, trans. Pauline Anderson and Eugene Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); James J. Sheehan, "The Primacy of Domestic Politics: Eckart Kehr's Essays on Modern German History," *Central European History* 1, no. 2 (June 1968): 166–74; and Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (New York: Berg, 1985).

⁶⁷ Wehler, *The German Empire*, 165.

Germany's aggressive foreign policy was not a reaction to external provocation, but rather the reflection of internal social conflict.⁶⁸

Jack Snyder argues that German "overexpansion" reflected a strategic ideology shaped by a cartelized political system where elite groups with highly concentrated interests in overseas expansion logrolled their interests, the result of which was a foreign policy that was more aggressive and extreme than any one group wanted or intended.⁶⁹ Interest groups exploited information monopolies and propaganda resources to justify their policies through myths that worked as rationalizations for the interests of the groups that derived parochial benefits from expansion. Over time the myths took on a life of their own as members of each cartel looked to pass the costs of overcommitment onto other coalition partners; the "more overcommitted Germany's foreign policy became, the more the individual cartels needed to mobilize support to invent myths to justify German overexpansion."⁷⁰ Germany's aggressive foreign policy, Snyder argues, was the result of a pathological domestic political system.

To evaluate the domestic-politics model against the historical record, we would need to find evidence that naval expansion was the effect of social and economic structures within the German state. There are two reasons to doubt that internal politics drove Germany's naval expansion. As it happened, German naval expansion was not a result of, nor did it solve, the socioeconomic problems plaguing German domestic politics. Building a fleet of battleships entailed extreme domestic costs that grew each year and created intense domestic problems that would not have arisen otherwise, and which only grew in magnitude and public visibility as naval expansion progressed.⁷¹ Thus, Germany's domestic socioeconomic struggles were in important ways the effect of naval expansion, not a cause of it.

Moreover, even if domestic politics explains German interest in naval expansion, it cannot explain the particular form that this expansion took. While it is obvious that heavy industry had an interest in expanding the German navy, it should not have mattered whether or not it took the form of cruisers or battleships or was directed toward one region over another.⁷² If parochial interests in industry were driving naval expansion, Krupps, for example, should have been interested in producing steel, for sure, but the form that steel took would have been unimportant. In short, just because

⁶⁸ Sheehan, "The Primacy of Domestic Politics," 171.

⁶⁹ Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, 44.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷¹ Kagan, *The Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, 138. For a thorough critique of the historiography on the domestic politics hypothesis, see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy Before 1914," *Central European History* 6, no. 1 (March 1973): 3–43.

⁷² Paul Kennedy, "The Kaiser and German *Weltpolitik*: Reflexions on Wilhelm II's Place in the Making of German Foreign Policy," in *Kaiser Wilhelm II: New Interpretations*, eds., John C.G. Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 152.

naval expansion benefited certain domestic interest groups does not mean that German naval policy had to be suboptimal from a security perspective. Therefore, domestic politics fails in very important ways to explain the character of German naval expansion.

German naval expansion proceeded in spite of the domestic political turmoil it caused and the consequences it held for German security. This suggests that Germany's naval policy was "driven not by domestic considerations but by the pursuit of power and glory . . . at any cost, at the risk of disruption at home and world war abroad."⁷³ In the remainder of this article, I reconsider German naval ambition with this intuition in mind, arguing that Germany's naval program was not a response to a perceived domestic or international threat, but rather was an attempt to secure recognition of its identity as a world power. To do this, I will present patterns of evidence from historical, diplomatic, and primary source records that support the observable implications of the theory of recognition discussed above. Specifically, I look for evidence of the two behaviors that the struggle for recognition generates: (1) that Imperial Germany understood itself to be a world power and presented this self-understanding to Britain as a *fait accompli*; (2) that Germany grounded this self-understanding in the symbolic material practices constitutive of that identity—the battleship; and (3) that Germany understood the building of battleships as a way to secure its identity as a world power. Finally, and most importantly, I will show how the constitutive contradiction at the center of the struggle for recognition explains how Germany was able to reconcile the paradox at the center of risk theory, enabling the doomed naval strategy to proceed despite its certain failure.

THE BIRTH OF THE GERMAN BATTLE FLEET

The German Empire was formally declared on January 18, 1871. Despite unification this new state was "deeply ambiguous about its untried European role, [as] were the Germans regarding their new identity."⁷⁴ Most of Germany's inhabitants did not identify as German, instead owing their primary identifications to local notions of tradition, loyalty, and belonging.⁷⁵ Because a shared sense of collective identity is essential to the constitution of the state as a political actor, much of the state's political project after unification was to create a shared sense of national consciousness at home and to establish Germany's presence abroad among the European great powers. The navy offered the consummate vehicle by which to construct a national identity and

⁷³ Kagan, *The Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, 138. See also, Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 305–70.

⁷⁴ Michael Stürmer, *The German Empire, 1870–1918* (New York: Random House, 2000), 45.

⁷⁵ Rüger, *The Great Naval Game*, 140.

project this image onto the world.⁷⁶ Domestically the navy was an exclusively imperial institution, the indisputable representation of a unified Germany.⁷⁷ Internationally powerful navies were symbols of national pride and power, “a status symbol of universal validity which no nation conscious of its identity could afford to do without.”⁷⁸ As a symbol of national greatness, the German navy became a salient political field whereby national consciousness was awakened and national self-understandings made. The consequence was a political discourse that conflated the greatness of the German nation with the state’s power-projection capabilities, making German naval expansion both imperative and inevitable, in spite of its dire security consequences.

However, because identity is formed intersubjectively, Germany could not “constitute itself as a world power.” To become a world power, Germany needed to be recognized by the reigning world powers of the day. The German navy, therefore, would be directed against the world’s preeminent world power—Britain. Britain possessed everything Germany sought to acquire for itself, and as such, was Germany’s significant other, the state from which it needed recognition.⁷⁹

Weltpolitik and the Fleet Against England

A coherent naval strategy designed to achieve *Weltpolitik* began to emerge by the turn of the century.⁸⁰ In June 1897 Tirpitz arrived in Berlin to take up his position as state secretary of the Imperial Naval Office and two weeks later had an audience with the Kaiser where he presented a top secret memorandum on the fleet.⁸¹ The document contained the seeds of a fully developed naval strategy directed against Britain, lending insight into the social motivations behind the naval program. Specifically, the German navy was conceived with Britain in mind, and the form the navy took reflected a concern with the constitutive markers of world power status: the fleet had to be constructed around battleships. Tirpitz argued that the German fleet must be powerful enough to inflict damage on the strongest naval power

⁷⁶ Volker R. Berghahn, “War Preparations and National Identity in Imperial Germany,” in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, eds., Manfred Franz Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 315–18.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday’s Deterrent: Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1965); Peter Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry* (New York: David McCay Company, 1974); and Geoff Eley, “Reshaping the Right: Radical Nationalism and the German Navy League, 1898–1908,” *Historical Journal* 21, no. 2 (June 1978): 327–54.

⁷⁸ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 124.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Steinberg, “The Copenhagen Complex,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 3 (July 1966): 45.

⁸⁰ The seeds of Germany’s naval strategy against Britain are evident as early as 1892–1894, however, it did not take form in terms of concrete plans for a Navy Bill until 1897. Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, 212.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 236; and Steinberg, *Yesterday’s Deterrent*, 126.

and “for Germany the most dangerous enemy at the present time is England,” against which Germany “most urgently [required] a certain measure of naval force as a *political* power factor.”⁸² Moreover, it argued the fleet “must be so constructed that it can unfold its greatest military potential between Heligoland and the Thames,” for “the military situation against England demands battleships in as great a number as possible,” leaving little doubt that the naval program was to be directed against England, from whom Germany must secure recognition.⁸³

The memorandum also made it clear that the German fleet would not be designed to threaten British commerce on the high seas, but rather directed against the Royal Navy, upon which the greatness of the British Empire was thought to rest.⁸⁴ It explicitly rejected the building of cruisers, which represented “a reduction from the forces needed for the ultimate outcome”; that is, securing Germany’s identity as a world power.⁸⁵ The 1897 memorandum is considered by historians and other experts to be one of the most important moments in German naval history. The memorandum gave purpose and direction to German naval planning, focusing its sights on countering British hegemony in the North Sea and allocating resources to the development of battleships at the expense of cruisers. These characteristics of Germany’s naval strategy suggest that the fleet was designed not for economic or military purposes, but rather for a political purpose: naval construction was to be a powerful political performance with the positive intention “to *alter* the existing balance of forces in the world in Germany’s favor and to achieve parity with Great Britain as a world power.”⁸⁶ By August 1897 a draft of the German Navy Law was presented to the Kaiser, which he approved.

On October 29, a final draft of the Navy Law, which called for a fleet of nineteen battleships, was presented to the *Bundesrat*. The naval program would be fixed by law and allowed for escalating costs as the result of changing naval technology. The result was a commitment by the government to finance whatever kind of ships the Naval Office claimed were militarily necessary, which guaranteed the size of the fleet and signified Germany’s long-term commitment to building a powerful navy. Yet at the same time, fixing naval expansion by law importantly gave the impression that it was bounded and reinforced the illusion that the purpose of the fleet was only defensive in nature. In doing this, Tirpitz hoped to create an image of Germany as a defensive-oriented, status quo power. But importantly, in a margin note commenting on the defensive nature of the fleet Tirpitz emphasized its hidden purpose: “for agitation, yes, but in fact a power factor which works

⁸² From the Tirpitz memorandum of June 1897, “General Considerations on the Constitution of Our Fleet According to Ship Classes and Designs,” in Steinberg, *Yesterday’s Deterrent*, 209 (emphasis mine).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Kagan, *The Origins of War and Preservation of Peace*, 139–40.

⁸⁵ As quoted in Steinberg, *Yesterday’s Deterrent*, 127.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 129, fn16, (emphasis in original); and Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy*, 24.

politically also against England.”⁸⁷ What this margin note indicates is that while the public rhetoric surrounding the Navy Bill was defensive in nature, cloaked in concerns about trade and commerce, the intended purpose of the fleet was offensively directed against Britain—where defense was understood “not as a means of securing the position of the German Empire as a European great power, but as the precondition of its transformation into a world power.”⁸⁸ Thus, Germany clearly connected the building of battleships to its aspirant identity as a world power.

The constitutive features of sea power for world power status were further evident in a speech Bernhard von Bülow delivered to the *Reichstag* about the First Navy Bill in December 1897, which outlined the need for naval expansion:

We do not by any means feel the need to stick our finger in every pie, but . . . the days when the German happily surrendered the land to one of his neighbours, to another the sea, and reserved for himself the heavens, where pure doctrine was enthroned . . . Those days are over. We are happy to respect the interests of other powers in China, secure in the knowledge that our own interests will also receive the recognition they deserve. In a word, we don't want to put anyone in the shade, but we too demand *our place in the sun*.⁸⁹

The imagery of a “place in the sun” was a potent rhetorical device that epitomized the objectives of the naval program and presented Germany’s aspirant identity as a *fait accompli*. The speech characterized a world where other states had already established their world empires while Germany patiently sat by doing nothing, “surrendering the land to [its] neighbor.” That time was now over, as Germany sought to establish its own place among these powers. Moreover, the specific imagery of a place in the sun evoked powerful connections to the British Empire: by acquiring naval power, Germany sought to replicate Britain’s empire on a global scale. In a state where the navy was linked to national consciousness, it suggested images of “Louis XIV, the Sun King, a British Empire ‘on which the sun never set,’ and the

⁸⁷ As quoted in Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics*, 143.

⁸⁸ Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, 297. This is consistent with the view held by several historians that Germany was an aggressive, offense-oriented state prepared for a long and protracted war. See Annika Mombauer, “Of War Plans and War Guilt: The Debate Surrounding the Schlieffen Plan,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 5 (October 2005): 857–85; Holger H. Herwig, “Germany and the ‘Short-War’ Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?” *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 3 (July 2002): 681–93; and Stig Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914,” in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, eds., Manfred Franz Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 343–76. For an application of these ideas to IR, see Lieber, “The New History of World War I.”

⁸⁹ As quoted in Holmes, “Mahan, a ‘Place in the Sun,’ and Germany’s Quest for Sea Power,” 37, (emphasis mine).

attainment of a Carolingian empire writ large.”⁹⁰ A powerful German fleet would enable Germany to follow *Weltpolitik* and gain its place in the sun. Battleships were the means and world power status the end.

In suggesting that it sought a place in the sun, Germany was simultaneously representing Britain and that state’s relationship to Germany’s goals, and thus laying the foundation for the identity struggle that would ensue between the two states. Within the imagery of a place in the sun, lay two contradictory representations of Britain, which would become important as German naval strategy developed. On the one hand, Germany sought a place among the world powers, where “a place in the sun” implied coequal status and perhaps even an alliance with Britain.⁹¹ Connecting back to Tirpitz’s description of the fleet as defensive in nature, German naval expansion was not unbounded; Germany did not intend to “stick [its] finger in every pie.” Rather, *Weltpolitik* was respectful of other states’ rights and only demanded its own due recognition. On the other hand, it also conveyed a keen sense of British decline, which opened an opportunity for Germany to wrestle colonies from Britain. The implication was that if Germany were to achieve its place in the sun, then Britain would have to relinquish its own dominant position. If Britain could accept its relative decline and Germany’s ascent to the rank of world power, then Germany’s transition to that status would occur peacefully. If not, then there would be inevitable conflict. Either way, “the battle fleet was not merely a defensive instrument, but one that could carve out the rightful German share of empire.”⁹² Overall, the objectives of the battle fleet were indisputable: Germany was now committed “to a supreme effort to attain standing at sea with the dominant naval power of the day,” and a battle fleet stationed in home waters would be essential to achieving this goal.⁹³

Risk Theory and the Political Purpose of the Fleet

When Germany turned its attention away from continental politics toward Britain, the reason for its navy shifted from a military to a political purpose. For Germany the political importance of sea power would somehow transform the empire into one of the great world powers of the twentieth century.⁹⁴ The First Navy Law laid out the fundamental objectives of German naval expansion, but gave little insight into the strategic and operational requirements that achieving these objectives necessitated. Mounting a challenge to British naval hegemony was no small task given the magnitude of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁹¹ Ibid., 48.

⁹² Ibid., 48.

⁹³ Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, 201.

⁹⁴ Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, 302–3.

Britain's naval capability. This challenge was amplified because Germany was essentially building its navy from the ground up. Accordingly, achieving world power status would require substantial augmenting of the First Navy Law over the coming years.

In September 1899 Tirpitz met with Wilhelm, at the imperial hunting lodge in Romintern, and presented a proposal for the introduction of a new fleet bill.⁹⁵ With its emphasis on the battle fleet, focus on Britain and discussion of world power, the Romintern interview provides one of the best insights into the ultimate objectives of German naval expansion: as Tirpitz argued "Germany has fallen behind in payment for sea power, so making up this neglect is a life question for Germany as a world power and great *Kultur* State."⁹⁶ The centerpiece of the new plan was the construction of forty-five battleships that would be reached in two stages, the first of which was the basis for the Second Navy Law. When finished only Britain would have a larger fleet than Germany, although Tirpitz reasoned that the political effects of this concentration of power would counteract Germany's numerical inferiority. The Second Navy Law defined the size of the projected fleet, gave it a strategic rationale and identified its *raison d'être*, making explicit what was left implicit in the First Navy Law.

Still, the German navy faced a tremendous obstacle in achieving world power status because the size of the Royal Fleet made the goal of superiority impossible. German naval strategy had to take this into account and find a way to obtain world power status without being able to actually outbuild Great Britain. Central to this strategy was the concept of a risk fleet:

Germany must possess a battle fleet of such strength that a war even for the most powerful opponent at sea is such a dangerous undertaking that its own power position will be at stake. For this purpose, it is not absolutely necessary for the German battle fleet to be equally strong as that of the greatest sea power, for a great sea power will generally not be able to concentrate all its forces against us, the defeat of a strong German fleet would weaken the enemy to such an extent that despite the victory it might have won its own power position would be for the moment not be secured by a sufficiently strong navy.⁹⁷

To accomplish its goal Germany did not need to out-build the Royal Navy. Rather, the German fleet must be "of sufficient strength that even the

⁹⁵ Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics*, 145.

⁹⁶ From Tirpitz's notes for the audience at Rominten, as quoted in Padfield, *The Great Naval Race*, 82.

⁹⁷ From the preamble to "*Begründung zum Entwurf der Novelle zum Flottengesetz*," as quoted in Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, 244.

strongest naval power could not attack it without endangering its own position in the world.”⁹⁸ It was figured that a fleet two-thirds the size of the Royal Navy would be able to inflict significant losses on Britain, so that the Royal Navy would risk its supremacy at sea forever in initiating a battle with Germany.

This statement of risk theory contained no specific mention of Britain; however, the theory could only apply to Britain.⁹⁹ Britain was the world’s strongest naval power, and its fleet was dispersed throughout the world. In order to maintain superiority, Britain operated according to the “two-power standard”: the Royal Navy should always maintain a battle fleet that was at least as powerful as the next two biggest fleets combined, friend or foe. With risk theory, Germany intended to build a navy that “even in the hour of German defeat could sink enough British ships to reduce the British navy below the numerical level required by the two-power standard.”¹⁰⁰ Even though in such a scenario the German navy might be destroyed, Great Britain would be powerless before the combined fleets of Russia and France. Tirpitz reasoned that if in attacking the German fleet Britain risked its own world power status, then Germany could force Britain to recognize Germany’s claims to that status. A comparatively small German fleet stationed in the North Sea would be a political lever and a deterrent—a shortcut to *Weltpolitik*.¹⁰¹

Risk theory, however, was not without its own set of risks for Germany. Despite its cleverness, risk theory contained a fatal flaw: it was premised on the belief that Britain would not respond in kind to Germany’s naval buildup, enabling Germany to pass easily through the danger zone. As the German fleet grew, British naval construction would remain constant, and the distribution of its fleet across the globe would remain the same. From Britain’s perspective, however, German naval expansion genuinely threatened British interests—both its status as a world power and its survival as an independent state were at risk—making a response almost certain. Therefore, Tirpitz’s risk theory possessed an inescapable paradox: “the danger zone through which Germany’s growing fleet would have to pass lengthened with each additional battleship,” as every risk for Britain translated into an equal and perhaps even more dangerous risk to Germany.¹⁰² Consequently, Germany’s risk fleet was chasing a goal that it could not reach; the more battleships constructed, the further into the future extended the danger zone, risking a dangerous arms race with Britain.

Despite the glaring paradox at the center of risk theory, Germany still proceeded with its plans for naval expansion, an irrational policy that should

⁹⁸ Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy*, 33.

⁹⁹ Ibid.; and Kennedy, “Tirpitz, England and the Second Navy Law of 1900,” 36.

¹⁰⁰ Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy*, 33.

¹⁰¹ Steinberg, *Yesterday’s Deterrent*, 21.

¹⁰² Ibid., 21.

have collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. How was this possible? The answer to this question, and hence the central insight into German naval expansion, lies in the nature of German objectives themselves and the contradictions that animated that desire. As I have already described, the struggle for recognition is marked by a constitutive contradiction: by insisting that other states recognize their identities as they already are, states refuse to acknowledge that their identities are formed through social interaction and as such deny their fundamental condition of interdependence. German naval strategy accommodated a contradiction of a similar sort, which allowed German naval expansion to continue despite its impossibility because it reflected back to Germany an image of itself as a world power regardless of Britain's reactions.

Risk theory was premised on a profoundly ambivalent understanding of British identity and how that identity implicated German objectives. In one sense risk theory depended on a representation of Britain as an aggressive state, willing to rush into German waters to destroy the Imperial Navy and eliminate Germany's standing as a world power. According to this image, the "development of the Imperial Navy and Germany's world position were dangling on a thread, which at any moment might be cut by a swift, ruthless stroke from Britain."¹⁰³ Britain represented an ever-present menace to German aspirations and necessitated German armaments in the name of defense. This provided the primary justification for the necessity of naval expansion in the first place.

In another sense, for risk theory to work—for the German fleet to exert its deterrent force and secure Germany's world power status—it would have to go unnoticed by Britain until it passed through the danger zone. This perspective relied upon an image of Britain as eminently practical, a state that made foreign policy decisions from the "absolutely prudent standpoint of the businessman."¹⁰⁴ Given its preoccupation with commercial interests, Britain would not redistribute its fleet from patrolling its empire. The sensibleness of the British mentality meant that Britain would not consider the German navy as a threat and would do nothing to disrupt or counter German building. Britain was a defense-oriented, status quo power. Accordingly, the Imperial Navy would be able to pass through the danger zone without a problem.

Herein lies the basic paradox at the center of Germany's naval strategy; a glaring contradiction between Tirpitz's political and strategic views: "for the more [Germany] believed in risk theory and the deterring of a British attack, the less [its] conviction that the Royal Navy would immediately rush into

¹⁰³ Steinberg, "The Copenhagen Complex," 23.

¹⁰⁴ Padfield, *The Great Naval Race*, 78; and Kennedy, "Tirpitz, England and the Second Navy Law of 1900," 47.

dangerous German waters can be accepted.”¹⁰⁵ These two images of Britain cannot be reconciled or make sense, no matter what the political context. Germany’s ambivalent attitude toward Britain enabled German naval expansion to proceed despite its impossibility by transforming Germany’s naval project into an ongoing affair, which necessitated and justified continued naval expansion regardless of the futility of that decision in the moment. What this did was shift the burden of responsibility for Germany’s armament program to the British, so that every German arming decision was made because of Britain, allowing Germany to pursue its doomed arming program no matter how detrimental the expansion proved to be for its overall security. In other words, Germany understood naval expansion to be an absolute necessity—a necessity demanded by the characteristics of Britain, rather than an unrealizable goal of its own. For if Germany acknowledged that Britain would respond in kind to its naval buildup, then it would be forced to confront the impossibility of its objective.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, because these arming practices embodied the constitutive features of world power status, each act of arming reflected back to Germany an image of itself already as a world power. Each image of Britain demanded that Germany pursue naval expansion, which in turn served the purpose of reinforcing Germany’s aspirant identity as a world power. Naval expansion became about securing recognition of what Germany already was, rather than as an act that brought that identity into being in the first place. This isolated Germany from the insecurity associated with the social formation of its identity, allowing it to experience its social status as a material fact rather than as a social construction.

On December 11, 1899 the Second Navy Law was brought before the *Reichstag*, followed by a speech from Bülow that embodied this “rhetoric of necessity.”¹⁰⁷ Bülow stressed the necessity of the fleet for Germany’s transformation into a world power. Germany had reached a crucial moment in its pursuit of world power status: “in the coming century, the German people will either be [the] hammer or anvil.”¹⁰⁸ Once again, this position puts responsibility for Germany’s naval expansion on others, a policy compelled

¹⁰⁵ Kennedy, “Tirpitz, England and the Second Navy Law of 1900,” 47; and Kennedy, “Strategic Aspects of the Anglo-German Naval Race,” 149.

¹⁰⁶ In this way German identity was doubly vulnerable: first, in the sense that any identity comes into being intersubjectively, and, as such, Germany’s aspirant identity was dependent upon Britain to have meaning; and second, that the practices Germany pursued in response to this first vulnerability would also not be able to achieve its desired goal.

¹⁰⁷ David Daiches, “The Rhetoric of Necessity, *Fürst Bülow: Rede Zur Flottenvorlage Am 11, Dezember 1899*,” in *Rhetoric and World Politics: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Political Speeches by W.E. Gladstone, J. Chamberlain and B.v. Bülow*, ed. Helmut Viebrock (Wisebaden: Franz Steiner Verlag), 158–60.

¹⁰⁸ Bernhard von Bülow, “Announcement of the Second Navy Bill, Meeting of the Reichstag, December, 11, 1899,” in *Rhetoric and World Politics: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Political Speeches by W.E. Gladstone, J. Chamberlain and B.v. Bülow*, ed. Helmut Viebrock (Wisebaden: Franz Steiner Verlag), 157.

by external forces.¹⁰⁹ By virtue of its unprecedented growth and the peculiar characteristics of the British Empire, Germany has been drawn into world politics by events beyond its control. Within this imagery a marked characteristic of German foreign policy is revealed: the “mixture of defensive and offensive elements which constitute the policy of ‘peaceful offensive’ adopted by the German Reich.”¹¹⁰ It was this internally inconsistent policy that enabled German naval policy to continue, even after Britain’s response made the achievement of *Weltpolitik* impossible.

The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition

As German naval plans developed, Britain was in the process of reassessing its naval strategy to meet the new challenges of maintaining the empire and countering the burgeoning German threat.¹¹¹ Central to British concerns were its relative economic decline, the proliferation of battle fleets among new great powers and, given these two factors, the consequent increase in the costs of maintaining naval supremacy. To meet these challenges Adm. Fisher proposed a major redevelopment of naval forces, designed to protect more effectively Britain’s imperial and strategic interests while reducing the overall cost of the navy. The result was two new types of warships launched in 1905: the 17,900-ton *HMS Dreadnought* and the battle cruiser *Invincible*.¹¹² The *Invincible* was quicker and more nimble than previous warships and was conceived to protect imperial and trade interests, but also could be used in wartime to perform the functions of both armored cruisers and battleships.¹¹³ The *Dreadnought* was an all-big-gun super battleship that reflected the latest developments in naval technology and at once transformed the meaning of sea power. The *Dreadnought* was so much more powerful than

¹⁰⁹ Daiches, “The Rhetoric of Necessity,” 158.

¹¹⁰ Peter Wende, “*Politische Rhetorik als Historische Quelle—Zur Imperialismus-Ideologie Chamberlains und Bülow’s*,” in *Rhetoric and World Politics: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Political Speeches by W.E. Gladstone, J. Chamberlain and B.v. Bülow*, ed. Helmut Viebrock (Wisebaden: Franz Steiner Verlag), 186.

¹¹¹ There is a debate in the historiography about the relative importance of the German threat in British naval planning. For those that emphasize financial constraints, see Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); and Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999). For a dissenting view, see Matthew S. Seligmann, “Switching Horses: The Admiralty’s Recognition of the Threat from Germany, 1900–1905,” *The International History Review* 30, no. 2 (June 2008): 237–58.

¹¹² Herwig, “The German Reaction to the *Dreadnought* Revolution,” 274.

¹¹³ Nicholas A. Lambert, “Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904–1909,” *The Journal of Military History* 59, no. 4 (October 1995): 642. The battle cruiser and flotilla defense were part of Fisher’s larger vision for British sea power that moved away from a central focus on battleships. See Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy*; Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution*; and Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010).

its predecessors that it instantly deteriorated the fighting values of all battle-ships that went before it. The introduction of these two ships, combined with the redistribution of the existing fleet, demonstrated that Britain would be able to adapt effectively in the face of mounting fiscal constraints, to maintain its naval supremacy, and protect interests that were vital to its national and imperial security.¹¹⁴ Britain would remain the world's preeminent naval power, and Germany's demand for recognition would go unmet: Britain would not recognize Germany as a fellow world power.

This change in British naval policy had obvious consequences for Germany's plan for world power status, prompting Tirpitz to reassess the entire naval program. Keeping pace with Britain would require significant additional expenditures at a time when the German budget was coming under increasing strain and the demands of continental defense were mounting. Moreover, Britain's innovation essentially eliminated the central premise of risk theory because once it committed to countering the German challenge Britain extended the danger zone indefinitely into the future. Germany's entire naval strategy depended on passing through the danger zone, without which it would not be able to command world power status. The contradictions at risk theory's core had been exposed, forcing Tirpitz to confront the possibility that *Weltpolitik* had proven a mirage.¹¹⁵

At this moment Germany faced an especially pernicious dilemma to which there was no easy solution: mobilize precious resources to launch an arms race that it was certain to lose or abandon its aspirations for world power status altogether to seek accommodation with Britain.¹¹⁶ Germany understood clearly the dire costs of an arms race with Britain. By Germany's own internal assessment, an antagonism with Britain had potentially catastrophic consequences for German security, as it would "cut Germany off from the rest of the world, disrupt its economic life and precipitate a financial and social crisis whose consequences were incalculable," as well as signal revisionist intentions to France and Russia thus further jeopardizing its continental position.¹¹⁷ What is more, continued naval expansion confirmed suspicions about the anti-British nature of German intentions, fueling a self-fulfilling prophecy about the inevitability of confrontation and ensuring that Britain would compete. Yet, accommodation amounted to an admission that world power status was impossible, thereby accepting Britain's representation of Germany as inferior and threatening Germany's fragile national consciousness, which in the domestic sphere had become conflated with the state's power projection capabilities. For reasons of national identity, then,

¹¹⁴ Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, 37.

¹¹⁵ Herwig, "The German Reaction to the *Dreadnought* Revolution," 278.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹¹⁷ Vice Admiral Wilhelm Büchsel, as quoted in *ibid.*, 281. Importantly, this shows that Germany understood the security risks it was taking in expanding its navy and proceeded anyway.

and as the struggle for recognition would predict, the British challenge could not go unanswered.

In spite of its grave consequences for German security, Tirpitz decided to take up Britain's challenge and build his own fleet of *Dreadnought*-style ships, ushering in one of the greatest arms races in the history of great power politics. The introduction of the *Dreadnought* temporarily erased Britain's quantitative advantage over Germany, but, as noted before, Britain's ability to build more battleships meant that German superiority was effectively impossible. Still, Tirpitz rigidly clung to risk theory, despite the fact that the strategy had been undermined by events. In 1906, he presented a supplementary naval bill that called for six new cruisers, changing to *Dreadnought*-style battleships, and prolonging the three-battleship per year production schedule for an additional seven years. This was followed with additional supplementary laws in 1908 and 1912, each of which substantially increased German power, and was in direct response to Britain's failure to recognize Germany's world power status.¹¹⁸

This increase in power also came with a significant increase in Germany's insecurity. The growth of German naval power genuinely threatened Britain's vital interests, and simple security calculations guided the British response.¹¹⁹ As Lord Richard Haldane told the Kaiser, "our fleet was like His Majesty's army . . . the '*Wesen*' [being, or essence] of the nation," and that "if Germany built, we must build," highlighting the zero-sum nature of the struggle.¹²⁰ Not only would the loss of naval supremacy endanger Britain's survival as an island nation, but also would call into question Britain's status as a world power. As identity theorists have noted, "the greatest threat to the Self is a comprehensive alternative identity, an Other that can plausibly be understood as a replacement."¹²¹ For this reason Britain could not "just recognize" Germany's claims to world power status, for in doing so it would call into question its own claims to that identity. Therefore, Germany's challenge had to be met: in 1909 Britain produced eight new *Dreadnoughts* and in 1912 Churchill announced plans for further expansion of the Royal Fleet.

¹¹⁸ In 1907 Russia invited the great powers to a conference at The Hague to discuss a reduction in armaments in Europe. Despite British efforts to halt the burgeoning naval arms race, Germany rejected Britain's ideas on disarmament talks because an arms control agreement would eliminate all possibility of achieving any of the goals associated with its program of naval expansion. Similarly, in 1912 Lord Haldane visited Germany to negotiate a naval agreement. Again, Germany refused to accept a naval understanding with Britain unless the agreement allowed a new German naval increase while British levels remained constant, thus allowing Germany to significantly increase its naval forces vis-à-vis Britain. In each of these cases, Germany considered parity to be the mark of recognition for its world power status.

¹¹⁹ Glaser, "When Are Arms Races Dangerous?" 63.

¹²⁰ Viscount Richard Haldane, "Diary of Mr. Haldane's Visit to Germany, September 2, 1906: Secret," in *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, eds., G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1928), 379.

¹²¹ Hopf, *The Social Construction of International Politics*, 8.

Britain's invulnerability to German pressure only served to reinforce feelings of status inferiority within Germany, further intensifying its commitment to naval expansion. As the struggle for recognition suggests, as German social insecurity grew, its commitment to the material practices that signified world power status also grew. Repeated attempts by Britain to negotiate an end to the competition were rebuked by Germany, who continued to insist on parity as a condition of agreement, for without parity Germany would not have recognition. Britain, of course, would not surrender superiority for reasons of physical and social security, so the arms race intensified. The positions of each had become intractable: either Germany give up its aspiration for world power status or Britain give up the reality of its world power. Thus, the tragedy of German naval ambition is that the impossibility of achieving superiority over Britain only served to reinforce Germany's sense of inferiority more, driving an arms competition that further exposed German weakness.

RECOGNITION, IR THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

The preceding story of identity, insecurity, and great power politics has important implications for IR theory. Germany's decision to pursue naval expansion is a significant instance of great power politics: the resultant arms race was one of the largest in history and a contributing factor to the instability that led to the First World War. Any theory of international politics, therefore, has to grapple with its source. Realism predicts that Germany would devote its resources to continental defense. Insofar as naval expansion drew resources away from continental defense—a tradeoff that it did indeed necessitate—it should be classified as a suboptimal policy from a strategic perspective and a deviant case.

One reason that IR has been unable to explain adequately this case is because extant theories are built from the narrow assumption that states only seek physical security, ignoring an array of motives that also drive state behavior. This article is a first step in broadening the motivational assumptions from which IR theory understands world politics to include recognition.¹²² No theory of IR can be validated on the basis of one case, so more theoretical and empirical work needs to be done in order to corroborate the explanatory power of the struggle for recognition. In particular, future research needs to consider under what conditions the desire for recognition would predominate over physical security concerns as well as identify other cases to test more systematically the proposition that the recognition-motive shapes state behavior in meaningful ways. Yet, as the tragedy of German naval ambition

¹²² Richard Ned Lebow, "Constructive Realism," *International Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (June 2004): 348.

indicates, there is good reason to suspect that the struggle for recognition captures something important about state behavior and therefore can contribute to a more explanatory theory of international politics. Indeed—from Japan's ill-fated decision to bomb Pearl Harbor, to the Soviet experiment with a carrier program during the Cold War, to India's nuclear weapon program—history is peppered with examples where states appear to pursue recognition at the expense of security.

Reflecting on cases of historical importance can also generate important insights into contemporary international politics. Just as Imperial Germany sought its place in the sun among the established world powers a century before, today China seeks to secure its status among the system's great powers. Over the last several decades China has maintained unprecedented levels of economic growth and now is increasingly devoting larger portions of its GDP to its military budget, allowing for the rapid modernization of its military. It is not surprising that along with this growth in economic and military power China also seeks great power status. That is, China seeks recognition and much like Imperial Germany is grounding its aspirant identity in the markers of this status.¹²³

There would be no more visible symbol of China's status as a great power than a carrier fleet. The Department of Defense noted in 2009 that China has an active aircraft carrier research and development program and "may be interested in building multiple operations aircraft carriers" in the near future.¹²⁴ This suspicion is reinforced by reports that China has been negotiating with Russia to buy fifty carrier-capable Sukhoi Su-33 Flanker D naval fighters.¹²⁵ An aircraft carrier alone would do little to help China's position in a conflict over Taiwan or to protect its territorial interests in the South China Sea because it does not possess the battle group to go along with it. Hence, like the battleships Germany stationed in the North Sea, an aircraft carrier would do little to advance Chinese interests. The aircraft carrier is, however, a potent symbol of great power status and has proven to be "a more attractive means of gaining prestige in the last quarter century" than even nuclear weapons.¹²⁶ In this way, the Chinese view a carrier fleet as an important marker of its great power status and arrival as a modern

¹²³ For a dissenting view of China's rise and the inadequacies of the comparison to Imperial Germany, see Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2009* (Washington, DC, 2009), 48.

¹²⁵ Ronald O'Rourke, "China's Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities," U.S. Congressional Research Service. RL33153, 9 April 2010, 11.

¹²⁶ Nick Smith, "Grand Delusions: The Psychology of Aircraft Carriers," *Harvard International Review* 24, no. 3 (2002): 7. Smith notes that nuclear weapons have become strategic deterrents, whereas aircraft carriers are inherently offensive weapons built as a projection of power into foreign waters. Moreover, aircraft carriers do not carry the stigma that nuclear weapons hold for proliferators.

military power.¹²⁷ Along these lines, China has taken important steps toward building a blue-water navy that will give it the ability to operate in waters more distant from China and thereby promote its political position in the Western Pacific. China understands, in the greatest tradition of Mahan, that great powers have historically obtained far-reaching naval capabilities.

Perhaps more interesting is China's emergence as a space power. Over the past five years, China has achieved important milestones in the development of its space program.¹²⁸ With the launch of the Shenzhou V in 2003, China became the third nation to put a person in space and in October 2007 launched its first moon-exploring spacecraft into lunar orbit. China has set a goal of landing a person on the moon by 2024, an objective that directly and metaphorically represents its desire to be recognized as a great power. China has also used its space program to bolster its military position vis-à-vis the other great powers. In January 2007 China tested an anti-satellite system (ASAT) by using a missile to destroy a weather satellite in low earth polar orbit, creating concerns from the international community over China's intentions as a spacefaring nation and leading some to worry about the potential of a future arms race in space.¹²⁹ Space control is an important instrument of modern warfare, and by developing its own space capabilities China seeks to compete on par with the United States.

The emergence of China to the rank of great power has important consequences for the United States in the coming years. Pessimists argue that China's rise will necessarily be conflictual, as China's quest for its place in the sun will inevitably cause tension with its rivals. In considering such scenarios we are well served to draw lessons from similar cases in history. What the preceding story about Germany's naval ambition highlights is the importance of understanding what rising peer competitors want when crafting foreign policy responses. If China is indeed seeking recognition of its status as a great power, then the United States must formulate a foreign policy that responds accordingly, recognizing China's place in the international order. Otherwise, we may be doomed to repeat the misfortunes that contributed to the First World War.

¹²⁷ Andrew S. Erikson and Andrew R. Wilson, "China's Aircraft Carrier Dilemma," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (2006): 28.

¹²⁸ Jing-dong Yuan, "China's Ascendancy to Space Power," *China Brief* 8, no. 8 (2008): 4–8

¹²⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, "US-China Relations: An Affirmative Agenda, A Responsible Course," Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council of Foreign Relations (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2007), 48.