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# Making Sense of Multipolarity: Eurasia's Former Empires, Family Resemblances, and Comparative Area Studies

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As the West retrenches and new powers emerge, students of international relations are well positioned to address an outstanding question: *How to thrive in a multipolar world?* The question—and the answers which we bring to bear—resonate beyond geopolitics. This is because the task of living together in diversity is arguably the greatest analytical as well as normative challenge facing world politics more broadly (Fisher-Onar, Pearce, and Keyman 2018).

In this intervention, I address the question of living together in a multipolar world from an IR perspective. I suggest that dominant approaches like realism and liberalism, which favor Western-centric categories and large-N data, fail to capture important dynamics. I then make the case for family resemblances as a method of cross-regional comparison which enables the analyst to examine cases typically boxed into different area studies compartments. Finally, I operationalize the approach towards a baseline for comparison across Eurasia's revisionist former empires: China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey. I argue that by thus establishing a basis for comparison, we uncover patterns relevant to prospects for cooperation as well as conflict in a post-Western world.

## Multipolarity: Views from the IR Tower

Attempts from within IR to make sense of multipolarity are often informed by positivist approaches like realism and liberal institutionalism.<sup>1</sup> Realist tools include concepts like revisionist versus status quo powers and their quest for status (Davidson 2006; Volgy et al. 2011), hegemonic stability, its eclipse and preventive war (Gilpin 1988; Levy 2011), the balance of power (Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann 2004; Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth 2007), and power transition (Tammen 2008). Such work offers a bird's-eye view and can help elucidate major mid-range questions like prospects for war between the retrenching United States and rising China.

Yet, there are limitations for the study of multipolarity. First, realism privileges substantive questions relevant to

great power—especially American—interests like nuclear proliferation (Kang 2003). This goes hand-in-hand with a tendency to ignore phenomena that appear pervasive to emerging powers—including nascent superpower China—like racialized hierarchies in world order.

Second, realists, like many others across the North American IR academy, tend to favor macro-quantitative methods which aggregate large numbers of randomized cases. By glossing over differences between cases, and ignoring outliers, the claim to universal purchase becomes possible (Berg-Scholsser 2018). The trade-off is that studies do not register nuance (Ahram 2013). As a result, the large-N analyst may overlook major motivational and behavioral patterns, including phenomena with causal force. A case in point is the game-changing role which counterintuitive alliances can play in and across national contexts (Fisher Onar and Evin 2010; Hart and Jones 2010).

An alternative approach is liberal institutionalism. Liberals are more likely to open the black box of domestic politics and thus to access non-Western readings of world order. However, liberals' concern is often less with non-Western perspectives than with the capacity of the Western-led liberal order and its institutions to co-opt challengers (Owen 2001; Ikenberry 2008). The primacy placed on Western concerns is evident in the intense but short-lived “hype” (Zarakol 2019) around the BRICS, which dissipated when these emerging economies wobbled by the mid-2010s (Hurrell 2019). Nevertheless, the relative share of economic and normative power enjoyed by the United States and Europe continues to diminish. As anger at relative decline finds expression in phenomena like Brexit and the Trump presidency, the capacity of the Western-led liberal order to absorb challenges under multipolarity remains in question, a concern brought into dramatic focus by the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of how other, critical approaches within IR address the question, see Fisher Onar 2013; 2018.

## **Multipolarity: Views from—and across—Area Studies**

If realist and liberal frames for reading multipolarity tell only part of the story, how to better access rising powers' perspectives? Given that the challenge is *how to thrive in a world of many poles*, the ability to triangulate across poles is valuable. Engagement of other perspectives can foster epistemological and pragmatic openings for more pluralistic research and foreign policy practices (Saylor, this issue; Acharya 2011; Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis 2013). That said, cross-regional triangulation is useful even if the analyst rejects the critical project of decentering international relations. Strategic reconnaissance of other cultures for defensive or offensive purposes is a well-established tradition. Examples include the adventures of British and Russian imperial agents in the nineteenth-century “great game” over Eurasia, and the foundation of area studies within the US academy during the Cold War to inform policy makers about non-Western regions (King 2015).

These (neo-)colonial origins notwithstanding, area studies today offers interdisciplinary insights into the cultures, economies, political systems, and foreign policies of non-Western powers. It leverages the nuanced knowledge of historians, linguists, geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and diplomats, among others. Area studies attends, moreover, to issues of geopolitical significance from migration and social movements to political economy and the sociology of religion. In each of these arenas, field experts are likely to draw conclusions that are both more accurate and more contingent than those of counterparts in the IR tower. Such sensitivities can be useful in the management of multipolar complexity.

Yet area studies are no panacea. Respect for complexity is a normative and a methodological commitment; it can yield rich, often counter-intuitive insights, but also insistence on the *sui generis* nature of each case. This tendency is reinforced by the structural division of labor between area compartments within the academy. Thus, experts on one world region (like the Middle East) rarely converse with specialists on or from other regions (like East Asia), nor develop cross-regional expertise. The upshot is that important insights may be difficult to translate across regional specializations, much less to disciplinary IR or political science.

The challenge, then, is to mediate between problem-driven respect for case or cross-case specificity on one hand, and broader relevance on the other. Enter

Comparative Area Studies (CAS), defined by Ahram, Köllner, and Sil (2018, 3) as any “self-conscious effort” to simultaneously: (i) “balance deep sensitivity to context... us[ing] some variant of the comparative method to surface causal linkages that are portable across world regions; and, (ii) engage ongoing research and scholarly discourse in two or more area studies communities against the backdrop of more general concepts and theoretical debates within a social science discipline.”

As Sil (2018) suggests, CAS often entails cross-regional, contextualized small-N comparisons. With regard to emerging powers, this intermediate level of analysis helps to capture variance within and across actors in different regions, teasing out cross-cutting patterns. For example, the ability to recognize that a power struggle is unfolding in X state where moderates are outmaneuvering hardliners, and to compare and contrast such struggles across X, Y, and Z states affords very different insights—and policy prescriptions—than reading states as monolithic blocks (Fisher Onar 2021).

### **Family Resemblances and Eurasia's Former Empires: China, Russia, Iran, Turkey**

There are many ways to operationalize cross-regional comparison as showcased in this symposium and the edited volume by which it was inspired. As a contribution to the toolkit, I invoke the notion of “family resemblances,” defined as cases that share significant overlapping elements even though they may not uniformly display one common feature. As Goertz (1994) suggests, family resemblances offer a handle on concepts which are “intuitively understandable,” such as electoral authoritarianism, but difficult to formulate in terms of “exact specification or definition” due to the presence of overlapping features across cases rather than identical “hard cores” (25).

The notion of family resemblances serves comparative area studies because it enables the analyst to escape the straitjacket of Cold War regional categories which tend to emphasize the role of geography over history, sociology, or economics in shaping outcomes (Pepinsky, this issue). By thus assessing resemblances across regional foci one can identify similarities and differences for fresh insights into actors that are otherwise lumped together (in large-N studies) or kept separate (in single- or area-bound small-N studies). Such patterns, in turn, can be probed towards refining the operative concept, hypothesis generation, identification of necessary and sufficient causal mechanisms, and

inductive theory-building (Goertz and Mahoney 2012).<sup>2</sup>

To demonstrate, I turn to a cross-regional, contextualized small-N set of cases which demand a medium level of expertise in return for a medium level of portability. The four cases—China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey—are geostrategic but rarely compared. Spanning the Eurasian landmass from the eastern Mediterranean to the Pacific, they have figured prominently in Western grand strategy since at least the great game between Britain and Russia. From the “Heartland” thesis of Anglo-American strategists in the early twentieth century through to Robert Kaplan’s 2018 book *The Return of Marco Polo’s World*, these states have long served as the “other” of European and American geopolitical imaginaries (Morozov and Rumelili 2012; Fettweis 2017). At the dawn of multipolarity, such anxieties are exacerbated by these countries’ revisionist behavior across the vast Eurasian geography (Mayer 2018).

However, operationalizing comparison is challenging. This is due to cross-case discrepancy when assessed via conventional IR or area studies criteria like material capacity or cultural attributes. Thus, for the IR scholar, Turkey and Iran are, at most, multi-regional middle powers with spoiler potential, while Russia is arguably a declining great power, and China a rising superpower. One can draw on the flourishing regional powers literature to address these differences (Nolte 2010; Parlar Dal 2016), but the fact remains that these four states present an “apples, oranges, and cherries” problem, as it were, regarding their comparative magnitude. Meanwhile, for the area studies analyst, historical, linguistic and sundry other specificities make comparisons between even Turkey and Iran problematic, much less with Russia and China.

Nevertheless, there is meaningful overlap, I argue, in China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey’s trajectories. The family resemblance emanates from their common experience as “revisionist former empires.” This feature matters because imperial legacies, both real and imagined, shape national projects and foreign policies (Fisher Onar 2013; 2015; 2018).

Consider that all four are: (i) successor states to large and long-lived, geographically contiguous Eurasian

empires which, (ii) since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and especially during the “long nineteenth century,” were overshadowed by European colonial powers (and by a Japan reinvented along European lines). European expansion was due to military primacy and emergent forms of political and economic organization, namely, the nation-state and capitalist industrialization. But if these features helped Europeans achieve global conquest, (iii) the four Eurasian empires commanded sufficient state capacity to retain formal sovereignty. This overlapping experience distinguishes China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey from the vast majority of non-Western actors who were thoroughly subjugated.<sup>3</sup> (iv) In response, moreover, reformists in each empire outmaneuvered traditionalists to pursue military, political, and economic modernization along Western lines for the paradoxical purpose of defense against the West.

(v) The four empires finally collapsed within roughly the same decade in the Chinese revolutions of 1911 and 1913, the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the Young Turk and Kemalist revolutions of 1908 and 1923; and the establishment of constitutional monarchy in Iran in 1925. (vi) In each case, moreover, it was internal rather than external agents that instituted modernizing authoritarian regimes. And while these regimes displayed great ideological variation as the states evolved over ensuing decades, from the foundational moment to today they have shared one common feature: deep ambivalence towards Western hegemony. (vii) Resentment of the West references the humiliating experience of eclipse,<sup>4</sup> and is inculcated through school curricula, national media, and commemorative practices, among other nation-building tools. (viii) Today, anti-Western sentiments—and the promise to restore once-and-future glory—are mobilized, in turn, for domestic or foreign policy. (ix) Such agendas are distinctive from post-colonial projects, which tend to eschew expansive claims. For China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, however, the frame is of manifest destiny regarding their ability—realistic or otherwise—to play order-setting roles in former imperial geographies. (x) Finally, overlapping resentment of the West and aspirations to power projection inform policy coordination (Kavalski 2010). This is evident in

2 Family resemblances are especially useful for analysts committed to causal inference. Soss (2018) develops the logic for interpretivist scholars, arguing that an exploratory commitment to “casing a study” rather than “studying a case” can better capture dynamics on the ground. Both approaches hold promise for problem-driven, cross-regional comparisons in a multipolar world.

3 This is a feature I elsewhere theorize in juxtaposition to the colonial and post-colonial condition as the “concessionary condition” in reference to the imposition of Capitulations regimes by European powers rather than full-fledged colonial control (Fisher Onar 2021).

4 The long-nineteenth century eclipse of these states’ *ancien regimes* by European powers is one source of what Zarakol (2010) characterizes as “stigmatization” within international society, as is the Cold War experience of domination by the United States (notably in Russia, where imperial nostalgia is arguably strongest for the Soviet rather than the Czarist period).



endeavors like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or the Astana group, via which Russia, Iran, and Turkey have sought to shape outcomes in Syria. Such initiatives hardly augur a unified block, but they provide discursive and institutional frameworks (Schmidt 2008) for both cooperation and rivalry, informed by an overlapping sense that the time for Western power projection across Eurasia is over.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, despite obvious differences, recognizing the family resemblance between China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey as “revisionist imperial successor states” enables exploration of compelling mid-range questions as the West retrenches: What commonalities and differences drive revisionist projects? How do national narratives, steeped in resentment of ebbing Western hegemony, shape policies? How, for example, do such frames intertwine with status-seeking behavior? And can they authorize action that defies rational choice expectations? If so, how do patterns at the sub- or trans-national levels compare with—and potentially mitigate—revisionism at the interstate level? What, ultimately, do our answers suggest for the propensity of Eurasia’s resurgent powers to clash or cooperate with each other, and with Western counterparts?

The toolkit of CAS can help to at least begin addressing such questions in ways that do not exclude (re-)emerging powers’ perspectives.

## Conclusion

In sum, at the dawn of multipolarity, students of world politics—including but not limited to IR scholars—must make sense of non-Western diversity. To supplement an analytical apparatus forged in the West for stronger cross-regional comparisons, I have proposed a comparative area studies (CAS) framework with which to examine similarities and differences in the revisionist behavior of four major actors rarely studied in concert. Proposing “family resemblances” as a tool for comparison, I show that China, Russia, Iran and Turkey are “revisionist former empires” (Fisher Onar 2013; 2018) which can be assessed vis-a-vis their imperial pasts, and the ways such legacies shape domestic and foreign policy today. By thus establishing a baseline for comparison, individual or collaborative research can explore mid-range questions regarding cooperation and conflict between resurgent Eurasian powers, and in their relations with Western counterparts. The study of family resemblances across other traditionally-segmented area studies foci can likewise elucidate outstanding real-world problems.

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<sup>5</sup> An interesting question beyond the scope of the present essay but bearing further exploration regards how many resemblances must be present to constitute a legitimate basis for comparison. Soss’s (2018) work on how to reflexively “case studies” as the analyst interpolates between empirics, theories, and research question rather than “studying cases” as pre-existing phenomena may offer some answers.

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