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Hierarchical regional orders: An analytical framework[☆]

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1. Introduction

Two major forces have been profoundly transforming the international-political landscape since the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, the sudden evanescence of the global-scale superpower confrontation that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Empire considerably reduced the intensity with which the global power overlay affected international outcomes. As the most powerful spur of the great powers to intervene worldwide declined, the relevance of regions as locus for the generation of international-political dynamics rose accordingly (Acharya, 2007, p. 629; Buzan & Waeber, 2003, p. 3; Lake & Morgan, 1997, p. 6; Stein & Lobell, 1997, p. 108). On the other hand, and more recently, stretching over several years, sustained differential economic growth rates favoring some large developing states of the non-OECD world have led to significant shifts in the distribution of wealth among and within regions (Flemes & Nolte, 2008).

Sensitive to these developments, IR scholarship has been devoting increasing attention to regions and the role played by emerging powers in the construction and maintenance of regional orders. The central assumption behind this burgeoning corpus of literature is that the existence of ‘regional (great) powers’,¹ their policies, and interactions with other regional states are key

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¹ I use the term ‘regional (great) power’ (reintroduced in the scholarly debate by Neumann, 1992) with the parenthesis for two reasons. First, not all regional powers are also great powers in world politics, even when they may aspire to such

for explaining and understanding the (re-)production of ‘regional orders’. In spite of significant progress made thus far, the bulk of the literature still focuses either on the systemic effects of the presence/absence of regional (great) powers (e.g. Buzan & Waever, 2003; Lake, 1997; Lemke, 2010), their types, roles, orientations and foreign policy approaches (e.g. Destradi, 2010; Frazier & Stewart-ingersoll, 2010; Prys, 2010; Stewart-ingersoll & Frazier, 2012) or, more recently, on the contestation of secondary regional states (e.g.: Flesmes & Wojczewski, 2011; Williams, Lobell, & Jesse, 2012); how do the dynamics of the strategic interactions between the regional (great) power and the weaker regional states (re-)produce regional orders remain, however, poorly understood (Destradi, 2012a, p. 151).

In this respect, Nolte (2010, p. 899) rightly observes that our analytical instruments should be better able to differentiate between the policies and strategies of regional (great) powers, the reactions of their weaker neighbors and the final outcome of their interactions. In this contribution, I precisely develop an alternative analytical framework that may help us grasp the ‘interaction element’ between powerful and weak state actors within discrete regional settings. For this purpose – and in contrast to mainstream literature – I do not derive the proposed model from the concepts and theoretical propositions of the ‘hegemony’ research program in IR but rather from the dynamics of strong-weak states interactions, an approach that, surprisingly, has not been thus far applied to the study of contemporary regional politics.

In a nutshell, my contention is that different patterns of interactions between a regional (great) power and its neighboring weaker states can be compassed if we focus on those aspects these states emphasize across substantive *issues of contention* over which states of unequal power and status usually bargain. As a consideration of the distinct foreign policy needs of small states vis-à-vis great powers and of great powers vis-à-vis small states suggests, states of asymmetrical power, if compelled to interact intensely – as I assume should be the case for states sharing a common regional neighborhood and geopolitical space – are likely to bargain over: (1) policy convergence; (2) the transfer of material resources, and (3) rules and institutions for the management and mobilization of the regional states’ power resources. Hence, the empirical observation of state preferences and bargaining outcomes over each of these issues are indicative of the type of ‘hierarchical regional order’ being (re-)produced by interstate interactions within regions featuring unipolar distributions of power. Thinking in terms of ideal-types, ‘hierarchical regional orders’ could vary across a continuum between ‘(neo)-imperial regional formations’, at one pole, and ‘hierarchical regional societies’, at the other. Whereas the former can be described as an extreme form of hierarchical relationship – commonly referred to in the literature as ‘empire’ (Lake, 2010, p. 39); the latter can be conceived of as an ideal regional formation in which order is a ‘contract’ that permits both strong and weak states to attain valued foreign policy goals.

In the following pages, I first make a case for the importance of gaining fresh insights into the varied patterns interstate interactions can assume within unipolar regional structures in the midst of major global power shifts and the purportedly regionalization of international politics. Secondly, I define the scope of applicability of the analytical model and specify how it differs from mainstream conceptualizations of ‘regional order’. Thirdly, I develop the concept of ‘hierarchical

status. Secondly, despite of the fact that many regional (great) powers are actually middle powers within the international hierarchy of states (sometimes referred to as ‘new middle powers’, see: Nolte, 2010, p. 890), from the point of view of the weaker states of their periphery, due to geographical proximity and relative power asymmetry, they have the potential to affect them as if they were fully-fledged great powers. Thus, I assume that the patterns of interstate regional interactions between the preponderant regional power and the smaller regional states can be grasped in terms of ‘great power-small state relationships’.

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