

“The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations”

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Summary

The Albritton Center for Grand Strategy welcomed Dr. Michelle Murray of Bard College to the Bush School to discuss her book, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations*. Her general hypothesis is that if a rising power is socially recognized by established powers, a peaceful transition is more likely. Destabilization and even violent conflict is more likely to result from the refusal of established powers to recognize an emerging power. Her major case study is WWI-era Germany.

In her book, Murray strives to answer the perennial question of how established powers can manage the peaceful rise of another great power. The conventional wisdom is that structurally, power transitions are destabilizing to the international order and almost inevitably result in some type of conflict or war. She acknowledges that rising powers are typically aggressive and revisionist, but that not every state will perceive them as a threat.

More precisely, Murray makes three arguments in her work. First, not all power transitions end in war and not all rising powers are perceived as threats. Second, power transitions are a social phenomenon; power status is an identity countries need in order for other international actors to voluntarily recognize their newly found influence. Finally, revisionism is a social construct ‘in the eye of the beholder.’

Rising powers are deeply insecure social actors and are, foremost, uncertain about their social status. Great power identity only comes when the ‘right actors’ in the world recognize them as a great power worthy of being called so. Specific factors that contribute to destabilization are the rising power’s: 1) fear of misrecognition, i.e. other great powers will not see them as they see themselves; 2) asserting control over their identity in an effort to show that they should be part of the ‘great powers club’; and 3) guarding against loss of identity control through the practices of great power voicing, exemplary military power to include signature weapons systems, and claims of a sphere of influence.

With regard to China and policy options that could be explored, Murray offers three, acknowledging they are preliminary. First, she suggests we consider our own identity narrative. Is our vision of the global order and what it takes to be a leader universally accepted? If we ask China to rise into this world order, does that mean we have actually said they are *not* equal? Secondly, she suggest we consider issues we do have in common and work in equal partnership on them. Thirdly, offer China great power markers. This however, necessitates the involvement of others actors like the United Nations, which may not see China as an appropriate great power in an international order it largely favors.

Murray acknowledges that the obstacles to the peaceful rise of China are daunting and not necessarily controllable by other parties.