Humiliation and Third-Party Aggression

By Joslyn Barnhart

There is a growing consensus that status concerns drive state behavior. Although recent attention has been paid to when states are most likely to act on behalf of status concerns, very little is known about which actions states are most likely to engage in when their status is threatened. This article focuses on the effect of publicly humiliating international events as sources of status threat. Such events call into question a state’s image in the eyes of others, thereby increasing the likelihood that the state will engage in reassertions of its status. The article presents a theory of status reassertion that outlines which states will be most likely to respond, as well as when and how they will be most likely to do so. The author argues that because high-status states have the most to lose from repeated humiliation, they will be relatively risk averse when reasserting their status. In contrast to prior work arguing that humiliation drives a need for revenge, the author demonstrates that great powers only rarely engage in direct revenge. Rather, they pursue the less risky option of projecting power abroad against weaker states to convey their intentions of remaining a great power. The validity of this theory is tested using an expanded and recoded data set of territorial change from 1816 to 2000. Great powers that have experienced a humiliating, involuntary territorial loss are more likely to attempt aggressive territorial gains in the future and, in particular, against third-party states.

Contributor Information

Joslyn Barnhart is an assistant professor of government at Wesleyan University. She is completing a book entitled, *The Consequences of Humiliation: Outrage, Status Threat, and International Politics*. She can be reached at joslynbarnhart@gmail.com.