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The regional powers' research programme in international relations: a critical assessment

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Abstract

More than a decade has passed since an intense research interest in Regional Powers arose in IR. However, this original impetus has of late notoriously tailed off. This was in part the result of an unfavourable international environment but also, I argue, of an exhaustion of the programme's conceptual and analytical framework as such. This can be specially seen in three fronts. First, in the inability of the initial theoretical framing to account for new empirical observations, and an insufficient engagement of Area Studies research for revising these initial propositions; second, in a conceptualisation of global-level influences that has been too restrictive and theoretically impairing; and third, in the difficulties encountered by efforts to explain the formation of regional orders by leveraging regional powers as main explanatory variables. A second argument is that some of the fresh approaches needed to overcome these problems might be found in Comparative Regionalism.

Keywords Regional powers · Comparative regionalism · Area studies · Regional order · Global south

Introduction

The term 'regional power' has had an inconsistent and sporadic appearance in the 'unfinished dictionary' (Guzzini, 2013) of the International Relations (IR) discipline. In contrast to the related notions of 'middle-power' and 'small state', on which an abundant literature emerged early on in the discipline, mentions of the term 'regional power' have been scattered and brief (the few examples are Wight, 1995/1972 and Holsti, 1970).[1] As late as 1992, Iver B. Neumann edited the first

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[1] Martin Wight (1995/1972, p. 63) briefly referred to regional powers as a sub-type of minor powers: '…in certain regions which are culturally united but politically divided, a subordinate international society comes into being, with a states-system reproducing in miniature the features of the general states-sys-

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volume dedicated exclusively to regional powers as a research topic. The arguments discussed throughout the volume, however, never managed to influence the mainstream of IR discourse. This situation changed dramatically around the second half of the 2000s, when an intense research interest in regional powers unexpectedly arose in the discipline of IR. This new interest soon translated into a growing number of publications dealing both theoretically and empirically with regional powers as a main theme. Unlike past appearances of the term, this time the arguments advanced and debated eventually irradiated to mainstream IR. This was evident by the various special issues that the discipline's principal outlets dedicated to the theme and by the increasing number of references to this literature in other branches of IR research.[2]

The array of subjects and cases addressed by this surge of research on regional powers is vast. Notwithstanding, a relatively structured debate organized around a few clear and interrelated research questions emerged. This was partly the outcome of participants sharing some common assumptions, but mainly, as we will see below, the result of a process in which each new debate built upon the previous one. This gave research on regional powers the shape of self-contained collective academic enterprise or research programme. In what follows, I will refer to it as the Regional Power's Research Programme or RPRP.

However, as Frazier and Prys-Hansen note in the introduction to this Special Issue, despite the richness of the debate that took place within RPRP, the initial impetus of the programme has of late notoriously tailed off. Interest in the topic was particularly hit by real-world developments that ended up eclipsing the perceived systemic importance of the states that had been identified as regional powers, among them: Brazil, India, Iran, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey. Indeed, several of these states are now experiencing varying degrees of economic decay and socio-political instability (see Stuenkel, 2019, Ogunnbi et al., 2017).[3] Since the second half of the 2010s, a steady appreciation of the US Dollar, together with falling oil and other commodity prices have been dragging down economic growth in emerging economies. This already adverse scenario was significantly aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis. At the time of writing, cumulative capital outflows from emerging markets and developing economies since January 2020 are double the level experienced during the 2008/2009 crisis and by all measures unprecedented in recent history (World Bank, 2020, p. 21). Because these developments have in some cases negatively affected these states' ability to sustain their regional projection, the

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Footnote 1 (continued)

tem… In such sub-systems as these, there will be some states with general interests relative to the limited region and a capacity to act alone, which gives them appearance of local great powers… Such regional great powers will probably be candidates, in the states-system at large, for the rank of middle power'. Holsti (1970) only writes that states might enact the role of a 'regional leader' or a 'regional protector'. In line with Holsti, for middle powers' researchers, the term 'regional power' has long been understood as one of the possible roles or functions that 'middle powers' can assume (see Holbraad, 1971, p. 87).

[2] For example: South African Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 16, Issue 2 (2009); Review of International Studies, Vol. 36, Issue 4 (2010); International Politics, Vol. 52, Issue 2 (2015); Bulletin of Latin American Research, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2016).

[3] Only two developed states have been identified as regional powers: Israel and Australia (see Cline et al, 2011).

enthusiasm with which observers talked about regional powers barely a decade ago has considerably winded down (see also Hurrell, 2018).

An unfavourable international environment is however not the sole responsible for the stalling of RPRP; there are also signs of an exhaustion of the programme's conceptual and analytical framework as such. In the introduction to this Special Issue, Frazier and Prys-Hansen pose the interesting question of whether RPRP has reached its zenith in helping us to understand regional dynamics, or it is still able to reach new heights? In this contribution, my answer is that the state of the programme is of one that has already reached its peak and is therefore unlikely to make significant progress forward without a thorough revision of its inventory of conceptual and analytical instruments. To make this case, I point at the limits of RPRP in three fronts in which they have become especially evident, namely: (1) in the exhaustion of the initial RPRP theoretical framing and the insufficient engagement of Area Studies research in a way that fosters theoretical revision of these initial propositions; (2) in its restrictive conceptualisation of the global-level influences that may impact upon regional powers and their regions; and (3) in the programme's struggle to account for the formation of regional orders by leveraging regional powers as main explanatory variables.

A second argument of this contribution is that one possible way so move beyond these limits is to bring RPRP in closer dialogue with Comparative Regionalism (CR). CR is a burgeoning sub-field of IR that investigates why and how world regions differ in their political and economic organisation. RPRP originally emerged within CR but drifted gradually away as RPRP came to be strongly influenced by political realism. As we will see in detail below, advances in CR research might just offer some of the perspectives and approaches needed to overhaul RPRP. These refer mainly to the treatment of regional context variables, the expansive CR understanding of the global-level influences that may impact upon regions, and the characteristics of research design that might improve our ability to grasp the complex political and economic organisation of regions as a dependent variable. The paper proceeds as follows: in the first section, I provide an overview of what RPRP is about and of the structure of the debate. I deem this exercise to depict an overall picture of the programme necessary to gain a sense of the current state of research, and exactly where and when RPRP has reached its limits. In the sections that follow, I proceed to discuss each of the three limits of RPRP mentioned above. I do so by considering in each instance the concrete way in which CR may contribute to untangle these problems. The paper closes with a summary of the main arguments.

The RPRP in IR: structure of the debate

As mentioned above, despite the vast array of subjects covered, a few clear and interrelated research questions structuring RPRP can be identified. Since these questions emerged successively as the debate unfolded, they tell us a story of what the programme was about. One story among many possible however, since no single account could comprehensively capture the full extent the regional powers' research.

According to this interpretation, and for the purpose of analysis, RPRP's debate can be divided into four different phases, each guided by a different research question.[4]

First phase

A first phase spans from Neumann's edited volume (1992), introducing the notion of 'regional great powers' for the first time in a systematic way into the discourse of IR, to Nolte's article *How to compare regional powers* (2010), which in a way represented a watershed in regional powers' research as Nolte drew heavily on the cumulated knowledge up until then but for the purpose of formulating a new research agenda. In this eighteen-year interval, a few scholars—Fuller and Arquilla (1996), Ayoob (1999), Lemke (2002) and Buzan and Waever (2003)—first applied the notion of regional powers to investigations on the international politics of regions. Their work was thus foundational for the latter development of RPRP.

This first generation of scholars saw no need to justify their research with a discourse on the 'rise of regional powers'. Their entry point was theoretical: to see whether well-established IR theories could also find application beyond the West. This research interest responded partly to a growing awareness that the theoretical toolkit of the discipline might have a limited empirical domain—preceding thus in certain ways more recent debates on the Western-centredness of mainstream IR theory—[5]and partly to a genuine curiosity for understanding and explaining developments in the 'regions'.[6] This curiosity, however, was accompanied by a strong critique of what they considered the 'atheoretical' approach of the Area Studies. These first authors were very much committed to the idea that regions were comparable and that the proper application of theories and methods could shed light upon common traits across regions. Their work was in this sense formative of the emergent subfield of CR in IR. These motivations translated into a systematic exercise of adapting IR theories, originally designed for the global level, to the regional one. This can be clearly seen in Lemke's (2002, p. 1) description of his own work as an 'effort to determine whether a well-established theory of great power interactions could be modified to help understand interactions among minor powers'.

As a result, this first cohort of RPRP scholars was much more interested in the 'regions' than in the 'powers'. The main dependent variable to be explained was regional order, especially the patterns of conflict and cooperation or regional security. Regional powers were just one variable among others in the theoretical constructs that they proposed for the analysis and comparison of regions. In Lemke's work, regional powers just filled a variable slot in his modified power transition

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[4] Although these phases unfolded sequentially, they overlapped in practice as earlier debates continued in parallel to newer ones.

[5] Buzan and Waever (2003, p. 42), for instance, justified their research in terms of the importance of surveying global variations in regional security 'to expunge Eurocentric elements and produce a general theory of regional security'.

[6] The 'regions' is meant to encompass the Global South or the non-Western world. This was a consequence of the organization of Area Studies centres and institutes in Europe and the USA in a Cold War context (Lewis and Wigen, 1997, pp. 163–169).

theory: that of a local dominant state supervising local relations and trying to preserve the local status quo. In Ayoob (1999), what he calls 'pivotal regional power' is one of the key variables in the construction of regional order together with incomplete state-building processes and different types of great power involvement. And for Buzan and Waever (2003), regional powers define the polarity or structure of their Regional Security Complexes (RSCs). Polarity and the patterns of amity and enmity among regional states are the main variables of their RSCs framework. Common to these authors was also that the research questions they asked in relation to regional powers were structural, that is: whether regions contained or not a regional power, how many, and what were the consequences of these values (structures) for regional order.

Second phase

The surge of the unusual interest on regional powers in the second half of the 2000s largely coincided with the beginning of this second phase. Unlike the previous one, in this phase scholars were more interested in the 'powers' as such. Regional powers were no more variables in complex theoretical constructs. Concretely, scholars wondered if these states were interested in using their superior material capabilities in shaping the political and economic organization of their regions, and if so, which strategies were regional powers pursuing? Given the vast power asymmetries that still separate global powers, especially the USA, from the states identified as regional powers, and perhaps also as a reminiscence of the coalition behaviour thematized by the middle-powers literature, it was thought that regional powers could not have a systemic impact on their own but needed followers. It was therefore crucial to investigate 'what kind of strategies are at disposal of regional powers to produce allegiance and following?' (Nolte 2010, p. 894).

While a few scholars opted for an inductive approach, in which the conceptualization of the strategy grew out of the empirical observation of what a case study regional power did (e.g. Burges, 2006, 2008), others followed the example of the previous phase and imported concepts and theories originally developed for analysing the behaviour of great powers into the regional level and applied them to the study of regional powers.[7] In this case, the concepts and theories borrowed belonged to a significant extent to earlier debates about US hegemony in the international system (e.g. Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990; Lake, 1993; Ikenberry, 2001). It was as if the debate about the concept and the phenomenon of 'hegemony' in international relations continued in a different setting and with different actors. The outcome of these adaptations was quite productive. Nowhere else in IR such an intensive discussion about power in international politics took place as in RPRP, especially about those forms of non-coercive power more suitable for militarily weak and

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[7] This was even encouraged at the very beginning by Nolte (2010, pp. 896–897): 'it would be useful to take the research tools and concepts that have until now been applied in the study of global power hierarchies or with regard to the US' hegemony in international politics and adapt them for the analysis of regional power hierarchies'.

still emerging powers. Hence, concepts such as 'cooperative hegemony' (Pedersen, 2002),[8] 'soft hegemony' and 'leadership' (Destradi, 2010; Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010) were proposed. The adaptations also gave room to thoughtful reflections on the meaning of hegemony in international relations (Prys, 2010; Nabers, 2010), and how we should differentiate the meanings of 'empire', 'hegemony' and 'leadership', terms that until then were used more or less interchangeably in previous debates (Destradi, 2010). These are but a few examples of the richness of the debate in this phase.

Third phase

A third phase was the necessary corollary of the second and inquired whether and how other smaller regional states were reacting to regional powers and their strategies. As scholars came to acknowledge that the strategic objectives of regional powers, the main focus of attention in the second phase, 'do not automatically become reality' (Nolte, 2010, p. 899) and are 'very much contingent on the policies of other states' (Jesse et al, 2012, p. 11) research interest turned towards the responses and reactions of weaker states in the region, that is, of secondary and tertiary states (Ebert and Flemes, 2018; Gardini, 2016a; Flemes and Lobell, 2015; Ebert et al, 2014; Williams et al., 2012; Flemes and Wojczewski, 2011). These reactions and responses were conceptualized by most authors as falling between the two opposites of balancing and accommodation (see Jesse et al, 2012; Lobell et al, 2015; Flemes and Lobell, 2015; Ebert et al, 2014), continuing thus a line of research initiated some years ago by Ikenberry (2003), Pape (2005), Paul (2005), Walt (2005) and others, seeking to enrich the simple dichotomy balancing/bandwagoning inherited from classical realism with the theorization and empirical identification of subtler middle strategies that may fall in between. Here again, as in previous phases of RPRP, the research strategy was to adapt to the regional-level theoretical propositions originally conceived to make sense of global-level phenomena, in this case of other states' reactions to US unipolarity. While in the second phase the critical effect of global-level influences upon regions could be controlled or assumed to be marginal, in the third phase, the global level necessarily took a more prominent role, as it soon became evident that smaller regional states often interacted more intensely with extra-regional powers than with their local regional power and were more concerned about global hierarchies than about regional ones.

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[8] Pedersen's (2002) work is in a sense unique. Published prior to the surge of interest on regional powers, it is the first attempt to theorize the strategies of regional powers and to relate these strategies to a number of considerations that would only appear later in RPRP writings, such as the domestic characteristics of regional powers, the expected reactions of weaker regional states and types of regional institutionalization. The empirical reference of Pedersen's theorisation is Europe.

Fourth phase

In a fourth phase, some researchers attempted to explain the formation and variance of regional orders by leveraging regional powers as main explanatory variables. If there is one key assumption underpinning the whole RPRP edifice is that regional powers play a fundamental role in the creation and maintenance of regional orders. This is stressed by the majority of RPRP authors (see Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010, p. 737; Destradi, 2010, p. 904; Pedersen, 2002, p. 696; Wigell, 2016, p. 136; Volgy et al, 2017, p. 467). To achieve the goal of explaining regional order, however, the main variables of the previous phases (structure, behaviour and reactions) had to be put together into one explanatory scheme or causal chain. Nolte (2010, pp. 898–899) broadly suggested how this may look like:

> one should differentiate more clearly between the strategies of regional powers, the reactions of other actors in the region, and the final outcome… Regional orders are the result of interaction between the states that aspire to regional leadership and the other states in the corresponding region… Moreover, it will be necessary to include outside powers in the analysis of regional orders and regional power relations in a more systematic manner.

More recently, Volgy et al (2017, p. 466) made the case that the study of regional powers needs a comparative regional analysis that discriminates between regions by '(a) whether one or more regional powers exist in a region; (b) if in existence, whether or not regional powers have the capability and willingness to seek to order affairs in the region, and if they seek to create such orders; and (c) whether such attempts are supplemental to or independent of global hierarchical arrangements'. As we will see below, it is in this fourth phase that RPRP starts to show true signs of exhaustion as the ambitious goal of integrating regional structure, the strategies of regional powers, the reactions of smaller regional states and the impact of global-level forces into a causal model that accounts for regional order never truly came into fruition (Table 1).

RPRP and the exhaustion of 'grand' theorising

As it can be seen in the development of RPRP since the first phase, a common research approach has been to borrow theoretical propositions originally conceived to make sense of global-level phenomena and to apply them to the study of regional powers. In the second phase of the programme, these adaptations have led to the conceptualisation of a rich variety of regional powers' strategies (Pedersen, 2002; Destradi, 2010; Prys, 2010; Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010; Wigell, 2016). Whether by hard power means such as threats, coercion or the use of force, or by softer ones such as public goods provision, regional institution-building or socialisation, all of these strategies implied the assertive use of the

Table 1 RPRP's guiding research questions: structure of the debate

First phase: structural and conceptual questions	Whether regions contain or not a regional power?
	How many, i.e. what is the polarity or distribution of power in the regions? What are the consequences of these different structures for regional order?
	How can regional powers be conceptualised? How can the concept be operationalised?
Second phase: regional powers' behaviour	What types of regional powers can be identified according to their behavioural outlook?
	How can the different strategies that regional powers pursue in their regions be conceptualized?
	What strategies are at disposal of regional powers to produce allegiance and following?
Third phase: reactions of other regional states	How do weaker regional states, i.e. secondary and tertiary states, react to the rise of regional powers? How do they respond to the superior material capabilities of regional powers?
	When and why do secondary and tertiary states choose to follow or challenge regional powers?
Fourth phase: outcome in terms of regional order	How does the combination of structural, behavioural, interactive and global-level variables account for the formation and reproduction of regional order?

superior power capabilities of regional powers. However, as empirical research progressed and area scholars became more engaged, findings revealed a somewhat different reality, namely that regional powers, while clearly preponderant in material terms, paradoxically often do not behave as assertively as expected. As Prys (2010, pp. 481–83) noted:

> The presence of a materially preponderant power does not necessarily lead to some form of 'hegemonic' behaviour or outcomes, such as public good provision or a relative absence of conflict… Empirical studies in fact often come to the conclusion that states categorized in this way generally appear less powerful and preponderant than conventional assumptions about hegemony would suggest: they do not provide public goods, such as order and stability, nor do they have an extraordinary impact on the behaviour of other states in their regions.

These observations started to put into question whether the proposed concepts of 'empire', 'hegemony' or even 'leadership' were the right ones to fully grasp the actual behaviour of regional powers. In a later publication, Prys (2013, p. 271) suggested that our inventory of conceptual and theoretical tools might be unsuitable to analyse the varieties of regional power behaviour that we encounter in the real world. In a similar vein, Destradi (2017, p. 316) observed that no suitable concept can be found in the analytical toolbox of IR to 'make sense of the widespread phenomenon of powerful or rising states that pursue inconsistent, confusing courses of action and do not bring to bear their power resources to coherently manage international crises that potentially affect them'. And Gardini (2016b: 13–16) found these categories at odds with the real international status of countries 'whose behaviour is

substantially different from the assertive and dominant posture of established great powers'.

Doubts about the analytical usefulness of the initial theoretical framing have led to the emergence of a new puzzle in regional powers' research, one that can be grasped in terms of accounting for a 'achievement-expectations gap' (Prys, 2010, p. 484), or more specifically: what explains the 'puzzling and paradoxical coexistence of resource abundance…with hesitant foreign policies and responsibility shirking'? (Destradi, 2017, p. 319). Have regional powers failed? And if so, how do we recognize 'failure' in regional policies when we see it? Or are the expectations derived from global-level theories offering inaccurate standards and benchmarks against which to assess the behaviour of regional powers? (Prys, 2013, p. 274). And if this is the case, which alternative analytical tools can account for these regularities? Here we stumble across a first limit that RPRP has been thus far unable to surmount.[9] Before the programme started to lose momentum, these authors proposed a few concepts that describe rather than explain the expectations-achievement gap. Thus, Prys (2010) suggested the category of 'detached regional powers' to more truly reflect the behaviour of regional powers that have an insignificant impact on regional order and that focus mostly on domestic or global politics; Destradi (2017) developed the alternative concept of 'reluctance'; and Gardini (2016b, p. 15) argued that the concept of 'international manager' may better capture Brazil's behaviour as it emphasizes a preference for 'order, coordination and predictability over change, inspiration or dominance'.

Another example of a not so smooth import into the regional level of theoretical propositions originally conceived to explain global-level phenomena can be found in the third phase of the programme. As mentioned in the previous section, in this phase, scholars tried to account for secondary and tertiary states reactions to regional powers by drawing on previous global-level theorisation on weaker states reactions to US unipolarity. The result was a conceptualisation of these reactions as falling between the two opposites of balancing and bandwagoning. Just as in the second phase theory expected from regional powers to behave hegemonically, in the third phase these theoretical adaptations led to the expectation that secondary powers should somehow balance their local regional power or contest its leadership (Flemes and Wehner, 2015; Schenoni, 2007). While this framing was a useful conceptual devise for analysing dyads characterized by deep rooted rivalries (see Ebert et al, 2014), in other regions such as Southeast Asia, Southern Africa and South America, states have been observed to systematically fail to comply with these expectations (Kuik, 2008; Merke, 2015; Schenoni, 2007).

In an analogous fashion as the 'expectations-achievement gap', failure of secondary powers to balance or contest their local regional power has been treated as a new puzzle that demands explanation (Schenoni, 2007, p. 80). I believe, however, that these empirical findings point to a more interesting research question, if read from a CR perspective, namely: why preponderant power is received differently in the

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[9] One exception is Prys (2013), who proposes a global-level explanation for India's failing to dominate its region (see next section).

regions of the Global South? If preponderant power does not trigger clear balancing/bandwagoning reactions from weaker neighbours, in which different ways then is power asymmetry processed?

Merke (2015) goes more or less in this direction when he offers an explanation of the absence of balancing/bandwagoning in South America by focusing on regional context conditions, specifically, by placing Brazil's rise and South America's response in the context of the region's distinct international society, of which main shared institution would be 'concertation'. Partly an inheritance of the formalist and legalistic diplomatic culture of Spain and Portugal, and partly a result of normative contestation to US influence, the institution of concertation and its accompanying norms of *uti possidetis*, non-aggression, non-intervention and international arbitration would be sufficient to offset any impulse towards balance-of-power or hegemony.

As this example shows, attempts to answer the new puzzles of why regional powers do not use their superior power capabilities more assertively or why preponderant power does not trigger balancing/bandwagoning reactions from weaker states in the region probably need to take into account context conditions at the regional level more seriously. This can only be done by actively engaging the Area Studies. Failure to do so is not something that can be faulted to RPRP as there has been a continuous and rich dialogue with the Area Studies from the very beginning of the programme. However, this engagement has to move away from a model in which the Area Studies are recruited to: (1) verify or test theories or theoretical frameworks developed in the discipline; and (2) develop particularistic idiographic explanations of regional developments. While these two 'terms of enlistment' of the Area Studies (Emmerson, 2008) have been useful for the programme to come up with the realisation that the initial theoretical framing might not quite well capture real-world regional powers as well as to get more familiar with the explanatory narratives originated within the Area Studies communities, they are unlikely to carry RPRP forward.

As a sub-discipline that seizes a middle ground between IR and the Area Studies (Börzel and Risse, 2016, p. 622), CR may offer a blueprint of a third way in which the Area Studies could be 'enlisted'. A central epistemological claim of CR is that the world is not an even surface but an 'ineluctably textured global terrain' (Köllner et al, 2018, p. 13), that is, that across the globe we can observe a spatial 'clustering of contexts' or common features uniting a number of countries in a region. CR assumes that these regionally clustered features potentially qualify interactions and other outcomes between and above the country-level unit (Ahram, 2011, pp. 70–72). According to this perspective, what groups a number of countries into a region is not mere geographical proximity but the sharing of a given relevant attribute.[10] What attribute is relevant at one time depends on the social science puzzle at hand. This means that

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[10] Hanson (2008, pp. 38–39), quoted by Ahram (2011), argues that these 'clusters of contexts' are created, among other things, by processes of imperial or colonial expansion and retreat, that end up embedding 'a territory with common linguistic, religious, political, or economic institutional modes. Once imprinted by these moulds, countries and societies within this territory tend to influence each other through diffusion, emulation, and competition'.

these shared attributes have to be conceptually specified and their effects on regional outcomes theoretically and empirically grounded. Recently, Volgy et al (2017) have proposed to classify these possible attributes into two types of variables: what they term 'Type I effects on regions' reflect an aggregate of considerations that emanate from state-level characteristics such as regime type or state capacity.[11] These are to be distinguished from 'Type II effects', which are processes at the regional level that emanate directly from interstate interactions, which might be international regimes, shared norms and institutions, or the co-production of positive/negative regional externalities. For instance, Merke's (2015) proposed institution of 'concertation' in South America would belong to this last category of variables.[12] Unlike particularistic explanations, these variables are apt to be operationalised and their effects upon the theories proposed by the discipline measured. How, for instance, the general mechanism of the balance-of-power caused by power asymmetry might be filtered or distorted by specific shared norms in a given regional setting? My perception is that RPRP might only be able to move beyond the theoretical limits it has reached by incorporating this type of context variables more systematically into a process of mid-level theorising.

RPRP and the problem theorising the global level

The emergence of the programme and in general of the new scholarly interest in the international politics of regions after the end of the Cold War was in a sense an expression of emancipation from a discourse that until then saw global-level forces as wholly overriding regional dynamics. As Lembcke (2009, pp. 150–151) observed, even in the 1990s, much of IR viewed regional orders as merely derivative of great powers' rivalries and policies. The point of departure of scholarly research on regions was precisely the contention that the sudden end of bipolarity had significantly reduced the intensity with which the global power overlay affected regions, thereby making them more relevant and independent stages in international politics (Fuller and Arquilla, 1996, p. 610; Ayoob, 1999, p. 247; Buzan and Waever, 2003,

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[11] Apart from Volgy et al (2017), one finds very few examples of this kind of state-level considerations in RPRP. Ayoob (1999, p. 251) argued that the dynamic of the balance-of-power and the prospects for the construction of regional order are 'inextricably intertwined with the essentially domestic enterprise of state making and nation building, thus holding regional dynamics and structures hostage to the internal processes of contiguous and proximate states'. For Ayoob state building is not a process that unfolds contained within the boundaries of individual states isolated from each other, but one that impinges on the state-making endeavours of other contiguous states in the neighbourhood. Buzan and Waever (2003), in developing their RSC framework, also made a few reflections about whether the nature of the states composing their RSCs matters for security dynamics. They deem that clusters of strong/weak states and of postmodern, modern and premodern state types predispose security dynamics within RSCs in significant ways. They note that at the regional level there is a marked, but no perfect, geographical clustering of states according to these types.

[12] Merke's interpretation is actually a particularistic account, but the norms of concertation that he proposes are liable to be operationalized as an attribute shared by a set of states. That is, particularistic idiographic interpretations can be adapted to the format of context variables.

p. 3; Acharya, 2007, p. 629). While this carved out a theoretical space for thinking about regions as more independent units of analysis, it did not quite settle the new status of the 'global'.

The problem of theorising the global level in RPRP emerges from the inherent theoretical tensions of preserving the assumption of relative independence of regions while simultaneously acknowledging that 'regions are per se open systems' (Prys, 2010, p. 484) and, therefore, susceptible to global-level influences that may significantly constrain the strategies available to regional powers, as well as their possibilities to create regional order (see also Hurrell, 2010, pp. 16–17). An additional problem is that the global level is an abstraction that can be defined in different ways, it is neither reducible to the whole system nor to any single aspect of it (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 28). In RPRP writings we can identify at least four different ways of thinking of the global level and its impact upon regions: (1) as a form of great power interference; (2) as a level into which regional powers can 'exit' from their regions; (3) as an overarching global order or hierarchy within which regions are embedded; and (4) as the wider structures of global political economy in which regions are inextricably entangled. While the first two are actor oriented, the last two conceive of the global level as a structure. As we will see below, not all received the same degree of attention and theoretical elaboration in RPRP.

The operationalisation of global-level influences as a form or variation of great power interference has been the most common approach in RPRP since the first phase. Early on in the programme, Fuller and Arquilla (1996) argued that the USA as the sole global power had three alternative strategies to influence regional orders: to support a regional hegemon, to cultivate a local balance of power, or to let regional orders develop according to their own dynamics in what they termed a *laissez-faire* strategy. Ayoob (1999, p. 252) arranged great power interference on a continuum ranging from 'disinterest' or 'low involvement' through 'instrumental intervention' to 'identification', being instrumental intervention the most detrimental to the construction of regional order, and identification (whether cultural, political or economic) the most beneficial in terms of security and welfare for the target region. More recently, Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010, p. 734) theorised four ways in which extra-regional great powers can impact regional security orders: (1) by having little or no impact. In this case, regional orders are driven primarily by regional structure and regional power's behaviour; (2) by changing the regional structure in ways that alter the distribution of capabilities; (3) by influencing the behaviour of regional powers in ways that could encourage, deter or reverse their actions; and (4) by altering the security order itself.

A newer approach in RPRP is the theorisation of the global and regional level as spaces across which regional powers and other regional states can navigate. According to this perspective, the global level not only impacts upon regions but also constitutes an independent arena within which regional actors can operate and, in doing so, sometimes effectively 'exit' from their regions. This introduces the 'inside-out' dimension of the embeddedness of regions in the global system (Prys 2013). In an attempt to give an answer to the puzzling 'expectations-achievement gap' of regional powers referred above, Prys (ibid.) argued that India does not seek to dominate its region because it sees it more as an obstacle to its main goal of acquiring global

power status. The instability of South Asia would negatively affect the reputation of India as a responsible power and consume its financial and human resources. Consequently, India has opted for a regional policy that minimizes engagements and tolerates the presence of extra-regional powers that were before seen as intruders such as the USA or China as long as they can bring in resources for regional conflict management. For Prys this implies that the goals and activities of regional powers at the global level can sometimes reduce the significance of their role at the regional level.

But regional powers are not the only states able to navigate the global-regional nexus. A similar perspective can also be applied to a consideration of the problem of why secondary and tertiary states fail to balance/bandwagon their local regional power. Theoretical expectations in this direction were rationalised with recourse to the argument that regional powers, by virtue of being the most powerful states in their regions were necessarily the most important reference point of the foreign policies of secondary and tertiary states (Flemes and Lobell, 2015, p. 140). This framing however fails to consider the multi-level structure of the relationships in which states are engaged. Quoting Tsebelis (1990), Lobell et al (2015, p. 150) point to the importance of being cognizant of all the multiple games in which an actor may be involved, and of the inherent difficulty from the point of view of the external observer of assessing the importance that an actor places into each game. Thus, what may appear a sub-optimal behaviour in one game—for instance, failure to balance—may be the result of a conscious trade-off by which an actor only seeks to raise the stakes in a different game of higher concern. In the language of RPRP, secondary or tertiary states are simultaneously playing different games at the global, regional and domestic levels. A given regional state, for instance, may choose to accommodate a regional power only to be able to balance a global power or may resist a regional power with a view to accommodate domestic audiences. Because of the difficulty of assessing the stakes that states have in each of these parallel games and the multiple factors influencing their perceptions and strategies, Lobell et al. (p. 151) conclude that 'no single generalization can be made about what a state will do when confronted by such a multiple game structure, for each state must navigate its own particular and unique games'. This warns us against assuming by theoretical fiat that the foreign policy activities of secondary and tertiary states are mostly related to the local regional power. Whether the regional game is indeed an important reference point of the foreign policy of a state in this category, or it is rather low placed in the ranking of its foreign policy priorities, is something that has to be evaluated in each case. Again, the only way to know this is to engage the Area Studies to inquire about the factors that have been empirically the most powerful drivers of secondary and tertiary states foreign policy initiatives.

This has been the approach taken by Kuik (2008) to explain the absence of any clear balancing/bandwagoning behaviour among Southeast Asian states towards the rising power of China. Although the shift in the regional distribution of material capabilities favouring China was unambiguous, the assessment of this regional-level foreign policy problem by the ruling elites of secondary and tertiary states in Southeast Asia was shaped by the priorities of their own domestic-level processes of 'regime legitimation'. That is, elites utilised the opportunities and challenges of the rising power for the ultimate goal of consolidating their authority at home. A

similar multi-level approach can also be applied to the puzzling case of the absent balancing/bandwagoning behaviour in South America. Scholars specialized in this area of the world have long sustained that the global and domestic levels, and how these are interconnected, have historically provided the main frame of reference of these states' external action, with the regional level playing rather a subordinate role (Russell and Tokatlian, 2013; Merke, 2015). Powerful drivers of foreign policy initiatives in this part of the world have been, first, the need to restrain US influence in the region and, second, to find ways to integrate in favourable terms into the global economy as a means to accelerate national economic development.[13] This might explain why Brazil, as a regional power, has not been the object of balancing/bandwagoning behaviour in South America. Considering that secondary powers have been mostly viewed as potential cooperation partners for intervening great powers from the global level (Flemes and Wojczewski, 2011), examining the behaviour of these states under the new lenses of a multi-level or 'inside-out' perspective is a research path worth pursuing.

In spite of being critical for determining the degree of relative autonomy of regions, much less thought has been given in RPRP to an understanding of the global level as an overarching global order or hierarchy within which regions are embedded. That is, to the crucial question of how regional orders relate to the global one. In CR, Katzenstein (2005) argued that regions are functional to world order, but that these functions vary across regions. Specially two regions constitute the backbone on which the 'American Imperium' is sustained, East Asia and Europe, as both have core regional powers, namely Japan and Germany, that support the power and purpose of the US. Any changes in either of these regional orders would have important consequences for global order. However, neither this vision of differentiated regional orders nor any other alternative has managed to permeate RPRP debates, where most authors ended up explicitly or implicitly subscribing to a conception of global order very much alike to what Lemke (2002) had theorized as the 'multiple hierarchy model'. This model assumes that (1) there are multiple, parallel and analytically equivalent regional power hierarchies nested within the overall global power hierarchy; (2) these regional hierarchies are susceptible to global power intervention, but these interventions are rare since regional powers try to avoid this interference by creating a local status quo that is not at odds with global powers' preferences; (3) in the absence of great power interference, regions function as smaller international systems.

The multiple hierarchy model exemplifies the inherent tensions that emerge from theorising the global level. On the one hand, by assuming that global power intervention is the only, at least visible, form of global-level influence on regions, it postulates that by properly controlling this variable we can assume that regions enjoy

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[13] As Merke (2015, pp. 186–187) observed: '…the most fundamental challenge for Latin America has been overcoming domestic and international obstacles that impede development… Simply put, the central stake in Latin America continues to be development, not power or interstate security…, the uneven development of globalized capitalism poses a more constraining dimension than the decentralized anarchic structure of international politics'.

relative autonomy. This is of course analytically very convenient. On the other hand, however, the multiple hierarchy model implies that regional orders are residual. Because regional orders do not need to be at odds with global order, it follows that part of the content of regional order is rooted in global order, and only a remaining part is the product of regional politics. Aware of the theoretical implications of his model, Lemke (p. 55) argued that the status quo of regional hierarchies only revolves around issues of local concern, especially rules about territorial control.

Finally, the global level can be thought of as the structures of the global political economy in which regions are entangled. This is mainly the perspective adopted by CR. It was precisely the new regionalism literature that theorised the particular configuration of the post-Cold War global economic order as creating strong incentives for semi-peripheral states—as regional powers were once called—to launch regionalist projects as a strategy of controlled or negotiated international economic integration (Grugel and Hout, 1999). However, despite these important references in the literature, few studies considered regional powers against the backdrop of the broader structures of the global economic system in which they and their regions are inserted. Building on the new regionalism literature, Krapohl et al. (2014) argued that the economic structures of regions determine the economic interest of regional powers. The provision of leadership for regional integration does not follow automatically from the economic preponderance of regional powers but depends concretely on the distribution of intra- and extra-regional gains from regional integration. When the privileged extra-regional economic relations of regional powers exceed these gains, regional powers will defect regional integration. Garzon (2017) also conceptualized the emerging structure of the global political economy as constraining regional powers' possibilities to build projects of regional economic integration. This global-level configuration, which he describes as 'decentred multipolarity', is characterized by the increasing propensity of both established and emerging powers to project their economic power to multiple regions. This would affect the cost–benefit calculations of smaller regional states which prefer the low political costs of cooperating and trading with distant powers over closely engaging with their local regional power, thereby negatively affecting the structure of incentives that sustained economic regionalism in the past. To countervail these centrifugal forces, regional powers would need to mobilise more resources to build regional integration schemes attractive enough for their smaller neighbours to follow. Perhaps an important reason of why we do not see much RPRP work with a similar conception of the global level is the time-consuming effort of empirically mapping the material structures in which regional powers and their regions are inserted, which is a necessary step before drawing any conclusions about the consequences of these structures for regional powers' behaviour (e.g. Scholvin and Malamud, 2020; Iapadre and Tajoli, 2014; Chen and De Lombaerde, 2014).

The theorisation of the global level constitutes thus a clear limit of RPRP. The programme's understanding of the global-level influences that might affect regions has tended to be very restrictive throughout most of its development. Above all, RPRP has struggled to theorize the global level outside an actor-oriented framework, neglecting thus the structural aspect of power. This had impairing theoretical consequences for the programme. These refer not only to the already mentioned

failure to consider secondary and tertiary states from an inside-out or multi-level perspective but also to other phases of the programme. In the second phase, the application of theories of hegemony to the regional level would have certainly not proceeded so unencumbered if more thought had been given to the possibility that regional orders are residual or that they may serve differentiated functions respect to global order. That is, that regions are neither analytically equivalent nor can function as smaller international systems. Whether they are the ideational or normative structures of global order or the material ones of the global political economy, these structures potentially restrict the range of strategies available for regional powers as well as the scope of regional order that is effectively subject to negotiation with other regional actors.

RPRP and the question of regional order

As mentioned above, in the fourth phase of the programme, some scholars have set out to explain the formation of regional orders by leveraging the alleged key role played by regional powers in their creation and maintenance. To achieve this goal, the main variables of the previous phases: regional structure, the strategies of regional powers, the reactions of secondary and tertiary states, and global-level influences had to be put together into one explanatory scheme or causal mechanism.[14]

The first serious attempt in this direction is Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll (2010, p. 735),who, borrowing from Morgan (1997), operationalise the dependent variable to be affected by regional power's behaviour as a typology of five security orders: hegemonic, collective security, power restraining power, concert and unstructured. The authors aim to explain the formation of these regional orders by means of a multi-dimensional independent variable that incorporates the structure or polarity of the RSC (determined by the number of regional powers), the role assumed by regional powers (custodianship, protection and leadership) and the orientation in performing these roles (status quo/revisionist, unilateral/multilateral and proactive/reactive). This framework however, as the authors acknowledge, fails to specify which combinations of structure, roles and orientations lead to which regional orders. They also consider four ways in which extra-regional great powers can impact regional security orders (see previous section), but they opt for not including these global-level influences into their formal model assuming that 'global-level explanations for security dynamics are less predominant' (p. 734).

Garzon (2014) is a second author proposing an explicit operationalization of regional order, in this case of 'hierarchical regional order' (HRO) as his model only applies to regions featuring a unipolar distribution of power. The concept of

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[14] Before these attempts only Pedersen (2002) had tried to articulate a theory of regional institutionalisation primarily based on the effects that different regional powers' strategies would produce in the behaviour of weaker regional states in terms of their allegiance/defection to a regionalist project. As mentioned in the second section, the work of scholars in the first phase of programme was also oriented at explaining regional order, the difference being that these early authors did not privilege regional powers as the main explanatory variable.

HRO tries to capture the interaction element between regional powers and weaker neighbours by focusing on substantive issues of contention over which states of unequal power usually bargain, being these issues: policy convergence, the transfer of material resources, and the existence of regional institutions that constrain the use of power. Thus, HROs could vary alongside a continuum between a 'neo-imperial regional formation' at one pole, and a 'hierarchical regional society' at the other. In an ideal-type neo-imperial formation, the regional power's demands for change in the policies of smaller states feature a high degree of intrusiveness in terms of the range of policy-areas covered, domain (foreign and domestic policy) and intensity; material resources flow from the weaker states to the benefit of the powerful one and no institutional power-constraints exist. In a 'hierarchical regional society' on the contrary, demands for policy change are low in scope, domain and intensity, material resources flow in the opposite direction, from the regional power to the weaker states on a regular and reliable basis, and a set of institutional rules and norms that manage the use of preponderant power can be observed. Unlike previous constructs that define regional powers' strategies *ex ante* to link up with an either specified or unspecified regional order, in this model the strategies of regional powers are deduced from the values of HROs actually observed in the empirical world and are theorised as the 'actors' orientations or patterns of behaviour that uphold the (re-)production' of regional order (p. 37). If there is consistency between regional powers' behaviour and the values of the HRO observed we can conclude that regional power's actions might have substantially contributed to the formation of regional order; if there is inconsistency, then the agency of smaller states might be at play. Although this model takes a further step towards a more fine-grained differentiation between the strategies of regional powers, the reactions of weaker states and the outcome of their interaction, the interaction element active in the (re-)production of regional orders, as the author admits, remains 'analytically complex and fuzzy' (p. 44). The model does not make room for global-level influences.

The most recent attempt to integrate all these variables is Volgy et al (2017), who propose a framework for comparative regional analysis that discriminates between regions based on the presence/absence of hierarchical relationships. Accordingly, there would be four types of regions: regions lacking any hierarchy, regions featuring a regional hierarchy (centred on a regional power), regions subject only to a global hierarchy (centred on a major power) and regions in which a regional and a global hierarchy co-exist. The framework assumes that regional powers seek generally to create order in their region, being this order understood in security terms as conflict/cooperation processes, and focuses mainly on the conditions which may facilitate or hinder regional powers' attempts to create this order. According to the authors, the starting point of a meaningful theory of regions should be to identify the types of regional and global conditions with the most powerful effects conditioning major and regional powers attempts at imposing order (p. 468). The framework is therefore very much big power centred. An inventory of three sets of these conditions is proposed: (1) the competitiveness of the regional environment, that is: if the region contains more than one regional power, features ongoing rivalries and/or the intrusion of a major power; (2) the extensiveness of the regional fault lines to be managed (being these regime dissimilarity, the extent of territorial disputes, ethnic

conflicts within and across states, and economic inequalities); and (3) the capability and willingness of regional powers to create regional order, which includes material capabilities, domestic political competence, and willingness.

The framework, however, does not address the critical question of how order is created. It identifies and lines up the variables but does not suggest how they fit into each other, that is, it does not propose a causal mechanism. The authors acknowledge this to be the hard task ahead. On the other side, the framework is the only one in this late phase of RPRP to identify, and also to stress the importance of, variables at the unit and dyadic level which might have important consequences for regional dynamics, in this case, for the efforts of powerful states to create order. These are precisely the type of variables taken into consideration by CR and to which we have referred above as forming a 'clustering of contexts' or common features uniting a number of countries in a region that potentially condition interactions and other outcomes at the regional level.

The limitations of these efforts are testimony of the intrinsic difficulty of bringing together all these variables into one explanatory scheme. However, part of the reason why a successful explanation of regional order has remained thus far beyond the reach of RPRP is in my view the result of two rigidities of research design: first, the assumption that regional powers play a critical role in the formation of regional orders has led to the formulation of excessively linear research designs: regional powers are the fundament upon which other variables are just added in a linear sequence. In this regard, the first cohort of RPRP researchers were wiser to treat regional powers as just one variable among others in the study of regions. They were conscious that the complex processes at play in the production of regional order are in essence multifactorial and multilevel. Second, in some cases it is not clear what exactly the notion of 'regional order' is reflecting, and why regional order should be the only dependent variable of interest. The question of whether and how regional powers shape the political and economic organisation of their regions is indeed an interesting one, but the concept of 'regional order' covers only a partial dimension of it. Regional order has been defined with reference to security as the 'patterns of amity/enmity among regional states' (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 50), or the 'mode of conflict management' within regions (Lake and Morgan, 1997, p. 9), or with reference to hierarchy as the 'patterns of interactions' among states of unequal power (Garzon, 2014). Common to all these definitions is the idea of 'pattern' or 'modality', that is, of how things usually happen or are dealt with within a particular region. Thus, regional order may but not need be purposeful. It is an outcome that often obtains irrespective of the designs and wishes of regional states. If the interest of scholars lies more in the purposeful and strategic use of power to affect regional outcomes, the concept of 'regionalism' may be more suitable as implies a 'states-led project designed to reorganise a particular regional space along defined political and economic lines' (Payne and Gamble, 1996, p. 2), or the closely related concept of 'regional institutionalisation' (Pedersen, 2002). After the 'governance turn' in IR, the relationship between regional powers and 'regional governance' has also drawn the attention of some researchers (Nolte, 2011; Kacowicz, 2018). Regional governance may be concisely defined as the overall configuration of partially overlapping international organisations and actor constellations, both public and private, at the

global and the regional levels that generate the norms and rules for the region in different policy-areas (Nolte, 2011; Börzel, 2016). Thus, CR has come up with a variety of concepts that reflect different facets of the political and economic organisation of regions. This is not reducible to any single dimension. Future research in RPRP should take this full range of possibilities into account to more precisely operationalise the dependent variable expected to be affected by regional powers in a nonlinear fashion.

Conclusions

Actors in the Global South have traditionally been conceived as rule-takers and as largely deprived of agency in IR. A major contribution of RPRP has been to subvert this situation from a non-critical or problem-solving perspective. Nowhere else in IR were scholars so actively engaged in investigating the ideas, preferences, and strategies of an array of southern actors as in RPRP. To make these inroads, the programme has drawn upon theoretical propositions and frameworks originally crafted to make sense of global-level phenomena and applied them to the study of regional powers. However, there are signs that after the completion of this empirical cycle, the initial theoretical framing has reached exhaustion in terms of its inability to account for empirical phenomena. This can be seen in the emergence of new research puzzles that cannot be solved by applying the same conceptual inventory.

One way to revise and update the programme's conceptual and analytical framework involves in my view, to incorporate Area Studies knowledge into the process of theory-building itself. We need to move from the import and adaptation of general IR theories to the regional level towards mid-level theorising. To get on track of this transition, RPRP could follow the model of CR that consists of conceptually specifying clustered context conditions or attributes common to a number of countries in a region. These may emanate from state-level characteristics or from interstate interactions. Unlike particularistic accounts of regional dynamics, these variables can be adequately operationalised to measure their conditioning effects upon the general theories and mechanisms proposed by the discipline. These variables also constitute a better basis for undertaking 'contextualised comparisons' that may reveal convergent or divergent processes and outcomes across different regions (Köllner et al., 2018, p. 4). It is striking that despite the continuous dialogue between RPRP and the Area Studies, we find very few examples of this particular use of area-based knowledge (e.g. Ayoob, 1999; Buzan and Waever, 2003; Volgy et al., 2017).

A second limit of RPRP has been its restrictive conceptualisation of the global-level forces that may impact upon regional powers and their regions. Most authors have indulged the analytical convenience of assuming the relative autonomy of regions after properly controlling for the absence of global power interference. Very few thoughts have been given to the way in which regions are embedded within broader ideational and material structures. This includes unanswered questions about where regional order ends and where it begins? What part of regional order is already 'settled' by the normative structures of global order and which part is effectively subject to negotiation with other regional actors? Or whether we can think

of regional orders not as analytically equivalent but as functionally differentiated respect to global order?

Regional powers also generally tend to appear less imposing when put against the backdrop of the broader structures of the global economic system in which they are embedded. As Scholvin and Malamud (2020) point out with reference to South America, if one considers connectivity and economic influence as vital elements of hegemony, Brazil's problems to consolidate as a regional power depends more on structure and not merely on agency. Future research in RPRP needs to consider regional powers' interests and strategies in the context of the different types of material structures in which the global economic system has been disaggregated, such as patterns of asymmetric interdependencies, trade networks, cross-border capital flows, or global value chains.

Finally, one of the most interesting research questions in RPRP is whether and how regional powers shape the political and economic organisation of their regions. However, this complex subject of study, to which CR as a subfield is devoted, is not reducible to any single concept or dimension such as regional order. Regional order is in fact a very restricted concept that does not fully reflect the power and purpose of states. This branch of regional powers' research could broaden its purview and gain in conceptual precision by incorporating CR advances in operationalising concepts that reflect different facets of the political and economic organisation of regions.

Declarations

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