

Regional Subsystems Redux: The Concept Nearly a Half Century On¹

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Analysts working in different academic disciplines have differential appreciations for the role of geographical regions. For example, a distinctive tradition emerged in the late 1950s in international relations. In reaction to macroscopic arguments that treated the world as a single system, area specialists argued that their own regional focus behaved differently than the generalizations then being proffered about international systemic behavior. Regional subsystems had their own capability distributions, regardless of whether the international system was considered bipolar or multipolar, and, for that matter, great power capabilities could not be extended into most subsystems at full strength.

Almost a half century ago, Thompson (1973) reviewed the emergence of the regional subsystem literature focusing in part on how these regional subsystems were conceptualized. Different authors emphasized different combinations of referents from a long list of 22 conceptual elements. The conceptual disarray raised the question of whether analysts were working with similar or dissimilar units of analysis. Decades later how have things changed? Is there more or less conceptual uniformity and does this make a difference to our understanding of regional behavior? Does the regional subsystem concept, in general, have a stronger academic foundation in the 21st century than it did in the second half of the 20th century? That is, is it more accepted now or did it represent a brief and dated revolt to over-generalization about the parameters of systemic behavior?

The answer to the conceptual uniformity question is no but not because new conceptualizations have been introduced. Authors on regional international relations have tended to shy away from defining the context in which they are operating. Why that might be the case becomes the focus for this paper. One of the main problems is that we have had problems pinning down what is distinctive about the regional level of analysis. A possible resolution for this problem is advanced in the form of a revised definition of the regional subsystem.

Regional International Relations

Regions, of course, have long been a subject of interest to social scientists and area specialists. The analysis of regional subsystems is a more recent development going back to the

¹ Prepared for delivery at the conference on Regions of Strategic Importance: Geographical space, cultural and political construct, analytical tool, sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Strategic Regions, Charles University, December 6-9.

late 1950s/1960s. Polarity was the central fixation of international relations analysis. Some regional analysts rebelled against the notion that systemic bipolarity told them a great deal about how their region worked. International systemic structure, in other words, was a dubious predictor of regional behavior. Alternatively, a different analytical apparatus was needed to decipher what went on within regions which might have wholly different polarity configurations or in which the interstate distribution of power simply may not be all that powerful a predictor.

We can question the utility of polarity analyses for understanding the international system then or now. We can also appreciate the grounds for regional rebellion in a world in which the variations in regional behavior have long challenged the wisdom of singular generalizations about interstate behavior. What stands out, nonetheless, is that regional analysis in international relations remains something of an unwanted stepchild. Most international relations specialists persist in talking only about the rules and structure of the larger system while area specialists continue to talk about what events in their regions of choice might mean. At least two consequences prevail. How regional international relations works in general or comparatively remains underdeveloped. How regional behavior that is nested within larger systems works (or vice versa) remains equally underdeveloped.

Why these conditions persist is curious. International relations is certainly no less regionally differentiated today than it was a half century ago. Most observers would argue the opposite – that the world has become even more regionally differentiated with the passing of the Cold War. Yet, by and large, analysts who specialize in regional interactions or comparative regional behavior remain fairly rare.² Generalizations about systemic behavior continue to be made as if they hold equally well in every nook and cranny of the planet even though the discourse has switched from bipolarity to unipolarity.

It is easy to characterize IR generalists as requiring some immunity from complexity to be able to develop theoretical generalizations. Many of them, it can be said as well, are simply not interested in what happens in Peru, Burkina Faso, or Turkmenistan. They would argue that is not where the IR action is. From their global perspectives, they have a point. Perhaps then some of the explanation for this state of affairs lies with regions. Are there things about regions

² One hypothesis is that the lack of interest stems from the failure to develop objective criteria for operationalizing regional subsystems (Lemke, 2002: 60). Another is that IR analysts were seduced away from doing regional analysis in the 1970s by the advent of structural realism and IPE neoliberalism. See Lake and Morgan (1997:6). It might follow that the analytical interest in unipolarity after the collapse of the Soviet Union had a similar effect. Even so, one might argue that in addition to analytical seductions, the main problem with the relative unpopularity of the regional subsystem idea is that most analysts of regional international politics are not especially enamored of theoretical or conceptual constructs. There are certainly exceptions to this hypothesis but most regional analyses are highly descriptive. Getting who is doing what to whom right is hard enough without adding the complexity of hypothesis testing and theory construction. Alternatively, the analysts who are most interested in hypothesis testing and theory construction prefer to focus on the global level. These hypotheses, in turn, suggest that the pool of analysts who would engage in comparative regional behavior is likely to be highly circumscribed by interest and expertise.

that make them analytically or theoretically elusive? Most analysts of regional international politics are not particularly theoretically oriented. For many, it suffices to keep up with changing events in a selected number of states which, after all, is not easy. "Comparativists" often study only one country at a time. Regional international politics, in contrast, may require keeping up with is going on in a half dozen to as many as twenty-five states. Since juggling that many analytical balls at the same time is not easy, it is less surprising that area specialists do not often address or develop theoretical questions about regional behavior. Students of global politics would no doubt note that keeping up with what seems to go on in Washington, Beijing, and Moscow is not all that easy either. We should not expect, therefore, much theoretical relief from systemic generalists.

Thus, the general study of regional IR is most likely to be carried out by a handful of people who feel less comfortable with universal generalizations but who are also less interested in particularistic generalizations about specific times and places. This helps explain the small number of analysts who do comparative regional IR. But there are more problems. One of the major problems pertains to the regions themselves. Where do we draw the lines between one region or another? Should we focus on geographic contiguity, cultural affinity, or interaction densities? What do we do with states that seem to belong in more than one region, no region, or drift back and forth? What do we do with regions that shift their shapes over time?

There have been a number of different approaches to these questions. This is not the time or place to review them all. Instead, the present focus will be centered on definitional issues and what might be called the inside/outside dilemma of identifying regional subsystems. More specifically, the initial premise of this paper was to assess how regional subsystem definitions had changed over the past half-century. However, it turned out that defining regional subsystems no longer happens very often. Why that might be the case, therefore, became plan B.

Defining and Identifying Regional Subsystems

Assuming that there are regional subsystems, how should we best go about identifying them? There are basically two ways: from the inside out and from the outside in. The inside out approach tends to be the more subjective of the two. Someone stipulates which states go where or, alternatively, who they think are members of the subsystem. Most authors who take this approach do one subsystem at a time but there also lists of subsystems or regions that have been constructed for various purposes. The United Nations has one as does the U.S. State Department. Regional lists, however, are not necessarily the same thing as regional subsystem inventories. The outside in approach develops some kind of methodology to empirically deconstruct the world's population of states into appropriate clusters. Various efforts have been made to do this since Russett (1967).

Either approach must or should start with a definition of what sort of regional subsystem is receiving attention. From the beginning of regional subsystem analyses,

developing an explicit consensus on what we are talking about has proved to be problematic. An early indicator of this problem is Thompson (1973). Examining 22 regional subsystem authors writing between 1958 and 1971, 21 different conceptual components (listed in table 1) could be discerned in their definitions. Not surprisingly, the odds of there being much definitional overlap was quite low given so many moving parts. The outcome reflected this likelihood.

Table 1: Twenty-one Regional Subsystem Attributes or Conceptual Components

	Conceptual Component
1.	Proximity, a primary stress on a geographical region.
2.	Actors' pattern of relations or interactions exhibit a particular degree of regularity or intensity.
3.	Intrarelatedness – a condition wherein a change at one point in the system affects other points.
4.	Internal recognition as a distinctive area.
5.	External recognition as a distinctive area.
6.	One or more actors.
7.	At least two actors.
8.	At least three actors.
9.	Small powers only.
10.	Units of power are relatively inferior to units in the dominant system.
11.	Subordination in the sense that a change in the dominant system will have a greater effect on the subsystem than the reverse and there is more intensive and influential penetration of the subsystem by the dominant system than the reverse.
12.	Geographical-historical zone.
13.	Some degree of shared ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social and historical bonds.
14.	A relatively integrated and unified area.
15.	Some evidence of integration or a professed policy of achieving forthcoming economic, political, or social integration.
16.	Functionally diffuse.
17.	Explicit institutional relations or subsystem organization.
18.	Autonomy – intrasystem actions and responses predominate over external influences.
19.	A distinctive configuration of military forces.
20.	A regional equilibrium of local forces.
21.	Common developmental status.

Source: based on Thompson (1973: 93).

At the same time, there is no good reason to give equal weight to each and every one of the 21 components. Some tell us very little if anything (numbers 16 and 19 functionally diffuse and a distinctive configuration of military forces). What is a non-distinctive configuration? Several mistake what should be variables that characterize subsystems differently for definitional markers. Numbers 12 (geo-historical zone), 13 (shared bonds), 14 (degree of

integration), 15 (future integration aspirations), 17 (a regional organization), 18 (autonomy), 20 (local forces equilibrium), and 21 (developmental equality) tell us something about regional subsystems that we might like to know but nothing that needs to be known to tell whether a subsystem exists at any given point in time. Numbers 9 (only small powers) and 10 (units inferior to dominant system) fall into this variable category as well but some might insist that regions with global powers behave differently than ones without them. That very well might be true but still is not a stumbling block for definitional purposes. Whether global powers occupy local positions in regions or not, their relative presence or absence is an important variable. Much of the combat in Europe between the 1490s and 1945 would have been much different if global power home bases had not also been anchored geographically to the European region.

The paragraph above eliminates slightly more than half (11) of the 21 components. The ten that remain include numbers 1 (proximity), 4 and 5 (internal/external recognition), and 6-8 (one, two, or three minimal number of actors). Proximity and recognition are probably crucial. States have to be geographically nearby one another to cluster. Is it conceivable that a stealth regional subsystem might exist that no one recognized?³ Internal/external recognition might be factors that go without saying but it is easy to retain them as useful elaboration and a check against highly dubious claims about non-existent arenas. Number 6 can probably be dismissed because no one has ever argued that a single state can constitute its own regional cluster of states. Logically, one would need at least 2 and quite possibly more states to also have a cluster.

Another set of necessary and unnecessary factors leaves numbers 2, 3, and 11 – the real trouble-makers for operationalization purposes -

2- Actors' pattern of relations or interactions exhibit a particular degree of regularity or intensity.

3 - Intrarelatedness – a condition wherein a change at one point in the system affects other points.

11- Subordination in the sense that a change in the dominant system will have a greater effect on the subsystem than the reverse and there is more intensive and influential penetration of the subsystem by the dominant system than the reverse.

These three components are about either the extent of the “sub” or the “systemness” of the subsystem idea. Of the three, the subordination idea is the most dubious. It seems highly likely that most regional subsystems are more influenced by the dominant system than the other way around. But what about situations in which the principal regional system becomes fused with the dominant system – as occurred in World Wars I and II, if not earlier?

³ When we (Rhamey, Thompson, and Volgy, 2014) presented data that demonstrated no empirical evidence for a Mediterranean regional subsystem could be detected, the answer from partisans of the Mediterranean idea was that it was still possible for such a subsystem to emerge in the future.

The point – especially for those who believe that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke initiated World War I or that the German invasion of Poland led to World War II – is that it is conceivable that regional affairs could have a stronger influence on the dominant system from time to time. In this respect subordination becomes a variable. At the least it is not a constant. Thus, if this is an attribute on which regional subsystems vary, it is not something that should be in the definition.

As a consequence of trial by elimination, the recommendation in 1973 was to focus on the following 6 of the original definitional elements:

1. The subsystem logically consists of at least two and quite probably more actors.
2. The actors are generally proximate.
3. Internal and external observers recognize the subsystem as a distinctive theater of operations.
4. The actor's pattern of relations or interaction exhibit a particular degree of regularity and intensity to the extent that a change at one point of the subsystem affects other points.⁴

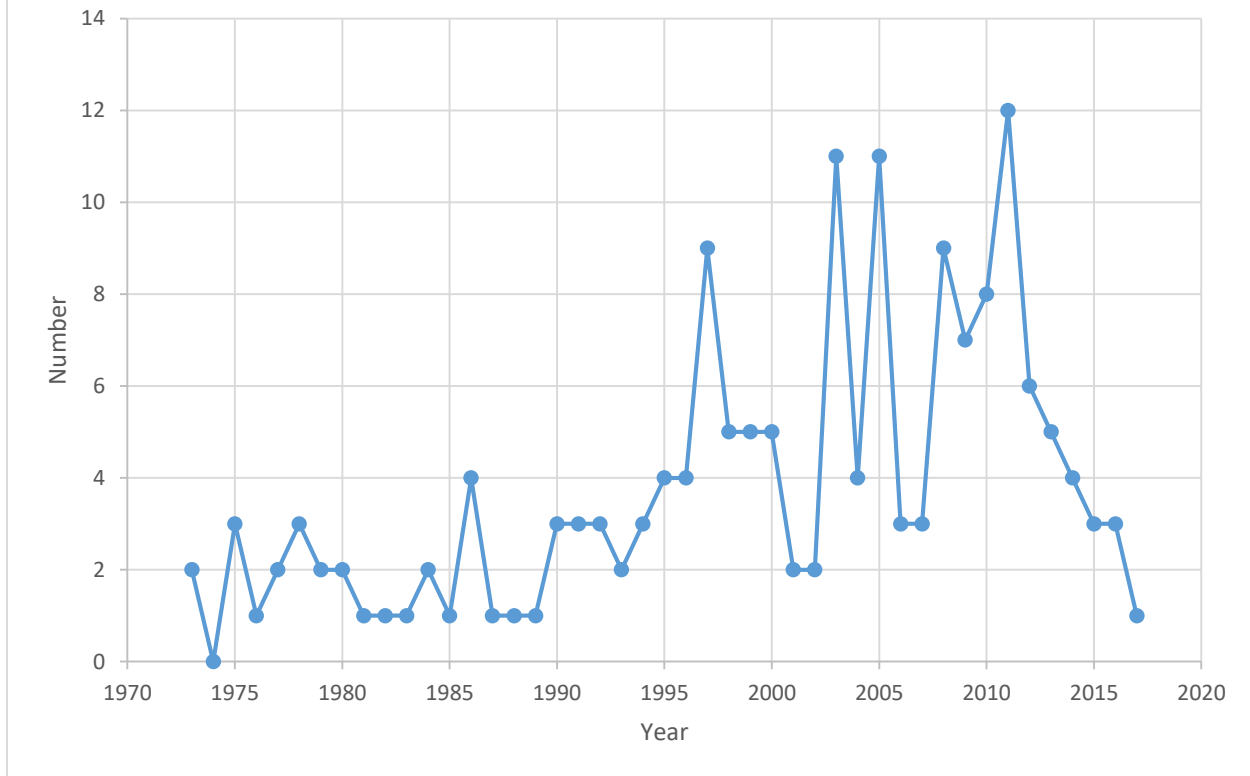
The third statement fuses components 4 and 5 while the fourth statement combines components 2 and 3. No advice was proffered on how best to measure statement 4.

To be sure, what is logical and parsimonious to one author need not appeal to other. Since 1973 was 44 years ago, one obvious question is whether the initial definitional disarray and/or the conceptual streamlining recommended above have worked themselves out in succeeding decades. To find out, Google Scholar was used to identify all entries on one of the labels early authors used for the regional subsystem. In addition to regional subsystem, this search included regional system, subordinate international system, partial international system, subordinate system, and regional security complex. The outcome is 168 entries that, if nothing else, demonstrate a growing interest in the regional international politics phenomenon – although figure 1 suggests the growth curve was slow to develop and may have peaked recently.⁵ Figure 1 also reinforces the popular idea that the Cold War was not good for analytical interest in regional subsystems. The premise is that if the superpowers chose to ignore regional boundaries or ran roughshod over them, analysts could do this as well. But, then, this tendency is precisely what stimulated the emergence of regional subsystem analyses in the first place.

⁴ See Lake (1997) for a critique of the 1973 definition.

⁵ We need to be cautious in not reading too much into the end of the plot line in figure 1. Google Scholar seems to give priority to older items while the web tends to privilege more recent material. When “regional subsystem” was put into a web search, different items of pertinence were found and a number (but not all) were of more recent origin. Google N-grams of variations on regional subsystem suggest different peaking times.

Figure 1: Google Scholar References to Regional Subsystem and Related Terms



The initial plan was to redo the same exercise undertaken in 1973 focusing on whether fewer or more conceptual components appeared in definitions advanced since the early 1970s. Ideally, some movement towards a rough consensus might have emerged that would serve as a building block for advancing generalizations and theory about subsystemic behavior. The only problem is that authors, by and large, ceased defining regional subsystems years ago.⁶ There are some exceptions to be sure but the exceptions do not appear noticeably in the Google Scholar sample.⁷ Whether this says more about the Google Scholar search algorithm or the

⁶ In a recent effort (Volgy et al. 2017), we reviewed the empirical literature that used “region” as part of the empirical analysis. Thus we focused on scholarship that had to conceptualize and operationalize the term “region”. When absolutely required to do so, there still was no consensus on what a region meant, or similarity in operationalization: we uncovered 70 different regional classifications across 75 studies, with a majority of regional classifications being based on meta-regions, with or without modifications. There was no evidence for a “gold standard” for classifying regions and discussion about the concept of region, or issues about the validity of the empirical classification for a state’s regional classification, were typically minimal to nonexistent, despite otherwise very rigorous scholarship in the treatment and measurement of other concepts in these works.

⁷ An example is Ehteshami (2013: 1) who argues that subordinate regions may be composed of multiple sub-regions if they satisfy five conditions: geographical proximity, a minimum of three actors, a high degree of interactions, recognition of the space as a distinctive theater of operations, and the tendency of the dynamics of the immediate area to dictate nearby states’ foreign policies. The first four characteristics can be found in table 1;

subfield is not clear. Nonetheless, it proved difficult to continue any semblance of the original plan of attack. The question then became one of asking why authors were avoiding this issue.

The answer seems to be threefold. Authors pursuing an inside-out approach merely stipulate (or not) which states are considered to be in their subsystem and proceed with their argument. The definition question can be side-stepped easily in this fashion. A second answer is connected to the emergence of the regional security complex idea in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead of focusing on a region per se, regional security complex's zero in on states that are interdependent because of mutual security problems. Who those states might be tend to be identified using an inside-out approach.⁸ For instance, if one is interested in northeast Asian foreign policies, there is no need to spend a great deal of time justifying examining the interactions among North and South Korea, China, and the United States. We know that they are the core actors. Perhaps Japan, Russia, and Taiwan may enter the picture as well and can be added if one wishes but it is not absolutely imperative to do so. Similarly, in Cold War days at least, one could look at the main South Asian security complex by encompassing the behavior of India, Pakistan, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States without worrying too much about whether Nepal or Sri Lanka fit in. Security complex analysts thus seemingly diverted the question from regions to security conflicts that happen to take place in regions. Or did they?

Morgan (1997: 26) argues that regional identifications usually involve some mix of five components: 1) member self-consciousness and that of others that a region exists, 2) geographical propinquity, 3) autonomy and distinctiveness from the global system, 4) regular and intense interactions among members, and 5) a high level of political, cultural, and economic affinities.⁹ He then goes on to say that the Buzan regional security complex (RSC) notion

.... gives some weight to the first of these but emphasizes the second and the third. He notes that members usually perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as being in a particular security complex, but he allows for complexes to exist, or have consequences, that members may

the fifth characteristic is either new or a variation on component 3 in table 1. Other examples of articles that might have appeared in the Google Scholar inventory and did not are Lebovic and Thompson (2006), Zakhirova (2012), or Volgy and Rhamey (2014a). Neither of these last three articles had "subsystem" in their titles and that may explain why they failed to be included. On the other hand, Thompson (1981) did not appear and it did have "regional subsystem" in the title. There may in fact be quite a few relevant articles that do not show up – hence the reason for referring to the Google Scholar list as a sample.

⁸ Since Buzan and Waever (2003) inventory the world, their approach might seem to be an outside-in approach by partitioning the world into a number of existing regional security complexes. But what they really do is move from one corner of the world to others and make assertions about which states are to be included. This approach resembles a multiple inside-out variant.

⁹ In terms of table 1's list of 21 conceptual components, Morgan's first component is expressed in numbers 4 and 5, his second component is number 1, his third component is a mixture of numbers 11 and 18, the fourth component is number 2, and the last component is number 13.

not clearly perceive or understand With regard to the fourth criterion, the interdependence of significance pertains to security. States can have intense conflicts, with resulting high interdependence on security, yet have few other interactions..... While the fifth criterion might have some impact on relations among a cluster of states, it is not intrinsic to the concept of an RSC..... (Morgan, 1997: 26).

If Morgan is right, and we think he is, the regional security complex carries implicit and explicit ideas that do not really move the question from regions to security. Instead, it simply privileges a region's security problem(s) over other issues, thereby allowing security-oriented authors to focus on what they are most interested in. Buzan (2012) would seem to agree because he argues later that

...by "region" I understand a geographically clustered subsystem of states that is sufficiently distinctive in terms of its internal structure and process to be meaningfully differentiated from a wider international system... of which it is a part..... The geographical element in the concept of region is crucial. Regions are not just any subsystem of states in an international system, but a specific type of subsystem defined by geographical clustering. The significance of geographical clustering rests on the idea that most types of interactions amongst units will travel more easily over short distances than long ones... This means that, other things being equal, it is reasonable to expect that interactions amongst a regional cluster of states will be more intense than between these states and more distant ones..... Regions presuppose that states are more or less fixed into geographic positions, and have to reach out from an anchored position.

So, Buzan's regional security complexes are defined by their regional clustering which implies proximity and more intense interactions within the region than with the rest of the world. It also follows that members of the regional cluster are apt to recognize the distinctiveness of their security interdependence, if nothing else. Thus the RSC concept may be attractive but it really does not take us as far from the regional subsystem notion or the identification problem as one might think.

Moreover, it may be a research design error to define universes in terms of one type of issue if other types of issues are ongoing as well. Another way of saying this is whether we can study conflict while ignoring cooperation or vice versa. Of course, it is possible to focus on one and ignore the other – we do it all the time. But when it comes time to analyzing regional subsystems per se, one would think all dimensions should be in play. To do otherwise may be a reasonable way to reduce reality's complexity but there are chances of missing significant processes while focusing only on conflict or only on cooperation. Then, also, one might anticipate that intense or strategically located regional security complexes are the ones most likely to draw in outside major powers. We do not want to leave these outsiders out of the

picture, but do we want the most penetrated complexes to represent how regions go about dealing with their security problems?

The third answer is connected to outside-in approaches that attempt to break the world down into empirically justified clusters. The bottom line is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to execute an outside-in approach that produces a regional mapping that everyone will acknowledge has a great deal of face validity. The root reason does not lie with positivism flaws, methodological liabilities, or alternative assumptions in how to employ specific techniques (although all three may be involved in some way). The real problem is that actual state behavior does not cooperate with attempts to construct subsystems in which the links within neatly exceed the links outside. Alternatively, it is one thing to name the members of the Arab League, add a couple of other actors, and call it the MENA subsystem. It is another to find evidence that each one of the states named actually behaves consistently and explicitly as if it belonged to a MENA subsystem.

Some regions, of course, are more cooperative than others. The northern and southern ends of the Americas and western Europe are fairly cooperative these days and it may not be a coincidence that they also either tend to exhibit pronounced trade insularity (North America and Western Europe) and/or they are separated from the rest of the world by two oceans (North and South America).¹⁰ Other parts of the world sometimes provide empirical support for interaction distinctiveness and at other times do not.

There are several ways to illustrate this problem. One rather telling example are the findings reported in Volgy and Rhamey (2014b).¹¹ As part of a much more extensive project on comparative regional behavior in international politics, they sought regional clusters with five state characteristics: 1) either contiguous or at most separated by 400 miles or less, 2) possessing sufficient capability (in terms of economic size and relative political capacity) to reach other states, 3) above average interactions with each other (based on planetary averages), 4) emerging as groupings in clique analysis, and 5) belonging in groupings that numbered more than two states per cluster. Thus, Volgy and Rhamey were looking for evidence of the existence of regional subsystems with members that numbered more than two, were proximate, and interacted distinctively. Only the sufficient capability dimension was added to several of the customary regional subsystem attributes. Unlike most outside-in efforts, however, they focused on events interaction data that seek to capture foreign policy

¹⁰ In these cases it is not the cooperation per se that is important but if there was less cooperation, there would be more attempts to a) attract allies from outside the region and b) reduce interactions with various parts of the region as a matter of strategy. Either facet could blur where the regional lines become demarcated.

¹¹ Other works in this project include Volgy, Rhamey and Fausett (2012), Rhamey and Volgy (2014a, 2018), Volgy et al (2018), and Volgy et al (2017).

behavior (and, therefore, both cooperative and conflictual activities).¹² They also sought to cover some six decades of activity (1950-2010).

Tables 2 through 6 show some of their findings. To summarize the five tables, Volgy and Rhamey find some support for many of the places imagined to be regional subsystems but it is a highly variable type of support. The same actors do not always cluster together. Some actors cluster together in some years but not in others. Some actors occasionally join clusters that most observers would regard as identification errors. In sum, not one single regional subsystem is consistently and perfectly validated by this technique – although, some come close. The reason as noted above is not because the networking technique is inherently flawed. The problem is that the regional subsystems we imagine existing and are quick to list do not operate the same way from year to year or decade to decade.

Table 2 starts the process with a four-fold split within the Americas. Two Europes are depicted – one that has western and eastern members is identified but there is another one that has a Baltic/North Sea flavor yet does not adhere exactly to a Scandinavian shape. The Middle Eastern subsystem looks familiar but encompasses Afghanistan and Pakistan. Finally, a rather large Asian subsystem with members that one might have thought would be located in a south, southeast, or east subsystem is generated.

Table 2: 1950's Regions

Region	State Members
Northern Central America	Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, United States*, Canada*
Southern Central America	El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama
Andes	Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, Haiti, Dominican Republic
Southern America	Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina Chile
Europe	Portugal, Spain, France, United Kingdom, West Germany, East Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Finland, U.S.S.R., Turkey, Iceland*, Ireland*, Switzerland*, Albania*, Morocco*
Northern Europe	Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway, Denmark, Sweden
Middle East	Libya, U.A.R., Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan

¹² Events interaction data enumerate directed foreign policy activity according to systematic scales that place an action on a continuum ranging from highly cooperative to highly conflictual. The Volgy-Rhamey project merges data from COPDAB (Azar, 1980) and IDEA (Bond et al, 2003).

East Asia	India, China, Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Nepal*, Laos*, South Vietnam*, North Vietnam*, Malaysia*, Australia*, New Zealand*, Cambodia*
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A decade later, the four American clusters have been reduced to three in table 3. The Middle East that is identified seems just as plausible as the three American clusters but it contains Greece oddly. Now, we have four European subsystems that are equally plausible – as demonstrated by the ease with which they are labelled. Exactly why the Maghreb ends up in western Europe is curious but only underlines North Africa’s closeness to the other side of the Mediterranean. Similarly, the multiple African subsystems are not too surprising. The shrunken Asia – reduced to east Asia now – is less expected.

Table 3: 1960’s Regions

Region	State Members
North America	Canada, United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba
Andes	Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Haiti
Southern America	Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile
Middle East	Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Sudan, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Libya, Syria
Western Europe	West Germany, Italy, Switzerland, United Kingdom, France, Spain Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Portugal*, Ireland*, Iceland*
Benelux	Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg
Scandinavia	Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland
Eastern Europe	East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, U.S.S.R.
West Africa	Guinea, Mali, Cote D’Ivoire, Upper Volta, Niger
Central Savannah	Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Central African Republic
Gold Coast	Ghana, Togo, Benin
Central Africa	Congo (k), Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Africa*, Rhodesia*, Zambia*, Madagascar*, Mauritius*, Lesotho*, Botswana*, Swaziland*
East Asia	China, Burma, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Ceylon, Maldives

In the 1970s (table 4), two American subsystems emerge – a rather large northern one and a small southern group. The single European and Middle Eastern clusters seem unexceptional. Much the same can be said about the six clusters (three in each) found in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

Table 4: 1970's Regions

Region	State Members
Northern America	United States, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Ecuador, Peru, Canada*, Bahamas*, Grenada*, Dominica*
Southern America	Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile
Europe	Ireland, United Kingdom, Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, West Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, M , East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, U.S.S.R., Turkey, Cyprus, Iceland*
Middle East	Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Yemen
West Africa	Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Cote D'Ivoire, Upper Volta, Ghana, Benin, Togo, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Gabon
Southern Africa	Central African Republic, Congo, Zaire, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Malawi, Madagascar, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique*, Lesotho, Swaziland*, Comoros*, Seychelles*
African West Coast	Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea
East Asia	Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma, China, Bhutan*, Maldives*
Northeast Asia	Japan, South Korea, North Korea
Southeast Asia	Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan, Australia*, New Zealand*, Papua New Guinea*, Fiji*, Solomon Islands*, Western Samoa*

The data from the 1990s actually generate a set of regional subsystems that most closely resemble what standard regional lists might have looked like in that decade. The Americas are split north and south. Europe is split east and west as are the Middle East and the Maghreb. Three conventional subsystems emerge in sub-Saharan Africa. A Central Asia appears for the first time. East Asia seems a bit large but the core- Pacific periphery distinction makes intuitive sense.

Table 5: 1990's Regions

Region	State Members
North America	United States, Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica
Southern Central America	Colombia, Venezuela, Panama
South America	Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay*, Uruguay*

Europe	Russia, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Turkey, Spain, Poland, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Israel, Czech Republic, Austria, Finland, Slovakia, Norway, Switzerland, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Bosnia, Slovenia, Iceland*, San Marino*, Andorra*, Lichtenstein*
Eastern Europe	Ukraine, Romania, Greece, Belarus, Serbia and Montenegro, Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, Albania, Moldova, Macedonia, Cyprus
Baltics	Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia
Maghreb	Algeria, Morocco, Portugal, Libya, Tunisia, Malta
Middle East	Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, U.A.E., Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Lebanon, Bahrain
West Africa	Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Chad, Niger, Liberia, Togo
Central Africa	Dem. Rep. of Congo, Sudan, Tanzania, Eritrea, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi
Southern Africa	Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, Namibia, Lesotho*, Swaziland*
Central Asia	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan
East Asia	China, India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Pakistan, Taiwan, North Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Bangladesh, Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Nepal, Laos, Australia*, Sri Lanka*, New Zealand*, Papua New Guinea*, Brunei*, Fiji*, Maldives*, Solomon Islands*, Vanuatu*, Samoa*, Tonga*, Micronesia*, Kiribati*, Marshal Islands*, Palau*, Nauru*, Tuvalu*

Much of the face validity found in the 1990s is exhibited again in the 2000s. The Americas split is maintained. The 1990s European split is not maintained but we can understand why that might be the case. The other subsystems that appear approximate the configurations that appeared in the 1990s. Only Central Asia disappears but the unsystem-like behavior of that part of the world has been discussed elsewhere (Zakhirova, 2012).

Table 6: 2000's Regions

Region	State Members
North America	Canada, Cuba, Mexico, United States
Southern America	Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Venezuela, Paraguay*, Peru*
Europe	Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Rep., Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Andorra*, Iceland*, Kosovo*, Lichtenstein*, Moldova*, Montenegro*, San Marino*
Middle East	Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, U.A.E.

Maghreb	Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia
West Africa	Ghana, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone
Southern Africa	Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho*, Swaziland*
Central Africa	Burundi, Dem. Rep. Congo, Congo Rep., Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda
Horn of Africa	Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia
South Asia	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Sri Lanka
East Asia	Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia*, Brunei*, East Timor*, Fiji*, Kiribati*, Marshall Islands*, Micronesia*, Nauru*, New Zealand, Palau*, Papua New Guinea*, Samoa*, Solomon Islands*, Tonga*, Tuvalu*

Table 7 attempts to summarize the findings reported in tables 2-6 with an emphasis on the variation in the number of subsystems identified and the variable size of their memberships. If forced to, readers could probably construct justifications for any one of the 21 regional clusters displayed. The problem lies not with their plausibility but their inconsistency. Nothing emerges fully consistent across all 5 columns. Some of this inconsistency can of course be attributed to the different dates of independence associated with the nearly 200 states in the world today.¹³ A Maghreb should not have emerged in the 1950s; nor should a Central Asia before the 1990s. But the problem is not that they appear prematurely. Rather, some regions come and go once they appear. The Maghreb shows up twice when it might have appeared four times. Central Asia emerges once but not a decade later. All of the other regional subsystems, with the partial exception of South America, tend to have different members. Some of the variations are understandable; some are less so.

Table 7: Regions Identified and Number of State Members, 1950s-2000s

Region	1950s	1960s	1970s	1990s	2000s
Northern Central America	5				
Southern Central America	4			3	
North America		10		6	4

¹³ One other possibility is that the 1990s and the 2000s look “better” and are more consistent with inside-out assessments because the IDEA data base is more comprehensive than its predecessors for gauging interactions.

Northern America			22		
Andes	7	7			
South America	4	5	6	8	10
Europe	23			27	46
West Europe		12			
Northern Europe	5				
Benelux		3			
Scandinavia		4			
Eastern Europe		8		12	
Baltics				3	
Maghreb				6	3
Middle East	10	14	14	11	12
West Africa		5	13	7	6
Central Savannah		4			
Gold Coast		3			
Central Africa		17		8	8
Southern Africa			21	7	9
African West Coast			4		
Horn of Africa					3
Central Asia				6	
South Asia					6
East Asia	19		11	36	32
Southeast Asia			12		
Northeast Asia			3		

At the same time, the results are never inexplicable. Rough expectations are met. The Americas are split north and south. Europe has been split east and west but no longer works that way. The Middle East and North Africa maintain some division. Sub-Saharan African subsystems are several in number but their cohesiveness or boundaries are fluid. An Asia is singled out but its exact configuration varies from decade to decade. Sometimes, clusters appear in the southeast, the northeast, the center, and the south. At other times, these fragments seem to dissolve into a larger pan-Asian entity. This, too, is not inexplicable in lieu of Cold War machinations and the rise of China (Pardesi, et al, 2017).

In general and not surprisingly, different results emerge in outside-in analyses if different techniques and methodological assumptions are employed. Yet the outcomes usually fail to correspond closely to expectations, even if sometimes they come close as we have seen in table 2-6. Rarely, then, are the inside-out images of regional subsystems validated exactly by

outside-in examinations. Either the mental images of what regional subsystems look like are at fault (thanks to subjective inside-out constructions) or regional subsystem behavior is more variable than we think. We suspect it is a combination of both. Regional subsystems, in general, are hazier and more fragile than we have supposed. States do literally and figuratively drop in and out of neighborhood memberships from time to time as their behaviors change. The boundaries are always a bit unstable or moving targets and in some parts of the world more so than in others. Some states could show up in more than one subsystem if that was allowed by methodological rules and some states act as if they are relative isolates in some years and less so in others. Similarly, some states are far more interested in the most proximate members of a perceived neighborhood than they are more distant ones, especially if the regional subsystem is large.

Consider, for example the close quarters of the Persian Gulf subsystem in contrast to the larger regional subsystem of which it is a part, the Middle East, which stretches from Morocco to Iran and Turkey. Should Omani decision-makers be as concerned about what takes place in Algeria as they are with events in Saudi Arabia? Alternatively, should we expect all Middle Eastern states to be equally attuned to what happens in some of the smallest members of the region? Should, for instance, Iran pay equal attention to Saudi Arabia and Tunisia? The quick answer is no unless on the rare occasion a self-immolation in a small country sparks a wave of unrest throughout the region that takes several years to play out its multiple repercussions. Yet this specific caveat is critical. Who would have thought Tunisia could have been the ground zero for the Arab Spring? It is a pluperfect illustration of systemness. It is also something that we could never have predicted by examining the regularity of other Arab states' foci on Tunisian events.

Finally, regional subsystems or at least some of them are in flux. For example, it is conventional to think of Asia as encompassing several regional subsystems. Starting on the Pacific side, there are an ambiguous collection of islands in the South Pacific that interact with one another and have some tenuous link to the Eurasian land mass. East Asia is thought to be characterized by Chinese centrality (historically some of the time) and bookended by smaller subsystems in the northeast and southeast that nest within the larger East Asia. Moving to the center of Eurasia, there are Central and South Asia. It is customary to stop there and consign southwest Asia to the Middle East. But it turns out that a strong case can be made for some of these specific theaters to be short-lived in the contemporary era. Pardesi et al (2017) find that a pan-Asian connectivity manifested itself shortly after World War II but that the Cold War encouraged the fragmentation of Asia into different theaters.¹⁴ The demise of the Cold War and the rise of Chinese power has, in its turn, tended to reunite the multiple Asian subsystems into one larger entity. The point here is that regions come and go. Perhaps then we should not get

¹⁴ The irony here is that most observers give the Cold War credit for blurring regional distinctions. In this case, they increased the number of operative regions.

overly committed to nailing down their precise boundaries empirically – but that surely hinges on the type of questions being pursued.

We probably do ask too much of decision-makers and our data bases to expect all members of a regional subsystem to consistently demonstrate pan-subsystemic orientations. This observation would also apply to aggregated dyadic tests of above average attention paid to neighbors. Some neighbors might merit above average attention all of the time but not necessarily all of them. Yet fluctuating attention spans vis-à-vis neighbors need not mean neighbors fade in and out of awareness. International relations does not seem to work that way. Tunisian affairs can seem of marginal importance for decades and yet, on occasion, Tunisian affairs can seize the central stage briefly because it is a part of a regional subsystem and because other parts of the subsystem were considerably receptive to what had happened and what it symbolized. Nor can we assume that it is only the other states that experienced direct Arab Spring consequences in the form of coups and civil wars that were most closely attuned to Tunisian events. In other parts of the Middle East, governments successfully scrambled to head off similar behavior in their own countries through increased repression, welfare payments, or both.

One way out of this outside-in, subsystemic identification cul de sac is to accept the poor odds of fully identifying regional subsystems empirically, declare victory, and walk away. The way to do that is to reduce the definition of a regional subsystem once more. Strike the troublesome fourth component calling for a level of regularity and intensity in interactions that lead to changes influencing the probability of changes elsewhere in the system and turn it into another variable that regional subsystems possess in varying degrees. That leaves a cluster of two and probably more proximate states that actors inside and outside the region recognize as a distinctive arena.¹⁵

The alternative to this definitional strategy is to retain the fourth component and acknowledge that it is unlikely that any single indicator is going to capture everything that one might seek in our search for subsystemic tendencies. In taking such an approach there is no need to give up on outside-in operational attempts. We need to keep trying because it is important to assess claims made about regional identities and systemic sensitivities. Analysts will still rely on lists of subsystems found in Buzan and Waever (2003), Miller (2007), and Stewart-Ingersoll and Frazier (2011). Authors will continue to justify their own inside-out constructions. But, for those committed to testing intra-relatedness in international relations, there is no real alternative to probing empirical evidence for subsystemic boundaries.

Conclusions

¹⁵ Such an approach would parallel counting political systems as states if they are given de facto and de jure status by other states. For the record, one of us (Volgy) prefers a minimum of three states to constitute a cluster while Thompson prefers the two or more minimum to preclude oddities such as Australia and New Zealand being ruled out as a potential subsystem.

What began as an examination of the fate of the regional subsystem concept over the past 4-5 decades turned into a reconsideration of a 1973 conceptualization. The reason for the switch in focus was the discovery that most authors declined to enter the subsystemic definitional fray or else they adopted Buzan's regional security complex which did not seem to require a delineation of the region. Yet we have shown that that is not really the case. Buzan and others have gone to some pains to insist that the regional adjective is in the security complex phrase for a reason.

Thus, we cannot say that any central definition of what authors are concentrating on when they adopt the regional level of analysis in analyzing international relations has emerged. That is unfortunate given the passage of all these years. Yet, at the very least, the literature is no longer characterized by a continuing proliferation of new definitions. Perhaps the relative silence on the question reflects some partial and implicit consensus on what regional subsystems are about.

Empirically, an important stumbling block may be the expectation that intra-regional interactions are greater in volume and significance than non-regional interactions. A second expectation is that all members of the region pay consistent attention to all other members of the subsystem. Sometimes, these assumptions may be validated but frequently they are not supported by pertinent evidence. When these assumptions are not supported, should we proceed to dismiss the existence of a regional subsystem? Or, should we revise our assumptions? In this paper, we have argued that it is best to reduce the regional subsystem definition as much as possible and treat the rest as variables that characterize different regional subsystems differently. We may never obtain as much empirical validation for subsystemic claims as we would like but that does not mean that we should stop trying to make assessments of the various claims out there. Nor should we give up on assessing relative interstate sensitivities to what happens in neighboring states. These sensitivities are clearly not constant. They can also be empirically elusive. None of that excuses us from making the attempt to pin down where these regional subsystems exist and how they function.

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