

CHAPTER 2



GREAT POWERS AND THE DRIVE FOR STATUS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The following chapter will present the theoretical concepts of Great Power status in international relations and status-seeking as a driver of state behavior. Used throughout this book, these two concepts provide the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis of Brazil's Africa engagement. Drawing on insights from both International Relations theory and social psychology, the chapter introduces the two key arguments on which the study is built: (1) There is a social hierarchy in international relations, and Great Powers enjoy the highest status within that social hierarchy; and (2) states strive for higher status in the international social hierarchy and apply different status-seeking strategies in order to achieve that goal. Which strategy is applied will be determined by the state's material capabilities and its international identity.

2.1 HIERARCHY IN ANARCHY: ON THE SPECIAL ROLE AND STATUS OF GREAT POWERS

Theorizing on the international system and the relations between states as its central actors typically starts with the assumption of anarchy (Donnelly 2006:141). Following the ideas of political philosopher Thomas Hobbes on the “war of all against all” as a state of nature, international relations (IR) theory presumes that the international system with its characteristic of lacking an overriding central authority is an anarchic arena of recurring struggle, conflict and war between states (Milner 1991:68–69).

Interestingly, scholars of international relations do not differ in their assumption of anarchy as the fundamental element of world politics, but only on the deduced effects of this feature (Lake 2009:2). Neorealists, assuming the anarchic international system to be the causal force for a never-ending power struggle among states that strive for security (Waltz 1979), have posited the lack of a central authority as the departure point as do constructivists like Alexander Wendt (1992), who argued that "anarchy is what states make of it." Even for neoliberal institutionalists that focus on collaboration and institution-building in international relations, the question is how cooperation among states is possible despite the state of anarchy (Keohane 1984).

As the international system lacks a centralized law-making and law-enforcing authority, international politics is commonly understood as a "decentralized competition among sovereign equals" (Milner 1991:75). In the words of Kenneth Waltz, "each [state] is the equal of all others. None is entitled to command, none is required to obey" (Waltz 1979:88). Yet, anarchy and the formal equality of states as sovereign equals do not imply that the relations between the actors in the international system are likewise anarchic (Lake 2009:17). In fact, despite anarchy there is order and hierarchy in the international society.¹

Although states do not acknowledge a central legal superior, there have always been states that exert authority over other states and establish political orders with differing roles, responsibilities, and privileges (ibid.:16). Hence, despite states being formally equal, there are obvious gradations in legal power and status among powers (Simpson 2004:64) with certain states enjoying special rights and holding a position of preeminence in the society of states (ibid:67).

This elite group of states, endowed with special rights and privileges, is commonly referred to as the Great Powers² (e.g., Simpson 2004; Bull 1979). Since the emergence of the modern state system,³ Great Powers have held a special place in the international hierarchy as they have enjoyed unequal influence over the setting of the international order and the management of international society (Donnelly 2006:152).

Great Powers assume the responsibility to maintain peace and security in the international society (Bull 1979:196). At the same time, they are expected to fulfill this duty by the other states (ibid.). In correspondence with the special role they are playing within the international society, they are granted a special status in the international social hierarchy: Great Powers enjoy special rights regarding the use of force as well as unequal representation in international institutions. Their responsibility for the order of the international society is both a