
Original Article

Contested leadership in international relations

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Abstract The articles in this special issue examine the responses to the rise of new and emerging powers including Brazil, China, India and South Africa across different regions. Rather than focus on great powers and hegemonies, the contributors address the contestation between regional powers, and secondary and tertiary states. The contributors address three questions: What are the drivers of different strategic responses? What are the different regional responses to shifts in the distribution of material capabilities? What is the influence of agency and structure in contested regional orders? To address these questions, different schools are employed including realism, institutionalism, and the English school to examine state characteristics, systemic, sub-systemic, domestic constraints and opportunities, the role of ideas and shared values, and different regional governance structures. *International Politics* (2015) **52**, 139–145. doi:10.1057/ip.2014.42; published online 19 December 2014

Keywords: secondary and tertiary states; realism; institutionalism; English School

This special issue proceeds from the observation that conflicts over the assertion or prevention of regional leadership will impact regional orders and the global order. The contributors are, therefore, interested in regional responses to the rise of new powers such as Brazil, China, India and South Africa. The leading regional role of these states can be based on their greater military or economic potential. In the same way, their legitimacy or representative function for a region might generate bargaining advantages.

With the heavy emphasis on the great powers and hegemonies, regional power and contestation of the secondary and tertiary states are understudied. The contributors to this special issue of *International Politics* examine the motives of the secondary and tertiary states to accept or contest the regional hegemon and its regional order. What regional, sub-systemic and domestic level strategies do secondary and tertiary states pursue in response to changes in the distribution of power and the new asymmetries, and why? Specifically, the contributors assess how to characterize different strategies



in various world regions, the impact of diverse forms of domestic, systemic and normative factors on strategic responses, and the role of regional institutions in managing the new power realities.

The contributors to this special issue address three theoretical questions. First, what are the drivers of different strategic responses? In reflecting the differences between realist, English school and institutionalist approaches, the contributors examine state characteristics, and systemic and sub-systemic constraints and incentives, ideas and shared values, and regional governance structures. Can regional resistance be best explained by combining domestic factors such as regime type, public opinion, or the influence of interest groups with the self-help mechanisms that occur in anarchic systems? Are middle powers' leaders driven by thicker patterns of identity and culture within their societies? Do common governance institutions dominantly shape the foreign policies of secondary states?

Second, how can one characterize the different regional responses to changes in the distribution of material capabilities? These questions seek to evaluate the descriptive value and conceptual clarity of the most dominant types of strategic responses. What are the distinctive features of strategies that fall between – or beyond – the extremes of balancing and accommodation? What frameworks exist to compare such strategies? And how can we effectively observe such phenomena in the real world?

Third, what is the influence of agency and structure in contested regional orders? Are systemic constraints of the global and regional economy shaping secondary and small states' behaviour? And how do these forces interact with domestic agents in shaping foreign policy adaptations to new regional asymmetries?

The positions of regional powers located between the centre and periphery of the current world system and at the nexus of international and regional politics means that they have particularly complex foreign policy strategies. Thus, complex strategic approaches are also necessary in order to respond to the rise of these powerful states. The reform of the Security Council of the United Nations has failed, not least because of the lack of acceptance in the candidates' regions. In general, empirical case studies suggest lower degrees of acceptance of regional powers' leadership claims in the neighbouring states than at the global level.

In order to analyse this contested dynamic, this special issue of *International Politics* will focus on regional contestation and identify factors that motivate secondary powers and tertiary states to accept or contest regional powers' leadership claims. Secondary powers have a particular significance in the context of regional contestation because they have the most influence and impact on the regional polarity. We can define a secondary state's position in the regional hierarchy based on relative material, institutional and discursive resources, with material resources being the easiest to quantify. One feature of secondary powers is that the most important reference point of their foreign policies is the regional power. Moreover, the regional power is the only state in the locale with extensive presence and agenda-setting capacity at the global level.



Is leadership acceptance by secondary and tertiary players a precondition for the representation of regional interests by the regional power at the global level? Is regional acceptance or at least acquiescence a necessary precondition for the rise of regional powers in the global hierarchy and for their transformation into great powers? In cases where regional acceptance is significant, which is assumed by the majority of the contributors to this special issue, secondary players will expect a reward from the regional power for their leadership acceptance asking: (i) for the payment of the political costs of regional cooperation such as the construction of democratic and participative regional institutions; (ii) for the payment of economic costs of regional cooperation including structural funds and domestic market access; and (iii) for the provision of public goods like regional stability and infrastructure by the regional power. The strategic choice of secondary powers will be influenced by the readiness of the regional power to pay and provide these regional public goods.

For instance, in the Africa section Timothy M. Shaw analyses the causes of many African states' ambivalence about South Africa's role as a 'BRICS state'. Shaw argues from the perspective of these smaller regional countries stressing that South Africa's economic growth comes with social and ecological costs, which are often paid by its neighbours. The author disproves the expression of the South African 'developmental power' focussing on Pretoria's challenges of governance and the uneven distribution of public goods verified through various comparative indicators from capacity building to transparency and human development. The symbolic that African secondary states pay for South Africa's growth is expressed by the continuing migration into South Africa.

Another key factor that impacts secondary players' acceptance of the primary powers' explicit or implicit leadership claim is the dominant mode of conflict management in the locale. Further variables tackled by the authors of this volume are the resources, interests and perceptions of foreign policy. To capture the relational dimension of these variables, the bilateral relations between regional and secondary powers as well as between regional and external great powers will be analysed. In the Asia section, Nicolas Blarel and Hannes Ebert present an analysis of the strategy of nuclear contestation in South Asia since 1947, which reveals the significance of relative power resources, mutual perceptions and great power involvement.

Blarel and Ebert demonstrate that nuclear contestation in South Asia operates under three specific conditions: (i) the secondary power anticipates the interference of a systemic great power – the United States – with significant stakes in the de-escalation of the crisis, a strategy which the authors label 'trilateral compellence'; (ii) the secondary power exploits the latent risk of nuclear escalation by using non-state actors to maximize its negotiation and deterrence leverage; and (iii) external powers engage in 'pivotal deterrence' in order to influence the contestation strategy chosen by the secondary power. Blarel and Ebert conclude that these conditions generate a situation of a 'stability-instability paradox', in which interstate war has been replaced by calculated risk-taking and sub-conventional warfare.



The most obvious reason to contest a regional power's leadership claim is the policy behaviour of the regional power itself. But this behaviour does not pose a vital threat to the secondary power as in the case of India and Pakistan. Two contributions to this volume address regional powers' strategic approaches towards their regions. In the South America section, Sean Burges revisits Brazil's regional strategy of consensual hegemony. He argues that the greatest obstacle for regional acceptance as well as for Brasilia's capacity to lead and leverage the region is its reluctance to accept measures that might restrict national autonomy.

Although the consensual hegemony approach allowed Brazil to establish an ideational project and a leading position in South America, it failed to provide concrete leadership goods and, therefore, weakened Brazil's regional position. Burges argues that the relative contestation by South American secondary powers is rooted in a contradictory approach that views Brazilian diplomats pushing away suggestions of assertive leadership while more concrete action is quietly taken by other regionally engaged sections of the Brazilian state.

In the Africa section, Chris Alden and Maxi Schoeman discuss the 'symbolic hegemony' of South Africa in Africa. They show that the state-led effort of an 'African Renaissance' to restructure continental institutions, which was complemented by commercial expansion by well-financed South African corporations, has been only partially realized. Even though the offensive economic strategy of public and private South African companies is often criticized as sub-imperialism in neighbouring states, the case for South African hegemonic dominance over the continent is challenged by its material weakness and uneven record of foreign policy successes. Despite this shortcoming, Pretoria is continually 'rewarded' with leadership positions in international groupings such as BRICS, G20, and nearly consecutive terms on the UN Security Council. Alden and Schoeman conclude that this constitutes symbolic representivity and poses a continuing set of foreign policy dilemmas for South Africa.

Besides the foreign policy approach of the hegemon, the dominant patterns of interaction shape secondary powers' responses to their rising neighbours. The conditions for conflict and cooperation within regional orders differ in many aspects from world order politics. For instance, regional cooperation processes such as the African Union, the Union of South American Nations and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation can serve as power bases or limit the leaders' foreign policy options as secondary players try to constrain the rising powers by refusing to grant them acceptance and legitimacy. These secondary powers can claim leadership in certain issue areas beyond the region and represent potential cooperation partners for external powers. The former scenario might enable them to project power globally. The latter extends their room to manoeuvre in bargaining with regional powers. Secondary powers play a key role with regard to regional acceptance.

For different reasons, Pakistan opposes India's leadership; Venezuela undermines Brazil's regional power status; and Nigeria refuses to follow South Africa. A lack of



regional acceptance can be expressed through claims of (sub)regional leadership by secondary powers. In this regard, Nigeria is labelled as guarantor of sub-regional stability. In addition, South Africa's historical legacy of apartheid is often instrumentalized by policy makers of African secondary states to delegitimize its leadership role. Pakistan is described as India's rival and a counterbalancing force in South Asia, especially with a view to the nuclear dimension of the hostile relation and the Kashmir conflict. And Venezuela is referred to as a regional middle power in South America, with an emphasis on its 'petropolitics' and its alternative regional integration project, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas.

In summary, the Indian-Pakistani constellation of contested leadership is marked by conflict, whereas the contested leadership dyads in South America and sub-Saharan Africa oscillate between competition and cooperation. China's revival as the primary power in Asia, finally, resulted in multiple foreign policy adaptations by states such as Japan, India and the Southeast Asian nations and sparked the debate about renewed balancing alliances in Asia.

In their article on drivers of strategic contestation, Daniel Flesmes and Leslie Wehner demonstrate that in regions characterized by relative stability such as South America, secondary powers rely mainly on soft balancing mechanisms in responding to their regional power. Whereas Brazil's foreign policy behaviour is the main driver to contest the country's power, the choices of secondary powers on the specific expression of soft balancing are shaped widely by domestic drivers. Flesmes and Wehner verify the assumption that domestic actors have much more influence in foreign policy in environments of peace and stability than in conflictive regions, where the foreign policy elite tends to exclude domestic interests for the sake of the survival of the state.

In general, secondary powers command limited foreign policy options in view of the hard power of regional states. In outlining state strategies, the two most common concepts in International Relations theory (IRT) are balancing and bandwagoning. In cases of contested leadership marked by conflict, we might expect secondary powers to pursue counterbalancing strategies, whereas in cases of contested leadership characterized by patterns of cooperative regional relations bandwagoning seems more likely. Although the literature often portrays states' alignment decisions as a dichotomy between balancing and bandwagoning, these are only the two most extreme polar strategies a weaker state can choose.

The contributors identify various middle-range strategies for weaker states to avoid making an obvious choice that lie between the two extremes of balancing and bandwagoning; it is theoretically and empirically important to distinguish middle-range strategies from the extreme polar opposites. Labels for strategies vary largely and need to be analysed through novel analytical frameworks. The authors of this volume seek to identify the most dominant forms of counter-hegemonic strategies across the three considered regions, and ask whether traditional IRT concepts can be adopted to these regions.



In the Asia section, Kai He proposes the middle-range strategy of institutional balancing for exploring the case of the Asia Pacific. He argues that China's ascent intensifies the institutionalization of security in the Asia Pacific because China's rise has led to a competition among different regional orders, including the US-led bilateralism versus ASEAN-centred and China-supported multilateralism. In addition, the deepening economic interdependence has encouraged powerful actors to rely on institutional balancing strategies to pursue security after the Cold War. The author optimistically concludes that the institutionalization of security in the Asia Pacific will create conditions for the coexistence of regional orders contributing to a relatively peaceful environment for states to compete without military conflict.

What explains variation in how secondary powers respond to rising powers in different world regions has been reflected upon by various IRT schools. The following articles present the most recent models ranging from Neoinstitutionalist and Neoclassical Realist approaches to Constructivist theory, and explore their explanatory power within Asia, Africa and South America.

In this regard, Federico Merke analyses the responses to Brazilian regional power from the perspective of international society and the English School of IRT. Merke stresses the values and institutions shared by Brazil and its neighbours and he argues that these offer the foundations for a distinct regional international society in South America. Therefore, Merke concludes that strategic reactions by states such as Venezuela or Chile towards Brazil are not shaped by material, but instead by common norms, ideas and historical experiences.

From the opposite perspective, Steven Lobell, Neal Jesse and Kristen Williams in their conceptual inroad into the special issue outline a model that examine systemic and sub-systemic constraints and opportunities on secondary and tertiary states. They ask how engaged in the region is the global hegemon, how many regional and extra-regional states are in the region, and which states are waxing and waning and by how much. Such a model can explain general tendencies towards accommodation, resistances and neutrality. To account for the specific foreign policy strategies of secondary and tertiary states would require domestic and unit level variables, and the authors leave it to the area specialists to provide such information.

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