

Reform and Revision in the International System

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Abstract: The concept of revisionism has long been a central concept within international relations (IR) theory, and is routinely used to explain and account for change in the international system. Over the past several years IR scholars have sought to expand and develop the original concept of revisionism, specifying additional forms of revisionist and status-quo states in order to gain additional insight into the processes that produce change. Though such contributions are indeed welcome, I argue that the current discourse on revisionism has been stymied by theoretical problems that were inherited from the original concept, decreasing the analytical utility and usefulness of recent developments on revisionism. In what follows I present an alternative analytical framework through which we can better understand the origins of change within the international system—one which classifies states on a spectrum, ranging from “reformist” to “revisionist.” This new analytical framework not only possesses distinct explanatory advantages over existing concepts of revisionism, but it opens the door to a wide research agenda, while also furnishing tools to better explain the origins and pathways of change in the international system and international order.

Key Words: revisionism; reform; international system; international order; process

Introduction

Take two states, state “A” and state “B,” both of which are dissatisfied with the current international system. In the case of state A, it is wholly dissatisfied with the way in which the international system works, as the existing architecture of the system fails to accommodate state A’s interests. State A therefore wishes to overhaul the vast majority of the existing system, however it does so gradually over time, faithfully utilizing the existing institutional mechanisms of the current order in order to bring about change, and even then, only with the assent of other states. In the case of state B, it does not challenge most features of the existing international system, however it has profound territorial grievances, and uses military force to acquire additional territory, up to and including the outright conquest of other states. Moreover, state B readily uses threats of military force as a tool of diplomacy, unlike the majority of other states in the international system. In this example state A has the desire and intent to significantly alter the international system as we know it, yet does so gradually through persuading other states, using the existing rules of the game. State B does not challenge most of the existing rules of the game, and yet engages in aggressive expansionist policies, using military force to acquire new territories, and the threat of military force as a standard tool of diplomacy. Of these two states, A and B, which is the more revisionist?

At first glance, one might say that *both* state A and state B are revisionists. State A, after all, is reminiscent of an “unlimited-aims” revisionist state given its desire to significantly amend and overhaul the existing international order.¹ Similarly, state B would appear to be a “limited-aims” revisionist, given that its overall goal is not a profound change in the international order *per se*; it seeks territorial enlargement, and uses military means not only to achieve this goal but its broader interests as well. On these grounds, state A might appear to be the more revisionist of the two; but in reality, the situation is more complicated. Certainly, state A’s aims are far more extensive than state B’s, however state B’s use of military force to increase its size, and its threat of military force in its dealings with other states seems far more provocative than state A’s assent-based, institutional approach. Moreover, state A’s approach entails (and certainly implies) gradualism, accompanied by measured and collectively agreed changes. State B’s approach and aims are unilateral and forceful, rapid in terms of its speed, and wholly reliant on coercion. If we wish to assess how “revisionist” state A is as compared to state B, where would we begin?

The above example might at first seem to be an odd one to consider, yet if it is unpacked more thoroughly it serves to highlight some of the fundamental tensions and weaknesses that are inherent to our existing concept of revisionism. Indeed, traditional concepts and understandings of revisionism would likely suggest that state A should be considered the more revisionist of the two (on account of its “unlimited aims”), however this technical attribution would likely cut against our more common sensibilities. Even if we decide that A is not any *more* revisionist than state B, we are still left with an additional problem. Assigning the “revisionist” descriptor to both state A and state B does not actually tell us very much outside of the fact that both states are, to at least *some* degree, dissatisfied with the existing international system, and that they seek to amend it. Given the profound differences between the intentions and actions of state A and state B, simply describing both as “revisionists” (whether limited- or unlimited-aims) collapses these distinctions more than it clarifies them.

The thought experiment above begins to touch on some of the problems with the way in which revisionism has been conceptualized. This is not a new observation, however, and I am far from alone in my criticism. Over the past few years scholars have increasingly turned their attention toward the concept of revisionism, and have sought to add further depth and specificity to it. However, while these attempts to further develop the concept of revisionism are to be lauded, they remain limited to the extent that they suffer from internal restrictions and problematic assumptions that have been inherited from the original concept of revisionism. This is something that I shall return to in due course. For now, I will turn to the main contention of this paper—that the concept of revisionism in international relations (IR) theory is not only highly undertheorized, but that the tacit assumptions that are built into the very fabric of the concept are highly problematic, and do a poor job of accounting for (as well as reflecting) the real-world phenomenon that it purports to describe. In this paper I will briefly examine and critique the literature on revisionism, and identify

¹ Throughout this paper, I will use “international system” and “international order” interchangeably. While I do recognize the distinctions between the two (a system could simply be the assemblage of states, and the order is the logic by which the system operates), my contention is that one is often implicated in the other.

four critical problems that are inherent to it—problems that also remain unresolved by recent contributions on revisionism. I then proceed to argue in favor of a new analytical framework – a spectrum along which states can be classified as being more reformist, or more revisionist. The reform and revision framework, I argue, would have greater analytical utility than existing theories and concepts of revisionism, and would resolve most (if not all) of the existing problems that have been embedded in the standard account of revisionism that have persisted since its inception.

The Concept of Revisionism: A Brief Overview

The discourse on revisionism is old, and can be traced at least back to Organski, although some trace the origins of the concept to Thucydides (Gilpin 1981, 94; DiCicco and Levy 1999). On these readings, changes in the distribution of power in the international system drives systemic change. One of the most influential accounts of this dynamic was presented by Robert Gilpin (1981) in *War and Change in International Politics*, where he argued that the laws of uneven growth leads to a situation in which a rising great power challenges a declining hegemon for supremacy, and for the ability to determine the nature and structure of the international system. In this formulation, a state that is increasing its capabilities—specifically material capabilities—relative to the existing great powers (or hegemon) becomes dissatisfied with the existing status-quo, as the prestige that it is afforded by the great powers does not conform to the new realities of the rising state's capabilities.² Stemming from this, the interests of the rising state are not satisfactorily met by the existing status-quo, and the more powerful the rising state becomes, the more that its dissatisfaction grows increasingly severe. As argued by Gilpin, when the capabilities of the rising challenger reach those of the declining hegemon, a hegemonic war will ensue, the outcome of which will determine the future structure of the international system and international order. This is often referred to as “power-transition” theory, and accounts for cycles of international stability, followed by increasing instability (as states begin to rise in power and grow dissatisfied), resulting in either the instantiation of a new international order (if the revisionist is victorious) or the reaffirmation of the current one (if the existing hegemon or great powers are victorious), which consequently returns the system to a stable state.³

Power transition theory, though principally focused on explaining cycles of war and peace, also demonstrates the centrality of revisionism in explaining and predicting change in the international system and international order.⁴ The significance of this cannot—or rather should not—be

² Crucially, as noted by Gilpin (1981), the prestige that a state possesses is essentially its reputation concerning how much (material) force that it is able to employ. Put more simply, it is “the credibility of a state’s power and its willingness to deter or compel other states in order to achieve its objectives” (*ibid*, 31).

³ Power transition theory is an alternative to balance of power theory (DiCicco and Levy 1999, 679), which is a direct implication of Waltz’s argument in *Theory of International Politics* (2010). Despite its contradictory conclusions and mechanisms, power transition theory still relies on many of the strong structural lines of reasoning that characterize balance of power theory, as will be discussed shortly.

⁴ Indeed, revisionism itself—which is often associated with realist IR theory—is one of the only macro-scale mechanisms that helps to explain change in the internationally system and international order. While some liberal contributions, such as Philip Lipsey’s (2018) examination of how states use memberships in international

understated, and warrants special attention. Revisionism (or revisionist states) are often seen as the primary mechanisms driving change in the international system, whether or not it is explicitly recognized. It is *revisionist* states that are dissatisfied with aspects of the international order, and the more powerful they become, the more dissatisfied they grow, and the greater the extent of the changes that they desire. The existing great powers or hegemon must *react* to the presence and demands of the rising revisionist power—absent the presence of a revisionist state, the great powers would have no interest in changing the existing system, as that system itself is a reflection not only of the balance of power among them, but must also reflect their vital interests as well. The great powers or existing hegemon may either appease the rising revisionist power, by granting it concessions, or refuse the demands of the rising revisionist power thereby paving the way to hegemonic war. Crucially, the granting of concessions often further enables the rising revisionist power, hastening its development and accumulation of material capabilities, and strengthening its hand in future dealings with the existing great powers (Schweller 2011, 287-288). Consequently, the existing great powers or hegemon are incentivized to refrain from granting concessions to the rising power, making hegemonic war the most likely outcome.

The problems of materialism and structuralism in the concept of revisionism

This classic understanding of revision has several baked-in assumptions which can be discerned from the logical progression of the argument, many of which are problematic. First, the root of revisionism is firmly planted in material capabilities. Dissatisfaction with the international system and international order arises when a state's power and capabilities do not correspond to its influence on the international stage. While it is certainly true that such a discrepancy *may* lead a state to become dissatisfied with the functioning of the international system, it does not logically follow that such a state *must* become dissatisfied. To make matters more difficult, this material understanding also does not account for the possibility that states might become dissatisfied with the existing system for reasons outside of the domain of material capabilities. If there is *any* possibility that states might become dissatisfied with the existing international system for reasons that do not stem from their material capabilities, then the framework provided by power transition theory would leave IR scholars unable to perceive such cases, leaving a potentially significant source of change outside of theory and discourse altogether.

The second problem is discernable from the first; that the international system as it is conceived in power transition theory is fundamentally the product of structural factors (especially the distribution of material capabilities among states in the international system). When taken together with the first problem, the remaining two are revealed: the third being determinism, and the fourth being a static frame of reference (or non-temporality), especially with respect to the existing

organizations (IOs) to renegotiate rules in the international system, very few of these contributions have been synthesized into a “grand-theoretical” account explaining systemic change. Similarly, many constructivist accounts provide extremely useful explanations on how and why the international system might evolve—such as Wendt’s (1999) account of movement between different cultures of anarchy, and Jeffrey Legro’s (2007) account of changing state perceptions—but these also remain unmarried to a clear process by which system change occurs.

international system, or the “status-quo.” While defenders of power transition theory might argue that it adequately accounts for temporality by assuming that states grow at different rates, they also (tacitly) assume that the structure of the international system does not change continuously. Change either comes in iterations, as the product of concessions granted by the great powers, or rapidly as the product of hegemonic war. According to this view, the international system does not evolve continuously—it is not a *process*.⁵ This brings us to the second problem, which is material determinism, and determinism more generally. Power transition theory tacitly assumes that the existing international system is stable and balanced, reflecting the balance of power among the great powers, or the stability provided by the existence of a single hegemonic state. The material basis of power transition theory means that an increase in a given state’s capabilities must necessarily lead to an increase in that state’s dissatisfaction. It is a logical entailment, even if not explicitly stated or intended. Further, the interests of the existing great powers or hegemon must intrinsically be at-odds with (if not outright opposed to) the interests of the new rising power. Finally, the rising revisionist power eventually gains enough power—either from concessions granted to it, or from building up its own capabilities—to engage in a war to establish its own hegemony, and implement its own vision of international order. In short, an increase in a state’s material power leads to dissatisfaction, which then eventually leads to war.

I am not the first to point out many of these problems: the concept of revisionism was substantively expanded and developed during the 1990s and 2000s, and especially in the past few years. I shall only provide a very brief overview of these contributions, and give predominant attention to their broad contributions. In particular, Randall Schweller’s (1994) distinction between limited- and unlimited-aims revisionist states did much to deepen the concept of revisionism, allowing for a new “class” of state (one that is dissatisfied, but not intent on overturning the whole of the international system) to enter IR consciousness. Furthermore, Indra de Soysa, John Oneal, and Yong-Hee Park (1997, 512) questioned why a rising challenger might be dissatisfied with the existing status-quo, given the fact that it would be growing more quickly relative to the established hegemonic state. Other scholars, such as Jason Davidson (2006) sought to develop a comprehensive theory of revisionist states. Davidson (*ibid*, 13) in particular argued (following Arnold Wolfers) that “revisionists seek ‘values not presently enjoyed,’ whereas status-quo states seek the maintenance of such values,” including territory, status, access or share of markets, ideology, as well as the creation or amendment of international law and institutions. Crucially, Davidson’s account in explaining revisionist strategies (as well as the strategies that status-quo states adopt in response) are dependent on largely material factors, including capabilities and resolve.

More recent scholarship has gone farther in unpacking both variation in the types of revisionist states, as well as the different kinds approaches that such states adopt in their attempts to change the existing status-quo. In some of his more recent work Schweller (2011, 286) argues that the hegemonic war cycle has effectively been broken, due to the massive incentives provided by economic globalization, as well as the destructiveness of nuclear weapons. Under these conditions,

⁵ I will elaborate on this problem more extensively in the next part of this paper, where I will explicitly argue that both the international system and international order are, in large part, processual phenomena.

rising powers can assume a variety of roles, including spoilers (states that are bent on overturning the existing status-quo), supporters (rising states that are more or less satisfied, and take on a leadership role in the existing international system), and shirkers (rising states that reap the benefits of the status-quo, but are unwilling to take on the costs and responsibilities of leadership). Furthermore, Schweller and Pu (2011) also argue that any dissatisfied rising states would need to adopt a strategy of delegitimation, undermining and discrediting the existing status-quo, before pursuing an alternative vision of international order.

Two very recent contributions also warrant special attention. The first of these is a recent article by Alexander Cooley, Daniel Nexon, and Steven Ward (2019), in which they create four different categories of states—status-quo, reformist, positionalist, and revolutionary—according to their satisfaction on two axes: the distribution of capabilities in the international system, and satisfaction with the existing international order.⁶ Second, the recent work of Stacie Goddard presents a thoughtful engagement with the concept of revisionism, addressing both the structural features that give rise to particular kinds of revisionist states (Goddard 2018b), as well as an argument regarding the strategies that particular kinds of revisionist states employ to achieve their desired aims (Goddard 2018a). In the first case, Goddard (2018b) argues that a dissatisfied state's network position offers strong constraining effects, which “alter the costs and benefits of revisionist strategies, making certain forms of revisionism more attractive than others.”⁷ In the second, Goddard (2018a) makes a compelling argument around the patterns of discursive legitimization employed by dissatisfied rising powers, which are subsequently used by the existing great powers to infer the rising state’s true type (i.e., the extent and nature of their revisionist aims).

Despite the thoughtful contributions of recent scholarship, pressing conceptual issues remain. While scholars have recently created distinctions among various revisionist “types,” in practice it is difficult to clearly distinguish between them, and discerning a rising state’s type still leaves considerable room for interpretation. Moreover, the recent identification of such types signifies something perhaps altogether more troubling—that considerable disagreement remains about what kinds of properties make a state “revisionist” in the first place. This brings an additional problem to light: the complexification of revisionism has not produced any greater insight into revisionism than we previously had, while the additional categories and distinctions produced often obscures more than it illuminates. For example, Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2019, 19) emphasize

⁶ According to their formulation (Cooley, Nexon and Ward, 2019, 7), status-quo states are states that are satisfied with both the existing international order (institutional rules of the game) and the distribution of capabilities. Reformist states are dissatisfied with the existing international order, but satisfied with the distribution of capabilities. Positionalist states, meanwhile, are satisfied with the existing international order, but are dissatisfied with the distribution. Finally, revolutionary states are those which are dissatisfied with both the existing international order, as well as the distribution of capabilities.

⁷ In particular, Goddard (2018b, 773-775) identifies four different kinds of strategies that revisionist states can pursue, depending on their network positions: (1) isolated revisionists, which seek to exit the existing international system; (2) bridging revisionists, which seek a “rules-based” revolution; (3) rogue revisionists, which seek to overturn the existing system through the use of unilateral force; and (4) integrated revisionists, for whom the constraining effects of their network position significantly limit the degree to which they can pursue their desired changes.

added) state in their conclusion that “[m]aking explicit the two-dimensional property space [of order and capabilities]… allows for a more nuanced understanding of debates over ‘revisionist’ hegemons,” yet admit in the next paragraph that “the balance of military capabilities *is actually a subset of international order*.” By qualifying their framework in this way, Cooley, Nexon and Ward essentially admit that their “two-dimensional” property is, in actuality, only one-dimensional. While the distinctions that Cooley, Nexon, and Ward identified appear logically consistent on paper, they have a tendency to bleed over into one another when considering real-world situations. The specification and creation of additional categories does not always translate into an improved conceptual framework, and at times confuses more than it serves to clarify.⁸ Unfortunately, I argue that this is the case with many of the most recent contributions and developments of revisionism. The root of this problem lies with the third and fourth weaknesses in the original concept of revisionism (determinism, and a static frame of reference) to which I shall now turn.

The problems of determinism and a static frame of reference

While scholars have attempted to address some of the issues associated with the materialist and structuralist origins of revisionism, most (if not all) of these contributions face their own conceptual difficulties. This is because, as previously argued, two additional problems extend as a consequence of the material and structural aspects of revisionism: first, a general orientation to determinism, and second, a static frame of reference with respect to the status quo. I will demonstrate this through a critique of Davidson (2006), Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2019), and Goddard (2018a; 2018b), and address the issue of determinism first.

Both Davidson (2006) and Goaddard (2018b) make arguments that are implicitly deterministic. Davidson’s account in the *Origins of Revisionist and Status-Quo States* hinges on a host of factors, including: (1) the balance of allied resolve;⁹ (2) security and autonomy concerns; and (3) the degree to which the dissatisfied state is either domestically- or internationally-oriented.¹⁰ Interestingly, however, the only occasions which could lead a dissatisfied state to enact a revisionist strategy would be when there is a favorable balance of allied resolve. Furthermore, the only occasion when a dissatisfied state would not pursue a revisionist strategy when it had a favorable balance of allied resolve would be when it has a low security and autonomy concerns, while also being domestically-oriented. Again, while this is logically consistent on paper, there is no reason that we should expect for this to hold true in the real world—at least, not always. This would suggest that the *only* times that a state might pursue a revisionist strategy would be when it has a

⁸ For an interesting (if not provocative) read on this issue, see Healy (2017).

⁹ Davidson (2006, 38) explicitly states that it is not the balance of allied power that is the primary concern here, but the “balance of capabilities between allied and adversary alliances, adjusted to reflect [the] relative resolve” of each alliance group.

¹⁰ All possible combinations of these factors are outlined in a “decision tree” on pages 42 and 43. For example, a dissatisfied state that has an unfavorable balance of allied resolve, high security and autonomy concerns, but are highly internally focused, will be a “status-quo” state, and not seek to enact change. A dissatisfied state with a favorable balance of allied resolve, low security and autonomy concerns, and which is internally focused will also be a status-quo state.

favorable balance of allied power, and even then, only if it has severe security concerns, or is externally-focused. But why should this be so? If a state is dissatisfied enough with the existing status-quo, why can it not seek to change it anyway, knowing the possible risks?¹¹ And beyond even this, Davidson's account still effectively conceptualizes revisionist strategies in military terms, cordoning off an entire domain through which dissatisfied states might amend the existing system—peaceful change through multilateral mechanisms.

Turning now to Goddard (2018b, 768), she argues that “[n]etworks provide states with power and influence within the [international] institutional order... affect how revisionists mobilize alliances... and augment or constrain the economic resources revisionists can muster to support their revisionist aims.” The network position of a dissatisfied state in international institutions, therefore, “produces powerful feedback effects,” altering costs and benefits of pursuing revisionist strategies while also “[modifying] the possible pathways... that enable certain types of revisionist behaviors [while constraining] others” (*ibid*). While I shall not delve into the details of Goddard's account here, it is important to note that she herself notes that the network position of a state can act as a perfect constraint against revisionists preferences: in such cases, Goddard argues that “revisionist preferences become endogenous to network position, inseparable from structural effects” (*ibid*). While structural effects do indeed condition the behavior of states, it seems incorrect to suggest that state behaviors are either reducible to or determined by them, not only because states are agentic and intentional actors, but also because states can actively affect their own positions in the international system (and therefore both their *own* network positions as well as the nature of the network *itself*).

Finally, this bring us to the issue of the “static frame of reference,” regarding the nature of the status-quo. For Goddard (2018b), dissatisfied states are highly constrained due to their network position in the international system. Crucially, however, conditions in the international system are *always* changing. Differences in trade patterns, the movement of individuals across borders, changes in global governance, the creation of new international rules, shifting alliances—each of these factors play a role in constituting the international system, while also helping to constitute and characterize international order. Goddard seems to rely on a reified notion of a state's network position, and indeed, an evolving or changing network would likely be problematic for her theoretical account. While Goddard (2018b, 777) does examine the effect of network changes on states across time, she does so only across relatively large timescales, and without investigating the underlying processes which led to the evolution of the network itself. While this is perhaps understandable, it still neglects to address or account for how and why the networks evolved in the way that they did. Outcomes are indeed important, but it is also necessary to consider the processes that produced them. Social networks are rarely iterative, and often undergo constant changes and modifications. Understanding how these sorts of changes affect states' strategies is an important

¹¹ In Davidson's (2006, 39) discussion of resolve, he directly invokes the logic of Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam, essentially arguing that the North's resolve would eventually prove greater than that of the US. It is important to note, however, that this line of reasoning is only proven in retrospect. At any given time during an actual conflict, gauging resolve is often (if not always) conjecture—*informed* conjecture, perhaps, but conjecture nonetheless.

explanatory component for understanding how and why states might move from being satisfied to dissatisfied, dissatisfied to satisfied, or from pursuing one kind of strategy to another.

While the above criticisms are not intended to suggest that recent contributions to the literature on revisionism are outright wrong, it does serve to illuminate many of the existing conceptual problems that persist in the discourse. While efforts to improve upon the concept of revisionism are to be lauded, most (if not all) of these recent contributions still suffer from innate conceptual weaknesses that have been inherited from the original concept of revisionism. While some scholars, such as Cooley, Nexon, and Ward (2019), have sought to identify and specify additional categories of revisionism, such attempts are often unclear and difficult (if not near impossible) to apply to real-world situations. If recent attempts to further develop the original concept of revisionism have been stymied, it is due to the problematic conceptual underpinnings inherent to the original concept, and not to any failing on the part of either the scholars or their scholarship. If the problem is fundamentally one that exists within the conceptual makeup of revisionism itself, I argue that a new analytical framework is necessary.

Toward an Alternative Framework: Reform and Revision in the International System

To say that the international system and international order are always changing might at first appear to be a problematic claim to make. After all, much of the architecture of the current international system has been outlined in formal institutions, given shape and structure through a network of treaties and agreements, and constrained by the wishes and desires of powerful states. This formal constraint on paper, however, conceals a much more complicated picture. Every day money is exchanged across borders, the prices and supply and demand for goods fluctuates, new technologies are invented, individuals move from place to place, and state, non-state, and private actors interact with one another on a global scale. In a very real sense, all these interactions in all their complexity help to make up the international system. To be sure, the distribution of material power within the international system is still an important factor in helping to shape international order—power still matters, and that is unlikely to change anytime soon. What is crucial to understand though is the nature of the international system *qua* international system—that the international system (and therefore international order) arises from a series of processes that are continually ongoing.

A process-oriented notion of the international system and international order

What, however, does this have to do with the question of revisionism? In a word, *everything*. It is the process-oriented concept of the international system and international order which is central in being able to move beyond the existing conceptualization of revisionism. Both classic balance of power accounts of realism, as well as power transition theory have tended to conceptualize the international system as being static, even if it is not explicitly stated. Given that the structure of the international system is determined by the distribution of capabilities among states, the international system only changes when this distribution changes. For balancers, even though states develop at different rates, states will counter the growing might of other states through a

combination of internal and external balancing (Waltz, 2010). Power balances against power, and the structure of the existing order is essentially preserved. For advocates of power transition theory, the existing international system of the reigning hegemonic state is eventually challenged by a rising dissatisfied challenger, leading to the outbreak of a hegemonic war (Gilpin, 1981). International systems then are iterative: systems begin stable, grow unstable over time, and are then challenged, either being reaffirmed or replaced, thereby beginning the cycle anew. The very possibility of instability in the hegemon's order is indicative of the static nature of its system—if the system were perfectly flexible, no rising power would be dissatisfied. The system only becomes unstable precisely *because* it is static.

In opposition to these conceptions of the international system and international order, a process-oriented conceptualization holds that the international system and international order are produced by a series of continually unfolding interactions. At any one given time the constitution of the international system and international order is unique, and its conditions and properties vary from moment to moment, even if only slightly. This is significant though—not only because these gradual shifts and changes can add up over time—but because states have interests and preferences. Even if a state is perfectly happy with the international order at one moment, changing conditions internationally, shifting economic fortunes, changes in institutional rules, and even the perceptions and desires of the state's elites or domestic population may cause it to become dissatisfied the next moment. Given that the international system and the preferences of states are constantly changing, it is highly unlikely (if not outright impossible) to say that any one state is perfectly satisfied with the existing international system. At any given time, *every* state desires at least *some* kind of change to the international system or international order.

This line of reasoning also poses a fundamental challenge to the “status-quo/revisionist” binary that is foundational to the classic understanding of revisionism, and which has also persisted up to the present day. In a world where every state desires some kind of change, it does not make sense to classify states as either wishing to preserve the status-quo, or to change it. Not only is it fundamentally impossible to actually preserve the status-quo—because as a process the international system is *always* changing—but states also have a consistent desire to see some sorts of change in the international system. This poses a fundamental problem though. In the classical understanding of revisionism (as well as in its most recent variants), states are differentiated according to some states’ desire for change as compared to some states’ desire for preservation. Discarding this binary would make it difficult to logically derive particular state strategies from states’ desire for change alone. While recent contributions have sought to get around this problem by introducing other explanatory factors (such as network position, and distinguishing between a state’s desire to amend the distribution of power as opposed to institutional rules), they still fundamentally hinge on the basic “status-quo/revisionist” binary and its flawed presuppositions. As such, the inclusion of new variables alone cannot solve the conceptual problems at hand. The solution that I propose is to pivot to a new analytical frame that is not based in a binary understanding of “no-change versus change,” and instead place states along a spectrum ranging from “reformist” to “revisionist,” according to where they fall on three different axes.

What makes a state more reformist or more revisionist? Three axes to consider

Given the process-oriented understanding of the international system, and the understanding that states all inherently desire some form of change internationally, how can we gain purchase on the kinds of strategies that states seek to employ, and how can we classify states in an analytically useful way? Straightforwardly, states can be classified as being either more reformist, or more revisionist according to where they fall on three different axes: (1) the extent or degree of a state's desired changes; (2) the means that a state employs in their attempts to amend the existing international system; and (3) the degree to which a state adheres to broader international norms. I will discuss each axis in turn, and then hash out what these mean more substantively by returning to the motivating thought experiment, by considering how states A and B might be classified.

The first axis involves the extent or the degree of the changes that states wish to enact. As I argued earlier, all states desire some kinds of change to the international system, with some states desiring a relatively minor change within a single issue area, to other states that desire far-reaching changes across a wide domain of issue areas. Some states might desire a modification of institutional rules, or to acquire greater voting rights in international organizations. Others might desire an entirely new international institutional order, with markedly different rules and norms. Understanding the extent and nature of a state's desired changes tell us something important—it reveals the discrepancy between that state's ideal vision of the international system, and the one that currently exists. Understanding the degree of this discrepancy, however, does not tell us much *beyond* that. We cannot logically derive any particular strategy that a state might employ merely through understanding the extent of that state's desired changes.

The second axis is concerned with the means that a state employs in its attempts to amend the international system. States are not confined to a narrow range of options in their attempts to modify the international system. Viable options include, but are not limited to, making use of institutional rules to enact reforms, the creation of outside organizations and rules to apply political pressure, and even the threat or use of military force. States that make use of existing institutional rules in order to achieve their desired changes play by the rules of the game, which implies a gradualist approach based in collective assent—this is suggestive of a state that is more “reformist.” The use of military force, however, is unilateral in nature, destructive in terms of human life and property, and designed to force adversaries or opponents to accede to the state's demands. However, while the threat or use of force is suggestive of a state that is more “revisionist,” it is not a deciding factor. The distinction between peaceable and violent means is not always the definitive factor distinguishing a reformist state from a revisionist state, as the norms concerning force as a legitimate tool of statecraft have varied across time. This brings us to our third and final axis.

Third, and finally, the degree to which a given state adheres to broader international norms is the third axis which must be considered when attempting to assess and classify states. International norms vary across time and place, and state behaviors that are normal and even expected in one context might be considered unacceptable and provocative in another. Consequently, whether or not a state's general behavior is consistent with the prevailing international norms serves as a good indicator regarding that state's intentions. For example, the use of military force by states

during the nineteenth century was largely expected (Black 2009, 196-197), and the waging of war between states was considered a legitimate tool of politics and state policy (Clausewitz 1989). The use of military force during the nineteenth century, therefore, would be consistent with the general norms within the international system (at least to some degree). Meanwhile, the formal use of military force as a tool of statecraft would presently be viewed as extremely provocative, and in violation of some of the most important norms and institutional rules of the present international system.

Two questions now come to the fore: (1) how exactly are states' actions to be scored and obtained for each axis; and (2) how do we obtain an overall score or assessment for each state? Regarding the first question, I unfortunately cannot present absolute specifics at the present time. At the very least, it would involve producing a measure of a given state's intentions regarding its desires for change (possibly through text analysis and rhetorical analysis), an assessment of the actions that the state is (and has) undertaken in its pursuit of these changes (such as tallying up proposals or requests for reforms, rule changes, competitive IOs created, etc.), as well as an assessment of how much that state tends to follow the prevailing norms of the day. Crucially, this data and these measures would be gathered over time (ideally at one-year intervals) in order to obtain values which also can capture changes over time (more on this later). With respect to the second question, a measure that is obtained from weighted axis scores, along with qualitative indicators, would likely be employed in order to arrive at particular scores for each state. Crucially, changes in states' scores will be factored into the analysis. For instance, if a state continues to seek changes through institutional means over a long period of time, it would be strong evidence that the state is a "reformist," while a state that begins to use strategies outside of existing rules might indicate that it is becoming more "revisionist" over time. While the methodological approach is still in its formative stage, the real advantage of this proposed framework is its amenability to a variety of methods, including network analysis, timeseries, mixed-methods, as well as qualitative approaches.

A conceptual application: Returning to the case of state "A" and state "B"

Having outlined the conceptual framework, and having touched on some methodological questions, I will now return to the cases of state "A" and state "B" in order to demonstrate its analytical utility. Recalling the earlier discussion, state A is wholly dissatisfied with the existing international order and desires its replacement. Despite its dissatisfaction, state A uses existing institutional rules as a means to achieve its aims—it is a gradualist, assent-based approach. Unlike the case of state A, state B is not dissatisfied with the entirety of the existing system *per se*, but desires territorial expansion, using military force to seize territory, and the threat of military force as a means to compel other states to accede to its broader international goals. Returning to the original question posed in the introduction, how are we to assess or classify both of these states?

With respect to the first axis, state A clearly desires a massive change to the institutions and rules of the international system, whereas state B's dissatisfaction is more restricted in terms of its breadth. When considering the second axis, state A faithfully uses the existing institutional

rules of the international system, and though some of its initiatives might initially be voted down, it persists in its commitment to assent-based change through collective agreement. State B, on the other hand, uses unilateral means to obtain its desired changes, either through overt force or the threat of force. State B relies on a coercion, spurning collective rules and institutions, and is steadfast in the pursuit of its aims in spite of the protests from other states. Comparing state A and state B with respect to their means, state A is clearly more reformist while B is clearly more revisionist. Moreover, state A's reformist orientation is made all the more apparent by its continued commitment to using existing institutional rules, even when its attempts are not always immediately successful. Finally, when comparing state A and state B via the third axis, it is clear that state A acts in accordance to broader international norms, whereas state B routinely flouts or violates them. Again, this lends further support to the notion that state A is a reformist, whereas the evidence that state B is a revisionist only deepens. Given the strong norms against the use of military force, state B's use of force not only is severe in terms of means, but can be interpreted as a fundamental challenge to the normative international order as well. Even if state B does not explicitly challenge the entirety of the institutional order, its reliance on military force demonstrates its apathy towards the rules of the international system, especially considering the norm of non-violent dispute resolution. In this sense, while state B does not overtly (or rhetorically) challenge the existing order, its actions demonstrate that it will attempt to amend the existing international system as it sees fit, using whatever means it deems necessary. Given this evidence, state A would be considered a highly reformist state, in spite of its professed desire to overhaul the entire order, whereas state B would be considered a highly revisionist state.

Conclusion

In lieu of a traditional conclusion, I will instead offer a brief discussion of the potential that the reform/revision framework has for the discourse on revisionism, and the possible questions and projects that it is well-suited to address. First, I shall address the advantages that the framework has over existing concepts of revisionism before proceeding to a discussion of the broader research agenda.

The advantages of the reform-revision framework

As compared to the classical understanding of revisionism, as well as many of the recent conceptual additions made by scholars, the reform-revision framework that I have outlined holds at least four distinct advantages. First, it is continuous (or near-continuous) and allows us to detect the way in which a state changes type over time. This helps to overcome the “static frame” problem that was addressed earlier, and can keep track of how states change their strategies over time, in response to a variety of factors. This temporal element is crucial, as it can provide insight into broader systemic effects that influence both the aims and strategies that states employ to achieve their international goals.

Second, the framework that I propose is not biased in favor of the existing great powers or reigning hegemon, and is able to detect whether an established power is reformist or revisionist.

As it presently stands, it is rising states that are often (if not always) given the label of revisionist, because current states see rising states as the primary source of disruption in the international system. The framework that I propose is entirely unbiased in this regard, and can detect reformist or revisionist behaviors on the part of all states, regardless of their position in the international system. Third, and related to the previous point, the reform/revision framework is able to be applied to every state in the international system, regardless of its level of material capabilities, unlike existing approaches to revisionism, which concern themselves only with the existing great powers and rising powers.

Fourth, the reform/revision framework is context-sensitive, and is therefore able to be applied “objectively” across many different regional and historical contexts. Most current approaches to revisionism rely on theoretical assumptions that may not be wholly appropriate to apply to different historical periods. Consequently, the analytical framework that I have proposed can be applied to historically disparate periods, in a representative manner, enabling scholars to more accurately assess states’ types across time, throughout the historical record.

An agenda for moving forward

Needless to say, the framework that I have proposed is ambitious. Its ambitiousness aside, the reform/revision framework holds much promise—not only with regard to the existing discourse on revisionism more generally, but also because it opens the door to new areas of research that could further our understanding of broader international phenomena. For instance, this framework could be used to assess and understand the role that so-called “middle powers” and weaker states play in the constitution and evolution of international order. Are such states “rule-takers,” or can they also be “rule-makers,” even if their desired changes fly in the face of great power preferences?

This framework could also be used to assess the role that perception might play in determining if a state becomes more reformist or more revisionist. If great powers perceive a rising state as a revisionist state and consequently deny that state its desired changes: (1) will the state become more reformist, doubling down on its institutional commitments to demonstrate its commitment to institutional processes; or (2) will that state eventually become more revisionist, rejecting existing institutional pathways to achieve change, and instead pursue means of achieving its aims that lie outside existing institutional rules?

Finally, the reform/revision framework can also help to confirm or disconfirm existing hypotheses and predictions posed by the existing literature on revisionism, and help the field to understand sources of international change more broadly. Do rising states always engage in revisionist behaviors, or are there particular conditions or systemic pressures that make revisionist behavior more likely? What sorts of state strategies are best for achieving goals to amend the existing international order? And, as a final example, are hegemonic states actually *more* likely to pursue revisionist strategies in the short- to medium-term than are rising powers?

Granted, there is much work to be done. As it stands, the framework that I proposed here is in its early stages of development, and comes as a response to a research area which has long been an area of discussion for IR scholars. In spite of this, however, the reform/revision framework

does hold distinct theoretical advantages over existing approaches to understanding revisionist states. Crucially, while the proposed framework should not be seen as an outright rejection of existing (and ongoing) projects addressing the question of revisionism, it can be considered a viable alternative to them. Understanding the sources of change in the international system and international order is crucial for IR theorists, and cuts to the core of the purpose of IR theory as a discipline of political science. In this regard, the reform/revision framework that I have developed here has the potential to shed light on the sources and processes that affect the evolution of the international system more generally, and provide insight into processes and dynamics in international order in particular.

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