From 1815 to 1848, the European order was relatively stable: shifts in power were negligible, and conflicts were managed through the Concert of Europe. Despite this stability, Prussia needed only seven years to fundamentally alter the balance of power in Europe. Over the course of three wars—the Danish-Prussian War of 1864, the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1871—Prussia systemically defeated its opponents and consolidated its position as the head of a unified Germany. Throughout Prussia’s expansion, no coalition emerged to prevent unification. Rather than balance against Prussia, the great powers sat on the sidelines and allowed the transformation of European politics.

The failure to balance against Prussia in 1864 is of particular historical and theoretical significance. Whereas scholars of international politics have all but forgotten the Danish-German wars over the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein,1 European governments at the time considered the conflict central to their international relations. European states believed that Prussian expansion into the duchies would have monumental consequences. Each of the major powers recognized that conquest of the duchies would serve as the first step toward German unification under Prussia’s rule. A successful war against Denmark would signal the birth of a continental powerhouse, one that would upset the balance of power in Europe. Prussia’s expansion, moreover, was normatively disruptive. By invading the duchies, Prussia threatened the Congress of Vienna Treaties of 1815, the foundation of Europe’s ideological order.2

Stacie E. Goddard is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College.

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While some political scientists have argued that German unification was the inevitable result of Prussian power and German nationalism, historians have dismissed such explanations, arguing that Prussia’s expansion was far from determined and might have been thwarted through great power intervention. In 1848 a similar attempt to conquer the duchies failed when Britain and Russia threatened to intervene, and in the 1860s, all signs suggested that Prussia’s expansion would again be checked. The European powers’ interests had not changed since 1848: each still believed that a unified Germany was a threat to European peace. In 1864, moreover, Prussia was relatively weak. To expand, it needed to ensure that Britain, France, and Russia would not intervene—no small feat, given that each side expressed interest in aligning with Denmark against Prussia. Indeed, Prussia understood that successful expansion would require an alliance with Austria, which as co-leader of the German Confederation had an interest in Schleswig-Holstein. Yet this fellow German power opposed upsetting the status quo.

Given the relative balance of power and states’ perception of interest, the European states’ failure to balance against Prussia is puzzling. Theoretically, this case has implications beyond nineteenth-century politics, cutting to the question: Why do states underbalance in international politics? Some scholars posit that underbalancing is likely under multipolarity. In a multipolar system, states are likely to miscalculate threats; even when they do correctly perceive threats, there are incentives to “buck-pass” and let other states counter the rising power. Other scholars argue that underbalancing results from domestic causes, that internal dissent undermines efficient balancing.
The Prussian case casts doubt on these explanations, suggesting instead that failures to balance might originate not within potential balancing coalitions, but in the choices of the rising state itself. Put another way, to understand balancing failures, scholars should look not only to the decisions of the great powers, but also to the rising power’s own foreign policy. In particular, I argue that Prussia’s legitimation strategies—the way it justified its expansion—undermined a potential balancing coalition. As Prussia prepared to invade the duchies, it appealed to shared rules and norms, strategically choosing rhetoric that would resonate with the great powers. In doing so, Prussia effectively countered opposition to its rise, ensuring an almost costless expansion into the duchies.

I proceed as follows. After providing a short background to the Prussian case, I examine alternative explanations for underbalancing, showing that even though each explanation is plausible, none provides a sufficient account of the 1864 war. I then define legitimation strategies and argue that they are successful under three conditions: when they signal constraint, or a willingness to abide by established international norms; when they set “rhetorical traps” by framing expansion in a way that deprives opposing states grounds on which to resist;7 and when they resonate with a state’s “ontological security,” that is, its need to secure its identity in international politics.8 Through each of these mechanisms, legitimation strategies make balancing coalitions more or less likely.

I analyze these hypotheses using a case study of Prussian diplomacy before the 1864 war. The Danish-Prussian War provides a superb test of legitimation theory. The case is a “most likely” case for conventional theories of underbalancing—neorealist explanations, as well as theories emphasizing domestic politics, are strong explanations. If the legitimation theory is convincing here, it is more likely to be generalizable to other cases. Furthermore, although I examine only one case, the study allows for process-tracing Prussia’s diplomacy with several great powers—Austria, Britain, France, and Russia. And although Prussia’s wars against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870 are better-
known cases, it was in the Danish-Prussian War that Prussia developed the rhetoric that would prevent balancing coalitions in these later conflicts.

I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this case study for theory and policy. The central question here—Why do states choose to balance rising powers?—underpins theoretical and empirical debates in international relations. Some scholars argue that since the end of the Cold War, U.S. compliance with international institutions has legitimized American hegemony, and thus thwarted balancing behavior. Theoretically, the Prussian case suggests that scholars should refine existing explanations of balancing behavior and embrace both constructivist and realist variables in their theories of international politics.

The Prussian-Danish War: An Overview of the Conflict

By 1864 Denmark and the German powers had shared control over Schleswig-Holstein for almost four centuries. The duchies were the site of continuous territorial disputes. The crisis that sparked Prussian expansion began in an argument over constitutional rule and dynastic succession. On March 30, 1863, Denmark’s King Frederick VII issued a royal ordinance, the “March Patent,” which attempted to prevent German interference in the duchies. The German powers were outraged and claimed that Denmark had breached the Treaty of London, the 1852 agreement that had ended the first Danish-Prussian war. In November the crisis intensified when Frederick promised to implement a liberal constitution that would further revise Denmark’s rule in the duchies. That month the Danish king died. The accession of Christian IX prompted German nationalists to challenge his right to rule the duchies. They argued that the duke of Augustenburg, a German noble, was the rightful heir to the Schleswig-Holstein throne. The duke’s ascension to the throne would secure Schleswig-Holstein’s membership in the German Confederation and sever its ties with the Danish monarchy.

For all of its complexity, the conflict over the duchies was not some obscure dynastic feud. The fate of the duchies was intertwined with the larger “German Question.” German nationalists hoped to use expansion in the duch-
ies as a springboard for unification, the creation of a liberal state governing all German-speaking populations in Europe. In Denmark, too, the dispute had taken on nationalist tones, with the Eider-Danes—extreme Danish nationalists—arguing that the king should use the crisis as a pretext to expel the German Confederation from the duchies. The issue had international significance as well. As William Mosse argues, “The fate of the Duchies came to involve the sanctity of treaties and the European balance of power . . . part of a wider conflict between the upholders of public law embodied in international engagements and revolutionary nationalist movements.” The conflict over the duchies challenged the treaties of 1815, which established the Danish monarchy as an integral part of the European political equilibrium, as well as the Treaty of London of 1852, which reaffirmed the status quo of shared sovereignty.

For Prussia and its minister-president, Otto von Bismarck, the crisis presented an opportunity. If Prussia were to invade Schleswig-Holstein, it could revise the status quo in the German Confederation in its favor. If Schleswig-Holstein became a German state, it would fall into Prussia’s sphere of influence and shift the balance of power in the Confederation away from Austria. Moreover, Prussia could improve its reputation among the German states: acting on behalf of Schleswig-Holstein would harness the power of nationalism and secure Prussia’s place as the moral leader of the German Confederation. But Prussia’s leaders understood that pursuing its interests would not be easy. Similar attempts at expansion had met with disaster in 1848, when Prussia announced it would annex the duchies for nationalist reasons. Benjamin Disraeli immediately denounced Prussia’s and Germany’s actions and called for military intervention: the Prussians and Germans, Disraeli declared, were “carried away by that dreamy and dangerous nonsense called ‘German nationality,’” and were making an illegitimate attempt to expand. Russia declared that it too would oppose any policy not founded on principles of legitimacy, as encoded within the Treaties of Vienna.

At the time, evidence suggested that expansion in 1863 to 1864 would

14. See speeches on the Danish question by Mr. Disraeli and Lord Palmerston, House of Commons, April 19, 1849, in Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt, eds., British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print Part I: From the Mid-nineteenth Century to the First World War (hereafter BFDA), Vol. 17, Series F: Europe, Denmark, 1848–1914 (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America), docs. 6, 15.
provoke the same outcome as it did in 1848. As Lawrence Steefel argues, “During the summer of 1863, the international situation had been favorable to Denmark.” Austria and Prussia were deeply divided, and Austria “was grouped with Denmark’s friends, France and Great Britain.” Although both Russia and Prussia were adamant proponents of conservative rule and resistant to the spread of nationalism and liberalism in Europe, Russia had made clear to Prussia that it would support Denmark and its preference for the status quo in the duchies. In late 1863 through early 1864, then, the European powers seemed poised to balance Prussia. Prussian expansion appeared unachievable.

Ultimately, however, efforts to build this balancing coalition collapsed, and as historians have argued, it collapsed in a baffling way. Rather than balance Prussia, by late 1863 Austria had chosen to ally itself with the rising power and to assist in occupying the duchies: Britain and Russia abandoned Denmark; and France, the state arguably with the most to lose from Prussian expansion, not only failed to balance but expressed sympathy with German nationalism. In the end, no European power would contest Prussia’s expansion, and the rising state would annex the duchies and begin its movement toward unification and continental hegemony.

Explanations Prussia’s Unchecked Rise

International relations theorists offer three explanations for the decision by the great powers not to balance against Prussia, and in particular, their decision not to intervene against Prussia in the Danish-Prussian War. The first explanation dismisses the events of 1864 as a case of underbalancing. Prussia was not a threat: neither its power nor its interests demanded balancing from the European states. The second explanation draws from general observations about distributions of power and posits that balancing is especially difficult in multipolar systems: miscalculation and buck-passing, in particular, undermine the emergence of balancing coalitions. The third explanation holds that domestic-level variables explain failures to balance.

defining away the puzzle: limited power and limited interests

Using Randall Schweller’s term, the European powers’ decision not to balance against Prussia in 1864 is a classic case of “underbalancing”: states either mis-
takenly calculate that the rising power is not a threat, and thus not worth balancing, or believe they are faced with a revisionist state and still neglect to adopt a countervailing policy. 18 Some scholars, however, challenge the claim that Prussia is a case of underbalancing, positing instead that it posed little threat to the European powers. 19 If anything, the European powers—particularly Britain and Russia—would benefit from a strengthened Prussia. For Britain, a strong Prussia would check France and Russia. 20 And there was no need to balance Prussia when the target was Denmark. In John Mearsheimer’s words, “It is not surprising that none of the European great powers balanced . . . in 1864 because the stakes were so small.” 21

Although seemingly intuitive, this portrayal of how the European powers perceived Prussia’s status is problematic. First, no European power, including Russia and Britain, was convinced that Prussia’s rise was in its interest, especially because each recognized that a strengthened Prussia would serve as a catalyst for German unification. Certainly, Russia looked on unification with suspicion. As Mosse argues, “A unitary national movement in Germany threatened to destroy alike the princely dynasties and the internal divisions which secured Russia’s influence. . . . The Russian national interest appeared to demand the maintenance of the status quo in Germany.” 22 For Britain, whether Prussian designs were a threat or an opportunity depended on the future of Prussia’s domestic politics. Whereas a liberal, unified Germany could be a powerful ally on the continent, a conservative German power would tip the balance against Britain. 23

Austria and France, too, were rightfully nervous about Prussian expansion. Austria had no interest in upsetting the status quo. It not only feared that a more powerful Prussia would supplant Austria as the leader of Germany, but it opposed German unification, fearing that unity would inflame ethnic divisions in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria thus was determined to contain Prussian ambitions and resist unification of the German states. 24 In France

24. See Clark, *Franz Joseph and Bismarck; Hallberg, Franz Joseph and Napoleon III, 1852–1864;*
Napoleon III was much more content to have the fragmented states of the German Confederation on his border.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, the European powers understood that Schleswig-Holstein was a particularly volatile target, and thus central to nineteenth-century European diplomacy. These states believed that Schleswig-Holstein, with its dynastic turmoil and conflict between Danish and German nationalists, was the most likely starting point for German unification.\textsuperscript{26} The Danish-Prussian dispute, moreover, challenged the sanctity of the Treaties of Vienna, which had established a unified Danish kingdom as an indispensable element in Europe’s political equilibrium. As a result, conflict between Denmark and Prussia would be no less than an affront to the European order. Strategically, Schleswig-Holstein’s location on the Baltic increased its importance among the great powers.\textsuperscript{27}

If power defines threat, then Prussia’s rise should have provoked a balancing coalition. Some scholars argue, however, that it is not power but intent that determines balancing behavior.\textsuperscript{28} In this case, European powers read Prussia’s intent correctly, believing that Prussia was a limited aims revisionist state interested in expanding and unifying Germany, but not in becoming a continental hegemon.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, the powers did not balance in 1864 because Prussia’s aims did not warrant it. And by the 1880s, according to this thinking, this claim was proven right: Bismarck declared Germany a satisfied power, with no interest in self-aggrandizement, and promised to play the “honest broker” of Europe.\textsuperscript{30}

To classify the 1864 case as appropriate balancing—a rational response based on Prussia’s limited interests—is to engage in retrospective history. Contemporary powers were deeply uncertain about Prussia’s intentions in 1864,
and many remained convinced that Bismarck had a “lust for expansion.”

That fifteen years later Germany appeared to have limited aims does not explain why European powers refrained from containing Prussian expansion at the time. If one evaluates the 1864 case using contemporary measures of intent, then the European states’ failure to balance seems imprudent. In an uncertain system, with an apparently threatening state, it seems incredible that these powers would have turned a blind eye. Some scholars might claim that, in retrospect, aggressive balancing in 1864 would have been a disastrous policy. Robert Jervis has argued that balancing too aggressively against status quo powers can lead to spirals, whereas appeasing revisionist states creates deterrence failures. Thus, given Bismarck’s ultimate restraint, the European powers’ foreign policy should be applauded. This argument, however, misstates the problem. Cooperation with Prussia might eventually have been proven the appropriate strategy, but this does not explain why the foreign policy was chosen in the first place.

In sum, the European powers’ decision not to balance against Prussia’s rise is a puzzle. All of them saw Prussia’s ascendency as a threat, both to their strategic interests and to the stability of the European order as a whole. No power was certain about Prussian intentions, and some powers—most notably Austria and France—were fairly certain that Prussian intentions were hostile. For these reasons, balancing should have occurred.

BUCK-PASSING AND MISCALCULATION?

For many neorealists, Europe’s multipolar system explains the failure to balance against Prussia. In multipolar systems, states do not balance for two reasons. First, cooperation is difficult. Each state has incentives to free ride on the efforts of others; as a result, each “passes the buck” when it comes to balancing against an emerging power. Second, multipolar systems are more unpredictable than bipolar or unilateral systems. With multiple powers, states are more likely to miscalculate others’ intentions; as a result, they may misidentify threats to the status quo.

There is much that is plausible about this explanation. Multipolarity does in-

31. Clark, Franz Joseph and Bismarck, p. 60.
crease uncertainty and ambiguity in international politics. Still, neorealist theory is problematic for two reasons. First, explanations that rely solely on multipolarity to explain balancing behavior are underdetermined and cannot account for specific foreign policies. As Jack Snyder and Thomas Christensen argue, multipolarity may lead to failures to balance under some conditions; in other situations, as in World War I, miscalculation may drive states to overbalance. Moreover, efficient balancing can occur in multipolar systems. In the 1848 Danish-Prussian war over Schleswig-Holstein, European powers easily forced a balancing coalition against Prussia, with Austria, Britain, and Russia intervening to force Prussia to agree to the Treaty of London and return Schleswig-Holstein to its status of shared sovereignty.

Second, the historical record casts doubt on the mechanisms that neorealists claim prevent effective balancing. According to neorealists, balancing fails under multipolarity largely because of collective-action problems: preferring other states to expend resources, states free ride and thus undermine balancing coalitions. But collective-action problems did not cause the balancing problems analyzed here. The historical evidence does not suggest that the European powers decided to rely on others to constrain Prussia. Indeed, three of them—Britain, France, and Russia—seriously contemplated unilateral action. Other states did incur military costs, but not in the way balancing theory would predict. Austria, for example, might have prevented Prussian expansion by refusing to support an invasion of the duchies; yet in the end, it reluctantly joined forces with the Prussian state. And when there were attempts at intervention, both before and during the 1864 Prussian-Danish war, the European states pushed Denmark, not Prussia, to compromise. In other words, the great powers not only failed to balance; they buttressed the rising challenger.

DOMESTIC POLITICS
Some scholars attribute balancing failures to domestic politics. Schweller argues, “The main reason why states have so infrequently balanced efficiently and in a timely fashion against dangerous threats ... is that states rarely conform to realism’s assumptions of units as coherent actors.” When domestic elites are divided—when there is no consensus on what constitutes a threat, when there are long-standing cleavages among elites, when social cohesion is

35. Christensen and Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks.” Note that the offense-defense balance does not account for variation between 1848 and 1864.
36. Schweller, Unanswered Threats, p. 11.
low and regime vulnerability high—balancing is unlikely. Not only do elites fail to agree on how threatening the rising state is; they cannot mobilize material resources to counter it.37

As with neorealism, this neoclassical realist theory sheds some light on Europe’s failure to balance Prussia in 1864. But the theory has shortcomings. It does not sufficiently explain the actions of Austria, France, and Russia during the crisis. Each of these actors proved unified in its policies. The Austrian government—save one minister—agreed to support Prussia’s actions. In France and Russia, the emperor and the czar controlled foreign policy, effectively eliminating disunity.

Even when applied to Britain, where there was disagreement about appropriate balancing policies, the domestic politics explanation is problematic. While Prime Minister Lord Palmerston and Minister of Foreign Affairs Lord John Russell fervently called for intervention, the queen’s sympathies lay with the Germans, and the Cabinet, although pro-Danish, preferred to avoid military involvement.38 At the same time, however, Schweller’s domestic politics theory overlooks two significant puzzles in the British case. First, why did the British fail to reach consensus? Why did elites hold such disparate opinions about the appropriate policy? This disunity was not a given. Rather, the way in which Prussia framed its policies had a critical effect on British elites, convincing them that balancing was unnecessary. Indeed many elites who had argued that Britain should balance Prussia ultimately backed away from their claims, which suggests that these factions were more fluid than Schweller’s theory assumes.

Second, Schweller’s explanation does not account for why pro-balancing forces in Britain failed to secure their policy. In 1848 similar disunity plagued the British; yet this did not undercut Britain’s decision to balance. In 1864, moreover, the antibalancing forces were not overpowering; the British public and media were extremely pro-Danish, and pro-balancing forces could count on support from the Tories, then in opposition.39 Thus, it remains a puzzle why proponents of balancing lost the debate and instead advocated peaceful mediation.

37. Ibid.
Missing in a domestic politics account is the rising power’s strategy. It was Prussia’s framing of its expansion—the way it legitimated its actions—that ensured dissent in British politics and undercut the position of elites who argued that Prussia’s rise must be balanced.

**How Legitimation Strategies Prevent Balancing Coalitions**

Prussia’s legitimation strategies undermined the formation of balancing coalitions from 1863 to 1864, allowing Prussia to expand into the duchies and set the stage for German unification. A “legitimation strategy” is the use of rhetoric that appeals to public, recognized norms and rules to justify a state’s foreign policy. Legitimation strategies are so common as to be an almost banal feature of foreign policy; all states justify their behavior with some appeal to shared norms. As a result, neorealists often treat legitimacy as epiphenomenal: actors may “legitimate” their actions, but this is window dressing for interests and power.40 Constructivists dispute this view of legitimacy, arguing that actors may be motivated not by power but rather by a “logic of appropriateness.”41

These realists and constructivists share a strict dichotomy between interests and power, on the one hand, and legitimacy, on the other.42 In contrast, the legitimation theory argues that the way states legitimate their actions is integral to power politics. By justifying its policies, a state hopes to build support for its position and to undermine those of its opponents. For example, Iran justified its nuclear activities with rhetoric appealing first to its security interests, and then to its sovereign right to develop nuclear energy; Iran’s language in the latter instance appealed to its domestic audience and even convinced some great powers that its program was legitimate. Similarly, prior to the 2003 Iraq invasion, Secretary of State Colin Powell spearheaded an effort to legitimate military intervention to a skeptical international community. Although the

40. This argument is associated with work on “cheap talk.”
42. This is not always the case. Some constructivists argue that legitimacy augments material power. See Voeten, “The Political Origins of the UN Security Council’s Ability to Legitimate the Use of Force”; and Little, “British Neutrality versus Offshore Balancing in the American Civil War.” Likewise, there are realists who contend that norms and ideas constrain great power behavior. See Walt, *Taming American Power*. 

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-pdf/33/3/110/693228/isec.2009.33.3.110.pdf by guest on 19 June 2021
international community’s reluctance to grant legitimacy to the war may not have constrained U.S. action, it has made it more costly.\textsuperscript{43}

Although all states justify their foreign policies, a rising power’s legitimation strategy is particularly significant. There is no more uncertain time in international politics than during a power transition.\textsuperscript{44} Some theorists suggest that states will always balance against a rising power; yet the empirical evidence is decidedly mixed. Paul Schroeder’s study of the European system suggests that bandwagoning and hegemony have historically trumped balancing behavior. Likewise, Victoria Tin-bor Hui demonstrates that the Qin dynasty was able to “roll up” Ancient China’s balance of power system.\textsuperscript{45} Theoretically, moreover, states consider several factors, not just power, when deciding to balance a rising hegemon. For example, there is no sense in aggressively balancing a state with limited aims: at best, it is a waste of resources; at worst, the policy provokes a security dilemma and a spiral toward war. And given that a rising state’s intentions—either in the present or in the future—are always uncertain, leading powers are constantly looking to gauge the true interests of an expanding state.

These criticisms suggest that a rising state can affect whether a balancing coalition forms: rising states can exploit the inherent uncertainty of power transitions to prevent balancing coalitions. Of course, legitimation strategies are only one way in which rising states influence balancing behavior. Charles Glaser and Andrew Kydd, for example, claim that states can use military strategies to signal defensive intentions, and thus prevent balancing.\textsuperscript{46} Evan Montgomery argues that structural conditions, especially the offense-defense


\textsuperscript{44} See Dale C. Copeland, The Origins of Major War (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).


balance, help to determine whether states can signal intent and stifle international opposition.47

Legitimation strategies also significantly affect balancing coalitions. States assess threat in part on whether rising states behave legitimately. As a result, how states justify their policies can prevent or provoke the creation of balancing coalitions. At the most basic level, to be successful a rising power’s legitimation strategy needs to resonate with other states: it must invoke shared rules and norms in the international system. For example, whether war “in the name of God” resonates depends on the norms that govern the international system. In European international relations until the seventeenth century, most political violence was legitimated in the name of God—not surprising given that religious institutions buttressed dynastic states.48 But where most political institutions are secular, as in the post-Enlightenment West, such legitimation strategies are unlikely to succeed. In contrast, a rising power’s rhetoric is likely to be successful under three conditions: if it signals constraint; if it “rhetorically traps” opposing states; and if it threatens a state’s ontological security.

**Signaling Constraint**

A rising power’s legitimation strategies can persuade other states that its expansion will not challenge the status quo or ultimately threaten other states in the international system. According to John Ikenberry, after the Cold War the United States’ appeals to liberalism legitimated its dominance and helped stave off balancing. In contrast, a rising power that appears illegitimate is likely to provoke a balancing coalition. Mlada Bukovansky shows that it was not just France’s growing power after the French Revolution of 1789–99 that provoked a balancing coalition; the revolution challenged the very notion of dynastic legitimacy. Likewise Stephen Walt contends that if the United States continues to act unilaterally, with no regard for international legitimacy, states will balance the once “benign” hegemon.49

Legitimation theory may seem similar to rationalist theories about signaling,
which argue that behavior by rising powers provokes or undermines the creation of balancing coalitions. While legitimation theory shares traits with these theories, there are two significant differences. First, in rationalist signaling models, a strategy’s success depends on its credibility. Rhetoric alone has little causal power: a rising state’s strategy must be a costly signal, such as a commitment to a defensive strategy when offense is dominant.⁵⁰ In legitimation theory, whether legitimation strategies are effective depends not on their material cost, but on their resonance: to be effective, the strategy must appear to have “pertinence, relevance, or significance” with a targeted group.⁵¹ Second, the rationalist signaling literature contends that rhetoric’s success depends on what that rhetoric reveals (or conceals) about a rising state’s intentions.⁵² This need not be the case, however. States do infer a rising power’s intentions from legitimation strategies. Yet they may decide that a rising power’s expansion is legitimate even if its intentions remain murky, undefined, or even aggressive.

Legitimation strategies can signal not only interests but also constraints. By appealing to international norms, rising powers signal that they are and will continue to be constrained by these norms. Because of this, the threatened power may conclude that the rising state will not pose a threat to the status quo. For example, the literature on U.S. hegemony posits that liberal institutions have constraining effects, even when they work against U.S. interests.⁵³ China’s apparent willingness to work within the boundaries of international norms—particularly those guiding international free trade—likewise indicates its respect for these rules and signals constraint. In short, rhetoric can persuade a balancing coalition that a rising power will maintain the status quo, even when its intentions are suspect.

SETTING RHETORICAL TRAPS

Legitimation strategies can set “rhetorical traps”: they can frame expansion in a way that undermines the opposing states’ grounds on which to resist.⁵⁴ Rising powers do not legitimate their expansion in a vacuum. They face states

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⁵². Edelstein, “Managing Uncertainty.”


that are also legitimating their own policies, both to an international and a domestic audience. To set a rhetorical trap, the rising power uses the opposing states’ own words to justify its policies. As a result, potential balancers become trapped in their own rhetoric, unable to balance a rising state even if it is in their interests. For example, Adolf Hitler set a rhetorical trap when he used the rhetoric of self-determination to expand into the Sudetenland. How could Britain possibly justify depriving Germany of this land, when the British had also espoused the principle of self-determination?55

Rhetorical traps increase the costs of balancing by making it difficult to justify the creation of an opposing coalition. Rhetorical traps are particularly useful if a state’s domestic audience is divided over whether to balance. Balancing incurs large domestic costs, and domestic elites must rationalize a balancing policy to the opposition, as well as to the public at large; it must give good reasons for constraining the rising power. If a rising power claims it is acting in ways consistent with long-held policies—particularly those that the potential balancer claims to defend—the rising power will undermine domestic support for balancing behavior.

Rhetorical traps create international costs as well. If a rising power uses rhetoric consistent with a potential balancer’s foreign policies, it raises the costs of opposing expansion. Under these conditions, a state might fear that balancing will create perceptions of hypocrisy and inconsistency.56 Similarly, states might fear that an “illegitimate” balance will set a dangerous precedent. Although it might have been in Britain’s interest to intervene in the American Civil War, for example, doing so would have violated conventions ensuring neutrality and belligerent rights, as well as Britain’s own stance against slavery. The domestic and international costs of this, the British believed, would have been astronomical.57

INCREASING ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

Legitimation strategies are likely to be successful when they appeal to a state’s core identity: a rising power can legitimate its expansion by evoking principles and norms fundamental to a threatened state. In doing so, the rising power suggests that balancing behavior would contradict the identity of the opposing state. If a state identifies itself as a champion of nations, for instance, it will

57. Little, “British Neutrality versus Offshore Balancing in the American Civil War.”
find it difficult to balance against a state expanding for nationalist reasons. Likewise, a liberal democratic state might find it impossible to balance when “expansion” is framed as “liberation.”

Although ontological security might seem similar to rhetorical traps, they work through different mechanisms. With rhetorical traps, the dynamic is one of “rhetorical coercion”: these traps increase the rational costs of balancing behavior. In contrast, with identity claims, legitimation strategies raise not the rational but the ontological costs of balancing behavior. As Jennifer Mitzen argues, states pursue not only material but also ontological security, a need to maintain a constant sense of self. It is not simply that states incur domestic or international costs by violating principles. Some actions would contradict a state’s reason for existence. If a legitimation strategy appeals to these core principles, therefore, it is likely to stifle balancing behavior.

**Legitimating Expansion: Prussia Frames Its Invasion of the Duchies**

Prussian legitimation strategies were successful because they signaled constraint, set rhetorical traps, and increased ontological security. As the Schleswig-Holstein crisis unfolded in 1863, it seemed that Prussia would face an insurmountable balancing coalition. Britain, France, and Russia all appeared poised to intervene, either unilaterally or as a coalition, and with force if necessary. All Austria had to do, moreover, was stand aside; without Austria’s assistance, Prussian elites believed that action against Denmark would fail. If successful action in the duchies was to be possible, Prussia needed to drive a wedge through this potential balancing coalition, convincing each of the great powers that its invasion was legitimate. This was not a straightforward task, in part because the European powers differed on what they believed constituted legitimate expansion. For Austria and Russia, a legitimate foreign policy was one that not only reinforced international treaties but also protected dynastic rights. Britain took a firm stand on the Treaty of London: only expansion that reinforced this treaty would be accepted as legitimate. In contrast, France proclaimed the treaties of Europe irrelevant, that only policies designed to fuel nationalism in Europe had legitimacy.

If Prussia were to prevent a balancing coalition, it would have to legiti-
mate its expansion to all four powers. To do so, Prussian elites—particularly Bismarck—invented a fundamentally new legitimation strategy, one that used both nationalist and conservative principles to justify expansion. It is hard to imagine today how opposed these two ideas were in the nineteenth century. Austria and Russia decried nationalist principles as an attack on conservative legitimacy. Nationalist actors had no ties with conservative forces; they were liberal actors, pressing not only for national integration but for constitutional rule as well. Yet Prussia’s legitimation strategy appealed to both conservative rationales—treaties and dynastic norms—and nationalist concerns simultaneously. On the one hand, the Prussian monarchy and government expressed sympathy with the German nationalist movement. By November 1863, for example, Kaiser Wilhelm had stated his intention to occupy the duchies on behalf of the German nation and create an independent Schleswig-Holstein. Even Bismarck, certainly not a nationalist, strategically used nationalist rhetoric to appeal to the German Confederation. At the same time, he framed Prussia’s interest in the duchies as an effort to uphold the Treaty of London and the broader principles of a European equilibrium. Bismarck argued that any intervention in the duchies would only be to secure “the essential objects and interests which prevailed in the negotiations of 1851 and 1852.”

How did Prussia ensure that audiences would hear two contradictory messages simultaneously? At times Kaiser Wilhelm and Bismarck would use different rhetoric, depending on the audience: private appeals to France and the German Confederation took on a decidedly nationalist tone, whereas confidential correspondence with Austria and Russia emphasized conservative principles and European treaties. But Prussia’s actions reflected more than an effort at deception or Bismarck’s diplomatic prowess. Prussia succeeded because it also used what sociologists call “multivocal” rhetoric, language that “can be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives simultaneously,” and thus resonate with radically different coalitions. For example, public speeches at the time often mixed symbols and justifications to achieve multivocality. In a speech before the Prussian Chamber (a speech reported internationally), Bismarck noted that the Treaty of London might be regrettable, but that “pru-

63. Bismarck to Bernstorff, communicated to Earl Russell by Count Bernstorff, October 30, 1863, Berlin, October 27, 1863, *BDF A*, doc. 34.
dence and honour bind Prussia to be faithful to its stipulations”; in the same speech, he hinted at more aggressive, nationalist actions, noting that the government could at any point free itself from the treaty in the name of German interests. A later speech by Wilhelm invoked treaty obligations and nationalist aspirations simultaneously: it argued that Prussia would act in the name of the treaty, yet cautioned “that no foots breadth of German land, that no fraction of German rights shall be sacrificed.”

There is ample evidence that this Janus-faced rhetoric was chosen for strategic reasons. For example, fearful of appearing overly nationalist, Bismarck at one point urged the German Confederation to drop its nationalist claims and portray its actions as upholding the European equilibrium. Prussia asked that the Confederation refer to any military action in Holstein as an “Execution” (which would recognize the succession of Christian IX in the duchies as legitimate), not as an “occupation” (which would suggest that Christian IX had no legitimate sovereign title within the duchies). In other words, Prussia insisted that the Diet change not its actions but its justifications. Likewise Bismarck begged other Prussian elites—even Kaiser Wilhelm—not to use the wrong language at the wrong time. Nationalist language might work for French diplomats and German nationalists, but it was to be avoided when speaking to the Austrians and the Russians.

In sum, Prussia’s leaders paid close attention to how it framed its interests in the duchies, and its legitimation strategies proved effective: they signaled constraint to Austria, set rhetorical traps for Britain and France, and persuaded Russia that Denmark, not Prussia, threatened Russia’s ontological security.

**Austria’s Fateful Decision: Prussia and the Language of Constraint**

Bismarck’s legitimation strategies persuaded Austria not only to refrain from balancing, but to assist Prussia’s expansion in the duchies. For some scholars, Austria’s choice is not a puzzle: although the state’s decision was not wise in retrospect, at the time it was a calculation of power and interests. Prussia and Austria had long struggled for supremacy in the German Confederation. Each hoped to become the hegemonic power in a unified Germany, and both believed that expanding into Schleswig-Holstein was a step toward achieving that goal.

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65. Quoted in the *Times*, December 3, 1863, p. 8.
69. See, for example, Heinrich Friedjung, *The Struggle for Supremacy in Germany, 1859–1866* (Lon-
Austria was far from a willing partner, however. Rather, it was a potential challenge to Prussia’s rise. Austria had no interest in seeing the status quo overturned in the duchies, fearing that any expansion would be fueled by German nationalism. Austria perceived German nationalism as a threat to its multiethnic empire, whose position had grown more tenuous in the mid-nineteenth century. If Austria were to appear overly devoted to Germany, then, as Bernard von Rechberg, an Austrian diplomat, argued, “the Hungarians, the south Slavs, the Poles, and the Italians would unite in the dictum that they would reject any policy that requires sacrifices of money and blood for Germany.” Furthermore, Austria viewed its international and domestic stability as dependent on the treaties of Vienna and conservative dynastic legitimacy. Austria believed that any nationalist attempt to upset these treaties—even if it increased Austria’s material power—was a threat to the Habsburg’s dynastic legitimacy. As argued by one Austrian minister during the crisis, “The [Austrian] Empire . . . has always been governed upon the sole basis of the principle of legitimacy. It would be a very great blot on its history if this principle should ever be departed from . . . a departure from them would bring direct injury to members of the Imperial Family.”

If expansion into the duchies were justified on nationalist grounds, Austria would reject it. Austria had already refused one plea for assistance: when the German princes sought out a power to help them invade the duchies, it was initially Austria, not Prussia, to which they turned. Despite the possibility that the occupation could enhance Austria’s power, the state refused. The German Confederation demanded an invasion to protect Germany’s national rights in the duchies: an appeal that the Confederation circulated among the public proclaimed that “Schleswig-Holstein . . . must not be allowed to suffer the fate of Alsace-Lorraine. Just as their ancestors reconquered East Prussia from Poland . . . the Germans must reclaim the northern duchies from Denmark.” As Chester Clark argues, “No sharper contrast to Austrian desires can be imagined than this program, for the smaller states violently attacked the London protocol, and invoked the principle of nationality, which Austria abhorred.”

If this were the justification for action in the duchies, Austria would refuse to

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71. Count Belcredi to Conte Malaguzzi, October 25, 1865, quoted in Clark, Franz Joseph and Bismarck, p. 27.
73. Quoted in Clark, Franz Joseph and Bismarck, p. 57.
cooperate. As the Austrian diplomat Rechberg argued, “The demand for the conquest of Schleswig for Germany, which is now so prevalent that it seems even to be catching hold of governments otherwise prudent, differs in no way from the striving of the French people for the Rhine.”

Prussia’s diplomats recognized that without a legitimate basis for intervention, Austria would withhold its support and effectively block expansion in the duchies. In November and December 1863, therefore, Bismarck worked to legitimate an invasion of Schleswig-Holstein on conservative grounds, framing Prussia’s interest in the duchies as intricately bound to the Treaty of London and the broader principles of a European equilibrium on which that treaty was based. As Bismarck argued, any intervention in the duchies was only to secure “the essential objects and interests which prevailed in the negotiations of 1851 and 1852.” So important was this framing that Bismarck pleaded with Prussian elites, including Kaiser Wilhelm, to avoid nationalist language when speaking to Austrian diplomats, for fear that “Austria would abandon her and leave her, single-handed, to face a conflict with the other signatory powers.”

Bismarck’s rhetoric never convinced Austria that Prussia was a satiated power, one that would avoid attempts to upend the status quo. The Austrian diplomats had no illusions about Bismarck’s intentions; they knew the ambitious minister-president was interested in using the Schleswig-Holstein dispute to augment Prussian power. As one Austrian diplomat remarked of Bismarck in 1864, “The task of keeping this man in bounds, of dissuading him from his expansionistic policy of utility . . . surpasses human powers.”

Although Prussia’s rhetoric did not persuade the Austrians that the Prussians had limited aims, it did convince them that Prussia could be constrained to limited outcomes. The Austrians believed that as long as Prussia acted as if it were interested in the sanctity of treaties, the treaties would constrain its actions, just as they constrained Austria’s. So even though the Austrians did not believe that Bismarck would uphold the treaties “any longer than necessary to satisfy the foreign powers,” his language of legality encouraged them to set their alliance “down in black and white.” As Baron Ludwig

74. Quoted in ibid., p. 58.
75. Bismarck to Bernstorff, BDF A, doc. 34.
von Biegeleben, then in charge of Austria’s German affairs, argued, if Austria
bound Prussia to its rhetoric, then Bismarck could not give way to his “lust for
the annexation of Schleswig and Holstein.”80 Strange as it may seem, as Clark
argues, few Austrians believed that Prussia would not be trapped by its own
rhetoric, that Prussia might “refuse to place her head in the noose.”81 In a
meeting to discuss the alliance in January 1864, only one minister raised the
possibility that Prussia could defect, that the state might not really be con-
strained by the treaties.
Austria’s choice to assist Prussian expansion would incur disastrous conse-
quences. The invasion allowed Prussia to build support among German na-
tionalists, persuading them that only Prussia could ensure unification.
Disputes over Schleswig-Holstein would also provide Prussia with its pretext
for war against Austria in 1866. What Austria misjudged, however, was
not Prussia’s intentions, but its flexibility in the face of its legitimation strate-
gies. Prussia had no reason to place its head in the noose: unlike Austria,
Prussia was positioned to benefit from the nationalist sentiments it was poised
to unleash.

SETTING RHETORICAL TRAPS: BRITISH AND FRENCH RESPONSES
By using a state’s rhetoric against it, a rising power can increase the domestic
costs of promoting a balancing strategy. In Britain, Prussia’s rhetoric increased
the domestic costs of balancing: those who argued that Prussia must be con-
strained were left without a legitimate rationale for their policy. In France,
Prussia’s rhetoric increased the international costs of balancing.

BRITAIN’S FAILURE TO BALANCE. At the onset of the Schleswig-Holstein cri-
sis, the British appeared likely to support Denmark and balance against
Prussia, just as they had done in the first Schleswig-Holstein war of 1848. In
July 1863 Palmerston declared in a parliamentary speech, “I am satisfied with
all reasonable men in Europe, including those in France and Russia, in desiring
that the independence, integrity, and the rights of Denmark may be main-
tained. We are convinced . . . that if any violent attempt were made to over-
throw those rights and interfere with that independence, those who made the
attempt would find in the result, that it would not be Denmark alone with
which they would have to contend.”82

This was more than just cheap talk: as Austria and Prussia threatened to in-

80. Ibid., p. 60.
81. Ibid.
vade Schleswig, British threats became more forceful. In late December Palmerston wrote to Russell, saying he believed that German intervention into Schleswig would be unacceptable. Palmerston argued that “Schleswig is not part of Germany, and its invasion by German troops would be an act of war against Denmark, which would in my clear opinion entitle Denmark to our active military and naval support.” On January 8 Russell submitted to the queen telegrams he proposed to send to Paris, St. Petersburg, and Stockholm inviting the governments to join Britain in denouncing an invasion of Schleswig as “an act of aggression on non-German territory” that should be met with great power resistance. Further, Prussia and Austria should be convinced to delay the occupation while London organized a conference to mediate the dispute.

British support of Denmark was not surprising. Britain had strategic interests in the region and hoped to prevent not only Prussian enlargement but a possible catalyst for German unification. Britain, moreover, saw itself as bound by both the principles of the Concert of Europe and the Treaty of London to ensure the integrity of the Danish monarchy. Despite these interests, Britain made no attempt to balance Prussia’s expansion. While lamenting that the conflict over the duchies had escalated to war, Britain ultimately pronounced that Prussian interests were legitimate; the Danes, in contrast, had acted contrary to the dictates of international treaties.

What explains Britain’s decision not to balance? In part, it resulted from domestic confusion, as Schweller’s theory suggests. Although Palmerston, Russell, and conservatives such as Benjamin Disraeli were eager to balance against Prussia, even at the cost of military action, Queen Victoria’s sympathies lay with Germany. She charged that Palmerston’s and Russell’s threats were anti-German and overly aggressive, and she worked through other ministers—notably Lord Granville—to undermine the prime minister in Parliament. The Cabinet, although pro-Danish, was strongly pacific, and ministers such as Granville and Lord Derby loudly criticized Russell’s language as the first step toward war.

86. Denmark was in breach because, by administering Schleswig separately from Holstein, it was violating the principle that the duchies were indivisible.
88. See Bell, Lord Palmerston, pp. 376–377.
Although domestic opposition played an important role in stifling Britain’s balancing effort, this explanation alone is insufficient. Similar disunity had plagued Britain in 1848; yet the British successfully mounted a balancing effort, joining with Russia to force Prussia to compromise over the duchies. Just as in 1864, in 1848 Palmerston and Russell opposed Prussian expansion, yet faced serious opposition from Queen Victoria, who denounced their efforts as a “direct attack upon Germany.” In 1848, radical members of Parliament also criticized the balancing policy; they hoped that Prussia’s actions would facilitate German unification, leading to a liberal-democratic government that would prove a firm ally on the continent. Palmerston and Russell, however, overcame this disunity to force a balancing policy.

Moreover, it is unclear why domestic opposition, in and of itself, would prevent a balancing policy. Yes, the queen opposed balancing, but she had limited influence on foreign affairs. Her interference even provoked a backlash. The *London Review*, for example, charged that the queen’s interference was “despotic.” A member of the House of Lords likewise proclaimed that the queen was acting in German interests, and that he hoped the ministers would side with Denmark “as to show to Germany and to the whole world that the policy and feelings of George III—those truly English feelings . . . still animate the Government of this country.”

In addition, public opinion was also fervently pro-Denmark, and thus supported a balancing policy. The British public had long seen itself as the protector of Denmark; the marriage of the Danish Princess Alexandra to the Prince of Wales in March 1863 had reinforced this view. Newspapers such as the *Times* echoed Palmerston’s and Russell’s call for balancing. A March 1863 editorial argued, “The maintenance of the independence and constitutional liberty of the Danish empire demands the carrying out of the principle, regardless of possible sacrifice.”

Given these strategic interests and public support, why did Britain not balance? The answer lies in Prussia’s legitimation strategies, which effectively set a rhetorical trap, weakening the position of those who wanted to balance against Prussia and strengthening the argument of those demanding isolation. Palmerston and others pursuing a balancing policy had taken their stand “on the sanctity of the treaties”: it was because Prussia was violating the Treaty of

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89. Quoted in ibid., p. 11.
London that a balancing policy was necessary. Following Prussian pro-
nouncements, for example, the earl of Derby argued that noninterference was
the only justified policy, noting that “the parties now proceeding against
Denmark do not rest their claim on any opposition to the treaty. On the con-
try, they proclaim they are proceeding in the spirit of the treaty.” Newspa-
ners such as the Times, too, changed their opinion. Where the paper had once
promoted balancing, even at the risk of war, it now noted that Prussia’s
rhetoric—specifically referring to an address by Bismarck earlier that week—
signaled that “there was no reason to complain of the conduct,” and that a
force could enter the duchies as long as Prussia continued to express “a proper
feeling of its responsibility to Europe.”

Interestingly, many of those who called for a balancing policy remained
convincing that Prussia was a revisionist state. Palmerston and Russell were
not at all certain that Prussia’s intentions were limited. The prime minister
chided the German powers, claiming their conduct “was unjustifiable,” and
argued to the Danish government that Prussia’s treaty claims were made in
“bad faith.” But these domestic leaders could no longer justify their support
of a balancing policy. Those who wanted to avoid intervention now pointed
out that Prussia was acting within the boundaries of the treaty Palmerston had
promised to protect. As a consequence, by February Palmerston was forced to
back down. In acquiescing, he proclaimed that Prussia was acting legitimately,
noting that the German powers “are prepared to declare that they abide by the
Treaty of 1852, and will maintain the integrity of the Danish monarchy in ac-

84. William M. Sloane, “Bismarck’s Apprenticeship,” Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Sep-
tember 1899), p. 437; Bell, Lord Palmerston, pp. 376–377; and Mosse, “Queen Victoria and Her Min-
isters in the Schleswig-Holstein Crisis, 1863–1864.”
85. Quoted in the Times, February 5, 1864, p. 5.
86. Quoted in the Times, December 3, 1863, p. 8.
87. Palmerston to Russell, May 1, 1864, in Harold Temperley and Lillian M. Penson, eds., Foundations
89. Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 3d ser., Vol. 182, cols. 107, 111.
90. See Echard, Napoleon III and the Concert of Europe; Pottinger, Napoleon III and the German Crisis;
and Jennings, “French Diplomacy and the First Schleswig-Holstein Crisis.”
one minister noted, “Today Germany, moving toward unity, needs seaports: she invades Schleswig. Another day she will want to protect her southwest border: she will claim Alsace and part of Lorraine. The pretext will be the same: German nationality.” Furthermore, public opinion in France was distinctly pro-Denmark. And in terms of power, each of the European states—Prussia and Austria included—believed that France might be the only state that could unilaterally balance against Prussia’s expansion. As Russia and Britain both retreated from a balancing policy, an 1864 editorial remarked that “the only thing that might, and probably would, even at this point... make the great German powers to hesitate is a decided declaration on the part of France.”

From 1863 to early 1864, therefore, it seemed likely that France would balance against Prussia’s expansion and offer assistance to Denmark. In 1863 France proposed a European conference designed to revise the territorial borders of European states, Schleswig-Holstein included. To Denmark, France signaled that the conference would further Danish interests. In one message, Napoleon III instructed his diplomats to “say to King Christian that the best way of inaugurating his relations with the Emperor would be to accept without delay the invitation of his Majesty. Before Germany, Denmark loses her case; before Europe, she may win it. Her interest, then, is to refer it to a European congress.” More strikingly, at the beginning of the crisis, France indicated it would support a military demonstration against Prussia to deter its advance into the duchies.

In early 1864, however, Prussia’s legitimation strategies set a rhetorical trap for France. From 1860 onward, Napoleon III had argued to the rest of Europe that legitimate rule rested not on the European treaties or on dynastic claims, but on national self-determination. In 1863 he had proclaimed, “The Treaties of 1815 have ceased to exist. The force of things has overthrown them or tends to overthrow them almost everywhere.” As Emile Ollivier, a member of the French elite, put it, “Balance is a fine word... but a conventional balance established against the will of the people is no more balance than silence pro-

102. Times, February 3, 1864, p. 5.
104. Ibid., p. 179.
105. See Echard, Napoleon III and the Concert of Europe; Pottinger, Napoleon III and the German Crisis; and David Baguley, Napoleon III and His Regime: An Extravaganza (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).
duced by despotism is order.” With the treaties now obsolete, Napoleon III called for a massive redistribution of territory based on nationalist principles. France’s policy was not only one of words but of might. France pursued this policy of nationalities in 1859, backing Italy against Austria, and the state continued to seek territorial adjustments on Italy’s behalf.

Napoleon III believed that Schleswig-Holstein was central to this redistribution, and called upon Europe to invoke a principle of nationalities to solve the conflict: “The cause . . . of this conflict is clearly the rivalry of the populations that make up the Danish monarchy. There exists in each of them a national sentiment, the strength of which cannot be doubted. What is more natural, then, in default of a unanimously accepted principle, to take as a basis the wishes of the population?” Here then Prussia had an opportunity: Napoleon III had long hoped that nationalist legitimacy would spread through the German states, and hence cement his program of political transformation. Prussia’s diplomats thus appealed directly to this nationalist ideology. Bismarck assured Napoleon that, by invading the duchies, Prussia would “loose the forces of nationalism.” If Napoleon III were to oppose Prussia, he would be party to placing Germans under Danish rule, a move that would reveal France as a hypocrite in international politics.

Like Britain and Austria, France was never convinced of Bismarck’s motives. Napoleon ultimately felt that a unified Germany would undermine France’s strength. Moreover, despite frequent negotiations and attempts to secure territory for France in exchange for the duchies, there was no material benefit to supporting Prussia; as Steefel argues, Napoleon “gained nothing definite from these negotiations.” What the evidence does suggest is that once Prussia framed its expansion in nationalist terms, Napoleon III feared the cost of appearing to suppress the German people—that in doing so, he would lose his rationale for a European congress, his foothold in the Italian conflict, as well as legitimacy at home. Indeed, Prussian diplomats even used the language of nationalism to avoid promises of territorial compensation to France. When French diplomats suggested they might keep quiet in exchange for terri-

tory on the Rhine, the Prussians replied, “It would be a most flagrant contradi-
c tion of the policy of nationalities to want to acquire German lands.”

In the end, Napoleon III refused to balance Prussia. In explaining his poli-
cy, he consistently fell back on a nationalist rationale. In a message to the
European states explaining his policy, for instance, he argued that he had com-
mitted himself to the policy of nationalities, especially in his congress proposal
and support for the unification of Italy. He “could not, therefore, be party to re-
placing the Holsteiners under the rule of Denmark which they detested.”
Moreover, as French diplomats conveyed to Britain, Napoleon III worried that
appearing inconsistent, and supporting a nationalist rationale in one policy
and not the other, would undermine his goals. As noted in one diplomatic
message, Napoleon III insisted his “great desire was to see Venetia wrested
from Austria and restored to Italy,” and thus “he could not lay himself open to
the charge of pursuing one policy on the Eider and a totally different one on the
Po [in Italy].”

PRUSSIA, RUSSIA, AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY. To expand, Prussia had to
prevent Russia from balancing against it in the duchies. In the summer of 1863,
this seemed unlikely. Russia had strong interests in the conflict. In 1848 it had
shown itself committed to balancing Prussian power: faced with Prussia’s in-
vasion of the duchies, Russia pronounced that the expansion would “gravely
affect the interests of all of the Baltic Powers and tend in its effects to destroy
down throughout the north the equilibrium established by the treaties. That was an
eventuality which Russia could not admit.” A Russian naval demonstration
signaled the state’s commitment. Russia’s interests in 1863–64 looked much
the same. Strategically, Russia “had no more desire in 1863–1864 than before
to see a German fleet in the Baltic based in Kiel nor to see Denmark so weak-
ened by the loss of the duchies that it would join with Sweden-Norway in a
Scandinavian union.”

Despite Russia’s interests, the state chose not to balance against Prussia’s ex-
pansion in the duchies. Some scholars have attributed this to the weakened
credibility of the Russian threat, arguing that after the Crimean War, Russia
was too weak, both externally and internally, to balance against an expanding

114. Ibid.
115. Nesselrode to Meyendorff, April 26, 1848, document printed in Fedor Fedorovich Martens,
ed., Recueil des Traité et Conventions Conclus par la Russie avec les Puissances, Vol. 8 [Collection of
treaties and conventions concluded by Russia with the powers] (Paris: Foreign Ministry, 1888),
p. 375.
Prussia. Although Russia was weaker in 1864 than it had been in 1848, this explanation is misspecified. It is not that Russia failed to make a credible threat to balance Prussian expansion. Rather Russia made no threat at all, declaring that it would not “send one soldier or spend one ruble for or against Denmark.”

Bismarck’s framing of Prussia’s expansion as upholding the European treaties ultimately persuaded Russia to stand aside. Specifically, Prussia’s legitimation strategies appealed to Russia’s identity as a conservative, dynastic power. Bismarck was successful in arguing that while Prussia might threaten Russia’s interests, it was Denmark that threatened Russia’s identity. Domestically, Russia held to Europe’s dynastic principles, principles inherently threatened by nationalist and democratic claims. Internationally, Russia believed that its legitimacy was integral to the maintenance of the European treaties: without these treaties, revolutionary states, such as France, might feel free to remake the boundaries of the European states, upsetting Russian control in Poland and other volatile territories. Thus Russia would not abandon “the defence of the [European] treaty and of the established order.” Nationalism was a revolutionary force, a “constant source of anxiety and disturbance to the other Powers.” To protect the status quo, Russia’s foreign minister, Prince Gorchakov called for a “moral coalition against revolutionary conspiracy, Ultra-Democracy, exaggerated nationalism” and any overt attempts to undermine the European equilibrium. Bismarck strategically chose rhetoric that resonated with this identity. Bismarck assured Prince Oubril, the Russian ambassador to Berlin, that he “intended to safeguard [Russian] interests and would faithfully observe the Treaty of London for the sake of the four-power agreement.” As a result, the Russian government informed Prussia that it viewed Prussia’s promise to occupy “Schleswig on ‘conservative principles,’ maintain the treaty of 1852, and preserve the Danish monarchy” as legitimate.

119. See Lord, “Bismarck and Russia in 1863.”
121. Napier to Russell, No. 823, most confidential, December 30, 1863, RA I 92/175, quoted in ibid., p. 165.
122. Ibid., p. 167.
123. Ibid., p. 168. For a discussion, see also Steefel, The Schleswig-Holstein Question, p. 200.
Furthermore Bismarck’s rhetoric convinced Russia that Denmark was pursuing an illegitimate nationalist strategy—that it was Denmark’s actions, not Prussia’s, that threatened Russia’s ontological security. Prussia’s pretext for action in the duchies had been Denmark’s imposition of a new constitution, one designed to please Denmark’s nationalist Eider-Dane population. Although Denmark realized that Russia would not recognize the legitimacy of a liberal-nationalist constitution in the duchies, the Danes hoped that Russia, with its strategic interests and adherence to the European order, would support Denmark as it had in 1848.

Instead, Russia informed the Danish government that it could not accept its actions as legitimate. Early in the crisis, in December of 1863, the czar told the Danish government, “I admit that the movement against you in Germany has at present in part a revolutionary basis” but “on your part, too, there are also . . . symptoms of exaggerated tendencies.”124 As the crisis developed, British diplomats noted that Russia saw Denmark as “dangerously excited by democratic and national passions,” and as a result, it was increasingly likely that the Russians would stand back from the conflict.125 As Russian officials stated to the British, “It was the intention of the Powers to maintain the Treaty of London,” but if Danish nationalist sentiment were not contained, Russia could not support Denmark.126

Prussia’s rhetoric therefore acted as a “wedge strategy,” splitting the long-standing Russian-Danish alliance. Even as Austria and Prussia marched through the duchies, Russia refused to accept Denmark’s rationale for its actions. On February 11 Russia proclaimed that it would not oppose the occupation of the duchies, as the Russians understood that Austria and Prussia were acting in defense of the treaties. To the Danes, the czar maintained that although he would do everything to restore peace, it was up to the Danish government to act legitimately: if anything, the Danes, not the Germans, were threatening the integrity of the European order. As a Russian diplomat explained to the Danes, “It is not for Denmark’s interest that Europe protects its integrity; it is for the European interests, for the treaties that are common to us.”127 Russia would not balance against Prussia, for reasons of identity rather than reasons of interest.

125. Quoted in ibid., p. 200.
126. Memorandum of the Transaction Which Preceded the War between Denmark and Germany, BFDA, doc. 39.
Conclusion

In the lead-up to the Danish-Prussian War of 1864, Prussia’s legitimation strategies produced consequences that cannot be explained in terms of power or interest. In Austria, Prussia’s rhetoric signaled that it would be bound by norms and persuaded the Austrians to assist its expansion in the duchies. In Britain and France, Prussia’s legitimation strategy set rhetorical traps and raised the costs of opposing Prussia’s rise. Finally, Prussia’s legitimation strategy persuaded Russia that its rise would strengthen European conservatism, and that it was Denmark that posed the real threat to Russia’s ontological security. Legitimation strategies were thus key to preventing a balancing coalition. Nor would this be the last time Prussia would use legitimation strategies to thwart balancing coalitions. In 1866, for instance, Prussia used directed rhetorical appeals to keep Britain, France, and Russia out of its war with Austria. To France, Prussia suggested that its war with Austria would destroy the German Confederation, install a national government, and overturn the last vestiges of the Treaties of 1815.128 To Britain and Russia, Prussia insisted that its dispute with Austria was merely an internal squabble, not a threat to broader European interests.129

More generally, at the core of this article is the question of why states fail to balance power in ways international relations theories would predict. Explaining balancing behavior, especially during power transitions, requires a thorough understanding of the rising state’s foreign policy. This seems straightforward. Yet, because many scholars of international politics assume that balancing is automatic, the ability of states either to provoke or to stave off balancing coalitions has remained underexplored. This question is not merely theoretically significant. It underpins contemporary debates over U.S. hegemony, specifically whether balancing coalitions are likely to form and displace the unipolar system. Scholars remain divided over whether the international community has either the will or the capacity to balance.130 Moreover, only the most ardent of structural realists believe that the United States has no control.

128. Austria’s diplomacy also ensured French neutrality.
129. Again, this is not to downplay the role of realist factors in these conflicts. Bismarck’s promise to Britain and Russia that he would help settle the Black Sea question was key in buying their acquiescence. See Panze, Bismarck and the Development of Germany.
over whether balancing coalitions form; most theorists believe that U.S. foreign policy will profoundly shape balancing behavior, although often how this happens is left undertheorized.

This study supports the argument that whether states will balance the United States depends, in part, on how it decides to legitimate its power, particularly its use of force in the international system. In this view, the United States’ half-hearted attempts to legitimate its foreign policy—such as its attempt in 2003 to persuade the United Nations that an invasion of Iraq was justified—have been counterproductive, if not catastrophic. The United States had done well in the past to legitimate its foreign policy in the name of international norms. Although it may have been acting out of cold, material interests, it nevertheless signaled its willingness to act within the boundaries of the status quo. In contrast, recent U.S. actions, particularly the 2003 invasion of Iraq, signal a much different, unilateral, perhaps even revisionist foreign policy. And as Bruce Cronin argues, such actions undermine “the legitimacy of the international order. . . . If this persists over time, the hegemonic order declines.”

Likewise it is still unclear how the United States, and the international community as a whole, will accommodate China’s potential rise. Much has been written about the dangers of overbalancing—if China is an insecure state and the United States engages in overly aggressive balancing, then there is a risk of provoking unnecessary conflict. Questions remain, however, as to what will determine U.S. foreign policy with regard to China, and whether or not China can secure a peaceful rise. Legitimation theory suggests that how the international community reacts to China’s rise depends not only on power and interests, but also on the ways in which the state will frame and legitimate its actions. So, for example, since the 1990s China has carefully justified its foreign policy, legitimating its expanding economic involvement in East Asia, as well as in Africa and Latin America through appeals to accepted free-market
norms. If legitimation theory is correct, this framing is likely to stave off a balancing coalition, even as China becomes more powerful.  

Finally, the article speaks to broader paradigmatic debates in international relations theory. Constructivists have charged that neorealists ignore the ideational foundations of international relations, that norms and legitimacy drive state actions just as much—if not more—than power and interests. In response, neorealists claim that constructivists too quickly dismiss power. Without downplaying real disagreements about the role of anarchy and ideas in state behavior, this article suggests that these paradigmatic debates are overdrawn. Legitimacy is not peripheral to international relations; it is an integral component of power politics.