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Geographical Patterns of Analysis in IR Research: Representative Cross-Regional Comparison as a Way Forward

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Abstract

In recent decades, there has been significant debate about the representation of the various world regions in international relations research. This paper contributes to the debate by providing the results of a survey of 290 research articles published over the last decade in three leading disciplinary journals. The survey shows that non-Western cases are indeed underrepresented in the research. However, an analysis of the research articles according to their research topics, objectives, and methodology finds no explanation for this underrepresentation. I argue in this paper that the inclusion of non-Western cases is important to secure the validity of international relations research. "Representative cross-regional comparison," which is based on comparative area studies approaches, is presented as a research design that addresses this issue.

Keywords: comparative area studies, non-Western theories, international relations (IR)

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Article Outline

1 Introduction

A lively discussion about the representation of the various world regions in international relations (IR) research has occurred in recent decades (e.g. Neal and Hamlett 1969; Hoffman 1977; Waever 1998; Acharya and Buzan 2007). The consensus reached is that IR research does not adequately consider non-Western regions – that is, all regions beyond North America and (Western) Europe.[1] This geographical imbalance in the research is problematic due to IR's

1 I refer to the geographical regions of Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), North America, South America, and sub-Saharan Africa.

self-understanding as a subdiscipline of political science that studies the international system in its diversity (e.g. Waltz 1993; Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006). The question of geographical patterns in IR research is thus highly relevant for the discipline.

The critics of West-centrism in IR present astonishingly little empirical information on the representation of non-Western regions in recent IR research. Most of the critical studies refer to the fact that the research ignores these regions. This finding, if true, is surprising, because the end of the Cold War and the growing impact of globalization – in terms of international networking and the improved access to data that comes with better access to technology – should have supported research on these regions.

After a brief discussion of the three shortcomings of mainstream IR regarding the representation of non-Western regions in the research, I aim to contribute to the debate in two ways. I first present a survey of recent IR research in three leading disciplinary journals. The survey examines 290 published research articles from the last decade in order to present an account of geographical patterns in the research. The results support the critics: non-Western cases are underrepresented in the field. Moreover, I analyze whether the specifics of the topic, the objective, or the methodology of the research might explain this geographical pattern. I can identify no evidence, however, that research on particular regions has specific characteristics.

Because the critics provide no straight answer as to *why* we should care about the geographical pattern, I then examine the IR research articles, in a first step, according to their comparative design and geographical coverage. Referring to the discussion in comparative politics, I argue, in a second step, that the non-Western cases are necessary to secure the validity of IR research. Related to the *why* question is another unanswered question – namely, *how* IR research strategies should address non-Western cases. As a final step, I therefore discuss the concepts of comparative area studies (CAS) and, especially, representative cross-regional comparison as research designs that could help improve the validity of the theories.

2 Shortcomings of Mainstream IR's Geographical Focus

In recent decades, IR scholars have discussed the representation of non-Western regions in their field. As early as the 1970s, authors such as Neal and Hamlett (1969) and Hoffman (1977) criticized IR's sole concentration on the United States and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe. At the end of the last century, surveys on the representation of non-Western regions indicated that no major change in the regional dimension of IR had occurred since the first criticisms were made (Waever 1998; Smith 2000). Steven Smith, for example, concluded, "the discipline of IR remains an American social science" (Smith 2000: 376; Hoffmann 1977). A more recent debate has picked up these older discussions. Acharya and Buzan (2007), for example, argue that a discipline that understands itself as analyzing the world cannot ignore the world outside the West, as IR seems to do. The authors identify three shortcomings of IR: the limited participation of non-Western IR scholars in the discipline, the limited develop-

ment of non-Western IR theories, and the limited acknowledgment of non-Western cases in IR research.

The first shortcoming of IR, according to the critics, is the limited participation of non-Western scholars in the disciplinary discourse. The argument is that these scholars could contribute to the debate thanks to their specific historical and philosophical backgrounds in these regions (Acharya 2011). Moreover, critics argue that a discipline that studies global affairs with scholars only from Western regions is not "global." Change in this regard has been relatively slow. Waever and Tickner (2009: 5), in one of the most recent comprehensive surveys on this topic, have found that more than 80 percent of all scholars published between 1970 and 2005 in US political science journals were from North America (see also Tickner 2013: 632–633; Karstensen 2013; Aydinli and Matthews 2000). The reasons behind this finding are possibly higher-quality education and better educational infrastructure in the West, an advantage for native English speakers, and better research funding in the West (Acharya and Buzan 2007: 296–299). In sum, non-Western researchers start out at a disadvantage, and this potentially hampers their chances of publishing in leading disciplinary journals. The hope is that non-Western scholars will become more integrated in the disciplinary discourse in the near future due to global exchange programs and cross-regional networking activities.

The second shortcoming is related to the philosophical basis of IR theories. The critics of mainstream IR claim that non-Western IR theories are necessary in order to incorporate non-Western regions in the discipline's discussions and to go beyond the Western philosophical basis of existing IR theories so that non-Western cases can be adequately captured (Acharya and Buzan 2007: 299–301; Bilgin 2008). One of the major issues in this regard is the predominance of positivistic and realistic schools of American social science in mainstream IR. Some argue that one cannot analyze the empirics of non-Western regions using only the toolbox of positivism and realism (Chen 2011; Acharya 2011). The assumption that radically different theoretical explanations can be found using non-Western perspectives, however, is not necessarily true (Bilgin 2008).

This second criticism of recent IR studies is not entirely convincing. It is not clear *why* we need non-Western theories that only address the problems of these regions. First, the theoretical range and empirical relevance of such theories would be rather marginal. They would not even claim to explain cases in other regions. Second, the critique is connected to the discourse on the weaknesses of the grand IR theories. The development of IR theory has recently been moving forward, and the field is now more open for theoretical improvements to these grand theories (Lake 2013). Finally, such non-Western theories would resemble the "old" IR mainstream because in the end only the dominance of the regions addressed by the theories (from Western to non-Western) would change. The benefit for non-Western theory, therefore, would be limited; the further development of existing IR theories or the generation of theories applicable to all regions would likely be more beneficial.

According to IR critics, the third shortcoming is that existing IR theories are not able to adequately analyze non-Western regions. The literature provides two explanations for this. First, the local knowledge of the phenomenon under study is often not incorporated into the broader IR discipline. Second, the IR mainstream does not consider non-Western regions at all (e.g. Acharya 2011; Acharya and Buzan 2007). Many remedies to these explanations exist. For example, why should a researcher not be able to gather information on these regions through fieldwork, surveys, ethnographic and historical literature, etc.?

In the following sections of the paper, I address this last shortcoming by analyzing *to* what extent non-Western regions are part of IR research today and if there is any methodological reason *why* non-Western regions are often not the focus of IR research.

3 Empirical Reality: Geographical Patterns in IR Research

This section presents the results of a survey of recent IR research articles in three leading IR journals – *International Organization*, *World Politics*, and *European Journal of International Relations*.[2] The data set includes research articles from the three journals that were published in 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2012 and covers a total of 290 articles – 112 from *International Organization*, 74 from *World Politics*, and 104 from *European Journal of International Relations*.[3] The survey first provides an overview of the number of articles that analyze cases in non-Western regions.[4] Disciplinary journals are, as Waever (1998: 697) puts it, the "crucial institution of modern sciences" and can therefore be seen as an adequate initial assessment of the current state of research within a discipline.

While the data set provides good insights into the representation of non-Western regions in the leading IR journals, it obviously has some limitations. First, it does not cover IR-related articles in the main disciplinary political science journals (for example, *American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics*). In contrast to a survey of comparative politics journals that reveals that only 23.6 percent of the surveyed articles use quantitative techniques (Munck and Snyder 2007: 13), Mahoney finds that over 90 percent of the articles published in the three disciplinary political science journals noted above are

2 The journals are ranked first, third, and fifth among the journals with the highest impact in the last five years according to the ISI Citation index. I have excluded *International Security* (position two) and *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (position four) because the subfield of peace and conflict studies recognizes the non-Western regions at an above-average level due to recent or ongoing violent conflicts in these regions. Thus, the data set is a conservative overview of the representation of non-Western regions in the current IR literature.

3 The data set does not include book reviews, research notes, or special issues. I have excluded special issues in order to avoid overrepresentation of one specific topic in the coding. If a special issue should have been coded, I coded the same issue number of the following year.

4 A reasonable criticism is that I refer to geographical regions and do not draw the boundaries of regions according to analytical categories (Ahram 2011; Fawn 2009). The data collection, however, has shown that the first step – identifying only geographical regions – is hard enough.

quantitative (Mahoney 2007: 34). The articles surveyed in this paper are thus slightly biased towards nonstatistical research designs relative to the IR research published in the main political science journals.

Second, the data set does not cover area journals that also publish IR-related articles and it does not cover books (e.g. Lemke 2003; Teti 2007). Harman and Brown (2013), for example, show that more IR studies on Africa exist than are represented in the leading IR journals. They distinguish between two kinds of IR studies on Africa: In the first kind, researchers apply IR theories to cases in Africa involving international actors (aid donors or specific states) or the institutional design of the African Union. Development-related studies remain an area with much activism and with a particular focus on Africa (Harman and Brown 2013: 75–76). In the second kind, researchers undertake empirical studies of international political phenomenon without any particular theoretical focus (Harman and Brown 2013: 77–78). The overview shows that Africa is not at the frontline of IR research, but that African cases are getting more attention compared to prior decades. This evidence suggests that more research on non-Western regions exists than that represented in the three IR journals surveyed here. Moreover, if one were to take the two excluded journals – *International Security* and *Journal of Conflict Resolution* – into account, the amount of research on non-Western regions would surely be greater. The critics, however, are concerned with the IR mainstream and not so much with the subfield of peace and conflict studies. This study's restriction to these three journals is therefore justified: these journals are widely viewed as being key in the IR field when it comes to research agendas and methodologies.

Keeping these limitations in mind, an examination of the articles in the three journals should improve our understanding of the study of non-Western regions in IR.[5] The following subsections present the findings regarding the geographical focus, the research topics, the objectives, and the methodologies in these articles. The descriptive account is intended to detect possible regional patterns in IR research.

3.1 Geographical Focus of IR Research

I first provide a systematic overview of the number and the percentage of articles studying the various geographical regions. Each article was coded according to whether it focused on a specific region or country case within a region, on the global level (for example, statistical studies with global data sets), or had no direct regional or country focus (for example, research on NGOs or methods). The coding was dependent on the main empirical analysis in the respective article. Since it was possible for one article to focus on more than one region, the percentage given could be more than 100 percent.

Table 1 shows that 31.7 percent of all 290 articles covered Europe and 23.1 percent (67 articles) were about North America. In sum, more than 50 percent of the articles analyzed cases

5 See Waever (1998) for a similar approach to IR scholars; see Munck and Snyder (2007) for scopes (research topics), methods, and objectives in recent comparative politics research.

in these two regions. The dominance was not as overwhelming as one might have thought. Indeed, articles with global coverage and those without any specific regional focus also made up more than 50 percent of all articles (see Table 1). Therefore, the Western regions were the subject of a large part of the empirical analysis but were not dominant.

Studies with a focus on non-Western regions accounted for 26 percent of all articles (see Table 1). A look at the data shows significant differences in the coverage of non-Western regions. Articles on Asia (37 articles, 12.7 percent; half as many articles as those focused on North America) and South America (22 articles, 7.5 percent) were predominant. One explanation in the case of Asia could be that the region fits very well within the grand debates in IR due to its still relatively stable state system. South America could be of special interest to US scholars due to, among other things, its geographical proximity. In contrast, the number of research articles about cases in Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was very low. Only 6 percent of all articles analyzed cases in these regions. This finding is odd given the importance of these regions in terms of global phenomena such as development and aid policies, their strategic relevance, and the engagement of international troops in these regions.

Table 1: Geographical Patterns in IR Research

Region	*No. of Articles*	*Percentage of Articles*
Europe	92	31.7
North America	67	23.1
Asia	37	12.7
South America	22	7.5
Africa	10	3.4
MENA	8	2.7
Australia	2	0.6
Global	68	23.4
No direct country or regional focus	62	21.3

Source: Author's own compilation.

In addition to the representation of regions, the representation of specific countries in the research is also of interest. The widely acknowledged concept of BRICS states, for example, leads one to assume that these regional powers are widely studied in IR. These "new powers" question the world order and have changed the international distribution of power, and are thus highly relevant from a policy perspective (Nolte 2010; Kahler 2013). There were, however, relatively few articles on these states in the three leading journals: 11 articles focused on Russia, eight on China, and five on Brazil. Interestingly, no articles focused on India or South Africa. The rather low number of articles about these states could be a result of the sample criteria. In fact, numerous books and special issues of IR journals focus on the emerging powers (e.g. Narlikar 2013; Destradi 2011).

If we take the low coverage of BRICS states in these leading journals as fact, there could be two possible explanations. First, the relevance of the BRICS states for theory and methodological discussion in the discipline may be rather limited. In general, the research on these states primarily addresses changes in the structure of the international system, from unipolarity to multipolarity (Narlikar 2013). Those articles in the survey that did have such a focus, however, generally did not examine any particular region or country (11 articles) or they concentrated on Europe (10 articles, see the section on research topics). Second, the empirical relevance of the five states could be overestimated in the public debate, or the research articles lag behind the empirical developments. Based on the survey, "traditional" powerful states indeed seem to be highly relevant for international politics and IR research, even today. Nine articles focused on Germany, six on France, and five on Japan. Not surprisingly, 62 articles focused on the USA.

In short, IR research does not cover non-Western regions to the same extent that it does Western regions, but the very pessimistic views stated by some critics are not supported by the survey – at least not for the cases of Asia and South America. With regard to single countries, the power shift towards the BRICS states has not impacted the IR research covered by this survey. The key countries of interest remain the Western powers. The following subsections analyze the possible reasons behind this imbalance in IR research.

3.2 Geographical Patterns of the Research Topics

In addition to coding for the regional dimension, I also coded each article according to its research topic. The topics of IR research articles are diverse: they range from foreign policy to the structure of the international system, or subfields of it, to the grand theories of the discipline. In undertaking the coding, I disaggregated the information on the research topic as much as possible, without being too specific to allow a useful comprehensive analysis across the regions. The percentage given is in some cases more than 100 percent because the articles often addressed more than one topic.

In the survey, peace and conflict studies was the focus of the largest number of articles (see Table 2 for an overview). The studies on democratic peace, which ask why democratic regimes do not fight each other, took the international system most directly into account. Another prominent research field was domestic policy – although this is traditionally a research area of comparative politics – with research questions focusing on party systems or national elections. I found articles on such topics in *World Politics* and *International Organization* (and one article in *European Journal of International Relations*), and I decided to include them in the survey because they often cover more than one issue. Another well-established subfield of IR is political economy; in the articles surveyed here, scholars address the economic and trade policies of states and international organizations or the international economic system. A further thematic cluster of articles in the survey was the international struc-

ture, with studies on the international system, global governance, and regime research. A substantively smaller number of the articles addressed the theories and methods of the field.

The articles surveyed, however, do not capture every topic in the discipline adequately due to the data set's limitation to research articles in the three journals outlined above. However, the data provide an indication of the most prominent research topics in IR. Because this paper is investigating the coverage of non-Western regions within the discipline, I am primarily interested in the distribution of research on non-Western regions across the various research topics. Table 2 provides an overview of the geographical patterns of the research topics covered.

Table 2: Geographical Patterns and Research Topics

		Europe	*North America*	*Asia*	*South America*	*Africa*	*MENA*	*Australia*	*Global*	*No Region*
Theory and methods	Theoretical approaches	3.2	0.1							9.6
	IR theories		0.1	10.8					1.4	12.9
	Methods	1								6.4
	Gender studies	2.1							2.9	3.2
International structure	International system	10.8	5.9	10.8	9	20			2.9	17.7
	Global society	2.1	0.1						1.4	6.4
	Global governance	5.4	5.9							12.9
	Globalization	5.4	5.9	5.4	4.5				1.4	4.8
	Legal system	3.2	5.9		4.5				2.9	3.2
	Norms and policy diffusion	5.4	4.4		13.6				7.3	11.2
	International organizations	5.4	4.4	8.1	9	10	12.5		7.3	8
	International regimes	3.2	0.1						5.8	4.8
Policies	Peace and conflict studies	15.2	14.9	18.9	9	30	50		38.2	19.3
	Economic policy	18.4	17.9	16.2	27.2			50	10.2	3.2
	International economic system	13	23.8	13.5	18.1			50	22	3.2
	Trade policy	10.8	20.8	13.5	19	10	12.5	50	11.7	1.6
	Environmental policy	2.1	2.9						1.4	6.4
State system	Alliances and cooperation	10.8	11.9	2.7					14.7	
	EU	14.1	1.4							
	Political regimes	7.6	5.9	21.6	4.5	30	25		23.5	8
	Domestic policy	30.4	34.3	48.6	59	40	25	50	11.7	
	Foreign policy	4.3	14.9	5.4	4.5		25		5.8	1.6

Source: Author's own compilation.

Peace and conflict studies is the main topic, as one would expect, in the articles on Asia (18.9 percent of all articles with a focus on Asia), Africa (30 percent), and MENA (50 percent). In contrast, only 9 percent of all articles focusing on South America address this topic. This finding is not surprising given the small number of violent conflicts in the last two decades in South America. The thematic issues examined in the peace and conflict articles differ between the regions. The articles on Asia focus on the subdiscipline of security studies, while

the research on African cases concentrates on civil wars. The differences in the coverage of these regions are remarkable because both regions have experienced numerous civil wars in recent decades (Themnér and Wallensteen 2013). While the civil wars in Asia appear not to be a major concern in the literature, questioning the explanatory power of the state concept in Africa clearly is (Harman and Brown 2013). The number of Asian civil wars, however, indicates that one can hardly speak of a high state capacity in these countries compared to the notoriously unstable African states.

Economic topics also figure prominently in the articles surveyed, especially in the research on Asia and South America (see Table 2). This illustrates the importance of both regions for the world economy. Africa and MENA, by contrast, are hardly visible. Only one article deals with trade policy in each region. This finding is, at least for South Africa, remarkable, because the concept of BRICS implicitly assumes that South Africa is a rising global economic player. Moreover, no methodological argument seems to explain this finding. At least for recent years, enough economic data on states in Africa and in MENA exists that researchers could have used it to undertake research. From a policy perspective, moreover, the two regions are clearly relevant if one looks at international trade dependencies or security concerns.

The majority of articles on international regimes, global governance, or global society had no regional focus. Such research dealt with the role of NGOs, specific multilateral events (for example, the World Summit on Sustainable Development), or the UN. These studies, thus, mostly did not deal with Western regions (see Table 2). The studies in the survey that discussed or improved upon IR theories also tended to have no regional focus. Notably, the few studies on IR theory that did have a regional focus were about Asia.[6] This finding is linked to the widely held assumption that Asian states are stable, which may also explain why the focus in peace and conflict research on this region is on security studies rather than civil wars.

While geographical patterns are evident in the IR research topics covered in the articles, there appears to be no systematic reason for this finding. The number of relevant events – for example, civil wars – is high in more regions than the studies suggest. Additionally, data for research on economics or peace and conflict studies exist for countries in all regions. The geographical patterns of the research topics thus cannot be explained by the real-world relevance of specific events or the availability of data. One explanation could be that some kind of "research-topic dependency" regarding the geographical focus in IR has developed over time. Asia is, according to this view, the best non-Western example for studies on the international system, while Africa fits best for research that sees civil wars as one indicator of the supposed absence of state structures.

6 Of a total of 11 studies with a focus on IR theories, seven have no regional focus and three focus on Asia.

3.3 Geographical Patterns of the Objectives

This subsection discusses whether any geographical pattern can be detected in the objectives of the IR articles covered by the survey. The data set includes information on the objectives of each of the 290 articles. I have coded the articles using the following categories: (i) theory generation, (ii) theory discussion, (iii) theory generation and empirical analysis, (iv) empirical analysis and theoretical discussion, and (v) empirical analysis alone. All articles have been coded only once to ensure comparability, even though some could be classified as belonging to two of the categories.

As Table 3 indicates, most of the articles further developed a theoretical argument and tested it empirically (49.6 percent of all articles); 25.8 percent of all articles foregrounded the empirical analysis but also included a substantive theoretical discussion. In total, approximately 75 percent of all articles combined the improvement of theoretical arguments with empirical analysis. This finding supports the recent criticism by Mearsheimer and Walt (2013) that the focus of IR research is hypothesis testing and not theoretical improvement or development.

Only 21 surveyed articles (7.2 percent) concentrated on theory generation, and only 38 (13.1 percent) discussed a theory without undertaking any further development or empirical testing. Empirical analysis alone was rather uncommon (12 articles or 4.1 percent). A long-term assessment of research articles in *American Political Science Review* (1910–2000) supports the latter finding. This study has shown that after the end of the Second World War there was a strong decline in the number of descriptive articles published in political science and that a significant increase in articles with a causal approach could be observed in the 1960s (Gerring 2012: 730).

Table 3: Geographical Patterns of the Objectives

	Europe	*North America*	*Asia*	*South America*	*Africa*	*MENA*	*Australia*	*Global*	*No Region*
Theory generation	2.1	3	2.7	4.5	10			2.9	22.5
Theory discussion	4.3	2.9	2.7			12.5			51.6
Theory generation and empirical analysis	55.4	53.7	59.4	63.6	40	50	50	64.7	20.9
Empirical analysis and theoretical discussion	30.4	31.3	35.1	27.2	30	37.5		30.8	3.2
Empirical analysis	7.6	7.4		4.5	20		50	1.4	

Source: Author's own compilation.

There is no obvious geographical pattern evident in the objectives of the articles (see Table 3). Those texts with a specific geographical focus concentrate on providing a synopsis of theoretical hypotheses and on empirical analysis (together between 70 and 90 percent). Not surprisingly, it is especially those articles without any regional focus that have theory generation and theory discussion as their objectives.

3.4 Geographical Patterns of the Methodologies

Another possible reason for the low representation of non-Western cases in IR research could be the methodologies used: the study of specific regions could tend more towards quantitative or qualitative methods depending on the information available. I have therefore coded the articles according to the principal methodology used (quantitative or qualitative). If articles explicitly used both methodological strategies, I coded them as using both. However, the research designs often did not follow a nested analysis strategy (Lieberman 2005).

The results offer no geographical pattern or surprises. More than 50 percent of all the studies, across all the geographical categories, were qualitative. This finding would change if one were to consider IR-related articles in the leading political science journals or the excluded *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, most of which tend to be quantitative (Mahoney 2007).

The quantitative studies made up approximately 30 percent of articles in nearly all regions. An exception here was MENA: only 25 percent of articles (two articles) covering it used quantitative techniques. This finding, however, could be explained by the small number of articles about the region. If more articles with this regional focus had been published, the number of quantitative studies would likely have increased automatically. The same reasoning applies to the two research articles about Australia (both qualitative). The other two exceptions were those studies at the global level or without any regional focus. The global-level studies often relied on global data sets and therefore had the highest number of quantitative studies relative to all other categories. The reverse was true for studies without any regional focus. Most of this research was qualitative due to its objectives (theory generation and theory discussion, see Table 3).

Table 4: Geographical Patterns of the Methodologies

	Europe	*North America*	*Asia*	*South America*	*Africa*	*MENA*	*Australia*	*Global*	*No Region*
Qualitative	65	62	54	59	60	75	100	47	74
Quantitative	31	36	32	36.3	40	25		47	22.5
Qualitative and quantitative	3.2	1.5	13.5	4.5				5.8	3.2

Source: Author's own compilation.

In sum, the methodologies used do not show a geographical pattern that would indicate that particular geographical regions are unsuitable for research using a particular methodological approach. Remarkably, 13.5 percent of the articles on Asia used a mix-methods approach.

4 Comparison in IR Research

One could ask *why* we should care about the geographical pattern of IR research, and *how* a research design that takes various regions into account should look. This section addresses these questions. First, I discuss the existing comparative dimension of IR research on the basis of the survey. Second, I argue for more representative global sampling of cases due to validity concerns. Methodologically and theoretically, the small number of studies focusing on non-Western regions in IR research negatively impacts their validity. Finally, I discuss comparative area studies (CAS) as an alternative research design that addresses such validity issues. I then present representative cross-regional comparison as a specific research design that could help to address these concerns by acknowledging the importance of the region as sample category for the cases used in the comparison. If a case is representative of its region, the results of the comparison should also have explanatory power for all cases in the same region.

4.1 Comparative Research Designs in IR

In this subsection, I look at how today's IR research deals with comparison. I do not understand comparative strategies in strictly methodological terms; if I did, the number of surveyed articles categorized as using comparative designs would clearly look worse than it already does. In the survey, I have coded all articles as "comparative" if they undertook in-depth discussion of different cases in relation to one theoretical question. I have excluded the quantitative studies because all of the comparative strategies, discussed below, require more contextual knowledge about each case than researchers can normally access using large data sets.

In total, only 57 of 290 articles (19.6 percent of all articles) compared cases with each other in some way. This number is quite low if we take into account the clearly relaxed determination of which designs count as comparative. The survey indicates, surprisingly, that non-Western cases make up a substantial part of the comparative IR research: 32 articles compare cases from the West only (North America and Europe), but 25 articles include at least one case from outside the West. A total of 25 articles is not bad relative to the overall number of articles that focus on non-Western cases: 77 (see Table 5).

Table 5: Geographical Patterns of Type of Comparison

Type of Comparison	*No. of Articles*
Only cases from Western regions	32
Comparison of Western and non-Western cases	14
Comparison of only non-Western cases	11
Single cases	42 (15 non-Western cases)

Source: Author's own compilation.

As already noted above, the comparative design in most of the articles does not follow strict methodological criteria. Many articles do not provide a theoretically guided comparison of their empirical cases. Additionally, they often do not discuss the methodology of their overall case-selection strategy. My call for increased recognition of non-Western cases in IR research therefore also incorporates a call for the increased formalization of the comparative research design. The theoretical models in the surveyed articles would be improved if non-Western cases were used to demonstrate external validity, as I explain in more detail below. IR research needs to put more emphasis not only on acknowledging non-Western cases but also on incorporating them into the research in a methodologically sound way. The findings here nevertheless indicate that non-Western cases can be and already are part of the comparisons made in IR studies.

4.2 The Case for the Increased Inclusion of Non-Western Cases

The understanding of *what a theory is* differs within the IR discipline, as it does within other social science disciplines (Dunne et al. 2013: 407–412). I follow the understanding of Mearsheimer and Walt (2013: 432): ''Theories provide general explanations, which means they apply across space and time." Their focus is on the causal components, whereas descriptive models have a different ontology. The following discussion focuses on the methodological and theoretical demands of causal theories.

The main problem with overlooking non-Western cases is that one cannot draw any empirical conclusions about cases in non-Western regions if the theories and the empirical studies ignore them. One does not know if theories tested only in Western cases have explanatory power in non-Western cases or not. This represents a problem for theoretical validity – that is, how relevant the theory is – in all social science disciplines.

In the case of causal theories, one can distinguish between internal and external validity (Gerring 2007: 217; Slater and Ziblatt 2013: 5). *Internal validity* refers to the correctness of the theoretical model in the sample under investigation. If the cases of the sample verify the theoretical hypothesis, the internal validity of the theory is high. The research design of most studies aims to demonstrate the (high) internal validity of the theoretical hypothesis. This leads to the common approach in most articles: stating a hypothesis based on a theoretical model before testing this hypothesis empirically (see Table 3). Things become problematic, however, if we must simultaneously demonstrate the high external validity of the theoretical model.

External validity refers to those cases that the theoretical hypothesis should explain but that are not part of the sample (cases not studied). It therefore relates to the representativeness of the sample studied (Slater and Ziblatt 2013: 5; Gerring 2007: 217). According to Slater and Ziblatt (2013), the hurdles for external validity are even higher than for internal validity. The authors take external validity as given only if it is the case "*both* that it [the theoretical model] holds true in more than one country case, *and* that the additional country case(s)

played no role in helping to generate the hypothesis in question" (Slater and Ziblatt 2013: 6; emphasis in original). A study thus demonstrates the external validity of its theoretical model if it can prove that cases not studied verify the hypothesis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods can provide external as well as internal validity. For example, Wilkinson's (2004) quantitative analysis of riots in India provides internal validity for his theory, while empirical qualitative evidence from further cases provides it with external validity.[7]

External validity comes with challenges for the researcher. First, the analysis has to consider the local context. As Sartori (1991) puts it, the pitfall of theory is the competition between generalization and specification. Contextual circumstances, however, affect the ways that given variables from the past are seen in the present and in comparison to the same variables in different contexts (Adcock and Collier 2001: 534). The trade-off between generalization and the specific setting of one case is, thus, inherent to the disciplines and to area studies (e.g. Bates 1997).

Second, the researcher has to take the *stretching* or *traveling* of theoretical concepts seriously. This refers to the adaptation of analytical categories to all cases (Sartori 1970). In recent decades, many scholars have discussed the problem and offer solutions for avoiding or at least reducing the problem of conceptual stretching in quantitative and qualitative research (e.g. Collier and Mahon 1993; Adcock and Collier 2001). This problem, however, remains, and each research design needs to address it carefully. The phenomena under study – in IR and other disciplines – are context-dependent, and the measurements of the analytical concept must reflect the specific context. However, comparisons of a specific phenomenon are possible if the measurements reflect the contexts and if this is justified in the research. These methodological challenges are not reasons to focus only on an abstract general level or on one specific case, thereby denying comparison. To improve our theoretical understanding, we need comparison and case sensitivity combined – in the best-case scenario – in one study.

Coming back to the need for IR research to incorporate non-Western regions, the validity testing of theoretical hypotheses is a good methodological and theoretical reason to recognize regions outside the West. A successful validity test, moreover, takes the wind out of the IR critics' sails by addressing one of their key criticisms: that "Western theories" cannot explain non-Western cases (Acharya and Buzan 2007: 299-301; Bilgin 2008). A high degree of external validity in the theoretical models would show that we do not need specific theories that solely explain phenomena in non-Western regions, but rather that existing theoretical models are able to explain these cases – with some extensions.

7 Slater and Ziblatt (2013: 13–14), however, argue that quantitative studies cannot make theoretical arguments externally valid. Instead, quantitative studies show that the arguments are valid. In their view, external validity needs more than statistically significant models due to the complexity of the social world, which is characterized by equifinality and multiple causation.

4.3 Research Design: Comparative Area Studies and Representative Cross-Regional Comparison

The debate on the comparison of cases from various regions is not a unique concern of IR. In comparative politics, various authors have recently discussed the importance of an area perspective in the research design. Basedau and Köllner (2007) have proposed comparative area studies (CAS) as a possible way of acknowledging the local context of cases in the research. They claim that CAS includes three distinct types of comparison: intraregional, interregional, and cross-regional (Basedau and Köllner 2007: 110–112; see also Ahram 2011: 81). Their concept of area is synonymous with this article's understanding of region. The CAS concept emphasizes the role of comparison – regardless of whether it is between or within a region. In a similar vein, Ariel Ahram (2011) argues that regions are analytical categories that need to be taken into account to a greater extent. Rudra Sil (2013), most recently, has proposed cross-regional contextualized comparison (CRCC). This research strategy calls for the integration of proper methodological case selection and the acknowledgment of the specific area context of cases. CRCC highlights both the area specialization of the researcher and the theoretical focus of the research. All three approaches emphasize that a well-planned research design must acknowledge regional specifics such as different understandings of state, power, relevant actors, or conflict.

The approaches from the field of comparative politics do not link their call for "regional comparison" directly to the external validity of theoretical models. However, cross-regional comparison – comparing entities from different regions (Basedau and Köllner 2007: 110) – is a first step to securing external validity by taking the empirics of cases from different regions seriously. But, because cross-regional comparison neglects the variety of cases in the regions, it is not enough as a measurement for external validity if one is interested in the validity of theories across regions. I argue, in contrast, that research only demonstrates external validity if it shows that the cases studied are representative of a specific region.

One way to achieve better external validity than in cross-regional comparison, as it is understood in the approaches discussed above, is to use representative cross-regional comparisons. The logic of the comparison remains, but the word "representative" calls for a greater awareness of *what* entities one compares and *why* one chooses these particular entities. To put it simply, comparing cases only because they are from different regions is not enough to strengthen the external validity of a theoretical model. The comparison of entities from different regions is only a comparison of entities and does not take the region as an analytical category seriously. I do not want to propose a (slightly) new research design approach, but I do want to raise awareness of the possibilities and the challenges involved in the incorporation of non-Western cases into the research. The idea that these cases are somehow from another world and are therefore not comparable with Western cases is not convincing, as the survey and the above discussion of the studies in the IR journals has demonstrated.

A reader does not necessarily know whether the cases used in a comparison are representative of their respective regions – and the researchers do not discuss the question very often. The "representativeness" of a case is connected theoretically to the analytical concept of the study. The cases, therefore, do not receive their representative character because of their geographical origin. It is in fact highly questionable that in the geographic regions – at least the regions understood as Africa, Asia, MENA, and South America – equal contextual conditions exist among all the countries of each region. For example, state capacity diverges highly between countries like South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Eritrea.[8] Nevertheless, if we cannot hold contextual conditions for the geographical regions constant, then the results of a cross-regional comparison will be weak. Such research will simply have compared cases that randomly happen to be located in different geographical regions. Therefore, the representativeness of cases in cross-regional comparisons is of great importance in order to, first, avoid the methodological weakness of comparing only geographically diverse cases and to, second, enhance the external validity of the research.

The identification of regionally representative cases is a highly difficult task. First, the geographical regions defined as continents are just too big to be analytically useful categories.[9] I claim that researchers instead need to deal with a specific analytical category of region (Fawn 2009). The researcher has to first define his or her concept of "region" and justify it as the appropriate analytical category for the specific research question (Ahram 2011). For example, the question of violent attacks by pirates is not a concern for Africa as a whole but rather for those countries on the Gulf of Aden and for Somalia. Another area where such attacks have been clustered is the Strait of Malaca (Coggins 2012). Therefore, it makes more sense to use these two analytical categories of region (Gulf of Aden and Somalia compared with Straits of Malaca) for a study of piracy in Africa and Asia. Such an understanding of region, however, must be made explicit so that the limits of the explanatory power of the analysis and the related theory are clear.

Once the relevant analytical region for the research has been defined, the second step consists of discussing the cases within these regional categories. At this point, the research has to identify a typical case for each region in order to secure the representativeness of the subsequent cross-regional comparison. The research design should incorporate why the case is representative of the region: What does it have in common with other cases in the analytical region? What differences between the cases in the regions could be theoretically relevant

8 Recent developments in quantitative peace and conflict research, moreover, have shown that the aggregation of data, meaning analysis at the country level, neglects the diversity of dynamics and factors at a lower level of aggregation, meaning analysis at the subcountry level (Gleditsch and Weidmann 2012). Thus, to understand the explanatory power of theoretical concepts, we must go beyond the rigid borders of geographical regions or areas.

9 This does not mean, however, that a study of a geographical sample using these regions is not useful. In fact, data availability, funding or time constraints, and personal skills make such a sampling strategy practical and useful in some instances.

for the specific research interest? Again, the representativeness of a case refers to the possible explanatory factors for the specific research question and not to all country characteristics.

The third step involves the comparison of the representative cases from the analytical regions. If the comparison supports the findings of the first theory test (internal validity), it gives the theoretical model a high level of external validity – due to the representativeness of the analyzed cases. To make this strong claim, however, we need to know that the cases actually are representative of their respective regions. If this is the case, the researchers can potentially also demonstrate that other cases from the regions under investigation support the theoretical model, thereby demonstrating additional external validity.

5 Conclusion

A major criticism of IR research is that it ignores non-Western cases. Such an oversight would indeed be problematic, because IR understands itself as a discipline that explains global developments and structures. The critics are right to some extent: the survey of research articles in three leading IR journals – *International Organization*, *World Politics*, and *European Journal of International Relations* – has indicated that non-Western cases tend to be the exception. Of 290 articles, only 67 (23 percent) focused on cases in Asia, South America, Africa, or MENA. In contrast, 67 articles focused on North America, and 92 articles focused on Europe. Articles with non-Western cases were underrepresented. A large number of articles, however, did not focus on a specific case (130 articles or 45 percent). The survey thus supports the recent criticisms, although a general survey of IR research that included other journals and books could come up with different results.

The survey was not able to identify possible factors related to the research topics, the objectives, or the methods of the studies that would explain this imbalance. No specific factor – such as data availability, real-world relevance – explains the rather small number of research articles about non-Western cases. Other possible explanations for this finding are therefore highly speculative. First, gaining access to data and to information might be easier in Western cases. The developments within the discipline of peace and conflict studies, however, do not support this view. Research in the discipline of area studies also demonstrates that access to data in non-Western regions is not the problem.

Second, the familiarity of researchers with non-Western cases could be the issue. Most researchers – who are primarily of Western origin according to existing surveys (Waever and Tickner 2009; Karstensen 2013) – are more familiar with their home countries or regions. The argument that a researcher only gains real knowledge of a case if he or she analyzes it in detail over several years is valid. In general, though, a discipline and the individual researcher should be open to a wide range of cases and not concentrate exclusively on one country or region. One possible way for a researcher to overcome his or her own regional or country focus is to collaborate with scholars who have experience with a different region. Moreover,

most IR research uses public information that is easily accessible and does not present cases with thick narration, as is often the case in area-specific journals. For example, only 14 research articles in the survey referred to interviews conducted, and only four studies based their research on work in archives. Therefore, the argument that information on non-Western cases does not exist appears not to apply in the case of IR research; the problem seems to have more to do with the challenges of becoming deeply in touch with the country cases studied – for example, through fieldwork.

Third, reviewers from the journals who are not familiar with non-Western cases could be hesitant to accept research on such cases. This possibility is not convincing, even if the selection of published articles indeed depends on the anonymous reviewers and their interest in the topic. The quality of the research is the main reason an article is accepted or rejected (or at least it should be). In order to assess this argument, one would need to know how many articles with non-Western cases have been submitted to the journals, the (objective) quality of this research, and finally the acceptance rate for this research. One would hope that journals accept good research on non-Western cases, and many articles support this view.

The main methodological problem with the low representation of non-Western cases is that one cannot draw any empirical conclusions about non-Western cases if the theories and the empirical studies of IR ignore these regions. This creates a problem in terms of the validity of these theories, and it is the validity of a theory that indicates how relevant it is. In particular, the external validity of such theories – that is, the representativeness of the sample studied – could be improved by incorporating non-Western cases into the research strategies. I have proposed representative cross-regional comparison as a research design that addresses this problem. While the logic of comparison remains a part of the design, the word "representative" calls for a greater awareness of what entities one compares and why one chooses these particular entities. The idea that non-Western cases are somehow from another world and are therefore not comparable with Western cases is not convincing, as the discussion of the studies in the IR journals has demonstrated.

The last point of this article is a rather optimistic one: articles on non-Western cases are present in the leading IR journals. Their number could be improved, and this is a task for all researchers in this field, not just non-Western researchers. The lower representation of non-Western cases, moreover, does not appear to be linked to the "American social science" critique. The survey shows that no specific feature – theoretical or methodological – explains the geographical imbalance in today's IR research. Therefore, we can dare to expect that the ongoing development of IR research will at least increase the number of articles that take non-Western cases into consideration.

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