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**Double Standard Policies of Great Powers – Comparing and
Contrasting China, the USA and Russia in Current International
Disputes**

Thesis booklet

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WORK HISTORY

The significance of the topic

Despite being a fairly common characteristic of a wide range of bi and multilateral cases, the use of double standards in international relations is a topic that has not been thoroughly researched. Bigger and smaller states as well as non-state actors can equally project double standards – the goal is almost always the same: improving their own chances or emerging victorious from – or, as is often the case with smaller, weaker states, surviving - a given clash or conflict situation.

States of all sizes and levels of influence are known to apply double standards when their leadership feels the need to do so in order to alter or protract the outcome of a conflict, however, for my thesis, I chose to delve into cases where nations of considerable regional or even global influence turn to double standards as their way of altering their situation. The reason for that is that double standard projection by great powers – be it on less powerful states or similarly powerful ones, Western or non-Western actors – is almost always without any legal consequence. Double standards – and accusations of double standards by one state towards another - are a deeply rooted element within international relations, something that can now be considered just as natural as asymmetry and inequality in relations between states. When they are mentioned in any shape or form during a legal conflict situation between states, double standards and double standard accusations are denied or ignored by international law – just like states applying double standards – at least partially or momentarily – ignore the rules and regulations of international law.

The main purpose of my research is to thoroughly analyze the behavior of great powers which entails the application of double standards as well as the accusations towards other state actors of using them. The concept of double standards used to be essential in international legal literature, having been used frequently to analyze certain conflict cases. At the beginning of the 21st century double standards lost some of their relevance in conflict analysis, however, with the emergence of China as a rival to the United States, as well as with Russia's military activities, they regained traction, once again becoming an important asset for better understanding the dynamic between nations. Despite their reemergence, double standards have not been thoroughly and comprehensively analyzed – this is where the novelty and significance of this work lies.

My work focuses on recognizing the goals, imperatives and constraints of big, influential states applying double standards, the specific reasons behind their application of double standards and the reasons behind states accusing other states with the application of double standards. Whether they are agreeable with international law or not, they are firmly rooted in international relations, even though at times they are difficult to perceive and analyze. As a result of that, conflict resolutions by international law also often become difficult and protracted, given that the more powerful participant of the conflict will always have the „tools” of double standards with which it is able to improve its chances of coming out of the ruling unscathed.

The theory presented in this research through case studies is that no matter which state applies a certain double standard or accuses another state of their application, there is a generally characteristic goal behind the act, something that can be utilized for describing the behavior of powerful states. The significance of this research lies in the fact that through identifying and analyzing double standards, one can get a lot clearer picture of the conduct dynamic of great powers, their intentions, constraints, purposes and the way they navigate conflict situations in order to maintain a solid leadership position.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Although double standard elements are frequently noticeable when looking at asymmetrical relations between states or even symmetrical ones (take two great powers, for instance), their existence is not as well-processed by researchers as many other typical behaviors projected by great powers. Double standards and accusations related to double standards are often overlooked or fully ignored. In some cases that is because applying double standards appear to be such a natural sort of conduct by a bigger, more powerful state towards a weaker, lesser one that there does not seem to be a „remedy” for it. In other cases, double standards are identified, strongly criticized, deemed unlawful, there are also rare events when they are brought up at legal proceedings, but their use never truly draws any negative consequence.

The main purpose of my research is to thoroughly analyze the behavior of great powers which entails the application of double standards as well as the accusations towards other state actors of using them. The main subjects of the analysis are of course some powerful states on today’s stage of international relations: China, Russia and the United States of America. When looking at a phenomenon generally present in the conduct of a certain category of international actors, especially one that has not been explored deeply enough, observing case studies is the ideal way of research. The case studies chosen for this work are all recent, therefore the double standards in them have either not been identified yet, or if they have been identified, they have not been focused on in terms of studying a behavioral pattern typical of great powers.

The nations that we now consider global leading powers are the same that held that status 10 or 15 years ago, however, states that were not known to be striving even for regional

leadership can be seen emerging into the „second tier” now, gaining the attention of the world and of the nations already in great power status. Of course, none of the emerging nations are there with the great powers yet, but thinking ahead a few decades, their growth may become a threat for the current great powers. Although it is true that a state considered as a global leading power probably does not have to fight for survival (like many smaller, softer states of the world have to), yet them being on top for lots of years to come is not a given – it is something they need to constantly work hard for.

The hypothesis I have for this work is that there is a characteristic pattern in the way great powers use double standards and in the events when one great power accuses another with using double standards. Identifying such a common, easily recognizable pattern in their reasoning behind the double standards and the manner in which they apply them could provide substantial help in really knowing what a great power exactly is. Also, it could help in understanding what „great power behavior” consists of – a conduct typical of all states that currently fall into the „great power” category, no matter what their location or other traits are. That way, great powers could be better molded into one category, something that is a lot easier to read and analyze. Through identifying a pattern, the steps a great power could take in an unequal conflict situation can be more calculable, making it easier for a smaller state – or multiple smaller states in case of a multilateral issue – easier to respond. That way, at least part of the inherent asymmetry and inequality could be taken away from the situation, making it somewhat more symmetrical and equal.

What is more, identifying such a pattern could also be of help when it comes to resolving a conflict by legal means – knowing the typical „great power reactions” would provide significant help to the legislation to conduct the proceedings accordingly and apply the means that would leave less space for double standards as well as for accusations related to the use of double standards.

APPLIED METHODS

In the literature review part of my thesis, I present my theoretical framework in detail, introducing theories of international relations that can be connected with the application of double standards. The concept that ties a given international relations theory to double standards is the same in every single case: power. The main notion of my research originates from the concept of asymmetry in international relations and the way such disparity has been shaping bi- and multilateral relations between states, creating an intense need in great powers to not just maintain, but secure their power, their superior position, resulting in the phenomenon of the application of double standards as well as accusations related to their application. The main theories of international relations that focus on retaining power are structural realism – and within that, the balance of power sub-theory - , offensive and defensive realism and constructivism. Other than theories of international relations that can be used to create a stable framework for great powers' use of double standards, there are some specific concepts that I deemed essential to be detailed in the context of double standard use. These concepts are lawfare, soft power and smart power. All three are frequently used by great powers with the aim of retaining their authority or influence, improving their reputation or securing a better position in a certain conflict situation. Given that these concepts are in a sense similar to that of double standards, they are often combined in the behavior of the nations I studied for this work, therefore they can also be better understood together.

As for the research method of this thesis, in order to discover whether the common pattern in great powers' application of double standards exists or not, I chose the case study method. I found that case studies allow to capture information on the 'how,' 'what,' and 'why,' of something that's implemented. It also provides a good chance to collect information on why

one strategy might be chosen over another. Furthermore, it permits the development of further hypotheses. Comparing and contrasting the behavior patterns of great and mid-size powers in asymmetrical conflict situations helped prove and solidify the preliminary thoughts I formulated and also aided me in adding new ideas to the ones I already had.

In the cases presented in this thesis, I carefully examine the events and use the theories of international relations and the aforementioned other concepts in order to support my main ideas about the existence of a pattern in double standard application and provide answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of my work.

FINDINGS

During my research I came to the conclusion that it is not only great powers that resort to using double standards in order to reach their goals of improve their situation or reputation, but middle-sized powers tend to use them as well, most of the times against states they consider less mighty than themselves. India's conduct against Pakistan is a prime example for that. In my view, „great power behavior” can be applicable for such cases as well, given that the bigger state acts from a superior position, automatically considering itself „great” compared to the smaller state it projects double standards onto.

The importance of identifying a common pattern lies in the fact that it could eventually serve to take at least a part of the inherent asymmetry and inequality away from a given conflict situation, making it somewhat more of a symmetrical and equal nature. What is more, identifying such a common pattern can also be of substantial help when it comes to resolving a conflict by legal means – knowing the typical „great power reactions” would provide significant help to the legislation to conduct the proceedings accordingly and apply the means that would leave less space for double standards as well as for accusations related to the use of double standards.

Observing all the case studies including the use of double standards, it is fairly easy to see that the aim of state actors when choosing to apply them is not to conquer or gain even more power, but to come out of a given conflict in a more positive light, and with that, to consolidate their status. China, Russia, the United States – even though they all might have nurture a lot more ambitious goals, with the specific cases of double standards they only want to stay great in an ever-changing system.

This is true even when the case study itself is that of a military conflict: I do not at all assume that with waging a war against another state or multiple states, a great power does not wish to conquer and acquire more power, but with the use of the double standard itself, it always just wants to ensure it is able to keep the status it already has.

The very nature of the double standard concept explains that fairly well: similarly to soft and smart power, a double standard is never an aggressive or even assertive, out-there sort of conduct. It is much more of a cunning, well-thought out strategy, something that, as I already explained in the introductory part of my work, is often not even noticeable or identifiable.

Through the cases I dove deep into, my main finding is that the use of double standards by great powers is here to stay. Of course, new rules can be formulated in order to accelerate or facilitate their eradication, but with that, the main issue is that as there is not just one set type of double standard, but numerous different sorts, it would be impossible to create a rule that was able to invalidate all those. There is the possibility of establishing new rules for every new case and every new variant of double standard, however, naturally, that would be a process without and end in sight.

Right now, it can be stated that double standards have the potential to coexist with international law. International law actually does not allow double standards as it is based on the principle of sovereign equality, which entails the equal application of law, but since international legal norms are often not enforceable, they can still survive in the international relations.

Double standards also have the potential to coexist with international law because there is no true repercussion to them, they can be applied without any significant consequence and, most of the times, they function in the sense that the states using them get out of the given situation having the advantages they initially wished to gain, or, at least, creating a *status quo* that provides them benefits in the long run. Failing to hold all states equally accountable for violations of international law enables powerful leaders of powerful state actors to ignore the policies and laws established by the international community. Until all powers, including the United States, Russia and China are uniformly held accountable for their crimes, international law will remain ineffective. Why should powerful leaders abide by the laws when others are excused? Justice can never be achieved while even the idea of double standards exists. While powerful leaders roam free, innocent civilians will continue to pay the price.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Double standards, even though they are not justifiable by the rules and regulations of international law, have been, are and will be an inherent part of characteristic great power behavior – an identifiable, familiar pattern that remains, despite the significant differences between the political systems of current great powers. Therefore, they are something that is impossible to be fully wiped out of the field of international relations. Double standards have for long served as a tool for powerful states to maintain, solidify or enhance their position in cases of international conflict or legal debate, and they have more often than not proven to be highly successful. In addition, given that they are above smaller, weaker states, great powers genuinely feel like it is their right to do things that lesser actors are not allowed to do, for instance apply double standards or evade the rules and regulations of international law in other not easily perceptible ways. As long as asymmetry between nations exists in international relations, states having great power are bound to feel superior and conduct themselves accordingly.

International legislation is always going to find new means to come up with a well-structured, thoroughly constructed framework on how to identify and eradicate already existing double standards from legal proceedings. However, the application of double standards will always evolve and re-appear as a means for great powers to maneuver their way out of not so favorable situations or constraints that block the assertion of their will or their other objectives similar in nature. As long as certain states – great, global and regional powers above all – treat international law as barely more than guidance, double standards are here to stay, therefore their study is necessary.

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