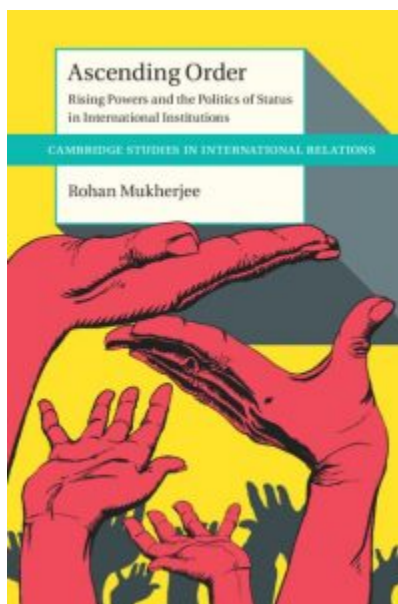


Q and A with Dr Rohan Mukherjee on **Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions**

*The LSE Review of Books blog spoke to Dr Rohan Mukherjee about his new book, **Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions**, which draws on historical case studies to explore the role and behaviour of rising powers in the international order. The book is the winner of the 2023 Hedley Bull Prize from the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), and the 2023 Hague Journal of Diplomacy Book Award.*

Q&A with Dr Rohan Mukherjee on *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions*. Cambridge University Press. 2022.



Q: What led you to look at rising powers in the international order?

In the first year of my PhD programme, I took an introductory course in International Relations. Among the many texts we read was a book called [War and Change in World](#)

[Politics by Robert Gilpin](#). I found this book simultaneously exhilarating and frustrating. Exhilarating because it brilliantly dealt with a big question — one of the biggest of our times — pertaining to global power shifts, or long-term changes in relative power between large countries. Frustrating because its argument felt limited and deterministic, assuming that rising powers are inherently dissatisfied with international order and invariably provoke war with the great powers. There had to be more to the picture. I decided to explore this topic through my PhD dissertation, which eventually became my book, [Ascending Order](#).

Q: What do we gain when we move our focus from war in the international order to instead explore why rising powers might be dissatisfied with the status quo in the first place?

Existing research focuses on war as the main outcome of global power shifts. Less understood is why rising powers might be dissatisfied with an international order that has worked very well for them by enabling their rise, or why they might see war as the best solution to their problems. There are also cases of rising powers accepting a disadvantageous international order (such as Japan in the early 1920s) and great powers accommodating rising powers (such as Britain did for the United States in the late nineteenth century).

Dissatisfaction and war are neither theoretically nor empirically inevitable, but the narrow focus of existing research obscures the conditions under which we can expect to see non-conflictual behaviour. We thus need to examine the sources of dissatisfaction and how it might vary across time and space. Once we do this, we begin to see a range of rising-power approaches to international order.



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Q: *Ascending Order* introduces ‘Institutional Status Theory’ to understand the behaviour of rising powers. What does this theory propose?

Institutional Status Theory (IST) highlights a neglected aspect of international politics during global power shifts — the design and functioning of the international order. IST assumes that, in addition to material ends like wealth and security, rising powers value the status of being recognised as equals of the club of great powers that manages the international order. The order itself operates through core institutions that govern international cooperation and conflict. These institutions are important sites of political contestation over status.

By treating power shifts as a process whereby new entrants on the world stage strive to find their place in an order they did not create, we can understand the conditions under which rising powers may or may not be satisfied. Lack of equal membership of the great-power club is a major source of dissatisfaction for rising powers and can cause them to

challenge an order that has enabled their rise.

Q: What key characteristics of the international order affect whether rising powers pursue conflict or cooperation?

Two factors matter regarding the core institutions of an international order. First, institutional openness, or the ease with which new aspirants can become leaders of an institution. Openness is relative — for example, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is closed to new permanent veto-wielding leadership, while International Monetary Fund (IMF) rules make room for new leaders by tying voting rights to economic power.

Second, procedural fairness, or the extent to which an institution is unbiased in its treatment of a rising power relative to the great-power club. For example, the UN General Assembly's 'one country one vote' system is fairer by this measure than the UNSC's veto system.

All else being equal, inclusive and fair institutions will elicit greater cooperation from rising powers. By contrast, exclusion and unfairness will cause rising powers to try and delegitimize, protest or undermine the core institutions of an international order.

Q: How did you choose the three historical case studies in *Ascending Order*?

Due to the methodological difficulty of comparing issue-areas and rising powers with very different characteristics, I chose case studies of a single rising power over time within an institution focused on managing international security. This allowed me to hold underlying issue and country characteristics constant while examining the effect of changing institutional characteristics on rising-power behaviour.

Starting in 1815, the beginning of institutionalised cooperation in the modern era, I followed existing scholarship in identifying three distinct historical orders: the Britain-led system of the nineteenth century; the US-led system of the interwar period; and the US-Soviet-led system of the Cold War. Within these, I identified three cases of rising powers and security institutions: the United States and maritime laws of war in the mid-nineteenth century; Japan and naval arms control in the interwar period; and India and nuclear non-proliferation in the early Cold War.

Q: What archives did you draw on for your research? Did you encounter any challenges or surprises when accessing materials?

I relied on four archives: the National Archives in Maryland; the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.; and the National Archives and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. I also used several published collections such as the *American State Papers*, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), *The Diplomacy of Japan*, proceedings of the Washington Naval Conference, transcripts of the UN's Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament (ENCD) and various memoirs, books and articles written by political leaders, military officials and negotiators.

Although it seemed initially that the Japan case study would suffer from my lack of language expertise, I was pleasantly surprised to find in the archives a trove of secret cables exchanged by Japanese diplomats around the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22 that were deciphered and translated by the US government at the time. These cables shed valuable new light on the negotiations during this critical period.

Q: What does Institutional Status Theory suggest about China's current approach to the international order?

Compared to previous international orders, the current US-led international order that has been in place since the end of the Cold War is vastly more global and more complex. It includes more state members than ever before, more involvement of non-state actors and more issue-areas and connections between them. It is difficult, therefore, to say that there is any singular way in which China approaches the international order.

Rather, China's approach varies depending on the degree of openness and fairness (from China's perspective) across institutions. Beijing cooperates in relatively fair and open institutions such as the UNSC, World Trade Organization, Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and G20; it seeks to reform partially fair or open institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, UN climate change framework and maritime law; and it challenges institutions in the area of human rights, which it sees as closed to China's leadership and unfairly singling China out among the great powers.

Q: How does your research encourage us to think differently about how great

powers treat and respond to rising powers in the international order?

My research suggests that the traditional picture of rising and great powers clashing over the material benefits of international order is incomplete. We can make better sense of rising powers accepting a materially disadvantageous order or challenging an order that enables their rise if we account for their status motivations. International institutions that ignore these considerations are likely to undermine themselves. An arms control treaty may produce an arms race, and a nuclear non-proliferation treaty may create a new nuclear power.

Great powers that are attentive to the status claims of rising powers may find it easier to win the latter's cooperation on key global issues. However, this approach too has its limits. Status is a scarce good — the bigger the club, the less prestigious it becomes. The real tragedy of great power politics is the understandable reluctance of great powers to admit new entrants into their club.

[Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions](#) is out now from Cambridge University Press. 2022.

This interview was originally published in the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).

Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Department of International Relations blog, the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The interview was conducted by Dr Rosemary Deller, Managing Editor of the LSE Review of Books blog.