

Faust, Anita<sup>1</sup>

# Concepts of World Order and their Implications for Regional Power Research

## ABSTRACT

Regional powers attracted the heightened interest of researchers in international relations (IR) when the first signs of potential challenges to the unipolar world order appeared, but after a decade's worth of efforts to make sense of regional power status, and regional ordering, it petered out, leaving hypotheses consistently unconfirmed. The paper investigates the interpretive framework – the concepts of world order – that underlay the unfruitful hypotheses. For this end, the paper re-examines four contemporary paradigms of world order – distinguished on the basis of their constituents and their concept of relations – from the viewpoint of regional power research. The approach offers a shift in viewpoints that may help foster the creation of a paradigm of world order that can account for the sub-global level. Furthermore, to realign theory and practice, the paper attempts to tackle the problem of regionality in the context of interdependence and globalization. By expanding the present categorization of powers as global, regional, and local to include the proposed novel category of transregional power the rigidity of regionality can be eliminated. The new category enables a more nuanced understanding of the hierarchy of powers as well as of the processes of world order on multiple geographical scales.

*Keywords: world order, regional powers, transregional powers, geopolitical codes, systemic relevance, hierarchy, legitimation*

---

<sup>1</sup> Research fellow, Geopolitical Research Group of the Eurasia Center, John von Neumann University. [faust.anita@gmail.com](mailto:faust.anita@gmail.com). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1196-7001>

## INTRODUCTION

In a remarkable critical assessment Garzón (2022) presents the rise and untimely decline of regional power research, a branch of study within the discipline of international relations (IR) that sought to examine the status, the strategies, and the performance of regional powers as shapers of regional order. Untimely, because amid the present crisis of world order, states formerly considered peripheral or perceived as low ranking in the international hierarchy of powers may have more significant impact upon the evolution of world order than geopolitical and IR theories suggest. The decline of regional power research was not without its reasons: in a span of over a decade, the research systematically failed to produce hypotheses that matched empirical observations.

How can it be that IR theory cannot successfully conceptualize the status, strategies and performance of regional powers? Garzón (2022) makes the compelling case that the key problem was that regional power research efforts were based on the application of the theoretical scheme of world order to the regional scale. His solution to the problem rests on the clearly correct assumption that regions differ sufficiently – structurally as well as culturally – to be unsuited to fit a single scheme and proposes a shift towards comparative regional studies.

Comparative regional studies are certain to bear fruit. Nevertheless, the problem that regional power research was unable to conceptualize regional order in the context of world order deserves our attention. The present paper seeks to investigate the theoretical assumptions underlying regional power research. While it is quite likely that the consistent mismatch of hypotheses and observations can be attributed to more than just concepts, any uninvestigated flaws in the theoretical framework will continue to undermine the understanding of world order, power hierarchies, and regionality within globality. A conceptual adjustment to the interpretive framework of regional power and regional ordering – that is, to the concept of world order – may help put regional power research back on track. Amid the acute transition of the global order at the time of writing, the analytical value of a nuanced understanding of power hierarchies and regionality is abundantly clear.

Relevant to our quest is how interest in regional powers and regional ordering arose in the first place. The appearance of regional power research in IR was closely tied to geopolitical circumstances. Rising at the time when BRICS – the cooperation platform of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – was a newcomer on the world stage, research sought to verify if the theories of IR also applied to regional powers (Garzón, 2022). Regional powers were defined as ones bearing “*special responsibility for the security and for the maintenance of order in the region*” and having both the self-conception and the international recognition as a regional power Nolte (2010). Candidates for regional powers ranged from Argentina to China (Cline et al, 2011), that is, they varied very widely in all aspects of power – territory, population, natural resources, economic strength, to name a few.

Regionally dominant players were hypothesized as having significant capabilities, with their power restricted to their own region, and otherwise being subject to the globally preponderant power within the unipolar world. On these grounds it was assumed that they would use their power to structure their regions, and to build a following that would bring them closer to making a systemic impact (Garzón, 2022). Their strategies were scrutinized in studies of regional geoeconomics (e.g. Fehér, 2017; Wigell,

2016), while the soft power capabilities of regional powers, particularly of Russia and China were examined in countless analyses (Barr, 2011; Callahan, 2015; Ellis, 2011; Holyk, 2011; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015).

Regional powers were found, according to Garzón's (2022) critical overview, to have failed to structure their regions. A gap emerged between scholarly expectations formulated in hypotheses, and the achievement identified empirically. The fact that scholarly studies should seek to discover the region-sized copies of the global ordering of the world points to an assumption on their behalf that calls for scrutiny. As Garzón (2022) says, the assumptions underlying the failed attempts at regional power research emerge from the very foundations of IR – a discipline that is far from globally shared, as Acharya and Buzan (2007) point out.

The notion of world order in IR theory is itself a product of the geopolitical endeavor to structure the world. IR Theory has been permeated by Western thought predating the US-led world order, and even the British. It was in connection with the latter that Carr (1946) urged the realization that world order is a dominant hypothesis, one that fosters an interpretive framework for processes, but crumbles as the distribution of power shifts. In our interconnected and interdependent world that is in a transitory state, examining and questioning our interpretive framework is in order, especially if we wish to study the processes on the sub-global level.

The hypothesis underlying the present paper is that the core problems that manifested through the failures of regional power research lie with the notions of world order, and to rectify regional power research, the contemporary conceptions of world order need to be re-examined.

The paper presents four distinct paradigms of world order distinguished based on the constituents of the world order, as well as the presumed nature of relations that structure the world. Each paradigm has vastly different implications for the notion of regional power, as well as for who structures regional orders, and how they do this. Common to them, however, is that they reflect the thinking of the leading – pre-eminent – power(s). Approaching the paradigms of world order with regional power research in mind, however, is inevitably an exercise in the conscious application of multiple viewpoints. By seeking a theoretical framework for global and regional power research that accommodates multiple viewpoints, the theoretical foundations can be laid for positive conflict resolution (Galtung, 1969, 2000; Nádudvari, 2020), a welcome by-product in a time of dangerous, and possibly further escalating conflict.

A further challenge arises from the indelible circumstance that the very notion of regionality is raised in the context of globality, a notion with which even the various paradigms of world order have grappled inconclusively.

To overcome the theoretical problems arising from conceptualizing powers as global, regional, and local based on their theoretically presumed reach, the paper proposes a two-fold solution. One is to complement the notion of intended power projection with that of systemic relevance as perceived by others, without geographical limitation. Importantly, systemic relevance as perceived by others does not and should not replace existing concepts of power but complement them. The other is to re-align empirical observation with theory by introducing the category of transregional powers. While regional power research theorize the concept of regional powers as ones whose formidable power capabilities

are limited to their own regions, transregional powers can be conceived as ones with stakes considered as strategic by recipients, in multiple, but not all, regions of the world. This modification in the categorization of powers offers IR research a more nuanced and productive approach for studying the ability of players to shape the global order, and their regionality in our interdependent and globalized world.

## METHODS

The purpose of the paper is to re-examine the concepts of world order within contemporary IR theory from the viewpoint of regional power research. At stake is whether it is possible to identify those components within the complex and multiple notions of world order, whose readjustment may eliminate key conceptual hindrances to regional power research.

To attain an understanding of world order – whether global or sub-global – that is fit for making a sense of, and for rectifying, the fallacies of regional power research, the contemporary concepts of world order need to be deconstructed. Through the critical analysis of the contemporary scholarly literature of world order as a concept, four paradigms are distinguished and broken down to lay out their theoretical implications for regional power research. The analytical criteria are derived from the four interpretations of world order. Once the assumptions underlying each paradigm have been gleaned, the paper offers a reconstruction of the concept of world order, building on assumptions adjusted to empirical observation.

The paper seeks specifically to pinpoint the conceptual hindrances to regional power research as a field of research within IR. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that in all probability, the failures of regional power research are complex, and only partially attributable to theoretical problems investigated in the present paper. The theoretical clarifications presented are indispensable for regional power research to eventually rid itself from the persisting mismatch between theory and empirical observation.

## RESULTS

### **Four paradigms of world order, and their concepts of regional powers**

Few would question Waltz's (1979) view that the goal of powers is to structure the world order and dictate its norms. Yet, fundamental as it is to international relations and geopolitics, the concept of world order remains a highly contested one. "World" not only means actual globality, it has also been a subjective category. "Order" is a far from settled notion. Nor is there consensus on the type of geopolitical entities that should be structuring the world on the grounds of the legitimacy attributed to them, or which they claim to hold. Distinguishing the paradigms reveals the multiple ways in which to observe the interaction of societies and organizations around the globe. Explicitly or implicitly, each offers perceptions of non-global powers, with major analytic consequences.

A territorially and temporally limited, static world order is envisaged by authors who stress the notion of “order” (Clark, 1989, 2005; Coicaud, 2010: 33; Lake, 2009, 2013). In their approach, world order is insular and temporary, applying to regions and times of stability (a contested notion). It is hierarchically structured, and its constituents are states. The stability of their relationship is underpinned by a social contract of sorts, compensating states for handing over some of their sovereignty to the leading power. In this approach, world order is a club, whose membership changes over time (Clark, 2005).

In this paradigm the definition of the leading power (that which takes sovereignty away from lesser powers and compensates them by offering security and economic benefits) leaves very circumscribed if any sovereignty for regional powers inside the club. Other parts of the world that fall outside the club are defined by a lack of stability. The instability outside the insular world order may in theory be due to conflict between the entities that are not subjects of the world order, or it may be between parties to the world order and non-members.

This paradigm of world order does not define regional powers, nor does it clarify the hierarchy of states that are party to the order below the level of hegemon or leader. World order is limited to a confined group of states deemed legitimate by, and accepting of the rule of, the leading power. Hence, any regional powers within the world order will be compliant with the global power. Regional power research assumes that regional powers are compliant with the leading power and its world order. It also hypothesizes that regional powers will provide public goods within the regions they structure in the same vein as the insular world order of stability is legitimized through a social contract of sorts.

Outside the club lie states or peoples that are not accepted as members, in other words, which are not granted legitimacy (Clark, 2005). Relations between non-members is not pursued as a field of interest or of relevance to this concept of world order, but the paradigm does not explicitly prohibit the existence of regional orders outside the world order. Any regional order outside the club would by default have to be inferior in legitimacy.

“All concepts arise in a context, and contexts change”, as Nye (2021) succinctly points out, we may add, however, that they leave a trace on interpretive frameworks. Although this paradigm carries a distinct air of colonial times and makes for a very uncomfortable fit with the interconnected and globalized world of our day, it arguably continues to contribute a layer of interpretation as testified by the assumption in regional power research that regional powers accept and comply with the global power.

The second paradigm of world order is an expansionist one, as proposed by Henry Kissinger (2015). In his theory, “*world order describes the concept held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire world*”. He also defines regional orders, which, he says “*involve the same principles applied to a defined geographic area*”. Kissinger’s paradigm is also spatially limited but expresses an intention on behalf of the constituents of the world order to extend it. This suggests that conflicts will necessarily arise between the expanding world order and the rest of the world – if the leading power lacks universal attraction or if its legitimacy as leader is not accepted by all. It is no wonder that soft power (Nye, 1990) is seen as crucial to the expanding world order dominated by the United States. Appeal being in

the eye of the beholder, it cannot be universal, hence, voluntary followship being less than universal, the expansion of world order is a source of conflict in the world.

In this paradigm not only does the expanding world order bring conflict upon others, but in theory, successfully expanding regional orders may challenge the world order (or its leader). In the eyes of the power(s) leading the world order, expansion becomes a contest among powers. Nevertheless, regional powers are not necessarily and not always rivals to the global power: the assessment of their potential expansion and appeal are fundamental to judging whether they constitute a threat to the world order. The hierarchy of orders is determined by their ability to expand.

Having ascended when the first signs of the rise of potential rivals to the unipole became visible, regional power research focused on emerging powers, whether limited to BRICS countries, or also applied to other states (Nolte, 2010). Its assumptions closely correlated with the definition of world order suggested by Kissinger, with emphasis on regional order being the small-scale version of the non-global but expanding world order. Yet regional power research fails to take into consideration the distinction Kissinger (2015) made between world order and international order.

International order is the practical application of the principles that drive the mechanisms of the expanding world order: the practical application of arrangements considered just, and the distribution of power seen as appropriate, by the leading power. So, while the world is populated by competing orders of various ability and intent to expand, the most significant power may be able to impose the rules of the game upon all regional orders to such an extent, that the ability of lesser orders to expand – or even to dominate within their own regions, in whatever terms regions are defined – are significantly impaired. A debate can be identified within regional power research about the extent to which the unipolar world order imposed its norms and processes onto the world, in the global sense. Some argued that with the end of the Cold War, the regions became more relevant and independent (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Katzenstein, 2005), and even hypothesized a world of strong regions. Others argued that there is a considerable “global overlay” upon regional orders, whether defined by a sub-global power that is satisfied with the world order, or by one that seeks ways of resisting it (Acharya, 2007). Overall, the assumption of well-defined regions structured by regional powers prevailed. The dynamic of competition and the ensuing uneven distribution of stability as a precondition of systematically ordering a region were shunned for the most part (Garzón, 2022). Thus, the hypotheses regarding the strategies of regional powers, or their performance within their own regions, have not matched empirical observations.

The third paradigm – offered by the liberal theory of IR, as formulated by Andrew Moravcsik (1992, 1997) – thinks in terms of actual globality. Here, world order is the global space populated by organizations of various types and sizes, including states as well as sub-state and transnational non-governmental organizations, corporations, multinational organizations. They are seen as interest groups, whose legitimacy stems from their fulfillment of their avowed mission of representing the interests of their own constituents on the international level. World order is, in all practicality, the space where organizations negotiate their preferences. States are considered to have less legitimacy than other organizations because they fail to live up to their claimed mission of representing all of their citizens and social groups on the international level. In one fell swoop, the liberal paradigm



brings back the notion of legitimacy-based membership in world order (as opposed to the expansionist paradigm of world order, which emphasizes legitimacy-based leadership).

World order being defined as the global arena where geopolitical entities seek to negotiate their preferences in the liberal paradigm, networks emerge internationally (Slaughter, 2004), paving the way toward the rise of global society replacing the notion of the international society of states as conceived in the club-like world order of states (Clark, 2005; Dunne, 1998, 2003).

Interpreting the state as a type of interest group and measuring it against specialized organizations appears to fall in the category of miscomparison (Sartori, 1991). Unlike interest groups like non-governmental organizations or corporations or other specialist organizations, the state is a territorial entity where the multitude of often inherently contradictory interests are reconciled for society to work. Its mission is not cause-specific or group-specific representation of interests. Yet, the seeming miscomparison deserves more attention. Moravcsik moves the process of the reconciliation of contradictory interests from the national to the global level. This means that the liberal paradigm of world order shifts the place where the processes of power and its legitimation take place from the level of the state to the global level.

With its failure to confirm hypotheses of the replication of the world order on the regional level, regional power research may have given the liberal paradigm a boost. The interpretation of regional power research as an endeavor to assess the emergence of rivals to the unipole, however, cannot readily be reconciled with the liberal paradigm.

While the liberal paradigm could have lent regional power research hypotheses on intra-regional and inter-regional embeddedness of regional powers, it has been largely ignored. The emphasis on regionality was not compatible with the consideration of non-territorial, or trans-territorial networks.

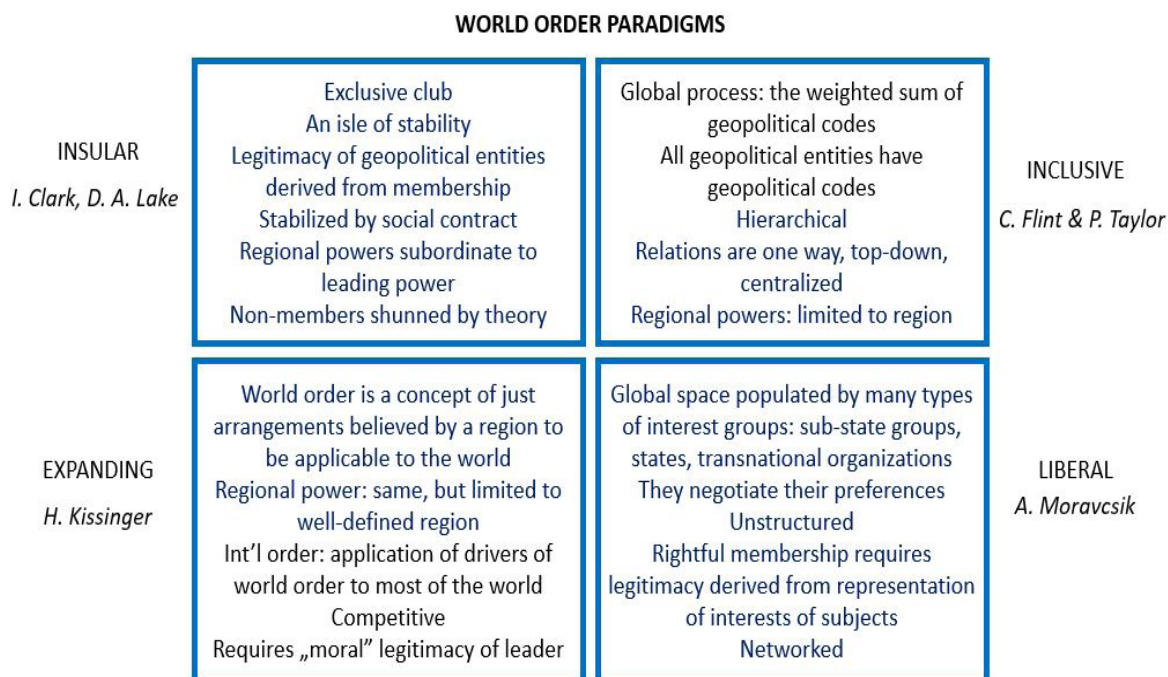
The fourth paradigm, proposed by Colin Flint and Peter Taylor (2018) emerges from a combination of world system theory and constructivism. This theory views world order as a global process, that is, dynamically, and without spatial or temporal limitations. In this paradigm, all geopolitical entities, meaning all states, great or small, and many non-state actors, too, have geopolitical calculations – “geopolitical codes” – whereby they lay out how they want to increase the number of their friends, weaken or eliminate their foes, and find ways of justifying these goals and ensuing action. World order is defined as the aggregate of the geopolitical codes of all geopolitical entities. This paradigm is inclusive and emancipatory as it rests on the idea that all states – and many non-state actors, too – have geopolitical codes. Membership in the global world order does not require special legitimacy. Geopolitical entities are considered based on their existence, and not on role or power status.

Differences between the constituents of world order arise from the geographical scope of their codes. Geopolitical entities are ranked as global, regional, or local powers, depending on whether their geopolitical calculations encompass the entire world, or are limited to their own region, or, in the case of local powers, only to their neighbors. In this paradigm stability is defined as the continuity of the power hierarchy that underpins the extent to which the various entities manage to realize their geopolitical codes.

Inclusive as it is, it is the spatial model of relations underlying the system of geopolitical codes that invites the question whether it is compatible with empirical observation. Is it realistic for any entity,

no matter how small, not to take the global and any regional powers into consideration when creating their geopolitical calculations? The four paradigms of world order are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Paradigms of world order from the viewpoint of regional powers



Source: author's own graphics

Regional power research assumes the existence of regions. The concept of regional powers in regional power research as well as in Flint and Taylor's paradigm of world order is based on the criterion of strict regional limitation. When discussing the world order, Kissinger (2015) also speaks of "well-defined regions". Indeed, who defines regions? What makes the definition of a region legitimate? Are regions imposed by the world order, or do regional powers produce them? Or do they arise from an interaction of the two? Or are they an inheritance shaped by geography and history? Can a region be defined by one power, but be structured by another? How static, or how malleable are regions? How relevant is strictly limited regionality in the age increasingly defined by the technologies and domination of outer space and cyberspace, the two truly planet-wide global commons?

Questions abound, highlighting the complexity – multiplicity even – of the notion of region. While one may hope for a world order where the top-down and bottom-up definitions of regions – and powers – coincide, and their roles within globality as well as towards their constituents are founded on consensus – in reality, the definition of regions is hotly contested in theory as much as in practice. Although Carr (1946) did not use the term 'social construct', his argument remains unrefuted that world order, and norms or morality were hypotheses that were made 'real' by the consensus that surrounds them, while it prevails. The same can be said about regions. What seems clear is that the notion of power, and the act or intent of structuring relations in spatiality are inseparable. For a better



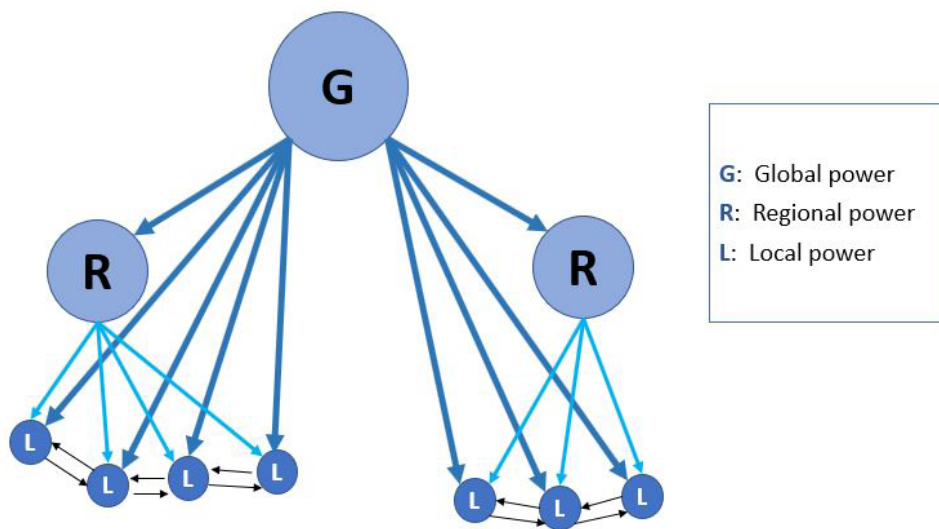
grasp of assumptions underlying regional power research, we need to turn to the system of relations as hypothesized within world order.

### Hypotheses of the relational structure of world order

As we have seen, in two of the four paradigms that relate to territoriality, regional powers are understood to assert their power to actively structure their region, and to have geopolitical calculations that are limited to their own region. According to regional power research, regional powers accommodate global level influences. The regional orders are hypothesized as smoothly embedded in the global order.

In the system of geopolitical codes categorized as global, regional, and local, relations that shape the world order are all hypothesized to be top-down between the global and regional level, and then again between the regional and local levels. Relations are horizontal among local powers and limited in scope to neighbors (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The relations assumed to underlie world order based on Flint and Taylor’s system of geopolitical codes.



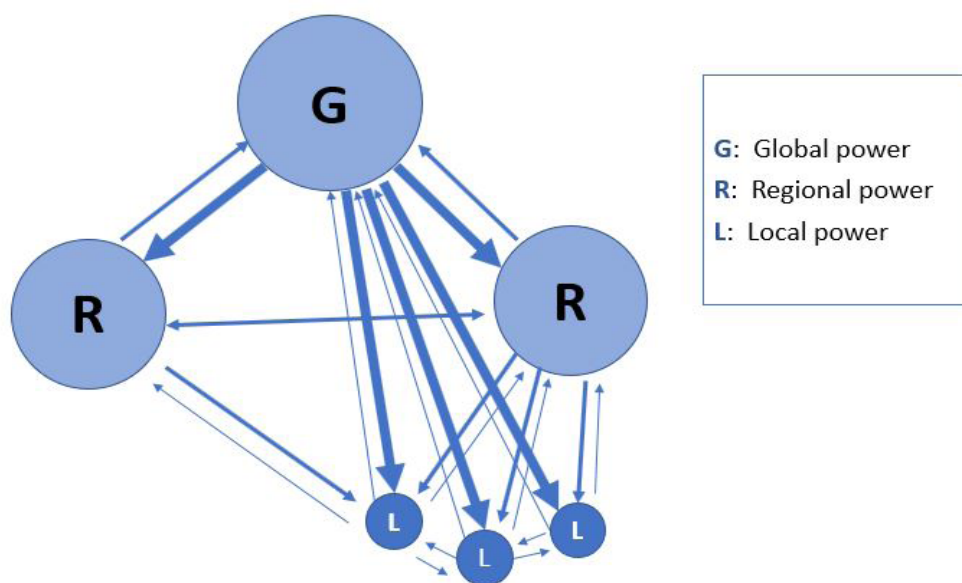
Source: author’s own graphics

In this model of world order, global relations are centralized. Neither bottom-up, nor inter-regional geopolitical calculations are envisaged. This view of global relations reflects an underlying hypothesis of unipolarity taken to the extreme or is reduced to coincide with the geopolitical intention of the global power in an expansionist world order. How to account for cooperation between sub-global powers, such as BRICS countries? Or Chinese undertakings in Africa or South America? Or the efforts of any country, large or small, seeking to influence the policies of the United States – or for that matter, that of China?

A systemic adjustment of the theorized relations is needed, to reconcile them with empirically observed processes that have produced, and continue to shape, global order. Two immediate modifications are in order:

1. Relations need to be conceived as two-way, no matter how asymmetric they are, between local and regional, regional and global, as well as local and the global powers.
2. Horizontal relations between regional powers – as well as diagonal relations between a regional power and a local power located in another region – need to be included. The adjusted system of relations is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. A re-interpretation of relations between geopolitical entities, accounting for non-centralized and two-way interactions.



Source: author's own graphics

### The challenges of theoretically defining regional powers

The inclusion of two-way and inter-regional strategic interaction between geopolitical entities in the model of relations opens the possibility of studying the strategies of regional powers more meaningfully, and of formulating hypotheses that can be confirmed by empirical observation. This opportunity comes at a price. The convenience of having a clear-cut definition of regional powers – no matter how flawed – is lost. The core issue of how powers between the global and local levels can be defined re-emerges, since they can no longer be reduced to the claim that they are states with significant power capabilities but limited to their own – “well-defined” (Kissinger, 2015) – regions. Can regions be well-defined in a world order hypothesized as powers seeking to expand? Contestation is inevitable. But the interactions, the actual geopolitical codes of sub-global players cannot empirically be confined to single regions, either.

The other definition (Nolte, 2010) says regional powers are ones bearing “*special responsibility for the security and for the maintenance of order in the region*” and having both the self-conception and the international recognition as a regional power. Here, the notion of region persists, but much less emphatically. A salient element of this definition is attributing special responsibility to regional powers for security and order within their own regions. This is an intriguing proposition in a unipolar world, just as much as in a bipolar one.

Special or not, ‘responsibility’ has not been part of the definition of ‘power’, while morality has (Carr, 1946). Power has been associated with ‘ability’ (Dahl, 1957, Nye, 1990), while its possession and use has been inseparably linked with ‘legitimation’ (Beetham, 2013; Weber, 2009), the latter also being defined as a “moral quality” (Kissinger, 2015). Holding someone responsible can, however, be interpreted as an act of power: it prescribes a certain kind of behavior or performance. In Nolte’s (2010) definition, regional powers are subordinates, to whom responsibility is attributed by superior power(s). Alternatively, on the purely theoretical (not empirical) level, the regional power may be expected by the states within its region to give them protection. Were such a phenomenon to materialize, it could lead to the emergence of a power block that could easily be perceived as a challenge to the world order by the global power(s). According to Allison (2017), in the overwhelming majority of cases, the incumbent power saw the rise of another power as an existential threat, and war ensued – that is, Thucydides’ trap is activated more often than not. Indeed, a regional power can only be able to uphold security and order in its region if it complies with the superior global power. A failure to comply will inevitably entail intervention by the superordinate global power (Flint, 2017).

In Nolte’s (2010) definition, regional powers are also required to have the self-conception and international recognition as a regional power, implying a consensus. A failure to comply with the global power clearly entails the loss of legitimacy as a member in the order in two of the four world order paradigms, the insular and the inclusive ones. While this may not necessarily undo the regional power status of a player, its ability to provide security or to maintain order will be actively hampered. ‘Responsibility’ in this case becomes synonymous with the regional power using its influence to uphold the world order.

Neither definition of regional powers, whether it emphasizes territoriality (Kissinger, 2015), or the consensual place of the given regional power in the international hierarchy of powers (Nolte, 2010), can be anticipated to serve as a foundation for hypotheses that are compatible with empirical observation. Nevertheless, the examined definitions manifest a consensus that regional power status has both a territorial and a hierarchical aspect. This consensus can be readily upheld. The challenge is to reconcile theory and practice, accommodating the competing drive of powers to secure for themselves an order that is aligned with their interests, and the possibly unintended consequences of globalization and interdependence.

## Towards a more nuanced theory of powers

As Garzón (2022) showed, the unfruitful approach pursued by regional power research projected IR theories of global ordering onto regional powers, which, in turn, were defined as having dominance limited to a specific region, and compliant with the world order built by global power(s). Based on the findings of the deconstruction of the hypotheses of relations underlying the paradigms of world order, which flow over into the various definitions of regional powers, I propose to reverse the approach to powers. Instead of projecting the geopolitical intent of the leading power(s) as a foundation of theory<sup>2</sup>, I offer a thought experiment whereby the empirically observed relations serve as the foundation of theory. Three assumptions are upheld:

1. All geopolitical entities have geopolitical codes (Flint & Taylor, 2018).
2. World order is the aggregate of the geopolitical codes of all geopolitical entities (Flint & Taylor, 2018)
3. All geopolitical entities can be described with a territorial aspect and a power hierarchy aspect (consensus derived from the various definitions discussed).

Thus, the notion of legitimacy of membership inherent in multiple paradigms of world order is replaced with the fact of existence. By accepting Flint and Taylor's (2018) territorially global notion of world order as the weighted sum of all geopolitical codes, lesser powers and relations not directly driven by the entity/entities with global geopolitical code(s) are also theorized as having a role in shaping the world order, even if their influence upon it is possibly indirect, and significantly weaker than in the case of global power(s).

At issue is how the territorial and power hierarchy aspects of sub-global powers are to be viewed. It is in addressing this question that empirically observed relations need to be applied.

The empirically observed relations – as outlined in part 3.2. and illustrated in Figure 3. – include bottom-up as well as horizontal and diagonal ones. Relations can be friendly or hostile – in both cases they are a factor that shapes the world order.

All geopolitical entities count with the global power(s), and all local entities also count with the sub-global powers that shape their regions. All regional powers count with one another. Some regional powers will have strategically relevant relations with remote parts of the world. As an example, Russia and China have long been building relations in Europe, Latin-America, and Africa, as has the United States. But one may look at Iran, more obviously a regional power than China, for instance. Yet, despite the sanctions imposed on it in the wake of the toppling of the shah in 1979, and again following the withdrawal of the US from the nuclear deal in 2018, Iran has been of strategic relevance not only to China, but also to India, and indeed, Venezuela<sup>3</sup>. These geopolitical entities are outside the more immediate – regional – sphere of influence Iran seeks to maintain, reaching from Yemen through

---

2 Power projection as the foundation of examining world order can be justifiably applied if global power status is under investigation (Faust, 2021b)..

3 To cite one example, Iran sent multiple fleets of oil tankers to the isolated Latin-American country to alleviate its fuel shortage, and most likely, to demonstrate at the same time its open defiance of the global power (Zerpa et al., 2020). While it is clear that the move was not seen as friendly, welcome or even legitimate by the United States, it remains a fact, while its legitimacy may be viewed quite differently by other geopolitical entities.

Syria to Turkey and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the territoriality of Iran as a power seems to be in another league than China, whose global or regional power status has long been a subject of debate. Or we may consider Turkey, a NATO member, whose strategic relevance to the US, Europe, Russia, China, the Gulf region, and North Africa is unquestionable. In fact, making sense of Turkey without considering its strategic relevance to multiple regions of the world would hardly be a meaningful undertaking. Or Qatar, as a financial and aviation hub, and a globally relevant LNG supplier is hard to interpret as a player with a reach or relevance limited to a more or less well-defined region. None of these geopolitical entities can be confined to a single region. We can also say that international organization does not reflect the systemic relevance of countries, as not all states listed above are party to the influential Group of Twenty. International fora are not shaped based on the systemic relevance of geopolitical entities but are reflective of arrangements deemed supportive of the world order by the satisfied global power(s).

What appears to be an attribute of all the states listed is that they have strategic relevance in multiple regions of the world. Rather than categorizing them as regional, in the sense of limitation to a well-defined region, we may consider them trans-regional powers: ones with strategically relevant stakes in multiple regions of the world. This makes them – to varying degrees – trans-regional powers.

The introduction of the novel category of trans-regional powers does not, and should not, entail the elimination of regional powers. It is an initial step towards an analytically relevant distinction in the hierarchy of states that are neither global, nor local powers, but somewhere in between.

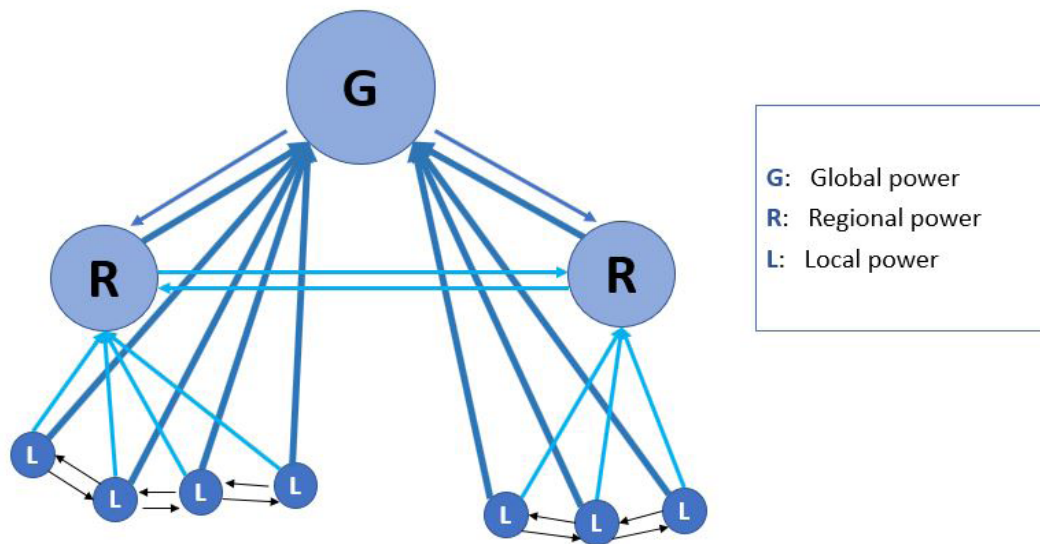
Theorizing the categories of powers as local, regional, trans-regional and global is still a very low-resolution approach to the international hierarchy. In a globalized and interdependent world, while territoriality remains of significance, it is above all systemic relevance of the various geopolitical entities that needs to be taken into consideration.

Systemic relevance differs from the predominant notion of power as the ability to impose intentions even in the face of resistance (Weber, 2009). It includes more passive forms of influence upon the world, whether it arises from the possession of natural, human, or cultural resources, technological capabilities, the domination of choke points, or, as Lukes (2005) suggests, on the ability to resist change. It also requires us to take into consideration relevance to others as perceived by others. Going back to our previous examples, it is not only the intended imposition of Chinese, Russian, or American intentions upon Latin America or Africa, but also, the strategic relevance of Chinese, Russian, American stakes in the given region to the given region that makes a difference. How many countries count with the US or Russia or China or Turkey, etc. is an indicator of global systemic relevance. Systemic relevance as reflected in the geopolitical codes of others requires the recognition of bottom-up relations. as illustrated in Figure 4.

Two fundamental questions need to be considered. One is whether it is reasonable to assume that small scale powers may also be shapers of world order: whether it is theoretically legitimate to take them into consideration when examining the processes of a global world order. Recent events suggest that they may, indeed. For the sanctions imposed by the US and its Western allies to achieve the isolation of Russia to the extent that it loses its ability to shape the world order – its ability to project power as well as its systemic role – it would have been necessary for all, or at least the vast majority

of powers to go along with the sanctions. They did not do so. This reluctance to follow the policy of the US and its Western allies may play a significant role in shaping the world order.

Figure 4. The systemic relevance of geopolitical entities as reflected in the geopolitical codes of others



Source: author's own graphics

Is it reasonable to think that all countries can have direct influence upon the world order all of the time? Definitely not. But it is reasonable to assume that the openness of lesser powers to relations not expected or not preferred by the unipole as stemming from its globalization of trade has indeed had a role in the emergence of powers it sees as rivals. Without countries that were open to its cooperation, China could not have advanced with its Belt and Road Initiative<sup>4</sup>. The multitude of projects within the Chinese scheme produced a swarm of cooperations that were too numerous for the incumbent global power to promptly and effectively counter them all. It was the cooperation of lesser powers that made this happen.

Both examples suggest that lesser powers may have an occasional and indirect influence, particularly if part of a swarm. Their behavior that under such conditions can shape the world order may involve positive action (e.g. joining a project) or it may be a refusal to cooperate (e.g. not imposing a sanction).

The other question has to do with territoriality: how to think of regionality if multiple trans-regional powers have strategic stakes in the same regions? How can stability be maintained if multiple trans-regional powers need the cooperation of a systemically relevant resource provider? What arrangements can be seen as just by all parties concerned? Can principles of accommodation and inclusion be coded into a new theoretical and practical paradigm of world order?

<sup>4</sup> In the post-Cold War era, foreign direct investment patterns as presented in the case of Hungary by Lendvai et al. (2021) have been a key indicator for mapping centralized relations as well as relations outside the control and intentions of the unipole.



If the Cold War has any lessons to offer, the one we need to take to heart is that the role and global organization that enabled the rise of the United States was the existence of the significant other, the Soviet Union, whose mere existence was a key pillar in the self-identification of the US as the leader – and defender – of the West. The fall of the Soviet Union was, as Huntington (1997) established it, a shock to the identity of the US. Today, Russia and China pursue their interests in various regions of the world in peaceful coexistence. It is their mutual interest to cooperate if they are to successfully retain their power positions despite US and Western resistance. Should a new world order emerge and were that world order to involve the cessation of US or Western rejection of Russia's and China's roles in shaping world order, it is unclear if these two trans-regional powers were able to continue to coexist peacefully in overlapping regions of relevance to them. The answers as to the way global relations evolve will be provided by practice, not theory. But the relevance of territoriality – and the hierarchy of power – is unlikely to cease.

## CONCLUSIONS

The paper has investigated the theoretical reasons as to why regional power research as a field of IR that arose with the emergence of BRICS has systematically failed to produce hypotheses that could be confirmed by empirical observation. The unfruitful attempts involved the projection of IR theory of world order onto regional powers. To grasp the theoretical reasons for the mismatch of hypotheses and empirical observation, the concept of world order in four distinct paradigms was deconstructed, from the point of view of regional powers. Out of the four, two require legitimacy for membership (the insular and the liberal paradigms), one – Kissinger's competitive expansionist paradigm – requires legitimacy for leadership, denying by default the legitimacy of emerging regional powers. The fourth paradigm is inclusive, as far as membership is concerned, but fails to conceive of relations as not fully centralized and top-down. This means that even the inclusive paradigm theoretically excludes the possibility of a power challenging the global power(s) that define(s) the world order.

The two definitions of regional powers used in regional power research were also deconstructed. One focuses on the limitation of regional powers to well-defined territories, which does not satisfactorily match empirical observations in a globalized and interdependent world. The other is reduced to regional powers that are fully compliant with the superior global power's world order. Again, empirical observation suggests that there are sub-global powers that are dissatisfied with the post-Cold War world order. Furthermore, treating powers that are between the global and the local extremities of the power scale as a homogenous group does not facilitate analysis. Globalization and interdependence – as well as resistance by dissatisfied powers to unipolarity – imply that there will be horizontal and diagonal strategic relations that shape the world order.

To lay the theoretical foundations of a more nuanced approach to powers, the paper reversed the theoretical approach to regional powers, by creating a model of empirically observable relations that structure global processes. The system of geopolitical codes that underlies the inclusive world order paradigm was complemented with bottom-up and inter-regional relations. This entailed the intro-

duction of a new category in the scale of powers: the trans-regional level. Trans-regional powers are defined as having strategic stakes in multiple regions.

Bottom-up relations mean that in addition to intended power projection, the systemic relevance of an entity as perceived by others also needs to be taken into consideration when theorizing world order and power hierarchies. By doing so, theory will be able to account for the occasional, and often indirect role of even local powers in shaping the world order, as well as for the role and rise of regional powers.

## REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. (2007). The Emerging Regional Architecture of World Politics. *World Politics*, 59(4), 629–652.
- Acharya, A & Buzan, B, (2007). Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. 7, 287–312.
- Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?* Scribe.
- Barr, D. M. (2011). *Who's afraid of China?: the challenge of Chinese soft power*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Beetham, D. (2013). *The Legitimation of Power*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Buzan, B., & Waeber, O. (2003) *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Callahan, W. A. (2015) Identity and security in China: the negative soft power of the China dream. *Politics*, 35(3-4), 216–229.
- Carr, E. H. (1946). *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939. An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Macmillan.
- Clark, I. (1989). *The Hierarchy of States. Reform and resistance in the international order*. Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, I. (2005). *Legitimacy in International Society*. Oxford University Press.
- Cline, K., Rhamey, P., Henshaw, A., Sedziaka, A., Tandon, A., & Volgy, T. J. (2011). Identifying Regional Powers and Their Status. In T.J. Volgy, R. Corbetta, K. A. Grant, & R. G. Baird (Eds.), *Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics. Evolutionary Processes in World Politics* (pp. 133–157). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Coicaud, J-M. (2010). Deconstructing International Legitimacy. In H. Charlesworth, & J-M. Coicaud (Eds.), *Fault Lines of International Legitimacy* (pp. 29–86). Cambridge University Press.
- Dahl, R. A. (1957). The Concept of Power. *Behavioral Science*, 2(3), 201–215.
- Dunne, T. (1998). *Inventing international society: a history of the English School*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dunne, T. (2003). Society and Hierarchy in International Relations. *International Relations*, 17(3), 303–320.
- Ellis, R. E. (2011). *Chinese soft power in Latin America: A case study*. National Defense University.

- Faust, A. (2021a). Az Egyesült Államok geostratégiai hatalomfelfogása és a hidegháború utáni világrend evolúciója az amerikai nemzetbiztonsági stratégiák tükrében. *Külügyi Szemle*, 20(2), 151–176.
- Faust, A. (2021b). Taking power seriously—A holistic approach to assessing the international distribution of power. *Modern Geográfia*, 16(3), 37–56. <https://doi.org/10.15170/MG.2021.16.03.03>
- Fehér, T. (2017). Geo-economics and geopolitics in Europe from the aspect of a centre-periphery divide. *Modern Geográfia*, 12(4), 15–28.
- Flint, C. (2017). *Introduction to Geopolitics*. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Routledge.
- Flint, C., & Taylor, P. J. (2018). *Political Geography. World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality*. (7<sup>th</sup> edition). Routledge.
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace-Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191.
- Galtung, J. (2000). *Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means. The Transcend Method*. United Nations Disaster Management Training Programme.
- Garzón, J. F. (2022). The regional powers' research programme in international relations: a critical assessment. *International Politics*, 1–23. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-022-00388-7>
- Holyk, G. (2011) Paper Tiger? Chinese Soft Power in East Asia. *Political Science Quarterly*, 126(2), 223–254.
- Huntington, S. B. (1997). The Erosion of American National Interests. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(5), 28-49.
- Katzenstein, P. J. (2005). *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*. Cornell University Press.
- Kissinger, H. (2015). *World order*. Penguin Books.
- Lake, D. A. (2009). Relational Authority and Legitimacy in International Relations. *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, 331–353.
- Lake, D. A. (2013). Great power hierarchies and strategies in twenty-first century world politics. In W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, & B. A. Simmons (Eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (pp. 555–577). Sage.
- Lendvai, T., Tésits, R., & Alpek, B. L. (2021). A Magyarországra érkező külföldi működőtőke gazdasági kapcsolatrendszer-vizsgálatának elméleti alapjai (1960–2004). *Modern Geográfia*, 16(3), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.15170/MG.2021.16.03.01>
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power. A Radical View*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moravcsik, A. (1992). *Liberalism and International Relations Theory*. Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.
- Moravcsik, A. (1997). Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics. *International Organization*, 51(4), 513–53.
- Nádudvari, A. (2020). A konfliktuskutatást megalapozó kutatási irányzatok áttekintése. In Kovács, K., & Tálás, P. (Eds.), *A konfliktuselemzés módszertani iskoláiról* (pp. 49–89). Dialóg Campus.
- Nielsen, K., & Paabo, H. (2015). How Russian Soft Power Fails in Estonia: Or, Why the Russophone Minorities Remain Quiescent. *Journal on Baltic Security*, 1(2), 125–157.

- Nolte, D. (2010). How to compare regional powers: analytical concepts and research topics. *Review of International Studies*, 36(4), 881–901.
- Nye Jr., J. S. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171.
- Nye Jr., J. S. (2021). Soft Power: the evolution of a concept. *Journal of Political Power*, 14(1), 196–208.
- Sartori, G. (1991). Comparing and Miscomparing. *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 3(3), 243–257.
- Sergunin, A., & Karabeshkin, L. (2015). Understanding Russia's soft power strategy. *Politics*, 35(3-4), 347–363.
- Slaughter, A. M. (2004). Sovereignty and Power in a Networked World Order. *Stanford Journal of International Law*, 40, 283–327.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Weber, M. (2009). *Politikai szociológia – Politikai közösségek. Az uralom*. Helikon Kiadó.
- Wigell, M. (2016). Conceptualizing regional powers' geoeconomic strategies: neo-imperialism, neo-mercantilism, hegemony, and liberal institutionalism. *Asia Europe Journal*, 14(2), 135–151.
- Zerpa, F., Bartenstein, B., & Millard, P. (2020). Biggest Iranian Flotilla Yet En Route to Venezuela With Fuel. *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-05/biggest-iranian-flotilla-yet-en-route-to-venezuela-with-fuel#xj4y7vzkg>

Ez a mű a Creative Commons Nevezd meg! – Ne add el! – Ne változtasd! 4.0 nemzetközi licen-  
ce-feltételeinek megfelelően felhasználható. (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

This open access article may be used under the international license terms of Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

