

# Role status and status-saving behaviour in world politics: the ASEAN case

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The study of status in International Relations (IR) has flourished in the past decade. Status-related variables, such as status dissatisfaction, status concern and status anxiety, have been used by IR scholars to explain various state behaviours, such as the initiation of conflict, status-seeking policies, rising powers' challenges, great power rivalry and status-signalling strategies.<sup>1</sup> However, there is an important conceptual and analytical problem in the study of status in IR. Many scholars implicitly emphasize 'trait status' instead of 'role status' in conceptualizing a state's status in a hierarchical community.<sup>2</sup> While trait status refers to valued attributes that determine a state's standing and rank in a social hierarchy, role status is constituted through state interactions and competent practices that bring the state respect and deference from others. This conceptual bias towards trait status in the status literature leads to material reductionism, and conflates power and status in shaping state behaviour.

In this article we highlight the importance of role status, especially the potential loss of role status, in influencing a state's policy choices. By integrating prospect theory with status theory, we construct a 'status-saving' model to suggest that when a state or a group of states faces a potential loss of status, especially of role status in a deference hierarchy, it is more likely to be positioned in a domain of losses according to prospect theory, which will lead to some dramatic policy

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to US primacy', *International Security* 34: 4, 2010, pp. 63–95; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for status: Chinese and Russian foreign policy* (London: Yale University Press, 2019); T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson and William C. Wohlforth, eds, *Status in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Tudor A. Onea, 'Between dominance and decline: status anxiety and great power rivalry', *Review of International Studies* 40: 1, 2014, pp. 125–52; Jonathan Renshon, 'Status deficits and war', *International Organization* 70: 3, 2016, pp. 513–50; Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for status: hierarchy and conflict in world politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Steven Ward, 'Lost in translation: social identity theory and the study of status in world politics', *International Studies Quarterly* 61: 4, 2017, pp. 821–34; Steven Ward, *Status and the challenge of rising powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: contested status signaling in the changing global order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Reinhard Wolf, 'Taking interaction seriously: asymmetrical roles and the behavioural foundations of status', *European Journal of International Relations* 25: 4, 2019, pp. 1186–211. This is not to say that most status scholars simply ignore the social and relational aspects of status. However, they seem to emphasize 'trait status' based on various material status markers in research.

changes in world politics. These changes constitute a pattern of ‘great-leap-forward’, risk-acceptant behaviours, with the aim of recovering the damaged or lost position in a status community.

In the first section, we discuss the analytical problem in conceptualizing status through ‘trait’ rather than ‘role’. Second, we introduce our ‘status-saving’ model to hypothesize under what conditions states are more likely to choose a risk-acceptant policy to prevent the loss of status, especially role status. Third, we test our status-saving model by examining ASEAN’s bold community-building efforts in the 2000s, especially its adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007. We suggest that ASEAN’s great-leap-forward policy towards regional integration demonstrates that its members, as political actors, tried to salvage their damaged role status through risk-acceptant policies—that is, policies that risk their reputation and status in the long run. In conclusion, we argue that pursuing role status is another way for states to seek status in a deference hierarchy. Dominant powers should consider accommodating the pursuit of role status by rising powers and also encourage ‘do-goodism’ in world politics.

## The state of the study of status

Status, like reputation and prestige, has long attracted scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> However, as Jonathan Renshon points out, much of the early study of status ‘has been guided by intuition, not evidence and this has left us with a significant gap’.<sup>4</sup> Since the late 2000s, the study of status has experienced a resurgence and work in this area of IR has proliferated.<sup>5</sup> This new wave of scholarship on status is characterized by methodological rigour, theoretical innovation and empirical richness.<sup>6</sup> As William Wohlforth points out, the study of status ‘has become mainstream and it has gone global’.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Hans Morgenthau, ‘A political theory of foreign aid’, *American Political Science Review* 56: 2, 1962, pp. 301–309; Robert Gilpin, *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the right pond: human behaviour and the quest for status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Renshon, *Fighting for status*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Yong Deng, *China’s struggle for status: the realignment of international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); William C. Wohlforth, ‘Unipolarity, status competition, and great power war’, *World Politics* 61: 1, 2009, pp. 28–57; Larson and Shevchenko, ‘Status seekers’; Larson and Shevchenko, *Quest for status*; Paul et al., eds, *Status in world politics*; Onea, ‘Between dominance and decline’; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon and Paul Huth, ‘Reputation and status as motives for war’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 17, 2014, pp. 371–93; Benjamin de Carvalho and Iver B. Neumann, eds, *Small state status seeking: Norway’s quest for international standing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Joshua Freedman, ‘Status insecurity and temporality in world politics’, *European Journal of International Relations* 22: 4, 2016, pp. 797–822; Renshon, ‘Status deficits and war’; Renshon, *Fighting for status*; Ward, ‘Lost in translation’; Ward, *Status and the challenge of rising powers*; Marina G. Duque, ‘Recognizing international status: a relational approach’, *International Studies Quarterly* 62: 3, 2018, pp. 577–92; Deborah Welch Larson, ‘Status competition among Russia, India, and China in clubs: a source of stalemate or innovation in global governance’, *Contemporary Politics* 25: 5, 2019, pp. 549–66; Pu, *Rebranding China*; Wolf, ‘Taking interaction seriously’; Joslyn Barnhart, ‘Status competition and territorial aggression: evidence from the scramble for Africa’, *Security Studies* 25: 3, 2016, pp. 385–419.

<sup>6</sup> See esp. Larson and Shevchenko, ‘Status seekers’; Renshon, ‘Status deficits and war’; Renshon, *Fighting for status*; Ward, ‘Lost in translation’; Ward, *Status and the challenge of rising powers*; Onea, ‘Between dominance and decline’.

<sup>7</sup> William C. Wohlforth, ‘Introduction’, in Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Diane Labrosse, eds, *Status and the challenge of rising powers: book review roundtable on Steven Ward* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017),

For example, scholars draw on status as a motivator of behaviour to explain various foreign policies, including conspicuous consumption in international relations such as the acquisition of aircraft carriers and expensive space races among great powers, middle powers' pursuit of moral authority through 'conspicuous do-goodism', and non-aligned states' participation in NATO-led operations and interventions.<sup>8</sup> In similar vein, Paul Musgrave and Daniel Nexon argue that hegemons can defend hierarchy and 'secure their dominance in arenas of high symbolic value by investing wealth and labor into unproductive (in direct military and economic terms) goods and performances'.<sup>9</sup> They support their argument with a comparative case-study of the American Project Apollo and the Ming dynasty's treasure fleets.

Despite the theoretical and empirical contributions of the burgeoning scholarship on status in IR, there are some analytical problems in the existing literature. First, most research highlights 'trait status' but de-emphasizes or even ignores 'role status' in conceptualizing status in IR.<sup>10</sup> For example, Larson and Shevchenko suggest that 'status is based on a group's standing on *some trait* valued by society'.<sup>11</sup> In a more frequently cited definition, Paul, Larson and Wohlforth conceptualize status as 'collective beliefs about a given state's ranking in *valued attributes* (wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, and diplomatic clout)'.<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing 'some trait' or 'valued attributes' in defining a state's status, scholars somehow downplay or even ignore the fact that status is fundamentally social in essence. As Marina Duque points out, this 'attribute-focused' definition of status 'leads to material reductionism' because it equates certain material resources with status attributes.<sup>13</sup> In other words, according to this trait-based definition, a state's status is mainly determined by what that state materially possesses of the so-called 'status markers', such as nuclear weapons and aircraft carriers.

It is worth noting that scholars who rely on 'trait or attribute' to define status do also explicitly recognize that the concept is social.<sup>14</sup> For example, as Paul,

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*H-Diplo* | *ISSF X*: 27, 2019, pp. 2–3 at p. 2. H-Diplo is a leading global interdisciplinary network which publishes on world issues relating to diplomatic affairs, international relations and international history. It is one of the 'most relevant and important open-access scholarly resources on the internet'. See <https://networks.h-net.org/ZZ-about-diplo-ZZ>.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Lilach Gilady, *The price of prestige: conspicuous consumption in international relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); William C. Wohlforth, Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira and Iver B. Neumann, 'Moral authority and status in international relations: good states and the social dimension of status seeking', *Review of International Studies* 44: 3, 2018, pp. 526–46; Rasmus Brun Pedersen, 'Jumping on the bandwagon: status seeking as a driver for Sweden's involvement in NATO-led operations?', *International Politics* 57: 1, 2019, pp. 41–56.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Musgrave and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Defending hierarchy from the moon to the Indian Ocean: symbolic capital and political dominance in early modern China and the Cold War', *International Organization* 72: 3, 2018, pp. 591–626 at p. 591.

<sup>10</sup> Wolf, 'Taking interaction seriously'.

<sup>11</sup> Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status seekers', p. 69 (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> Paul et al., eds, *Status in world politics*, p. 7 (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> Duque, 'Recognizing international status', p. 579. It is worth noting that there are some non-material traits or attributes, such as culture, according to the trait-status definition. However, trait-status scholars are more likely to emphasize one or more material status marker(s) in their research.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Paul et al., eds, *Status in world politics*; Wohlforth et al., 'Moral authority and status in international relations'.

Larson and Wohlforth point out, 'status reflects collective beliefs ... status cannot be read off a state's material attributes; it depends on others' perceptions'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, status is not measured only by what a state has materially, but is also determined by how others collectively perceive or recognize its possessions. For example, although North Korea has nuclear weapons, it does not have the status of 'great power' because other states do not collectively perceive or recognize it as such. In this sense, North Korea's 'great power' status is not socially accepted and recognized, despite its possession of nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, although scholars have inserted 'collective beliefs' into the measurement of status, this trait-based conceptualization is still inclined to material reductionism because a state's status is determined by the collective beliefs of others on whether certain material resources it possesses serve as a recognized status marker or at least a proxy of one. However, as Duque and Wolf point out, status is not all about a state's attributes or traits.<sup>17</sup> If status is social in nature, social roles that a state has in a society or community will also be an important source of status. In other words, the key distinction between 'trait status' and 'role status' lies in the *source* of status, not the *process of obtaining* it. Both 'trait-status' scholars and 'role-status' scholars agree that status is based on social recognition, but they disagree on its source. While most trait-status scholars argue that traits and attributes—mainly material in essence—are the only 'source' of status, the role-status school suggests that a state can rely on its role—social interactions with others in an international society—to obtain recognition and status in world politics. For example, culture is a non-material trait or attribute for status. However, not all states know how to 'use' culture to improve their status. Employing culture wisely as soft power to attract others and obtain recognition in a deference hierarchy is a performance of 'role status', not 'trait status'.

It is worth emphasizing that there are some scholars who do implicitly or explicitly highlight non-material, non-trait-based features of status, such as performance, competence and recognition.<sup>18</sup> Many constructivists and English School scholars also emphasize the ontological and social aspects of status in an international society.<sup>19</sup> However, they have not clearly defined and theorized these non-trait/non-attribute features as *role status* in the emerging literature. Role

<sup>15</sup> Paul et al., eds, *Status in world politics*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> For recognition and status see Michelle Murray, *The struggle for recognition in international relations: status, revisionism, and rising powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); also Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status seekers'; Larson and Shevchenko, *Quest for status*.

<sup>17</sup> Duque, 'Recognizing international status'; Wolf, 'Taking interaction seriously'.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Vincent Pouliot, 'Hierarchy in practice: multilateral diplomacy and the governance of international security', *European Journal of International Security* 1: 1, 2016, pp. 5–26; Murray, *The struggle for recognition in international relations*; De Carvalho and Neumann, eds, *Small state status seeking*; Wohlforth et al., 'Moral authority and status in international relations'; Jelena Subotic and Srdjan Vucetic, 'Performing solidarity: whiteness and status-seeking in the non-aligned world', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22: 3, 2019, pp. 722–43; Duque, 'Recognizing international status'.

<sup>19</sup> Erik Ringmar, 'On the ontological status of the state', *European Journal of International Relations* 2: 4, 1996, pp. 439–66; Evelyn Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order in southeast Asia: analyzing regional security strategies', *International Security* 32: 3, 2007, pp. 113–57; Alice D. Ba, 'Who's socializing whom? Complex engagement in Sino-ASEAN relations', *Pacific Review* 19: 2, 2006, pp. 157–79; Bernard Ong, 'Recognizing regions: ASEAN's struggle for recognition', *Pacific Review* 25: 4, 2012, pp. 513–36.

status in this research is defined by the social standing that a state obtains through behavioural interactions with others and competent practices in a society.<sup>20</sup> For example, Norway and Sweden are normally seen as leading states in human rights and humanitarian activities. The reason they have attained such a status is their competent practices in humanitarian activities, which have led to their recognition by others as 'leading states' in this area. Here, Norway and Sweden gain their status not by possessing any particular material trait or attribute, but rather by their behaviour and competent practices in humanitarian activities and human rights diplomacy. In other words, role status is not only about what a state has—certain material or non-material attributes or traits as status markers or proxies of such markers—but about what that state does: a certain role practice, especially do-goodism, in world politics.<sup>21</sup> In terms of GDP or GDP per capita, many oil-rich countries in the Middle East may be wealthier than Norway and Sweden; however, these countries do not have a similar 'role status'—as exemplary humanitarian countries—to Norway and Sweden. Thus role status, as distinct from trait status, does not necessarily require material foundations as a prerequisite for social recognition.

A state is unlikely to be able to obtain its role status by a single action, because the constitution of this status takes time and also needs frequent interactions and practices between actors. More importantly, competent practice is a key to the successful constitution of a state's role status.<sup>22</sup> According to role theory, there are at least two parts in a state's constitution of its role identity or role status: its own self-conception of its role and others' role prescriptions or expectations.<sup>23</sup> First, role bargaining between a state and other states may or may not lead to a successful role constitution for that state.<sup>24</sup> Second, domestic contestations over a role conception may also complicate the process of establishing a state's role conception as well as its role status.<sup>25</sup> In other words, a state's role status is not only hard to achieve but also vulnerable (in comparison with a state's trait status) to others' actions and behaviour. Unlike trait status built on some material foundation, role status is based mainly on a state's competent practices and others' due recognition. Therefore, a state's role status is easily challenged by others' behav-

<sup>20</sup> We share a similar relational approach in redefining status with Marina Duque, but we emphasize social roles that a state performs through interactions and practices with other states in a society, while Duque highlights social recognition. See Duque, 'Recognizing international status'.

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that some research highlights other non-material status markers in world politics. For example, Gilpin suggests that the provision of international public goods is one source of international prestige (Gilpin, *War and change in world politics*), while Pu analyses 'conspicuous giving' as a status-signalling strategy in China's regional diplomacy (Pu, *Rebranding China*). On moral agency and responsibilities, see Chris Brown, 'Do great powers have great responsibilities? Great powers and moral agency', *Global Society* 18: 1, 2004, pp. 5–19.

<sup>22</sup> Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices', *International Theory* 3: 1, 2011, pp. 1–36.

<sup>23</sup> Kalevi J. Holsti, 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly* 14: 3, 1970, pp. 233–309; Stephen Walker, ed., *Role theory and foreign policy analysis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Cameron G. Thies, 'International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8: 1, 2012, pp. 25–46.

<sup>25</sup> Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo, 'Contested roles and domestic politics: reflections on role theory in foreign policy analysis and IR theory', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8: 1, 2012, pp. 5–24.

iour, especially by acts of disrespect and humiliation.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, recognition is a socially constructed process. Different states may have different perceptions of the same behaviour. Here, we follow Renshon's notion of 'common or shared beliefs' to suggest that a state's role status will be recognized or established through a majority of states' 'shared beliefs' in a given deference hierarchy.<sup>27</sup>

The 'trait' bias in conceptualizing status leads to some empirical problems in the study of status in IR. First, the criteria used to measure status-related variables, such as status inconsistency, status dissatisfaction, status concern, status anxiety and status competition, are mainly material in nature. For example, Renshon acknowledges that a state's expected status is normally set by its 'asset level' of material capabilities, such as military and economic capacities, though 'other assets (for example social welfare or normative authority) might be relevant for certain groups of states in certain time periods'.<sup>28</sup> This materially driven measure conflates status and power. Consequently, it reduces the analytical utility of status in explaining state behaviour. For example, how to differentiate a rising power's pursuit of status (social recognition) from its lust for power (material domination) seems to be an analytical challenge for trait-status scholars.

In addition, this materially based measure of status omits some important cases that are rooted in a state's concern over its role status rather than its trait status. As Wolf rightly suggests, some 'status-conscious governments overwhelmingly care about the way in which significant others *treat* them and frequently protest against *behaviour* they consider as disrespectful, often by resorting to direct countermeasures'.<sup>29</sup> This means that a state can feel 'status inconsistency' or 'status dissatisfaction' if its expected 'role status' is challenged by others' *behaviour*. Here, the state's concern is rooted in its behaviour-based role status rather than its materially determined trait status. For example, Larson and Shevchenko argue that 'Putin expected Russia to be treated as an equal partner with the United States'.<sup>30</sup> That is, Putin expected Russia to have the role status of an 'equal partner' when dealing with the United States. However, they warn, 'continued indifference to Russia's great power aspirations will encourage Russian elites' sense of injury and humiliation, possibly leading to further conflict, especially in the Caucasus'.<sup>31</sup>

It is worth noting that the distinction between role status and trait status is made mainly for analytical clarity and convenience. In reality, the role and the trait are not necessarily separable. For example, without a solid financial basis (trait), a country will not be able to devote resources and efforts to international humanitarian actions, which will help it to obtain the role status of a leader in protecting human rights. However, not all rich countries are generous and competent in humanitarian missions. Similarly, many states inherit ancient cultural heritage, but not all of them can transform that heritage into soft power and improve their

<sup>26</sup> Reinhard Wolf, 'Respect and disrespect in international politics: the significance of status recognition', *International Theory* 3: 1, 2011, pp. 105–42.

<sup>27</sup> Renshon, *Fighting for status*, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Renshon, *Fighting for status*, p. 55 and n. 77.

<sup>29</sup> Wolf, 'Taking interaction seriously', p. 3 (emphasis in original).

<sup>30</sup> Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status seekers', p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status seekers', p. 93.

status in international society. This means that even with a similar trait or attribute (material or non-material), different behaviours will determine states' various role statuses in a status hierarchy. Role status highlights the behavioural nature of the status, in which competent performance is a key to determining the success or failure of a state's pursuit of a certain role status. All other things being equal, the more competent a state is, the more likely it is to achieve its desired role status. Competence can be a state's trait status. However, without behaviour or performance, competence alone will not lead to a desired role status.

Finally, why should states care about role status in the first place? There are two reasons. On the one hand, since international hierarchy is based in essence on social relations, most political leaders care about how others perceive them as well as about their status in international society. In other words, status-seeking behaviour is natural in the socially constructed deference hierarchy. On the other hand, not all countries have the means or capabilities to acquire the 'status markers' of trait status. Role status, therefore, becomes an alternative way for states to climb up the status ladder in world politics. One caveat is that role status is hard to get but easy to lose in comparison with trait status. This is why states will become sensitive and risk-acceptant when facing 'status loss', especially loss of the hard-earned role status.

### **Prospect theory and status-saving behaviour**

Borrowing insights from prospect theory, we introduce a status-saving argument to explain a state's policy choices after losing its status, especially its role status. Prospect theory is a behavioural economics theory which explains people's behavioural preferences under conditions of high uncertainty. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, the originators of prospect theory, suggest that people's behaviours do not always follow the cost-benefit calculation—the so-called expected utility function. Instead, people's decisions are influenced by their interpretation of a situation in which they have to make a choice as a domain of either gain or loss.<sup>32</sup> People tend to evaluate choices with respect to a reference point—an artificial benchmark in their mind. Above the reference point, choices are placed or framed in a domain of gains, while below the reference point they are in a domain of losses. People are more likely to choose risk-averse behaviour when framing the choice in a domain of gains, and risk-acceptant behaviour when in a domain of losses. In other words, people are more likely to behave cautiously (be risk-averse) to protect their gains and avoid potential losses, if they perceive a bright and advantageous future (in a domain of gains). However, when people are placed or framed in a disadvantageous situation or face a dark future (i.e. in a domain of losses), they are more likely to choose to take

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Prospect theory: an analysis of decision under risk', *Econometrica* 47: 2, 1979, pp. 263–91.

risks (be risk-acceptant) in the hope of reversing the situation, even though at the same time the risks they are taking might worsen their losses.<sup>33</sup>

Because status is a social and ideational concept, its application in world politics is intersubjective and perceptual among political leaders. As Richard Ned Lebow suggests, political leaders are not only driven by material motives, such as appetite and security, but also heavily influenced by ideational and emotional factors, such as spirit and related standing, esteem and honour, which are more likely to trigger risk-acceptant behaviours in world politics.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Lebow argues, prospect theory should be reformulated to take into account the non-material motives of leaders in shaping state behaviour.<sup>35</sup> For example, Onea introduces an emotional variable called 'status anxiety' to explain why a declining dominant power is more likely than a rising power to adopt a risk-acceptant policy.<sup>36</sup> This research follows in Lebow's footsteps by applying prospect theory to examine how status loss, a 'spirit' variable in Lebow's reformulation, can drive risk-acceptant behaviour in world politics.

To recall our discussion above, a state's role status is based on its behaviour, especially competent performance, in a particular area. However, in order to define a state's role status, this competent behaviour has to be widely recognized by others. Therefore, a state's role status is vulnerable when facing challenges from others. We set the existing role status of a state as a 'reference point', employing the terminology of prospect theory. If a state's role status is seriously challenged, to the extent that the original recognition by others is changed, then the state's policy-makers are placed in a domain of losses. In other words, the political leaders of this state are facing a 'status loss' situation.

According to prospect theory, the political leaders in this state are more likely to choose a risk-acceptant action with the hope of salvaging the lost status, which implies a testable, falsifiable hypothesis of our status-saving model. When a state's status, especially its role status, is challenged by others, it is more likely to be placed in a domain of losses. Therefore we arrive at the following hypothesis:

*The perceived 'status loss' is more likely to induce a state's political leaders to choose risk-acceptant behaviour to save their potentially lost status.*

Here, two concepts are worth clarifying. One is the existing role status. As noted above, a state's role status is not easy to establish. However, once it is estab-

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Rose McDermott, 'Prospect theory in political science: gains and losses from the first decade', *Political Psychology* 25: 2, 2004, pp. 289–312; Jack S. Levy, 'Prospect theory and International Relations: theoretical applications and analytical problems', in Barbara Farnham, ed., *Avoiding losses/taking risks: prospect theory and international conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 119–46; Robert Jervis, 'Political implications of loss aversion', *Political Psychology* 13: 2, 1992, pp. 187–201; Robert Jervis, 'The implications of prospect theory for human nature and values', *Political Psychology* 25: 2, 2004, pp. 163–76; Rose McDermott, *Risk-taking in international politics: prospect theory in American foreign policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Barry O'Neill, 'Risk aversion in International Relations theory', *International Studies Quarterly* 45: 4, 2001, pp. 617–40; Kai He, *China's crisis behavior: political survival and foreign policy after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Richard N. Lebow, *A cultural theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Lebow, *A cultural theory of International Relations*, p. 366.

<sup>36</sup> Onea, 'Between dominance and decline'.



lished, it will be cherished by political leaders. Therefore, the sudden 'status loss' from serious challenges by others will position the political leaders in a domain of losses. For example, a state's status will face serious damage if it loses a war, as we can see from the tarnished reputation and international status of Germany after the First and Second World Wars. War is an extreme case of status loss, and it also makes 'fighting' the most likely option to restore the status lost in war.<sup>37</sup> However, it is worth noting that a state might change its status conception after losing a war: examples of this include post-1945 Japan and Germany, as well as India after the 1962 border conflict with China. The present study, however, focuses on states' 'status loss' in peacetime as a result of incompetent policy practice or policy failure.

The second concept is risk-acceptant behaviour. Risk is a contested concept in prospect theory. Following Rose McDermott's measurement of risk, we use the magnitude of variance among policy outcomes—that is, the range between the best and worst ones—to specify different levels of risk in state behaviour.<sup>38</sup> The wider the gap between the best and worst outcomes, the more risk-acceptant the policy choice. In practice, a state's risk-acceptant behaviours normally refer to destructive and reckless or even self-isolating policies, adopted because the distance between the best and worst outcomes of these policies is wider than usual. However, this is not to say that these risk-acceptant behaviours are 'irrational', because such policies can well serve decision-makers' self-defined interests. For example, an assertive foreign policy might lead to a diplomatic disaster. However, it is still rational if it could help political leaders to strengthen their domestic legitimacy. Therefore, in prospect theory there are no irrational or rational behaviours, only risk-acceptant and risk-averse decisions.

In order to demonstrate the utility of the status-saving model and test our hypothesis, we examine ASEAN's bold community-building efforts in the 2000s, especially its decision to adopt the ASEAN Charter in 2007. Here, we treat ASEAN as an actor with a collective identity in international forums.<sup>39</sup> ASEAN's bold community-building efforts in the early 2000s are astonishing, because both the economic and political conditions of the organization were far from sufficiently mature for the pursuit of such a major endeavour in institutionalization and legalization. This great-leap-forward behaviour in diplomacy may temporarily boost ASEAN's reputation and salvage its damaged status, but it has placed ASEAN's long-term status in a more risky and vulnerable position: if ASEAN fails to honour the legal and institutional principles embodied in the Charter, it faces serious status loss.

The ASEAN case has a unique value because there is limited research on status and institutions.<sup>40</sup> If status is a currency of international politics, then international institutions (especially intergovernmental organizations) as prominent actors

<sup>37</sup> Renshon, 'Status deficits and war'; Renshon, *Fighting for status*; Ward, *Status and the challenge of rising powers*.

<sup>38</sup> McDermott, *Risk-taking in international politics*.

<sup>39</sup> Parudee Nguiragoel and Jürgen Rüländ, *ASEAN as an actor in international fora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Some notable exceptions include Tristen Naylor, *Social closure and international society: status groups from the family of civilised nations to the G20* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Pål Røren, 'Status seeking in the friendly Nordic neighborhood', *Cooperation and Conflict* 54: 4, 2019, pp. 562–79.

should also be engaged in this competitive game for status. Previous studies have demonstrated how states use different institutions to pursue their balancing and competitive purposes in international politics.<sup>41</sup> However, the existing study of status seems to focus on states and avoid institutions and the interactions between them and their member states. Our research will probe this uncharted territory by linking status and institution.

Another advantage to examining the ASEAN case is to isolate power from status. As mentioned before, most status research focuses on great powers, either rising or dominant actors in the international system. Great powers, by definition, can enjoy some inherent trait status associated with their material capacities in a status hierarchy. Therefore, when discussing a great power's behaviour, the role of status is difficult to separate from the function of power. ASEAN, as a group of middle and small powers, does not have the inherent trait status conferred by material power. From the trait-based perspective, ASEAN's international status is a hard case to explain, because the association does not possess material-based status markers as great powers normally do. ASEAN's status, however, is mainly built on its 'role status', through its competent diplomatic practices as a successful regional organization in maintaining regional peace and stability as well as promoting regional cooperation through multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific region after the Cold War. Therefore, ASEAN can be seen as a crucial case to demonstrate how the potential loss of role status shaped its risk-acceptant behaviour as specified by our status-saving model.

Last but not least, the ASEAN case can offer some new insights on the study of 'status clubs'.<sup>42</sup> International institutions are a natural form of status club in a hierarchical international community. This is why states strive to gain entry to certain prestigious 'state clubs', such as the G20, the G7 and even NATO. In other words, membership of a prestigious and exclusive institution is a manifestation of a state's status in a hierarchical order. However, no research has been conducted to examine how the members of a 'status club' will try to salvage the status of their club when its status or reputation is threatened. As one of the most important regional organizations in the Asia-Pacific, ASEAN is a status club for south-east Asian countries. The ASEAN case, therefore, can shed some light on how member states will behave when the status club is in trouble.

## ASEAN's bold community-building efforts in the 2000s

ASEAN has been at the centre of Asian regionalism and multilateralism since the end of the Cold War. The high strategic uncertainty in the region, as well as the deep strategic distrust among great powers, especially between the United

<sup>41</sup> Goh, 'Great powers and hierarchical order in southeast Asia'; Kai He, 'Institutional balancing and International Relations theory: economic interdependence and balance of power strategies in Southeast Asia', *European Journal of International Relations* 14: 3, 2008, pp. 489–518; T. V. Paul, *Restraining great powers: soft balancing from empires to the global era* (London: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. Deganit Paikowsky, *The power of the space club* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Naylor, *Social closure and international society*; Larson, 'Status competition among Russia, India, and China in clubs'.

States and China, provided an opportunity for ASEAN to play a leadership role in building regional security and economic architectures in the Asia–Pacific after the Cold War.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, ASEAN has initiated and led almost all multilateral institutions in the Asia–Pacific during this period, including APEC (Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation), the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), APT (ASEAN Plus Three) and the EAS (East Asia Summit). The proliferation of multilateral institutions and relative peace in the Asia–Pacific region have offered ASEAN an unprecedented role status as the leader of Asian regionalism.

ASEAN is not shy of claiming publicly that it is in the ‘driver’s seat’ of Asian multilateralism, especially in the ARF, which is also endorsed by all major powers, including the United States, China, Japan and the EU. For example, at the 2000 ASEAN–UN Summit, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated, ‘I salute your [ASEAN’s] leadership of this vital forum, which remains the only multilateral arena in which to address political and security issues in Asia. Its work on confidence-building, preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution deserves every possible support.’<sup>44</sup>

In 2007, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono also publicly claimed at the ASEAN Forum that ‘These three processes [ARF, APT, and EAS] need ASEAN to be in the driver’s seat because, in the first place, it is ASEAN that gives them political cohesion. Without that cohesion it would be difficult for them to function on a collective basis.’<sup>45</sup> It is clear that ASEAN has achieved a widely recognized role status as the leader in Asian regionalism because of its significant contributions to regional affairs.

However, ASEAN’s role status faced three serious challenges in the early 2000s, which placed its leaders in a domain of losses. First, the 1997 financial crisis ended the so-called Asian economic miracle; most ASEAN states suffered from the crisis and struggled with economic recovery in its aftermath. It is reported that the 1997 economic crisis caused ASEAN’s share of world foreign direct investment to fall from 7.0 per cent in 1997 to 3.1 per cent in 1998, and to a low of 1.7 per cent in 2000.<sup>46</sup> To make things worse, the economic crisis was accompanied by political and social turmoil. For example, Indonesia’s financial crisis led to the downfall of the Suharto regime as well as brutal anti-Chinese riots in 1998.<sup>47</sup>

Second, the negligent attitude of the United States after the Asian financial crisis threatened the legitimacy of ASEAN’s role status in the early 2000s. As noted

<sup>43</sup> Amitav Acharya, ‘Ideas, identity, and institution-building: from the “ASEAN way” to the “Asia–Pacific way”’, *Pacific Review* 10: 3, 1997, pp. 319–46; Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a security community in southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001); Richard Stubbs, ‘ASEAN’s leadership in east Asian region-building: strength in weakness’, *Pacific Review* 27: 4, 2014, pp. 523–41.

<sup>44</sup> Kofi Annan, ‘Strengthening Asean–United Nations Partnership’, remarks at the ASEAN–UN summit, ASEAN, Bangkok, 12 Feb. 2000, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2000/20000215.sgsm7300.doc.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, ‘Keynote speech by H. E. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono President Republic of Indonesia at the ASEAN Forum: rethinking ASEAN towards the ASEAN Community 2015’, ASEAN, Jakarta, 7 Aug. 2007, [https://setneg.go.id/baca/index/keynote\\_address\\_at\\_the\\_asean\\_forum\\_rethinking\\_asean\\_towards\\_the\\_asean\\_community\\_2015](https://setneg.go.id/baca/index/keynote_address_at_the_asean_forum_rethinking_asean_towards_the_asean_community_2015).

<sup>46</sup> Poh Kam Wong and Kwan Kee Ng, *The competitiveness of ASEAN after the 1997 Asian financial crisis* (Singapore: Asian Competitiveness Institute Monography Series, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia 1996–1999* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2005).

above, a state's role status depends on endorsement by outside actors. The support of the United States, as the most powerful nation in the world, is the key to legitimizing ASEAN's role status. Although the US publicly supports ASEAN in the 'driver's seat' in the ARF, its policy toward ASEAN is best described as one of 'systemic neglect' or lack of strategic attention.<sup>48</sup> This is understandable to a certain extent, because the United States has its traditional hub-and-spokes security alliance system in the region, and multilateralism is an unwelcome development in the eyes of US policy-makers.<sup>49</sup> Although the United States joined the ARF in 1994, it still kept its distance from Asia's multilateral institution-building efforts, because flourishing multilateralism would inevitably challenge its traditional bilateralism in the region.

After 9/11, the United States warmed up its relationship with ASEAN states for a short period of time because it needed their cooperation for the 'war on terror'. However, as some scholars point out, US unilateralism and its utilitarian approach seriously damaged the general image of the United States in south-east Asia.<sup>50</sup> Preoccupied with the 'war on terror', the United States paid less diplomatic attention to ASEAN in the early 2000s. For example, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped the 2005 and 2007 ARF meetings, and President Bush cancelled the US-ASEAN summit in 2007. These actions are easily interpreted as intentional US alienation from or marginalization of ASEAN. In the eyes of ASEAN leaders, these slights are evidence that ASEAN's relevance or established role status has been questioned by the United States.

The third challenge to ASEAN's role status comes from China. China has been widely praised for its responsible behaviour during the 1998 financial crisis. However, its charm offensive towards south-east Asia in the early 2000s also aroused worries and suspicions in the region. As John Ravenhill points out, ASEAN faced new challenges in these years, particularly from the rapid economic growth in China and also from the proliferation of preferential trade agreements after the 1998 financial crisis.<sup>51</sup> ASEAN's laggardly economic integration and cooperation as a group rendered it less capable of coping with outside challenges. On the one hand, China competed with ASEAN for foreign investment; on the other hand, the proliferation of free trade agreements undermined ASEAN's own economic integration. Therefore, ASEAN's role status as the leader of Asian regionalism is seriously threatened in the economic domain partly because of the rise of China and partly because of the slow integration of ASEAN itself.

In sum, ASEAN's role status as a leader of regionalism was seriously challenged after the 1997-8 financial crisis. As Hadi Soesastro, a leading scholar in south-east Asia, points out:

<sup>48</sup> Alice Ba, 'Systemic neglect? A reconsideration of US-southeast Asia policy', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 31: 3, 2009, pp. 369-98.

<sup>49</sup> Evelyn Goh, 'The ASEAN Regional Forum in United States east Asian strategy', *Pacific Review* 17: 1, 2004, pp. 47-69.

<sup>50</sup> Sheldon W. Simon, 'Mixed reactions in southeast Asia to the US war on terrorism', *Comparative Connections* 3: 4, 2001, pp. 1-9; Ba, 'Systemic neglect?'

<sup>51</sup> John Ravenhill, 'Fighting irrelevance: an economic community "with ASEAN characteristics"', *Pacific Review* 21: 4, 2008, pp. 469-88.

Until then [the financial crisis] ASEAN was still in a state of euphoria due to the region's remarkable record of rapid economic growth, the near completion of the One Southeast Asia enterprise, and its important role in the creation of the wider regional co-operative structures by virtue of being a co-pilot in APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and occupying the driver's seat in the ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum). This position crumbled almost overnight with the financial meltdown. ASEAN's future relevance to its members and to the region suddenly becomes a relevant question in many quarters, even within the ASEAN officialdom.<sup>52</sup>

A senior diplomat in Singapore concurs that the 1997–8 financial crisis was a 'wake-up' call for ASEAN leaders, prompting them to rethink their relevance in regional affairs.<sup>53</sup> In the words of ASEAN Secretary-General Keng Yong Ong, the financial crisis forced the organization's leaders to face a 'decisive moment' for action, because 'the forces of globalization eroded the competitive edge of the ASEAN economies and weakened ASEAN's ability to remain on the center-stage of regional affairs and development'.<sup>54</sup> Since competition for status is a zero-sum game, the decline of ASEAN's role status as the leader of regionalism implied that China might steal its thunder in the regional architecture after the financial crisis. Another status competitor is the United States. Although America is lukewarm towards ASEAN, the strengthened hub-and-spokes alliance system in the Asia-Pacific will also threaten the relevance of ASEAN-led institutions in regional affairs. Therefore, according to our 'status-saving' model, the potential status loss will position ASEAN leaders in a domain of losses, which in turn will trigger risk-acceptant behaviour, in the hope of salvaging the potential loss in role status. And indeed, ASEAN did start 'fighting irrelevance' with bold economic and political efforts in the early 2000s.<sup>55</sup>

In 2003, ASEAN leaders signed the declaration of the ASEAN Concord II (the Bali Concord), which committed to establishing a community with three pillars: political and security cooperation, economic cooperation and social-cultural cooperation. In particular, ASEAN pledged to form an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2020, to 'create a stable, prosperous and highly competitive ASEAN economic region in which there is a free flow of goods, services, and investment and a freer flow of capital, equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities'.<sup>56</sup> At their 2007 summit, ASEAN leaders agreed to accelerate the completion of the ASEAN Community with a target date of 2015.

Alongside these community-building efforts, in 2004 ASEAN leaders started to consider an ASEAN Charter, which would provide a legal foundation and

<sup>52</sup> Hadi Soesastro, 'ASEAN during the crisis', *ASEAN Economic Bulletin* 15: 3, 1998, pp. 373–81 at p. 374.

<sup>53</sup> Author interview with a Singaporean diplomat, Singapore, Jan. 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Keng Yong Ong, 'At close quarters with the drafting of the ASEAN Charter', in Tommy Koh, Rosario G. Manalo and Walter C. M. Woon, eds, *The making of the ASEAN Charter* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2009), pp. 107–15 at p. 108.

<sup>55</sup> Ravenhill, 'Fighting irrelevance'.

<sup>56</sup> ASEAN, 'Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II)', 2003, <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/declaration-of-asean-concord-ii-bali-concord-ii/>.

institutional framework for these efforts.<sup>57</sup> Despite mounting challenges and difficulties, especially the controversial issue of Burma's crackdown against pro-democracy protesters before the ASEAN summit, in November 2007 ASEAN leaders adopted the ASEAN Charter, which claimed to make ASEAN a more effective and rules-based organization. The most controversial part of the Charter is the requirement to establish a human rights body and dispute settlement mechanisms, given some members' infamous human rights records as well as many unsolved intra-ASEAN disputes, including those in the South China Sea.<sup>58</sup> In particular, the ASEAN Charter clearly states an intention to 'strengthen democracy, enhance good governance, and rule of law, and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, with due regard to the rights and responsibilities of Member States of ASEAN'.<sup>59</sup> To a certain extent, the adoption of the ASEAN Charter is a threshold by which to measure ASEAN's boldness or risk-acceptant behaviour in community-building efforts, because it not only sets out guiding principles governing how ASEAN will conduct its affairs, but also officially confers international 'legal personality' on the organization.<sup>60</sup> It disturbs the institutional principles and foundation of ASEAN in multiple ways.

For example, a leading scholar in ASEAN affairs points out that the words 'democracy, good governance, and human rights' in the Charter actually challenge the long-time taboo embodied in ASEAN's founding principle of 'non-interference in internal affairs', because several ASEAN states are still not considered to be democracies according to the international standard.<sup>61</sup> In principle, ASEAN does not have the right to criticize a member's political system; political diversity has been cherished by ASEAN states since the organization was established in 1967. However, the ASEAN Charter lists democracy as one of the political goals for all ASEAN states, which entails political consequences. On the one hand, it might erode the political unity among ASEAN states, especially between democracies and non-democracies. On the other hand, it raises the reputational stakes for ASEAN, because the extent to which ASEAN states perform what has been promised in the Charter on democracy and human rights will be seriously judged by outside powers.

The outcome in respect of both economic integration through the AEC and the enforcement of the Charter seems at best disappointing. Although ASEAN claimed that it succeeded in establishing the AEC in 2015, some critics suggest that the AEC is a failure because non-tariff barriers to trade and investment remain a major obstacle to ASEAN economic integration.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the promised four

<sup>57</sup> Mely Caballero-Anthony, 'The ASEAN Charter: an opportunity missed or one that cannot be missed?', *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2008, pp. 71–85; Koh et al., eds, *The making of the ASEAN Charter*; Walter C. M. Woon, *The ASEAN Charter: a commentary* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016).

<sup>58</sup> ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter*, 2007 (26th reprint, 2019), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter*, art. 1, sec. 7.

<sup>60</sup> ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter*, art. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Author interview with a Singaporean scholar, Singapore, Jan. 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Lee Jones, 'Explaining the failure of the ASEAN economic community: the primacy of domestic political economy', *Pacific Review* 29: 5, 2016, pp. 647–70.

freedoms in the AEC, i.e. freedom of movement of goods, services, investment and skilled labour, are still far from being realized. As some critics suggest, the AEC is best described as ‘a work in progress’.<sup>63</sup>

In 2012, ASEAN members signed a ‘Declaration on Human Rights’. However, as one commentator points out, the declaration seems to reaffirm ASEAN’s longstanding policy of non-interference in internal affairs, because it ‘allows member governments to exclude serious abuses because of “national particularities” or “cultural background” as well as restrictions on a wide array of grounds including “national security” and “public morality”’.<sup>64</sup> ASEAN’s silence on the 2016–17 Rohingya crisis is a vivid example of the Charter’s lack of teeth in protecting human rights in south-east Asia.<sup>65</sup> ASEAN’s incompetent response to Myanmar’s coup in 2021 also shows up the Charter’s commitment to democracy as premature at best.<sup>66</sup> Using a Philippine scholar’s words, ‘ASEAN as a group is a failure’, because ‘the notion of national sovereignty continues to undermine its integration while the identity of the grouping has yet to crystallize’.<sup>67</sup>

The question thus arises: why did ASEAN leaders decide to push for the establishment of the ASEAN community and adopt the Charter in the first place? These were risk-acceptant decisions, as these bold moves have actually brought more reputational costs than tangible benefits to ASEAN. Hypothetically and counterfactually speaking, if ASEAN had not adopted the ASEAN Charter and conducted these bold community-building endeavours, it might have been better able to defend itself against charges of ineffectiveness in both economic integration and human rights protection by reference to its longstanding principles of incrementalism, the ‘ASEAN way’ and non-interference in internal affairs. Although critics might still blame ASEAN for its failure in coping with regional challenges, the expectation gap between what the organization claims to do and what it really does would have been significantly narrower.

There are two existing arguments that explain ASEAN’s bold community-building efforts after the financial crisis. One stresses the ‘material benefits’ of these efforts. Economically, the potential AEC might boost the economic development of ASEAN states.<sup>68</sup> Diplomatically and politically, successful community-building might increase the institutional balancing weight of ASEAN against external players such as China and the United States.<sup>69</sup> The other possible explanation focuses on the ‘identity root’ of ASEAN’s community-building. It suggests that the ‘we-feeling’ common identity among the south-east Asian states

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Delios, ‘Is ASEAN’s economic integration still a work in progress?’, Channel News Asia, 3 May 2017; Somkiat Tangkitvanich and Saowaruj Rattanakhomfu, ‘Assessing the ASEAN economic community’, *East Asia Forum*, 21 March 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Eduardo Tadem, ‘ASEAN: delusions of integration’, *Business World Online*, 15 Nov. 2017, <https://www.bworldonline.com/asean-delusions-integration/>.

<sup>65</sup> Jera Lego, ‘Why ASEAN cannot ignore the Rohingya crisis’, *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Oren Samet, ‘ASEAN won’t save Myanmar’, *Foreign Policy*, 12 April 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/23/asean-summit-myanmar-coup-diplomacy-min-aung-hlaing/>.

<sup>67</sup> Pravit Rojanaphruk, ‘ASEAN as a grouping is a failure’, *The Nation*, 24 Aug. 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Sanchita Basu Das, Jayant Menon, Rodolfo C. Severino and Omark Lal Shrestha, eds, *The ASEAN economic community: a work in progress* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> Goh, ‘Great powers and hierarchical order in southeast Asia’.

might have encouraged ASEAN to move towards further integration after the Asian financial crisis.<sup>70</sup>

Both arguments face some analytical and empirical challenges. As discussed above, the 'material benefits' of ASEAN's community-building efforts are not that great because of the shaky foundation of economic cooperation among the member states.<sup>71</sup> The institutional weight of ASEAN, compared to outside powers, is mainly built on the effectiveness and success of its internal cooperation and coordination, which have been criticized as 'making process, not progress'.<sup>72</sup> As for the identity-based argument, the so-called ASEAN identity is still a myth because the member states are very diverse in respect of language, religion, ethnicity, political system and economic development.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, for a long time ASEAN has been viewed as a diplomatic community in which the member states coordinate and cooperate in foreign policy on an ad hoc basis.<sup>74</sup> In explaining a sense of community in economic, political, social and security areas, the identity-based argument is indeed overstretched.<sup>75</sup>

Our 'status-saving' model, however, can shed some light on ASEAN's bold community-building efforts. It suggests that the mounting challenges to ASEAN's role status after the 1998 financial crisis placed its leaders in a domain of losses, because the organization's role status at the forefront of Asian regionalism was in danger. Therefore, in order to salvage the possibly lost status, ASEAN leaders made some risk-acceptant decisions to push for both regional integration via community-building and institutional legalization of ASEAN through the ASEAN Charter. ASEAN members were certainly not shy about the ambitions lying behind their great-leap-forward efforts in institution-building. The Charter clearly states that the organization intends 'to maintain the *centrality* and proactive role of ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive'.<sup>76</sup>

Commenting on the reasons behind ASEAN's decision to adopt a Charter, the then Secretary-General Keng Yong Ong stated:

By acting together and staying more cohesive, ASEAN member countries believe that they would be in a better position to influence other people's policies toward ASEAN. To convince the external parties that the ten diverse countries of ASEAN are serious about exerting collective strength, a concrete new *modus operandi* is required.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a security community in southeast Asia*; Alan Collins, *Building a people-oriented security community the ASEAN way* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>71</sup> Munir Majid, 'ASEAN integration lags the real world', *Nikkei News*, 3 Aug. 2017.

<sup>72</sup> David Martin Jones and Michael L. R. Smith, 'Making process, not progress: ASEAN and the evolving east Asian regional order', *International Security* 32: 1, 2007, pp. 148–84.

<sup>73</sup> Michael E. Jones, 'Forging an ASEAN identity: the challenge to construct a shared destiny', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 26: 1, 2004, pp. 140–54.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Leifer, 'The ASEAN peace process: a category mistake', *Pacific Review* 12: 1, 1999, pp. 25–38.

<sup>75</sup> Author interview with a Singaporean scholar, Singapore, Jan. 2020. For the achievements of and challenges to ASEAN's community-building, see Aileen Baviera and Larry Maramis, eds, *Building ASEAN community: political–security and socio-cultural reflections* (Jakarta: Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2017).

<sup>76</sup> ASEAN, *The ASEAN Charter*, art. 1, sec. 15, p. 5 (emphasis added).

<sup>77</sup> Ong, 'At close quarters with the drafting of the ASEAN charter', p. 108.



Further, on the possible benefits arising from the proposed ASEAN Charter, Ong pointed out that, through it, member states would ‘codify organic Southeast Asian diplomacy’,<sup>78</sup> which in turn would ‘reinforce the perception of ASEAN as a serious regional player in the future of the Asia–Pacific region’.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, commenting on the timing of the initiation of the ASEAN Charter in 2005, Simon Tay, chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, stated bluntly: ‘It’s no coincidence that ASEAN is discussing a charter when the East Asia Summit is taking place. They know that if they fail to achieve agreement on it, ASEAN could lose its role as the hub of Asian integration.’<sup>80</sup>

It is clear that ASEAN’s bold and risky decisions in the early 2000s were mainly driven by the members’ shared perception that the organization would lose its ‘role status’ as the leader of Asian regionalism if it stayed idle. To be fair, ASEAN’s bold institution-building efforts did indeed pay off in the international arena. As Mely Caballero–Anthony points out, ASEAN’s community-building endeavours ‘have catapulted the grouping to a prominent position in the international community. This heightened profile has been depicted as “ASEAN centrality”’.<sup>81</sup> At the 43rd ASEAN ministerial meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, its dialogue partners, including the United States, China and Japan, reaffirmed their unequivocal support for ASEAN’s centrality as well as their declared hope that ‘ASEAN would continue to play a central role in the emerging regional architecture’.<sup>82</sup>

Since then, the narrative of ASEAN’s ‘centrality’ role has replaced that of the ‘driver’s seat’ in highlighting the organization’s relevance in Asian regionalism. In 2019, ASEAN released an official document entitled *ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, which ‘envisages ASEAN Centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region’.<sup>83</sup> Although the United States and Australia have been advocating an Indo-Pacific strategy for a long time, they shun the spotlight by publicly endorsing ‘ASEAN’s centrality’ in the regional architecture. However, no matter how outside powers flatter ASEAN’s relevance in international affairs for various reasons,<sup>84</sup> ASEAN may yet face an embarrassing moment when its three community-building pledges come under scrutiny, because promising too much but delivering too little will be costly and risky for its role status in the long run.

<sup>78</sup> Cited by Termsak Chalermpananupap, ‘In defence of the ASEAN Charter’, in Koh et al., eds, *The making of the ASEAN Charter*, pp. 117–35 at p. 130.

<sup>79</sup> Cited by Caballero–Anthony, ‘The ASEAN Charter’, p. 76.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Richard McGregor, Victor Mallet and John Burton, ‘Trade clout wins China allies yet stokes distrust’, *Financial Times*, 9 Dec. 2005.

<sup>81</sup> Mely Caballero–Anthony, ‘Understanding ASEAN’s centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture’, *Pacific Review* 27: 4, 2014, pp. 563–84 at p. 564.

<sup>82</sup> ‘ASEAN Bulletin August 2010’, <https://asean.org/asean-bulletin-august-2010/>. See also Seng Tan, ‘Rethinking “ASEAN centrality” in the regional governance of east Asia’, *Singapore Economic Review* 62: 3, 2017, pp. 721–40.

<sup>83</sup> ASEAN, *ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, 23 June 2019, [https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> See Seng Tan, ‘Consigned to hedge: south-east Asia and America’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy’, *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 131–48; Kai He and Huiyun Feng, ‘The institutionalization of the Indo–Pacific: problems and prospects’, *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 149–68; Kai He and Mingjiang Li, ‘Understanding the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific: US–China strategic competition, regional actors, and beyond’, *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 1–7.

## Conclusion

In this article we have highlighted the importance of role status, a largely omitted dimension of status, in shaping states' behaviour in world politics. We argue that a state's international role status is socially constituted through behavioural interactions and competent practices involving the state and outside actors. Borrowing insights from prospect theory, we introduce a 'status-saving' argument to suggest that states are more likely to take risk-acceptant decisions when they face a 'status loss'. We test our status-saving hypothesis by examining ASEAN's bold community-building efforts after the 1998 financial crisis, especially the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007. We argue that the perceived decline of international role status drove the ASEAN states to take risk-acceptant actions in institution-building. It is not our main intention to challenge or compete with other existing explanations. However, our status-based research does provide a plausible alternative explanation to complement or shed new light on the 'great-leap-forward' policy changes made by states' collective efforts through international organizations in world politics. Other scholars are encouraged to test and refine our argument by examining the different responses of ASEAN (or other states and international organizations) when their role status is placed in a domain of losses. One interesting case for future research is ASEAN's behaviour in coping with the 2021 Myanmar coup.

Although our status-saving model focuses on examining the dynamics of role status in ASEAN's policy behaviour, it can apply to other cases of great powers whose trait status is more salient than their role status. For example, this model could shed some light on what some scholars have identified as 'obstructionist', 'defiant' and 'spoiler' behaviours in seeking status.<sup>85</sup> These seemingly irrational behaviours might well be better seen as risk-acceptant efforts by states seeking to salvage their endangered role status when policy-makers are placed in a domain of losses. Moreover, our status-saving model explains how states save their damaged role status or collective role status in a status club without the use of force in peacetime.

There are two policy implications to be drawn from this research. First, we have shown that states can improve their status by competent practices in a status hierarchy. In other words, improving trait status through 'conspicuous consumption', for example acquiring nuclear weapons or aircraft carriers, is not the only way for states to seek status in world politics. For rising powers, if their goal is to seek social status instead of power or domination, they can obtain the desired recognition and respect by improving their role status, that is, by pursuing 'do-goodism' in world politics. As for existing dominant powers, they should learn how to respect, recognize and accommodate the role status of rising powers in a hierarchical order. Dominant powers will certainly have incentives to keep rising powers out of their social clubs and refuse to recognize rising powers' status

<sup>85</sup> Larson and Shevchenko, 'Status seekers'; Wolf, 'Taking interaction seriously'.

requests, even though rising powers may have acquired some valued attributes that the in-club states also have. For example, although India has successfully conducted nuclear tests, it is still kept outside the nuclear club.

However, it might be wise for dominant powers to consider recognizing the role status that rising powers have merited through competent practices in world politics. For example, China has been widely praised as a responsible stakeholder because of its positive and significant role in the 2008 global financial crisis. If the United States respects this role status that China has obtained, Beijing might be encouraged to improve this role status and behave as a responsible stakeholder should do in world politics. However, if the United States and others do not recognize or respect its role status as a responsible stakeholder, China may or may not behave like one—and, more seriously, may look for other radical ways to improve its undervalued status. Respecting what others do, rather than what others have, is a new way to construct peace and stability in world politics.