

Conceptual Framework

[\(Guidelines for Authors\)](#)

[Regional Powers](#) | [Material and ideational resources](#) | [Foreign policy interests](#) | [Foreign policy strategies](#) | [Ideas, norms and perceptions](#)

Please take this contribution as a possible common starting point or source of inspiration and not as a limitation. The RPN is committed to the diversity of approaches and methods generating excellent and innovative scholarship.

Regional Powers

Regional powers (or regional leaders, major regional powers or regional great powers) are considered to be powerful actors in their own regions, irrespective of whether they represent regional relationships of enmity or amity. Wright (1978) distinguishes between middle powers and regional powers:

“States with general interest relative to a limited region and the capacity to act alone in this region, which gives them the appearance of local great powers. [...] Such regional great powers will probably be candidates, in the state system at large, for the rank of middle power.” (ibid.: 63)

The same point is stressed by Huntington (1999: 36). He argues that major regional powers are pre-eminent in areas of the world without being able to project their interests globally, as for example the United States. One of the first efforts to develop a concept of regional powers in the international system was made by Østerud (1992: 12), who used the notion ‘regional great power’ defined as a state, which (1) is geographically part of the delineated region, (2) is able to stand up against any coalition of other states in the region, (3) is highly influential in regional affairs, and (4) contrary to a middle power, might also be a great power on the world scale in addition to its regional standing.

Chase, Hill and Kennedy (1996: 35) link the role of regional powers to the notion of ‘pivotal states’. These states are so important regionally that their collapse would cause trans-boundary mayhem. A pivotal state’s economic progress and stability, on the other hand, bolsters its region’s economic viability and political soundness. Regional powers are expected to play the role of regional peacemakers and police force as well as taking on the role of a moral authority. They have the responsibility for keeping their backyard neat and orderly, at times with support of the great powers. Furthermore regional powers seem to be expected to support and promote acceptable rules and norms in the conduct of regional politics and relations.

Both Schoeman (2003) and Schirm (2005) agree on the basic premises for regional leadership. In order to assume leadership regional powers, obviously, need to possess the necessary capacities, show willingness to use them appropriately, and in turn to be accepted by their potential followers. Schoeman (ibid.: 353) adds the internal dynamics of the state, in particular its political and economic system, as an important factor in regional leadership. To actually assess whether a state has assumed a leadership role, Schirm (ibid.: 110-111) proposes to also look at both the activities and the actual influence of the regional power in its sphere of influence.

We can also draw upon Baldwin (2002) who has developed a multidimensional perspective on power that could be applied to regional powers as well. Baldwin’s (ibid.: 178-179) multidimensional concept includes the scope, the domain, the weight, the costs and the means for power. *Scope* refers to the possibility that an actor’s power might vary in different

policies (economics, security). *Domain* defines the size of an actor's influence on others (regional, global). *Weight* describes the reliability of an actor's power (the chance to put one's will into practice against the will of others). *Costs* indicate the price an actor is willing and able to pay to achieve other actors' compliance. And finally *means* include symbolic, economic, military and diplomatic methods of exercising power.

Flemes (2007: 12-18) aims at identifying and operationalising regional power by four pivotal criteria in order to design a comparative framework: (1) the formulation of the claim to leadership, (2) the possession of the necessary material and ideational power resources, (3) the employment of material, institutional and discursive foreign policy instruments, and (4) the acceptance of the leadership role by third states. Each of these criteria is applied at two systemic levels (regional and global) for two policies (economy and security).

And Nolte (2007: 15) suggests a comprehensive definition arguing that a regional power is a state that (1) is part of a region, which is geographically, economically and political-ideationally delimited; (2) articulates the pretension of a leading position in the region; (3) influences the geopolitical delimitation and the political-ideational construction of the region; (4) displays the material, organizational and ideological resources for regional power projection; (5) is economically, politically and culturally interconnected within the region; (6) truly has great influence in regional affairs; (7) exerts this influence by means of regional governance structures; (8) defines the regional security agenda in a significant way; (9) is recognized as a leading state or at least respected by other states inside and outside of the region; and (10) is integrated in interregional and global forums and institutions where it acts, at least rudimentary, as a representative of regional interests.

Research questions:

- What makes a regional power?
 - internal dynamics
 - leadership claim/ willingness
 - capacities/ resources
 - activities/ means/ strategies
 - acceptance/ followership

- What constitutes a region?
 - How can we delineate regions or spheres of influence?
 - To what extent do spheres of influence vary in different policies (economy and security)?
 - What is the role of regional institutions?

[Top ▲](#)

Material and ideational resources

Both material and ideational resources have to be taken into account to assess whether the regional power possesses the necessary resources to make a difference in regional and international bargains.

From a realist perspective, power is defined by the disposal of material resources. Military strength is the key factor because force is the *ultima ratio* of international politics (Mearsheimer 2001: 56). Military power is based on the latent power of a country, which consists of its economic and demographic resources. A broader approach to material power incorporates competitiveness, technology, infrastructure, geography, energy, and agricultural,

environmental and human development factors as well. The national political process is the vehicle to convert these capabilities into military power (Tellis et al. 2000, Treverton/ Jones 2005). It is true that the relative wealth of a country is not automatically convertible into military power, but it is a precondition for large-scale military capabilities.

For an overall view and as a base for the comparison, the material resources survey should consist of a set of military (defence expenditure, military personnel), demographic (population size), geographic (territory) and economic (GDP, Growth Competitiveness Index) resources.

There are many approaches to ideational power in the literature of International Relations. Lake (2005, 2006, 2007), for instance, introduces the concept of authority, distinguishing it from coercion, as the defining character of a power relation between two actors. In such a relationship, legitimacy and moral obligation are the drivers that motivate the follower to follow:

“To build and maintain authority, there are two necessary requirements: to provide a social order that benefits subordinates, and thereby binds them into that order, and to commit credibly not to exploit subordinates once they have consented to one’s authority.” (Lake 2006: 28)

Other authors describe ideational resources to have a symbolic, psychological or subjective dimension, but always emphasising the actor’s legitimacy and credibility. Treverton and Jones (2005: 12-17) propose the number of foreign students in a country, its attraction for foreigners in general, website hits and the number of media subscribers as measures of its cultural power. Nye (2004: 5) defines soft power as the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments:

“Soft power [...] co-opts peoples rather than coerces them. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. [...] Simply put, in behavioural terms soft power is attractive power.” (ibid.)

In effect ideational power is based on resources like the culture of a nation, its norms and values as well as its foreign policy reflecting these. Grant and Keohane (2005: 37) argue that public reputation is simultaneously both an ideational power resource and a mechanism of accountability. In sum, it can be said that ideational resources consist of political and social values and objectives, which can enhance a state’s reputation and can serve as model for others. On a long-term basis credibility, legitimacy and moral authority can develop from paradigmatic behaviour, which may potentially contribute to a strengthened position within bargaining processes.

Research questions:

- What degree of material and ideational resources are under the command of regional powers?
 - Relative demographic, economic and military weight
 - Relative credibility, legitimacy, moral authority and cultural attraction
- Has the global resources distribution changed after bipolarity and after 9/11?
- Were any changes in the distribution of power among the regional powers influenced by national (e.g. trade policies), regional (e.g. detente) or international (e.g. rapprochement to great power) factors?

Foreign policy interests

Classical realists (Morgenthau 1951) argue that states are rational unitary actors pursuing their national interest. The overriding national interest of each state is its national security and survival. In pursuit of national security, states strive to amass resources. This classical understanding of national interest is particularly significant to the analysis of power balancing strategies pursued by regional powers.

In sharp contrast, Alexander Wendt (1992) notes that 'anarchy is what states make of it' implying that the international structure is not only a constraint on state action, but in fact constitutes state action through constituting the identities and interests of state agents. The constructivist approach to state interests is of great significance to the analysis of foreign policy ideas and mutual perceptions of states.

Liberal theorists in International Relations (Moravscik 1997) focus on the formation of domestic preferences arguing that a variety of actors influence the domestic policy process, including social and economic interest groups, political parties, the legislature and the executive. The preferences of social interest groups and parliaments, however, are more relevant for democracies whose decision makers have to submit their foreign policy to societal and parliamentary control. Changing interests and preferences can be the result of domestic transition or reform processes. For instance, processes of economic liberalisation and privatisation will directly influence economic interests of state actors.

Research questions:

- Which national interests and foreign policy goals do the regional powers pursue at the regional and global level?
- Can we identify relations between regional and global policy goals?
- Which actors and influence factors determine their interests?
- How relevant are domestic factors in the exercise of regional leadership?
- Does economic liberalization lead to more cooperative regional relations?
- Is a democratic political system a precondition for regional powerhood?

[Top ▲](#)

Foreign policy strategies

Baldwin (2002: 187) comments that power can be exercised through the formation and maintenance of institutions, within and among institutions. We, therefore, need to assess if and how regional powers use institutions to assert their interests. Hurrell (2000: 3-4) suggest that:

“Indeed, sovereignty may be increasingly defined not by power to insulate one’s state from external influences but by the power to participate effectively in international institutions of all kinds. [...] institutions provide political space for important middle-level players to build new coalitions [...] provide ‘voice opportunities’ to make known their interests [...] to defend themselves against norms or rules or practices that adversely affect their interest or [...] to change dominant international norms in ways that they would like to see.”

Deriving from this observation, it makes sense for weaker states to participate in regional institutions. But it remains unclear why regional powers participate in regional cooperation processes, because regional institutions empower weaker states by constraining the freedom of the regional powers through established rules and procedures. It is therefore puzzling that

we can observe empirically that regional powers are the key players, and often creators, of regional governance institutions. A possible explanation of this is offered by the theoretical concept of 'co-operative hegemony' (Pedersen 2002).

Pedersen explains under which conditions it is possible for regional powers to rule through regional governance institutions and characterises regional institutionalisation as a typical product of the grand strategy pursued by regional powers. From this perspective, a strategy of co-operative hegemony has both advantages and costs. Among the advantages are *advantages of scale*: aggregation of power is of particular importance to a regional power aspiring to a global role, because it will enable it to use its region as a base for projecting power in world affairs. Additionally, the regional institutionalisation process helps to avoid intra-regional counterbalancing and makes alliances between neighbouring states and external powers more difficult (*advantages of stability*). Among the costs are *power-sharing* and *side payments*. On the one hand, the regional power shares power with its neighbours on a permanent basis within common institutions with significant competences. In bargains at the global level, it pursues not only national, but also regional interests. On the other hand, the regional power has to shoulder great parts of integration costs and has to share the distributive outcomes of global bargains with the regional neighbours (ibid.: 685-687). The concept of co-operative hegemony is, however, limited as it is mainly applicable to regional contexts characterised by patterns of co-operation or competition than conflictive regional settings.

Young (1991) suggests three strategies of leadership in multilateral negotiations: structural, entrepreneurial and intellectual leadership. *Structural leadership* aims at translating relative power capabilities into bargaining leverage by making use of material threats and promises. *Entrepreneurial leadership* reflects the leader's capacity to act as agenda setter, showing innovative solutions to overcome deadlocks or operate as broker to gain support for salient solutions. *Intellectual leadership* focuses on reflective processes, necessitating deliberative exchanges of arguments. It implies the 'power of ideas to shape the intellectual capital available to those engaged in institutional bargaining' (ibid.: 300).

At the global level, the crucial question is which foreign policy strategies can regional powers pursue to react to Washington's hegemonic position? In outlining weaker states' strategic options, the two most common concepts in the theoretical literature on International Relations are *balancing* and *bandwagoning*. Although the literature often portrays states' alignment decisions as a dichotomy between balancing and bandwagoning, these are only the two most extreme polar positions a weaker state can choose.

The strategy of *bandwagoning* is generally understood as the decision by a state to align itself with the superior power in order to either neutralize the threat or benefit from the spoils of victory (Waltz 1979, Schweller 1994). Bandwagoning occurs, hence, when weaker states decide that the cost of opposing a stronger power exceeds the benefits to be gained from supporting it.

A crucial reason for US hegemony in international relations is its military supremacy. According to Wohlfort (1999) the current unipolar constellation of US hegemony can only be transformed into multipolarity by the emergence of regional unipolarities. But in conventional military terms, the US will remain the dominant global power for a long time. Consequently, *hard balancing* (Waltz 1979, Walt 1987) based on countervailing military alliances (external balancing) and arms build-ups (internal balancing) is not a viable option for regional powers.

A third approach '*soft balancing*' (Pape 2005, Paul 2005) covers some of the middle ground between the two extremes. It is a strategy that does not directly challenge the more powerful state's military preponderance, but uses non-military tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine the superior state's unilateral policies. Soft balancing involves institutional strategies such as

the formation of limited diplomatic coalitions or ententes to constrain the superior power. It also consists of strengthening economic ties between peers, which can possibly shift the balance of economic power against the more powerful state in the long term. Questioning the legitimacy of unilateral policies will increase the costs of using unilateral power by reducing the number of countries likely to cooperate with the superior power.

Other strategies beyond bandwagoning and balancing are buffering, binding and niche diplomacy.

- *Buffering.* Weaker states establish an institutional framework among each other to reduce the influence and impact of the stronger state and to extend their room to manoeuvre (Greenfield Partem 1983, Griess 2005).
- *Binding.* Weaker states establish institutional agreements with the stronger state that reduce the risks of domination or abandonment. This strategy aims at restraining the stronger state through rules and institutions (Ikenberry 2000, 2003).
- *Niche diplomacy.* Weaker states enhance their functional value in specific issue areas through the employment of their expertise and specific capabilities, e.g. peacekeeping (Wood 1988, Cooper 1997).

We also have to ask how external powers themselves respond to the rise of (new) regional powers. Among the strategies that can be deduced theoretically is, firstly, the support of intra-regional balancing processes to contain the regional power by obliging it to commit its resources to its own backyard instead of projecting power to others' (Mearsheimer 2005). Secondly, external powers can support regional powers to maintain regional stability with its own diplomacy, prestige and military power. And thirdly, a *laissez-faire* approach of external powers would avoid an active interference into the region (Fuller/ Arquilla 1996).

Research questions

- How do regional powers convert material and ideational resources into political influence?
- Can we identify different foreign policy strategies in security and trade affairs?
- Are different foreign policy approaches applied in global and regional affairs?
- Have these strategies changed after bipolarity and 9/11?
- How and why do regional powers use institutions?
- How do regional powers deal with balancing behaviour within the region?
- How does the regional power deal with the impact of great powers in its own sphere of influence?
- What foreign policy strategies do external powers adopt to respond to the rise of (new) regional powers?
- Which roles do the US, the EU and Japan foresee for the (new) regional powers in the future world order?

[Top ▲](#)

Ideas, norms and perceptions

The status of a regional power is foremost a social category and depends on the acceptance of this status and the associated hierarchy by others. Thus, it is important to include the role of ideas, norms and perceptions into our discussion. Particularly, constructivists' approaches argue that

“Leadership is relational, disputed and constituted by shared ideas about self, other, and the world, relying on the intersubjective internalisation of ideas, norms, and identities.” (Nabers 2007: 13)

Social interaction therefore ultimately has transformative effects on interests and identity and continuous co-operation is likely to influence intersubjective meanings. The arising common norms, ideas and identities of regional powers and its followers consequently promote regional acceptance. In a constructivist perspective, multiple interactions between the regional players therefore lead to parallel socialisations, positive mutual perceptions and result in a tendency of peaceful change (Wendt 1992, Katzenstein 1996, Adler 1997).

Deutsch (1957) has defined stable relations between the social environments of states based on a sense of community as characteristics of a security community. The following components are essential to a security community: (1) mutual interdependence within the intra-regional relations, (2) a high degree of collective identity and common values as well as (3) a tight network of common norms and institutions, which regulates the relations and contribute to peaceful conflict resolution. In a regional framework characterised along the lines of security communities it is likely that the regional power is perceived positively by populations and political elites of its potential followers.

Research questions

- How relevant is the notion of leadership for regional powers?
- How can we measure the impact of norms and ideas in the region?
- What is the impact of norms and ideas on the regional power's foreign policy?
- Which are the specific ideas that drive the foreign policy of regional powers?
- Are there commonalities in how the regional powers use norms and ideas to promote their regional projects?
- How do other states (elites and populations) perceive the regional power?
- How do common norms and ideas within the region evolve?

References

- Adler, Emanuel. 1997. Seizing the Middle Ground : Constructivism in World Politics. *European Journal of International Relations*, London, 3 (3):319-363.
- Baldwin, David A. 2002. Power and International Relations. In *Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Walter Carlsnæs, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons, 177-91. London: Sage.
- Chase, Robert, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy. 1999. *The Pivotal States: A New Framework for U.S. Policy in the Developing World*. New York: Norton.
- Checkel, Jeffrey T. 1998. The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory. *World Politics* 50 (1):324-48.
- Cooper, Andrew F., ed. 1997. *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War (Studies in Diplomacy)*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Deutsch, Karl. et al. 1957. *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

- Ferguson, Niall. 2003. What is Power? Hoover Digest 2. Available from <<http://www.hooverdigest.org/032/ferguson.html>>.
- Finnemore, Martha. 1996. *National Interests in International Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Flesher, Daniel. 2007. Conceptualising Regional Power in International Relations - Lessons from the South African Case. Working Paper 53. Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies.
- Fuller, Graham E., and John Arquilla. 1996. The Intractable Problem of Regional Powers. *Orbis* 40 (4):609-21.
- Grant, Ruth W., and Robert O. Keohane. 2005. Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics. *American Political Science Review* 99 (1):29-43.
- Greenfield Partem, Martin. 1983. The Buffer System in International Relations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27 (1):3-26.
- Gries, Peter Hays. 2005. China Eyes the Hegemon. *Orbis* 49 (3):401-12.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1999. The Lonely Superpower. *Foreign Affairs* 78 (2):35-49.
- Hurrell, Andrew. 2000. Some Reflections on the Role of Intermediate Powers in International Institutions. Working Paper 244 "Paths to Power: Foreign Policy Strategies of Intermediate States":23-41. Washington, D.C.: Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Centre.
- Katzenstein, Peter J. 1996. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Lake, David A. 2005. Hierarchy in International Relations: Authority, Sovereignty, and the New Structure of World Politics. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2004, Chicago (revised version December 13, 2005).
- Lake, David A. 2006. American Hegemony and the Future of East-West Relations. *International Studies Perspectives* 7 (1):23-30.
- Lake, David A. 2007. Escape from the State of Nature. Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics. *International Security* 32 (1):47-79.
- Lukes, Steven. 2005. Power and the Battle for the Hearts and Minds. *Millennium* 33 (3):477-93.
- Mainwaring, Scott and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. 2004. Regional Effects and Region-wide Diffusion of Democracy: Why Regions are Important in Comparative Politics, paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2-5 September 2004, Chicago.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1993. Introduction. Integrating International and Domestic Theories of International Bargaining. In *Double Edged Diplomacy. International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* edited by Peter B. Evans, Harald K. Jacobson and Robert D. Putnam, 9-15. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Moravcsik, Andrew. 1997. Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics. *International Organization* 51 (4):513-53.
- Morgenthau, Hans J. 1951. *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America.
- Nabers, Dirk. 2007. China, Japan and the Quest for Leadership in East Asia. Paper presented at the workshop "Area Studies and Comparative Areas Studies: Methodological Challenges and the Road Ahead", 12-13 April 2007, GIGA, Hamburg.
- Nolte, Detlef. 2007. How to Compare Regional Powers: Analytical Concepts and Research Topics, Paper presented at the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, 7-12 May 2007, Helsinki.
- Noya, Javier. 2005. The Symbolic Power of Nations. Working Paper 35. Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano.
- Nye, Joseph S. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

- Østerud, Øyvind. 1992. Regional Great Powers. In *Regional Great Powers in International Politics*, edited by Iver B. Neumann, 1-15. Basingstoke: St. Martin's Press.
- Pape, Robert A. 2005. Soft Balancing against the United States. *International Security* 30 (1):7-45.
- Paul, T.V. 2005. Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy. *International Security* 30 (1):46-71.
- Pedersen, Thomas. 2002. Cooperative Hegemony: Power, Ideas and Institutions in Regional Integration. *Review of International Studies* 28 (4):677-96.
- Schirm, Stefan. 2005. Führungsindikatoren und Erklärungsvariablen für die neue internationale Politik Brasiliens. *Lateinamerika Analysen* 11:107-30.
- Schoeman, Maxi. 2003. South Africa as an Emerging Middle Power: 1994-2003, In *State of the Nation: South Africa 2003-2004*, edited by John Daniel, Adam Habib and Roger Southall, 349-67. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Schweller, Randall L. 1994. Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back in. *International Security* 19 (1):72-107.
- Tellis, Ashley J. et al. 2000. *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age: Analyst's Handbook*. Santa Monica, Conn.: RAND Corporation.
- Treverton, Gregory, and Seth G. Jones. 2005. *Measuring National Power*. Santa Monica, Conn.: RAND Corporation.
- Walt, Stephen M. 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Waltz, Kenneth. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. Anarchy is what the States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization* 46 (2):391-425.
- Wohlfort, William C. 1999. The Stability of a Unipolar World. *International Security* 24 (1): 5-41.
- Wood, Bernard. 1988. *The Middle Powers and the General Interest: Middle Powers and the International System*. Ottawa: The North-South Institute
- Wright, Martin. 1978. *Power Politics*. Edited by Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Young, Oran R. 1991. Political Leadership and Regime Formation: On the Development of Institutions in International Society. *International Organization* 45 (3):281-308.