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Regional Politics and Powers: Hierarchy and Comparative Regional Analysis in International Relations

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Summary and Keywords

Comparative regionalism constitutes a new frontier of international relations analysis that provides a more focused theoretical lens for understanding the localized phenomena dominant in international politics. However, as is often the case with a relatively new area of academic inquiry, the subfield currently suffers from a number of challenges in conceptual agreement and operationalization conventions that have slowed progress. Having perhaps finally caught up with area specialists and researchers in the field of comparative politics in recognizing the relative importance of regional spaces, the question remains as to how to most effectively understand the extent regions—as either levels of analysis or units unto themselves—are substantively integral in generating the outcomes studied by international relations scholars. Following almost four decades of theorizing, future steps lie in clearer conceptual definitions followed by generating novel empirical findings that may complement, or contradict, existing international relations theories.

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While some early attempts at engaging comparative regionalism exist prior to the Cold War's conclusion, most theorizing begins at the point at which the region as a concept is able to emerge from the shadow of international relations research's emphasis on the bipolar order of the American-Soviet rivalry. These early explorations, however, were frequently limited to either qualitative discussion of emerging trading behaviors and political institutions or, alternatively, the exploration of "non-Western" types of political engagement that challenged the traditional Anglo-European understanding of both international relations and the conduct of political science. Building on the backdrop of this conceptual theorizing, empirical work highlighting regional distinctions began to emerge as well. This renewed emphasis on comparing regional spaces is often undertaken from a small-N comparative methodological approach to identify similarities and differences between regions, with a very specific interest in developing an understanding for the causal variation behind how regional spaces' trajectories develop and diverge.

Finally, one of the greatest theoretical challenges of comparative regionalism is the applicability of theories designed to understand the interactions of the entire international system (with primary focus on the major powers) to more localized spaces and conflicts. This is not to claim that politics necessarily follows different rules within different regions, but instead that because regional-local contexts are sufficiently unique, the combination of causal variables present may lead to very different outcomes for many phenomena of interest that scholars seek to understand. As regional importance has risen over the past 20 years, a clear set of criteria upon which theoretical development and empirical analysis can proceed is required in order to delineate the effects of regions on states and international politics.

Keywords: regions, comparative regionalism, hierarchy, regional powers, status, empirical international relations theory

Comparative Regionalism and Hierarchy in International Relations

While relatively new, the field of comparative regionalism remains one of the more methodologically varied in international politics (Sbragia, 2008). Uniting these diverse approaches is the underlying observation that regional subsystems in international relations appear to possess heterogeneous causal processes that alter our understanding of traditional international topics, such as conflict onset and diffusion, the formation of formal institutions, or the proliferation of trade ties. Fundamentally, this recognition of contextual causal diversity corresponds with the realities of how geographic proximity modifies the ways by which states are able and willing to engage one another.

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Existing examinations of regions often emphasize hierarchy¹ as a key variable that changes across spaces and overtime (e.g., Butt, 2013), the impact of which extends beyond mere conflict but may also translate into authority exercised over groups of states, whether from a major or regional power within a region, a major power without, or both, and sovereignty is therefore divided between that possessed by the state and that directed by others (Lake, 2009, pp. 51–52). Comparative regionalism is at once an evaluation of hierarchical processes and a criticism of the anarchy concept originating in the nation-state-centric context of European political development. The qualitative work that until recently has dominated the subfield is an engagement of hierarchy within constructed spaces called regions, with a desire to understand how types of hierarchical engagement impact issues of security, economic relationships, and status considerations at the core of understanding both what a region is and the substantively important ways in which the diversity of regional subsystems matter to international politics. Similarly, the empirical development of the subfield has followed a trajectory that seeks to move beyond capabilities and the meddling of external major powers toward exploring a more holistic understanding of hierarchy—whether economic, diplomatic, or institutional—and the consequences of its presence or absence. As empirical engagement of comparative regionalism continues to progress, a key approach to addressing many of the subfield’s challenges will be integrating questions of domestic, regional, and international hierarchy into a more complete understanding of the region as a substantively interesting political unit with important consequences for international politics.

While comparative politics and area studies have long histories of regional emphasis, international relations and particularly quantitative, large-N research has generally avoided the region as little more than a control for geographic proximity. However, an emerging recognition that a variety of important outcomes globally in international politics clearly cluster in geographic space has inspired renewed interest in the region as potentially of substantive importance. By integrating the regional level through the lens of hierarchy across levels of analysis, international relations may move beyond the area studies emphasis of comparative politics, which merely recognizes the potential for varying causal processes across culturally and historically distinct domestic contexts, and engage in a linkage politics step required to examine the regional subsystems themselves in a generalizable manner.²

With a strong background in qualitative theorizing, both extending from area studies as well as qualitative and non-Western international relations approaches, empirical examinations of hierarchy(ies) within regions have developed theoretically interesting conclusions applicable to both order and disorder in the international system. However, this recent empirical progress also highlights the need for further conceptual and theoretical development to properly organize variables in a multi-level framework and create meaningful, non-arbitrary measurement strategies for both the outcomes under examination as well as regions themselves.

Background in Qualitative Research

While some empirical examinations of regional subsystems existed during the Cold War period (e.g., Russett, 1967; Thompson, 1970), the collapse of the Soviet Union redirected scholarly attention away from systemic phenomena typical of the period toward the regional subsystems that proliferated with the additional independence of new states that were no longer overshadowed by the bipolar conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Due to the collapse of that bipolar system, what emerged was a more fragmented “global world order of strong regions” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 20) with specific attention needed to discern the varying patterns of order that developed within these emerging spaces and their potential struggles (Lake & Morgan, 1997). However, many examinations often took on a more critical, non-empirical bent as scholars took issue with the dominant, Western approach to international relations (Acharya, 2014; Acharya & Buzan, 2007), claiming that the contours of causal processes within regional subsystems may very well function differently in the Global South than in Europe or North America (Breslin & Higgott, 2000).

This initial engagement took on a heavily constructivist tenor as the underlying observation posited that regional orders appear to be constructed (and deconstructed) and that the emerging patterns do not neatly follow capability distributions or the emergence of functional trade or institutional networks. However, limiting the advancement of the field is how these initial qualitative observations may be translated into generalizable empirical work explaining why regions vary in their politics (De Lombaerde et al., 2010). Yet these same theoretical challenges should and may be answered: *If regions are constructed geographic spaces, cannot we uncover the behavioral consequences of such constructions? What variables provide insights into their relative salience and formation? Do concepts like power and hierarchy have similar meaning across spaces, or do they instead reflect shifting organic normative processes and values (Acharya, 2007) and can they be measured? If regional hierarchies matter, then should we not differentiate between types of dominant states (e.g., Peterson & Lassi, 2017) at the pinnacle of the regional pyramid, as well as whether regional spaces are being dominated by global major powers or regional powers (Volgy, Gordell, Bezerra, & Rhamey, 2017B)?*

In these qualitative evaluations of regional spaces, the gold standard that sought to unite the constructed elements of regionalism with both a more analytical evaluation and an emphasis on hierarchy lies in Katzenstein’s (2005) *A World of Regions*. With its emphasis on (a) the role of regional powers, (b) the nested nature of regional subsystems in the broader global order, (c) the impact of status attribution on regional policy choices, and (d) the behavior of potential challengers, Katzenstein’s work provides a foundation for the empirical examinations of regional politics and powers that followed. His effort compares the unique ways by which the United States, at the pinnacle of international hierarchy, manages two separate regional spaces through different engagement strategies with

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post-war Germany and Japan. Within that analysis, Katzenstein explores issues of hierarchy relating to proximate competitors for regional order, such as Russia in Europe or China in East Asia. The ways in which these regional powers (or American proxies) are capable of engaging their regional spaces varies with the degree to which they receive status from their own region's members, resulting in a far less multilateral framework in East Asia than in Europe and mirroring work finding that Japan may be the only major power that is not also a regional power in the post-Cold War era (Cline et al., 2011). While relying primarily on historical background and cultural elements, the engagement of the hierarchical process is a consistent theme in subsequent analyses.

In a manner perhaps more consistent with typical nomothetic approaches, Buzan and Wæver (2003) developed an analysis of regions constructed along recurring security issues in order to explain the varying stability and instability across persistent geographically present spaces of interest in the international system. Like Katzenstein, the approach also engages questions of hierarchy and its corollary that relative capability distributions are an important component driving issues of regional security. However, unlike Katzenstein's emphasis on the stability-providing processes of recognized hierarchy in constructed regional spaces, Buzan and Wæver's analysis is explicitly realist, as questions of alliance patterns and bipolar configuration of relevant powers to security complexes create more orderly, less conflictual, geographic spaces. However, they, like Katzenstein, recognize the nature of regions as a discrete (albeit permeable) level nested within the broader dynamics of major power engagement, allowing for the development of their own orders with unique internal variables and internal processes while acknowledging the variable impact of proximate major powers and their interjection into regional affairs. Again, regions remain constructed, but herein the causal process behind that construction, as with Katzenstein, lies in the engagement of powers at the regional and international levels.

To some extent, these initial critical, constructed, and descriptive examinations attempted to provide context to a pre-existing and expanding trend in most quantitative studies of international politics: regional dummy variables.³ In one inventory of such examinations, the authors found that 11% of recent empirical examinations of international relations used regional effects in their analyses, usually with a significant relationship to the dependent variable, but in nearly half of these instances there was no discussion about or attempted explanation for why that might be so (Volgy, Bezerra, Cramer, & Rhamey, 2017A, p. 8). The potential heterogeneity of causal processes across regions is often treated in much of this literature as little more than a statistical nuisance: noise, without substantive interest, to be eliminated from the model.

As the need to empirically treat regions as substantively important rose, initial theorizing presented international relations more broadly with two important challenges: Why are regions persistently unique, regardless of the topic of study or paradigmatic perspective? If they are persistently significant, how might such uniqueness force scholars to re-examine the traditional, systemic perspectives that have historically dominated international relations debates? Bridging these divides requires empirical analysis to

develop a (1) resolution of operationalization debates toward empirically useful and observable variables and (2) the implementation of rigorous empirical approaches that accurately capture the nested nature of the multilateral patterns of behavior consistent with an examination of regional politics. Initial empirical work examining regional hierarchy provides the best insights into how this field may continue to evolve, hopefully resolving past debates and criticisms while taking regions seriously.

Progression in the Empirical Examination of Regional Space

The study of regions and regionalism has a somewhat extensive background, where regionalism is limited to recognition of relevant proximate geographic spaces, particularly related to trade patterns (Bhagwati & Panagariya, 1996; Krugman, 1991; Peterson & Lassi, 2017) or institutionalization (Powers & Goertz, 2011). In these studies, however, the region is treated typically as a means of accounting for geographic realities, often either fixed in delineation by arbitrary unrelated designations (e.g., Solingen, 2007A) or tautologically defined by the dependent variable under study (e.g., Haftel, 2007). However, this is in part due to the region not necessarily being a substantively interesting level or unit unto itself but representing an appreciation of distance similar to that found within the relevant dyads literature (e.g., Bremer, 1992; Lemke, 1995; Lemke & Reed, 2001; Quackenbush, 2006). While an improvement over treating the region as a nuisance in most studies with regional fixed effects, substantively interesting findings about regions and their hierarchical structure is not of primary interest in these studies either.

Emphasis on hierarchy within regions, however, typically intends to provide some theoretically salient conclusions about the regions themselves given relevant hierarchical attributes, similar to the use of domestic political and economic structure in the comparative regional work of Solingen (1998, 2007A, 2007B). Early research highlighted the importance of regional spaces between global major powers (Cohen, 1982, 1991), tested notably through the emphasis on shatterbelts (Hensel & Diehl, 1994; Kelly, 1986). Findings have shown that regions located between the projected capabilities of the most powerful states in the international system are significantly more likely to be characterized by conflict, due to both actively interfering major powers as well as unrestrained non-major power dyads within these contested spaces (Rhamey, Slobodchikoff, & Volgy, 2015). Lake (2009) moves beyond the emphasis on capabilities in the preceding works to develop an index of economic and security authority to construct a continuum of hierarchy and anarchy within different parts of the international system. As with research gauging geographic spaces of major power contestation, Lake's approach relates to regional considerations: region members fall along the anarchy-hierarchy continuum of notably powerful states, whereby the extent of subordination to the dominating power manifests itself in their economic openness and their security engagement. Regions, thereby, are

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carved out by authority rather than substantively interesting spaces unto themselves. While not a clear engagement of regionalism, Lake's conceptualization of political authority, however, deteriorates the traditional notion of sovereignty, highlighting the necessity of the relative hierarchy present within a region toward understanding its politics.

Going beyond hierarchy at the systemic level toward examining hierarchy within regions, and in clear contrast to the work of Buzan and Wæver and Katzenstein, Lemke (2002) provides an initial empirical examination of the impact of hierarchy on regional subsystems by focusing exclusively on the distribution of capabilities among regional actors. Lemke extends power transition logic to the regional subsystem to identify both when actors are capable of interacting given geography and, given the distribution of those projected capabilities, the relative impact on propensity for conflict. In this multiple hierarchy model, states capable of reaching one another's capitals across geographic space, but with a single state clearly dominant, are the least likely to experience conflict. States within regions, however, at relative parity, and with a dissatisfied rising challenger, are most likely to experience conflict. As with Katzenstein and Buzan and Wæver, Lemke also recognizes the nestedness of the regional subsystem within the broader capability distribution between major powers at the international level, and when including major powers as interfering actors in local hierarchies, his results explaining the probability for conflict between regional powers and challengers are upheld (Lemke, 2002, pp. 151–155).

However, the power transition emphasis on capabilities and satisfaction remains insufficient in capturing conflict dynamics entirely between the most powerful actors in regional subsystems. As Lemke shows in his concluding analysis, regional dummy variables remain significant, suggesting either an omission of variables relevant to Africa (and South America) or alternatively some concern with cross-regional measurement. Consistent with power transition logic on domestic political capacity (Kugler & Tammen, 2012), Lemke suggests a potential impact by the limited political development of African states but leaves the question open for future research. Alternatively, there may be more to these regional dynamics, as perhaps the cultural development that emerged during state construction created a different set of normative values (Thies, 2010), hinting at the need for empirical comparative regional analysis of hierarchical interactions beyond mere capabilities. One challenge underscored by Lemke's work is the problem of regional identification distinct from the identification of hierarchy, such that it would thereby provide variation among regional systems between those that do, or do not, have hierarchical systems (Lemke, 2010). While the extent of hierarchy is important, some regions may lack hierarchy altogether, the identification of which would be important for understanding the variation in the types of orders that may exist across regional spaces.

Lemke's application of power transition logic to regions provides not only a compelling examination of hierarchy in relative capabilities' impact on local conflict behaviors, consistent with the pyramid characterization of the international system as overlaid hierarchies originating in Organski (1958), but also an important exploration of systemic theories of international politics' ability to improve our understanding of the regional

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subsystem. Clearly, any application suffers from the potential complexity of intervening great powers from beyond the regional space to further their own interests, as was the case throughout the Cold War (Papayoanou, 1997): But can the logic of systemic level theories be extended to regions?⁴ Might the international relations paradigms have varying applicability to different regional contexts, or perhaps even be merged to develop insights into regions that provide greater explanatory power (Ripsman, 2005)? Lemke's analysis provides a key first step in treating the regional level as a relevant subsystem in empirical international relations and focusing on the hierarchy within that subsystem as a key causal component to regional outcomes.

Moving Beyond Capabilities

Given the assumption that hierarchical structures within regions matter, one first necessary attempt is the operationalization of that hierarchy to determine its relative impact. Going beyond capabilities, some authors have taken the concept of status (Paul, Larson, & Wohlforth, 2014; Volgy, Corbetta, Grant, & Baird, 2011; Wohlforth, 2009) and applied it to the study of regional hierarchy to identify what regional powers exist (Cline et al., 2011) and how they may interact with their regional spaces. In contrast to Lemke's (2002) purely capability-based operationalization of hierarchy in regional spaces, this approach analyzes hierarchy as recognition of status through attribution by those within the hierarchy, thereby providing an empirical means of identifying the type of "authority" described by Lake (2009) via the observed consent of those within the uniquely powerful and active state's relevant regional space. As with the findings of major powers at the international level of analysis (Corbetta, Volgy, & Rhamey, 2013), the empirically driven assessment of hierarchy leads to important conclusions about the impact of that hierarchy on politics within these regions. Initial examinations find that regions with clearly defined hierarchies, where major powers reside and receive their commensurate status, have the fewest number of severe militarized interstate disputes. Furthermore, those without either major or regional powers, all else equal, have the greatest number of militarized interstate disputes, though a variety of dyadic and state-level conditions, such as the presence of rivalries, civil wars, and territorial issues, also contribute to the levels of conflict present beyond the hierarchical organization of the region's politics (Volgy et al., 2017B).

Moving beyond regional power status as recognition and attribution by system members of a regional power's hierarchical positioning is the relationship of actors within a region to certain perceived "roles" (Harnisch, Frank, & Maull, 2011; Walker, 2017). The regional power may take on variable strategic orientations toward its region based upon its perceived role that may alter the context of regional engagement for all region members (Destradi, 2010). Alternatively, both less powerful states in a region and external major powers participate in accepting and attributing "roles" that support or undermine the politics of the regional power and the region more broadly (Thies, 2013). Indeed, the degree of engagement by actors in these roles, and the extent to which lesser actors

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accept the role of the regional power(s), might impact regional system outcomes beyond traditional hierarchical variables involving relative capabilities (Nolte, 2010). Engaging role theory empirically may help move comparative regionalism beyond simply aggregating state behaviors in a geographic space toward a more holistic understanding of the multilateral interactions of states. While some research has explored the role of states within a single regional context (e.g., Bengtsson & Elgström, 2011; Harnisch, Berstick, & Gottwald, 2016; Wehner, 2015), broadening the scope of these single region explorations into a workable framework that compares across regional subsystems may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Further, adapting existing dominant explanations of global politics to incorporate regions may provide counterintuitive or contradictory results, at least suggesting the need for further inquiry. Indeed, hinting at this possibility in the democratic peace literature is the inclusion and significance of regional dummy variables in Gartzke's (2007) "capitalist" peace. In some regional spaces, more open, relatively more democratic regimes may actually be more conflict-prone than their autocratic peers (Henderson, 2009). Engaging these regional contexts as substantively interesting rather than a statistical nuisance may lead to a modified understanding of how liberal peace variables impact dyadic and multilateral relationships and whether those causal processes hold true across all regions.

Underscoring the potential of regional spaces to provide substantive insights, approaches that highlight geographic space have shed light on the ways in which regional context, such as stable borders, may condition certain state behaviors (Gibler & Braithwaite, 2013). Managing geography through an appreciation of the subsystem dynamics of regional space provides insights into the causal dynamics of conflict analysis that may be lost if context is ignored, as with the finding that democracy may be spurious, and the democratic peace is instead driven by the proliferation of stable borders within a regional space, permitting those states to both form democracies and remain at peace with one another (Gibler, 2007, 2012). The proliferation of territorial stability within a region may provide the foundation for other pacifying effects leading to democracy, such as increased wealth (Gibler & Tir, 2010), explaining why democracies tend to cluster in certain regions but not others. Combining these characteristics with hierarchy may provide further information on the relevance of existing global international relations findings, as when controlling for territorial claims within a region the presence of major or regional powers has a moderating effect on regional conflict propensity (Volgy et al., 2017B). Taken together, this may suggest that hierarchy within a region provides insights into the development of certain key aspects of international politics, including the resolution of territorial disputes, democracy formation, rivalry termination, intergovernmental organization (IGO) formation, the proliferation of trade, as well as diffusion processes within or between regions.

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While empirical research highlighting the importance of regional space is predominantly conflict-centric, aspects of hierarchy may also have important consequences for cooperative patterns of engagement. For example, Hafner-Burton and Ron (2013) find that human rights norms vary across regional spaces and are often associated with perceptions of proximate powers in the extent to which human rights violations are noticed and receive widespread media attention. Volgy et al. (2017B) underscore the strong association between intraregional cooperative economic relationships and whether regions have major power regional hierarchies; they likewise note that the strongest impacts of regional organizational membership on pacifying regions appears under hierarchical conditions. However, explorations of cooperation in regional space, where regions are treated as substantively interesting, remain somewhat limited outside the econometric analysis of geographically bound trading relationships. To some extent this limited expansion of empirical analysis beyond traditional peace science literature illustrates the relative incompleteness of the subfield, hinting at the continuing need for engagement with both area specialists and scholars focused on cooperation processes and structures to best operationalize and develop theories of regionalism (Acharya, 2014).

Acharya (2007, 2014) especially makes the claim that in certain regions cooperative processes and institutions arise without hierarchy and sometimes in resistance to either global hierarchies or intrusions from global powers. Additional research, however, is lacking to identify the extent to which these efforts can create the strong institutions capable of creating pacifying effects among members and/or increasing substantial cooperation. Little systematic work exists that explores the relative effectiveness of such institutions for expanding cooperative relationships between institutional members in the absence of hierarchical relations.

Next Steps and Challenges

Conceptually, a rough consensus exists that regions are neither fixed nor fleeting and are highly related to the political context in which they arise, following Katzenstein's (2005) assertion that regions are "politically made" (p. 9) and "reflect the power and purpose of states" (p. 2). However, little progress has been made in developing a consensus in operationalizing regions since Thompson's (1973) initial inventory of more than 22 distinct definitions, and the lack of clarity over functional definitions has continued (Hurrell, 2005). Operationalizations of regional spaces include the stagnant variations that generally originate in the Correlates of War dataset (2011), the United States Department of State (2017), or the World Bank (1998). Alternatively, they may be defined by some study-specific criteria related to the dependent variable of interest, such as institutional architecture (Powers & Goertz, 2011), local security concerns (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Lake, 2009), or historical context (Silverstein, 2002). Even Lemke's analytical and non-arbitrary approach to identifying local hierarchies by calculating Boulding's (1962) loss of strength gradient, adapted by topography and infrastructure, begins with arbitrarily defined geographic spaces. Due to this arbitrary distinction, Lemke identifies a very non-arbitrary moment at which Venezuela and Colombia are capable of reaching one another but does no such calculation for when Colombia might reach Panama, as he only calculates the capability reach for states within "South America" (defined as a continent). Obviously, however, the inclusion of proximate states across much shorter distances, on the same continent or otherwise, may have important consequences for his results. To move beyond specific topics of study and develop generalizations about regions requires consensus on a non-arbitrary definition of a regional space. Comparison of empirically generated regional findings may require consensus on the composition of the regional unit, or at least the manner by which that unit might be identified. For example, whether one includes Turkey in the Middle East or Europe may severely alter assessments of regional conflict, institutionalization, or economic integration. While some attempts have been made (see Cline et al., 2011; Volgy et al., 2017A), no consensus has yet developed, with disagreement even over which regions might exist (e.g., Teixeira, 2012; Zakhirova, 2012).

Conceptual challenges on the development of the unit/level of analysis aside, the region remains of particular interest given the nuanced understanding it provides through merging "area-based knowledge" into something more generalizable to the broader system (Katzenstein, 2005, pp. ix-x). One methodological strategy for empirical investigations of that nuance may be the development of multi-level models that capture hierarchy and preferences across levels of analysis. As a consistent theme in some regionalist literature, originating in neo-functionalist (Haas, 1961) and intergovernmental approaches (Moravcsik, 1993, 1997), the inclusion of domestic processes may provide a clearer understanding of regionally related outcomes. Further, as suggested by role theory, domestic factors may shape national roles, which in turn may shape how states engage their regional and international environment (Wehner & Thies, 2014).

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Incorporating these perspectives into a multi-level model that also includes the hierarchical conditions discussed above has the potential to further improve our understanding of regions as substantively interesting spaces that not only incorporates but also moves beyond the characteristics and interactive politics of constituent region members. It may very well be that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and properly modeling the nested nature of regional context through multi-level modeling provides important insights into regional variation.

Uniting domestic origins of regional outcomes with hierarchical regional and systemic approaches has the potential to further and more extensively develop explanations of typical international relations outcomes, including but not limited to conflict. Integrating findings about the evolution of domestic political groups' impact on regional foreign policymaking (Solingen, 2007A) or the extent of state-building and/or national cohesion (Miller, 2009; Rasler & Thompson, 2014) may be effectively merged with the orientations of hierarchically relevant major and regional powers to develop a "linkage" politics framework across levels of analysis. The integration with domestic and international systems into our understanding of regional space, notably the extension of relevant hierarchies within both levels above and below the region, provides an important step for future empirical examination of regional subsystems.

Relatedly, the focus of empirical work thus far has been heavily slanted toward the emergence of conflict as a result of some shift in the hierarchical arrangement of power within a space. Work focusing on the development of cooperative architecture and institutions in response to hierarchy is an important next step and remains an area as yet relatively underdeveloped. As with our understanding of regional space and hierarchy, an important initial step would be to identify more precisely what order might mean within the regional context (Acharya, 2007, p. 637). Is it purely functionalist, or perhaps does it possess more normative elements that may vary across regional spaces, reverting back to the area studies roots of the fields' engagement? What role does the regional power play in its development? In either case, how might theories operationalize key variables in a manner that is useful for cross-regional comparison in empirical international relations? While the functionalist literature has heavily addressed the emergence and evolution of the European Union, applying similar functionalist approaches to the development of organization elsewhere, or lack thereof, may constitute an important next step.

Finally, while more research is important to understanding issues of hierarchy, rivalry dynamics, and external interference in regional subsystems, an improved empirical understanding of the region itself may also be of value. Scholars may wish to concentrate more specifically on the region as the appropriate unit of analysis for various forms of conflict, as an alternative or complementary to monadic, dyadic, or system units of analysis. This strategy is of course dependent on an analytically justifiable methodology for regional delineation, but that problem does not appear to be any more difficult to address than has been the issue of "politically relevant dyads." One approach seeks to analytically define regions through the multilaterally observed opportunity and willingness of states (Rhamey, 2012; Volgy et al., 2017A). Borders of regions may shift and

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change, as do the leadership roles of dominant states (e.g., Butt, 2013; Prys, 2010) and corresponding status or authority, just as states may change borders or internal characteristics. While this approach to regions as units does carry certain drawbacks, such as substantially reducing the number of observations in large-N empirical analysis, it offers some highly salient benefits, including an assessment of conditions under which regions change membership, emerge, or dissolve.

Comparatively, regions themselves might be explored for their causal impact on global outcomes, such as their relative levels of formal institutional architecture and ability to manage security concerns. Further, key questions might include to what degree does regional architecture have geographic coverage? For example, the European Union is a highly sophisticated and formal form of regional architecture but certainly does not cover all parts of the European region with significant fault lines on its eastern border. How does that regional coverage impact regional outcomes? To what extent does that coverage, in conjunction with hierarchy, status, and unresolved internal disputes, develop a regional space's long-run stability both in its levels of internal and external cooperation as well as its operationalized contours as a stable politically constructed space?

A comparative regional analysis also offers the promise of gauging the extent to which regions become permeable to global forces across time and to major changes in global power relationships. For instance, we know too little about the effects of regional expansion on global politics: In what ways—if at all—would it matter to international politics if an East Asian region grows to encompass other regions to become a super-Asian region? Likewise, we know too little regarding the effects of multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar global power distributions on the conflict propensities within regions and on the nature of the hierarchies that they may contain. These are all questions that may be best answered by focusing on regions as the appropriate unit of analysis. Pushing international relations scholarship to move beyond dyads into the exploration of politically salient multilateral spaces may be a highly fruitful area for future research.

Conclusion

Contrary to some of the initial comparative regionalist engagement following the Cold War, the empirical examination of regional spaces serves to augment and improve existing theories of international politics rather than to introduce a new field complete with its own theoretical fiefdoms. The challenge for traditional empirical examinations, however, is to no longer treat the region as a nuisance artifact of geographic proximity, but as a multilateral pattern of engagement that is unique from the international system and thereby worthy of examination.

While increased attention has been paid to regions in post-Cold War academic research, we should not assume that regions were not of significant importance to international politics beforehand. Indeed, reviewing regional dynamics from the Cold War (and prior to

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the Cold War) may provide clearer and more plausible insights into the development of contemporary regional orders. Extending data and empirical examination back from the post-Cold War era would allow not only greater temporal depth but the ability to compare different international systemic environments' impact on regional hierarchical spaces to better explore interplay between regional and systemic hierarchies.

Finally, comparative regionalism provides international relations scholars with the ability to integrate levels of analysis to develop insights in political activity, whether at the domestic, state, or regional level. The recognition that regions are substantively important for the trajectory of the international system allows for an improved understanding of the system as a whole. As European efforts to deepen regional integration have demonstrated, the causal processes internal to one region can have an important impact on other regions and on the broader development of the system. As the hierarchy at the system level begins to slowly shift away from Western dominance, comparative regional examination of both interregional and intraregional politics in the geographic spaces relevant to rising major powers may shed light on future non-Western orders. Via these comparative examinations of regions and regional hierarchies, to an extent, the West vs. non-West challenge of constructivist "new regionalism" research might be addressed by uncovering the non-Western, non-EU development of alternative regional subsystems in an empirically rigorous and methodologically consistent manner. In our understanding of hierarchy, the comparative regionalist literature has already begun to move beyond questions of power to explore aspects of status and engagement, providing greater nuance to old approaches. Future research will need to address some of the specific methodological and operationalization challenges confronting the empirical advancement of the field but is likely to continue to be somewhat diverse in exploring the broad question of regions' importance, both as unique arenas of political engagement and perhaps units unto themselves.

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Notes:

(1.) For an excellent summary of alternative approaches to hierarchy in international politics, see Bially Mattern and Zarakol (2016).

(2.) See, for example, the discussion by Hentz (2008) of the distinct importance of regionalism as a “three level game” in South African foreign policy and the ways by which the regional power may leverage domestic and regional phenomena for global policy goals.

(3.) For example, see Gartzke (2007).

(4.) For an example of an attempt to apply the major international relations paradigms to the regional level, see Paul (2012).

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