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Barbara Pisciotta

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Regional and Global Revisionism: Russia and China in a Comparative Perspective

Barbara Pisciotta

Roma Tre University

ABSTRACT

What happens when a state is dissatisfied with its status quo or perceives its decline on the international stage? What variables determine the nature, degree and extent of a country's revisionist threat? A preliminary distinction between status quo and revisionist powers lies in the opposite tendency to either strengthen or threaten the distribution of power and goods, international rules and territorial order. Drawing on these premises, a new typology of revisionism is proposed based on four variables: power capabilities, objectives of the revisionist policy, the means employed and the level of action. The aim is to develop a theoretical framework that can identify and differentiate between past and present types of revisionism through an interpretative grid that takes into account not only the factors that are already known (for example, objectives and means) but also the link between power capabilities, objectives and the level of action. It will thus be possible to explain the difference between the current Russian and Chinese revisionist policies.

KEYWORDS

regional revisionism; global revisionism; Russia; China

International Relations literature has always emphasised the *temporary* character of hegemony, drawing attention to the dominant power's *fiscal crisis* (Gilpin 1981), the *transition* from the waning to the rising power (Organski and Kugler 1980), the *long cycles* determined by the succession of hegemonic wars (Modelski and Thompson 1987) and the *gap* between internal political, demographic or economic changes and international positions (Doran 1983). In different historical eras, hegemonic wars have often resulted in the challenger taking over from the declining power, as in the cases of the Netherlands and Britain in the 18th century and two European powers – France and the United Kingdom – and extra-European powers – the United States and the Soviet Union – after the Second World War.

If over the centuries, the succession of hegemonies has been the ideal condition for the struggle between rising and declining powers, testifying to the link between power transition and revisionism, the question of the relationship between revisionism and the balance of power is also crucial on the theoretical level. As Sten Rynning and Jens Ringmoose (2008) pointed out, Classical Realists have never ceased to study revisionist states. For them, all states are entangled in the perennial struggle for more power, but they also

claim that these states pursue different goals: some are revisionist, while others are status quo-oriented. Classical Realists argue that revisionist states somehow emerge from human nature and the phenomenon of revisionism always appears in particular political-historical contexts. By contrast, Defensive Realism posits that in anarchy, security is the highest end; states have no real incentives to become revisionist, and expansionist powers are anomalies because the international system provides few incentives for expansion.

A country's revisionist or status quo tendencies essentially refer to its support or rejection of the international order. This order includes a set of principles, norms and treaties that guarantee its legitimacy and regulate borders, territorial integrity, state sovereignty and the use of force (Chan *et al.* 2019). In this perspective, the first major methodological task is to identify the conditions that enable a power dissatisfied with the status quo to move from *passive acceptance* of the established international order to *active support* for its national interests and claims. Some scholars suggest that the transformation from a simple *rising power* to an authentic *revisionist power* requires a determination to use force to change the balance of power (Schweller 1994; 2015; Mearsheimer 2006). In general terms, a revisionist power threatens to destabilise the international order, to upset and undermine the prevailing rules and norms of the international community (Chan 2004) or to redistribute valued goods (Ward 2017).¹ As Barry Buzan (2008, 241) pointed out,

[i]f stability is the security goal of the status quo, then change is the banner of revisionism. (...) Revisionist states, in other words, are those that find their domestic structures significantly out of tune with the prevailing pattern of relations, and which therefore feel threatened by, or at least hard done by, the existing status quo. Because of this, revisionist states tend to view security in terms of changing the system, and/or improving their position within it.

More recently, Maysam Behraves (2018) defined state revisionism as “dissatisfaction activated towards changing in the existing pattern of structures and distribution of resources, material or ideational, in ways that involve conflict/war or are prone to cause it” (838).

Is the basic premise of revisionism necessarily dissatisfaction? The division of powers into champions of the status quo and supporters of revisionism in terms of stability and change does not exhaust one of the thorniest issues in International Relations. On the one hand, there is the problem of identifying with certainty the states that are dissatisfied with the current status quo and *potentially* prepared to challenge the norms and rules of the international order. On the other, the fact that the dominant power must therefore *always be satisfied* with its position and remain *immobile* cannot be taken for granted. It seems equally controversial to define the United States as the paradigmatic example of a status quo power.

While theorists have highlighted the ability and desire of rising states to transform the system, it is precisely the hegemonic powers that “are best positioned and most motivated to be revisionist powers” (Schweller 2015, 13). Moreover, at the empirical level, recourse to the veto within the framework of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC),

¹Realist literature uses different terms related to conservative or revisionist powers. Edward Carr speaks of satisfied and dissatisfied states, Hans Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger of status quo and imperialist or revolutionary states respectively, and Nicholas Spykman of dynamic and non-dynamic states.

NATO's eastward expansion, Washington's decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the pre-emptive military attack on Iraq and the withdrawal from the Paris Accords all show just how difficult it is to determine whether US foreign policy is *defensive* or *offensive* and suggest the possibility of clear revisionist aims (Chan 2004), further-
more backed by the use of force to undermine the legitimacy of international norms (Hurd 2007).

Given that different conditions can lead to a revisionist policy, how can we distinguish between the various types of revisionism? What variables determine the *nature, degree and extent* of a country's revisionist threat?

Starting from these premises, this article proposes a new typology of revisionism based on four variables: the power capabilities of the state (military power, economic power, soft power); the objectives of the revisionist policy (territory, hierarchy of power, international norms); the means employed (military, economic, diplomatic); and the level of action (global, regional). The aim is to develop a theoretical framework that can identify and differentiate between past and present types of revisionism that have characterised international politics from the beginning of the 20th century to the present. The originality of the work lies in the attempt to elaborate an organic theory of revisionism that connects different aspects of the phenomenon, which existing literature has thus far analysed only separately, through an interpretative grid that takes into account not only the factors already known (such as the objectives and means) but also the level of action and the link between power capabilities, objectives and means.

The article is divided into two parts: the first describes the theoretical framework and introduces the new typology of revisionism; the second compares the two most relevant empirical cases – Russia and China – and highlights the differences in terms of power capabilities, means, objectives and level of action.

Types of revisionism

State of the art

Despite its popularity, revisionism remains a poorly defined concept in International Relations for three reasons: first, definitions of revisionism in world politics reveal a strong, underlying “rising-power” bias (Davidson 2006; Ward 2017); second, a moral dimension separates some countries from others in terms of their stability or threat to the international order (West and non-West: Turner and Nymalm 2019); and third, there is confusion between desire and conduct (He *et al.* 2021). In short, what policies justify the inclusion of a certain country in the category of revisionist powers? Moreover, acknowledging that such policies certify the presence of revisionist intentions, what difference is there between a country that uses force to pursue its objectives and one that uses diplomacy and economic cooperation instead?

It follows from the above that the nature of revisionist aims can involve changes in norms, regimes, territory and the hierarchy of prestige. Some domains of revision are, therefore, more dangerous than others. There is a qualitative difference between territorial revisionist aims and those pertaining to changes in norms or regimes:

Dissatisfaction with the division of territory, borders, or spheres of influence has been shown to be a ‘most likely’ cause of interstate war. Unhappiness over the nature of global

governance structures (norms and regimes), by contrast, is far less likely than territorial disputes to lead to large-scale violence or the need to resort to the battlefield for their resolution. Emerging powers can circumvent most established international rules and norms without resorting to or provoking the use of force. (...) Like norm violation, prestige demands need not result in war; they can often be satisfied by providing the emerging power with a seat at the table (Schweller 2015, 10).

The presence of a threat, its specific nature, the means that the revisionist power is willing to deploy and the determination to achieve a country's aims make it possible to compile a sufficiently exhaustive profile of revisionism. On this point, Randall Schweller (2015, 8) has argued that

there are four dimensions to revisionism that, taken together, determine whether the revisionist state poses a dangerous threat to the established powers and to what degree: (1) the extent of the revisionist state's aims; (2) the revisionist state's resolve and risk propensity to achieve its aims, (3) the nature of its revisionist aims (does it seek changes in international norms, or territory, or prestige); and (4) the means it employs to further its revisionist aims (whether peaceful or violent).

The presence/absence of an intention to use military force – generally but not necessarily bound up with the nature of the claims – can also contain an implicit reference to the nature of revisionism (Coley *et al.* 2019). Buzan (2008) has developed a typology of revisionism based primarily on the degree of change sought by the state in question and identifying three major types: orthodox, bound up with the improvement of one's status through policies of self-promotion that have no direct impact on the international distribution of power and preserve the rules of the system; revolutionary, which involves a complete transformation of the system's rules and hierarchy and challenges the status quo in markedly ideological terms; and radical, an intermediate position characterised by the desire to change the rules within the existing framework of international society but without pursuing any revolutionary aims. Ward (2017) identifies three types of revisionism: distributive revisionism, which implies that a state challenges the distribution of resources but accepts the rules; normative revisionism, when – on the contrary – a state challenges the rules but accepts the distribution of resources; and radical revisionism, which rejects both the international order and the distribution of resources. Behraves (2018) suggests two modes of revisionism: “thick revisionists” seek to alleviate their dissatisfaction and perception of threat or injustice through offensive measures, such as conquering or redrawing territorial boundaries; “thin revisionists”, on the contrary, implement defiant policies and often resist the dominating force of the status quo by destabilising the export of ideology and spread of soft power. Goddard (2018) proposes four ideal types of revisionist states: integrated revisionists, who are likely to pursue institutional engagement; bridging revisionists, who seek rule-based revolution; isolated revisionists, who prefer to leave the institutional system; and rogue revisionists, who have few resources at hand and must resort to hegemonic violence. Goddard also suggests that the international order can affect revisionist behaviour by providing resources and opportunities: the relations between states become institutionalised in alliances, legal economic agreements and official diplomatic relations. If states invest in relations that maximise their strategic interests, they may seek alliances with other powers, pursue economic ties or diplomatic relations that favour wealth or influence, or resort to violence. While states have some control over their relations,

they still face significant limitations in determining their network positions, defined as patterns of social and cultural transactions among states. Network positions change the costs and benefits of revisionist strategies, making certain forms of revisionism more attractive than others. Strategies also depend on the extent to which a state can mobilise military, economic or social capital to pursue revisionist aims (Goddard 2018).

Means, objectives, capabilities and level of action

In general, the above-mentioned contributions have highlighted the need to differentiate between the various types of revisionism, but they have neglected two central aspects: the level of analysis and the connection between means, objectives, capabilities and level of action. As we will see, the importance of the regional or global level of revisionism is determined by the extent of the threat; an expansionist policy, for example, can involve more or less distant or extensive territories. Moreover, both the distance and the extension of these territories are inevitably linked to the means (military or not) that the state decides to use and, above all, to its capabilities. Prolonged military action that is territorially extended and geographically distant undoubtedly requires adequate military capabilities but also sufficient economic capabilities to sustain the effort in the long term. Therefore, a revisionist strategy depends not only on the resources that a state can mobilise but also on the regional or global projection that it can express. This aspect is crucial because the availability of economic, military or diplomatic resources can determine the level of a revisionist policy; while a state endowed with massive economic, military and symbolic resources may also choose to use only peaceful means, at a regional or global level, a state that pursues territorial objectives at the global level needs adequate economic and military support – in the medium and long term – to achieve its revisionist aims. Starting from these assumptions, I aim to develop a new typology of revisionism based on the link between four dimensions: capabilities, objectives, means and level of action.

Capabilities. Power capabilities refer to the types of resources – both material and symbolic – that a state can use in the international system to achieve its objectives: military, economic and diplomatic. Susan Strange (1987) has suggested that *structural power* lies with the person or group who can exercise control over security from violence, control the system of production of goods and services, determine the structure of finance and credit and influence the acquisition, communication and storage of knowledge and information (565). According to Joseph Nye (1990), instead, “the ability to affect what other countries want tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions” (166-7). In past centuries, the military capability of a country was the direct expression of a radical or revolutionary type of revisionism, characterised by territorial expansionism and the country’s consequent rise in the international hierarchy. Until the Second World War, economic capabilities were obscured by military power and territorial claims; furthermore, they always depended on the economic resources of the states. Economic capabilities can now directly influence a state’s objectives and allow it to implement its revisionist policies without resorting to military force:

Instead of competing for territory (because land was the prime source of wealth, and therefore wealth and political power for the state could be achieved through control over territory), states are now engaged increasingly in a different competitive game: they are

competing for world market shares as the surest means to greater wealth and therefore greater economic security (Strange 1987, 564).

China's economic rise, for example, has significantly changed the balance of power, confirming a strengthening of its position compared to other states and without the use of military force. If increasing a state's position in the international hierarchy or changing the rules is compatible with the presence of economic and/or diplomatic resources, with or without the availability of military power, we could argue that the ability of states to exercise *hard power* (military and economic) and *soft power* is the key factor that can determine both their transition from rising to revisionist powers – and thus from aspiration to actual behaviour – and the nature of their objectives (territory, power/prestige or norms).

Objectives. The objectives can be more or less radical depending on the empirical cases: territory means military expansionism, annexation or control; the hierarchy of power can refer to the redistribution of power, a challenge to the leadership or an improvement of the state's international position; and the change in norms may affect both primary institutions (international order and international rules) and secondary institutions (organisations, procedures and conventions).

Means. The literature has also emphasised that the use of certain means – military, economic or diplomatic – implies the choice of a strategy that goes beyond the possession of certain resources (Hymans 2006; Mazarr 2014; Goddard 2018). The decision to resort to military means may depend on the degree to which the international order is challenged. The effective use of a *military strategy*, represented by armies and weapons, is the first indicator. Another indicator of this strategy is the alliance policy, which may refer to a *defensive* or *offensive* military policy (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). Three alliance policies can be distinguished for the purposes of this study: 1) an *offensive strategy*, through a military agreement between two or more states to expand their power within the hierarchy of power (Steel Pact); 2) a *hegemonic defensive strategy*, when a state tries to expand a security structure to guarantee its own security and that of its partners (US with NATO enlargement); and 3) a *challenging defensive strategy*, which can contain, reduce or replace the existing security structure (Russian foreign policy against NATO enlargement before 2022).

Economic means, on the other hand, imply a strategy to mobilise resources to increase economic growth, participate in the economic competition game and challenge the hegemonic power (Strange 1987; Schweller 2015). In this perspective, the economic trajectory of a state's economic power depends on its control over: 1) the expansion of the production of goods and services on an international scale (the Marshall Plan); 2) the enlargement of its market share (the spread of Chinese capital in Western economies); and 3) the development of an international financial and credit structure (China's attempt to create a *renminbi* circulation area parallel to the dollar).

Finally, regarding the use of diplomatic means, He *et al.* (2021) identify four strategies that a country can implement to pursue its objectives: 1) *institutional reform*, which aims to revise the rules, procedures, leadership and agenda *within* the existing institutions (the IMF quota review promoted by emerging countries); 2) *institutional obstruction*, which

challenges the existing institutions from the inside through the use of a protest vote (Russia and China in the Security Council); 3) *institutional exit*, an external strategy that challenges the existing institutions through withdrawal (the US decision to withdraw from the TPP); and 4) *institutional competition*, an external strategy based on the creation of a new institution to directly compete with the existing ones (the creation of the AIIB, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank).

Level of action. When revisionist claims take on a regional dimension, the intention to control or annex a territory, reformulate the norms or change the regional structure or hierarchy of prestige is limited exclusively to the regional area in which the revisionist power is located (Pisciotta 2020). More specifically, the regional area defines the actions that a state can decide to undertake with respect to the countries that depend on it and/or have geographical, economic and cultural relations with it. The degree of danger posed by the threat of possible changes to the status quo reflects regional balances of power and *directly* affects the neighbouring states and those located in the area. When the demands of the revisionist power extend beyond its regional area, the challenge may, instead, influence the dominant global power (or powers) directly, with the risk of limiting or compromising its (or their) strategic interests and spheres of influence at the global level. Unlike the previous case, here the action of the revisionist state – be it peaceful or violent – tends to transcend the area and extend to the international order, thus affecting the international norms, the hierarchy of prestige, the distribution of power and the control or conquest of territories, neighbouring or otherwise.

Although the regional and the global levels are both ‘external’ with respect to national boundaries, to avoid misunderstandings, here the term ‘global’ is preferred to ‘international’ to stress the difference between a geographically delimited space (regional) and a potentially open space (global), by definition exposed to any external factor (regional, international or transnational).²

A new typology of revisionism

The four dimensions of revisionism – namely power capabilities (military power, economic power, soft power), objectives (territory/norms/power), the means employed (military, economic, diplomatic) and the *level* of the aims (regional or global) – can thus be used to create a table containing six different kinds of revisionism (Table 2). This typology has three objectives: 1) to provide a framework for understanding and comparing past and present forms of revisionism; 2) to identify the predominant characteristic of the revisionist strategy; 3) to combine previous theories in a single interpretative model.

The first objective regards the relation between capabilities, means employed, level of action and objectives. If all four variables work simultaneously to determine the type of revisionism and the extent of the threat, it becomes possible to compare the different empirical cases and highlight similarities and differences between the different forms of foreign policy, which would collapse if there were no connections between states’ capabilities, objectives, means and level of action. For example, two countries can pursue the aim of changing the hierarchy of international prestige and therefore act at the global

²On the choice of terminology, see Pisciotta (2016).

Table 1. Revisionism's variables and indicators

<i>Power capabilities</i>	Military power 1. military equipment: a. weapons; b. technology; c. active personnel; 2. military expenditure	Economic power 1. GDP; 2. average per capita income; 3. volume of industrial production; 4. import/export	Soft power 1. cultural attraction; 2. ideological and cultural homogeneity; 3. way of life
<i>Objectives</i>	Territory 1. territorial expansionism; 2. territorial annexation; 3. territorial control	Hierarchy of power 1. improvement of international position (power/prestige); 2. redistribution of resources; 3. challenge to international leadership	Change in norms 1. international order; 2. international organisations and conventions
<i>Means</i>	Military strategy 1. use of force; 2. alliance policy: a. offensive strategy; b. hegemonic defensive strategy; c. challenging defensive strategy	Economic strategy 1. expansion of production; 2. enlargement of market share; 3. development of financial and credit structures	Diplomatic strategy 1. institutional reform; 2. institutional obstruction; 3. institutional exit; 4. institutional competition
<i>Level of action</i>	Global international and transnational space		Regional neighbouring and local space

Table 2. Typology of revisionism

Type of revisionism	Power capabilities	Objectives	Means	Level of action	Empirical cases
<i>Nationalist</i>	military power economic power	territorial control and/or annexation; increase in power and prestige	military	regional	Russian military intervention in Ukraine and Georgia
<i>Moderate</i>	economic power soft power	redistribution of economic resources; increase in power and prestige	economic	regional	Chinese economic policy in South- east Asia
<i>Revolutionary</i>	military power economic power	territorial expansionism; increase in power and prestige; redistribution of resources	military	global	Nazi Germany; Napoleonic France
<i>Radical</i>	military power economic power	territorial control; increase in power and prestige	military	global	Russian military intervention in Syria
<i>Reformist</i>	economic power soft power	increase in power and prestige; redistribution of resources; possible change in norms	economic	global	China's Peaceful Rise and Development (PRD) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policies
<i>Normative</i>	soft power	change in norms	diplomatic	global	Group of 77 for New International Economic Order (NIEO)

level, but they may choose to use either military or economic means. It is true that the level of threat to the status quo can be equally high, especially if the action is more under-hand and less visible, but because the use of military force is more explicit and devastating, it may require both capabilities and means to restore the status quo. Moreover, the

use of military force outside a country's regional area can be associated both with objectives of territorial conquest, the pursuit of hegemony and a complete change in the status quo, and with objectives of mere control over zones of strategic importance along with the security of national borders and the growth of power and prestige. Evidently, there is a substantial difference between these two kinds of revisionism and hence a drastic difference in the level of the threat to the status quo. Likewise, there is a difference between the two forms of foreign policy that opt for the use of peaceful means but pursue markedly different objectives at the global level, such as changing international norms or regimes, on the one hand, or the hierarchy of power, on the other. While both can bring about significant change at the global level, only the second type of revisionism can potentially affect the distribution of power.

The second objective emphasises the need to resort to ideal types to reconstruct an entire phase of foreign policy. On an empirical level, in fact, each revisionist strategy tends to take the form of a mix of various objectives, means and action levels. Identifying the prevailing type of revisionism does not mean neglecting the heterogeneity of objectives and means; on the contrary, the theoretical effort to develop a framework that places each case in a specific category highlights similarities and differences between the various cases, which would disappear without an articulated interpretative grid. In other words, defining China as an example of reformist revisionism highlights the economic and global dimension of its claims, despite its territorial claims against neighbouring countries or its regional economic agreements.

Finally, the third objective combines the previous typologies. Alongside known forms of revisionism such as revolutionary, radical or normative forms, it proposes other types based on the level of action and the link between the four dimensions discussed above.

In this framework, *nationalist revisionism*, *radical revisionism* and *revolutionary revisionism* represent three forms of change in terms of both expansion and control over a territory by the revisionist power. All three forms imply the use of military force and the pursuit of power and territory with a gradual escalation in the degree of change sought. The first (nationalist revisionism) involves forms of territorial control or annexation with respect to neighbouring countries for the enhancement of power and prestige at the regional level. The second (radical revisionism) concerns an intermediate modality of change in prestige and/or power at the global level through the acquisition by the revisionist state of territorial control over areas that are geographically distant but regarded as strategically vital to its national interests. The third and most extreme form (revolutionary revisionism) is based on military conquest and the overall redistribution of power, rules and territory at the global level. The (nationalist) Russian military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, the (radical) Russian military intervention in Syria and the (revolutionary) foreign policy of Nazi Germany (or Napoleonic France) are examples of each of the types put forward (Pisciotta 2020).

Moderate revisionism, *normative revisionism* and *reformist revisionism* refer to three foreign policy types pursued with non-military means of diplomatic and/or economic nature, which again involve a gradual escalation of objectives and scope of action. A state may decide to strengthen its position at the regional level through a whole gamut of policies, ranging from diplomatic or commercial relations with bordering and/or culturally similar states to the imposition of agreements that are highly advantageous to its national interests. The 'moderate' connotation of this kind of revisionism depends on the

choice of peaceful means, cultural influence and objectives limited to the regional level; think, for example, of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), China's Good Neighbour Policy, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with Taiwan (moderate revisionism). A state may also decide to undertake large-scale diplomatic action at the global level to change certain norms and rules of the international system in order to reduce the economic, social and political costs that these involve for the country, as shown by the aspirations of the Group of 77 to support human rights, global disarmament and promote new rules to change the international economic system and favour developing countries (normative revisionism). Finally, it may use diplomatic and/or financial means to improve its power and/or prestige at the global level and expand its capital, exercise economic control worldwide and even pursue a change in international norms to strengthen its position and prestige. Both the PRD and BRI represent two examples of China's reformist policy.³

Since every type of revisionism always seeks to change the status quo, differing in intensity but always substantial, it follows that even when economic means are employed to achieve the set objectives, the effects are anything but mild. Based on this assumption, the typology put forward here can provide an effective heuristic tool for two reasons. First of all, the close relationship between capabilities, means and objectives makes it possible to delimit the sphere of application of the concept of revisionism and limit it – in most cases – only to states with sufficient military and/or economic resources to be able to aspire to a real change in the regional status quo and to strengthen their position with respect to global hegemonic power. The weaker states will hardly be able to pursue any form of revisionism other than the normative one with any chance of success. Secondly, the distinction between the regional and global levels makes it possible not only to reconstruct an escalation of objectives concerning a change in the status quo, but also to identify a predominant level of revisionism – as we have already seen – that characterises an entire phase of foreign policy.

Russia and China in a broad comparative perspective

Starting with the capabilities data in Table 3, this section will discuss and compare the different revisionist strategies of Russia and China with reference to objectives, means and level of action. While neither Russia nor China exercise a real soft power at the diplomatic level, given the absence of a democratic regime and lack of respect for human rights within their borders, the comparison of economic and military capabilities nonetheless highlights two very different situations.

Russia

Level of action. Having the second military force in the world, Russia has chosen a revisionist trajectory characterised by a military escalation in the post-Soviet space (Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine) and in the Middle East (Syria). Following the NATO summit in

³The Peaceful Rise and Development (PRD) policy was formulated in the mid-2000s by former leader Hu Jintao to assure the international community that China's growing political, economic and military power would not pose a threat to international peace and security. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was a global economic strategy, inaugurated in 2013 by Xi Jinping, based on a network of infrastructures to expand Chinese markets all over the world and foster trade.

Table 3. Russia's and China's revisionist strategies

	Russia	China
Power Capabilities		
<i>Military power</i>		
	(2022)	(2022)
Nuclear warheads	4477	350
Active personnel	1,000,000	2,185,000
Aircraft	4,173	3,285
Tanks	12,420	5,250
Navy fleet	605	777
Military expenditure (in current US \$ million)	63,485	270,016
<i>Economic power</i>		
	(2020)	(2020)
GDP (in current US \$ billion)	1,488.32	14,687.67
GDP per capita	12,172.80	12,556.30
GDP growth (annual %)	-2.7	2.2
Industry (% GDP)	30	38
Exports of goods and services (% GDP)	26	19
Imports of goods and services (% GDP)	20	16
Foreign direct investments (in current US \$ billion)	9,479	253,096
Objectives		
Territorial control	yes	no
Territorial annexation	yes	no
Power increase	yes	yes
Redistribution of resources	no	yes
Changing norms	yes	yes
Means		
Use of military force	Georgia, Ukraine and Syria	no
Challenging defensive strategy (alliance policy)	CIS	no
Expansion of production	no	PRD
Enlargement of market share	no	BRI
Development of financial and credit structures	no	renminbi circulation area/AIIB
Institutional obstruction	veto within the UNSC	veto within the UNSC
Institutional competition	no	AIIB
Level of action		
Regional	Georgia and Ukraine	investments in South-east Asia
Global	Syria	PRD, BRI and AIIB
Prevailing revisionism		
	<i>Nationalist</i> (regional)	<i>Reformist</i> (global)

Sources: www.Sipri.org; www.GlobalFirepower.com; www.WorldBank.com. Data revised by the author.

Bucharest in April 2008, during which Putin openly declared that an entry of Ukraine into the Alliance would have involved a Russian military intervention, Russia acknowledged the failure of the Commonwealth of Independent States in the face of NATO's attractiveness; it subsequently decided not only to rely on a strategy of institutional obstruction in the Security Council (see the cases of Iraq, Libya and Syria), but also to resort to force at the regional level.

Objectives. The shift towards military means has required a reformulation of the objectives of Russian foreign policy, not only to contain the NATO enlargement – highlighted in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2008, 2013 and 2016 – but to change the territorial status quo in the post-Soviet space and regain territories previously belonging to the USSR. By combining minimal military force with maximum advantage, Russia achieved extremely important territorial objectives – until February 2022.

Means. According to the estimates of Russian military analysts (partially corrected by the US State Department), in August 2008, the war between Russia and Georgia saw 35,000

to 40,000 Russian and allied forces – backed by significant air and naval forces (200 fixed-wing aircraft, 40 helicopters, 300 combat aircraft and the Black Sea Fleet ships) – confront 12,000 to 15,000 Georgian forces with little air and no naval support (Cohen and Hamilton 2011). The success of the operations in the field, which eliminated any uncertainty about the outcome and military risk, enabled Russia to secure a series of territorial and strategic objectives that could only have been obtained through military intervention: 1) expelling Georgian troops and effectively terminating Georgian sovereignty in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, thus preparing the ground for independence and the possible annexation of these separatist territories; 2) undermining Georgia militarily and politically, and destroying its Western ambitions; 3) sending a strong message to its neighbours that their anti-Russian claims may lead to war and/or their dismemberment; and 4) increasing its control over the Caucasus, especially strategic energy infrastructures like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Erzurum gas pipeline.

Military intervention in Crimea was another success for Russia, despite the costs associated with the sanctions. The operations in the field, which lasted from 26 February to 18 March 2014 and were carried out by a few units of the Russian Rapid Reaction Forces Command,⁴ enabled Russia to seize control – quickly and with little bloodshed – of the airport, the major television stations and the military bases in Crimea (Bartles and McDermott 2014, 56). This military action enabled Russia once again to obtain results of great importance in territorial and regional terms: 1) the annexation of a strategic territory like Crimea; 2) consequent control over the military base of Sevastopol and the Black Sea region; 3) the weakening of Ukraine in both territorial and political terms; 4) an interruption of Ukraine's path towards joining the EU and, above all, NATO; 5) protection of Russian minorities residing in the Crimean peninsula; 6) a military escalation in the Donbas area; and 7) demonstration of the capacity to engage in asymmetric warfare, a form of warfare that combines the use of conventional and unconventional force with non-military tools (cyber, economic, political and information war programme) (Bukkvoll 2016).

Even in the case of Syria, the cost-benefit ratio clearly favoured the military option. According to estimates, between 30 September 2015 and 14 March 2016, Russia deployed a dozen Su-24s, Su-25SMs and Su-25 UBMs, four Su-30 fighter jets and six Su-34s in Syria, starting with 20 sorties per day and increasing to over sixty per day when the ground operations were under way. The number of ground troops has been estimated to be 1,700 units at the beginning of the intervention and 3,000 at the end, supported by Russia's Mediterranean squadron, which is composed of about ten ships on rotation (Kofman 2015). In military terms, the intervention in Syria enabled Russia to achieve the following objectives: 1) to strengthen the Syrian government and weaken both the rebel forces and the position of the Islamic State; 2) to demonstrate its capacity for military intervention also outside its regional area; 3) to participate in future peace negotiations as a great power; and 4) to obtain permanent access to the port of Tartus, strategically located to control this area of the Middle East. Under the terms of the 49-year agreement signed by Russia and Syria in January 2017 and ratified by the Duma in December, Syria grants Russia free use of various zones in the harbour area of Tartus and access to Russian nuclear-powered warships.

⁴The Russian military mentioned about a thousand men, whereas Kyiv asserted that there were several times more (GlobalSecurity.org 2018).

The current military intervention in Ukraine has a completely different cost–benefit ratio, owing to the escalation of the war effort and the extension of Russian territorial claims. In this case, the connection between means and objectives emerges from the notion of “uncertainty” – introduced by Schweller – that arises from the effective military capacity of the revisionist state with respect to that of its potential allies and the adversary, the importance of what is at stake for both sides in the conflict and the possible involvement of other actors. Schweller argues that this is a crucial criterion for the identification of actors as risk-acceptant and risk-averse:

Risk-acceptant actors are gamblers, while risk-averse actors are cautious under conditions of uncertainty. Risk-acceptant leaders, because they attach some added utility to the act of taking a gamble, are less constrained in making war decisions than are risk-averse actors; they are the actors most likely to saber-rattle, to ruthlessly engage in greedy expansion, and to anticipate bandwagon effects (Schweller 2015, 10).

If risk acceptance thus constitutes a key determining factor within the sphere of revisionism, according to Schweller, risk-acceptant and revolutionary powers are the most aggressive expansionist forces.

Prevalent revisionist strategy. From this perspective, the revisionist paths taken by Russia and China could not have been more different. Russia has chosen to accept the risk associated with the military option since 2014, but today it is paying a very high price. The military interventions conducted since 2008 confirm: 1) the territorial dimension of Russian claims; 2) the strengthening of its position at the regional level and the desire to improve it at the global level; 3) the predominantly regional profile of the Russian revisionist strategy; and 4) the presence of an economy that is not strong enough to support a prolonged military effort beyond regional borders. Consequently, the prevailing form of revisionism in Russia has been of the nationalist type, corroborated by the presence of – variously defined, in the Kremlin’s narrative – Russian minorities in the military interventions within the post-Soviet space, echoed in Putin’s statements that were reported in the New York Times on 18 March 2014:

Crimea has always been an integral part of Russia in the hearts and minds of people. (...) After a long, hard and exhaustive journey at sea, Crimea and Sevastopol are returning to their home harbour, to the native shores, to the home port, to Russia! (...) Millions of Russians went to bed in one country and woke up abroad. Overnight, they were minorities in the former Soviet republics, and the Russian people became one of the biggest – if not the biggest – divided nations in the world.

On 24 February 2022, Putin himself stressed his nationalist claims, justifying the need for military intervention: “It was necessary to immediately stop this nightmare: the genocide against the millions of people living here, who rely on Russia, hope only on us. It was these aspirations, feelings, pain of people that were for us the main motive for making a decision to recognise the people’s republics of Donbass” (*The Spectator* 2022). Without downplaying the importance of the military intervention in Syria, which confirms the territorial as well as global nature of that action and falls within the model of radical revisionism, regional interventions determine the nationalist nature of the prevailing form of revisionism in Russia.

China

Level of action. By contrast, Chinese revisionism has taken on a global profile, preferring the use of economic and diplomatic means. As the world's second economic power, China has the economic and financial resources to challenge the supremacy of the United States on the global level. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, despite China's territorial claims in the East and South Chinese Seas, Beijing implemented a regional 'good neighbourhood' policy with most of its South-east Asian neighbours that reflected a traditional Westphalian view of non-intervention, a priority given to national sovereignty and regime security, and a commitment to joint development through trade and investments. At the global level, China pursued economic integration into the Western-led world economy (see its membership in the World Trade Organization) to accomplish its peaceful rise and development policy (2003-13), based on the expansion of its production worldwide and the conquest of market shares (Buzan 2010).

Objectives. In this phase, the central goal of the Chinese leadership was to create a peaceful and stable international environment for its development and economic growth by engaging with status quo powers rather than challenging them through war. However, China's unstoppable economic power and increased maritime military capabilities have fuelled tensions and rivalry with the US and Japan. After three decades, economic growth rates favoured the perception of a gap between China's economic capabilities and its international position, nurturing Chinese claims to progressively reduce the American presence in Asia and be treated on equal terms as a great power (Okuda 2016). The second phase of Chinese foreign policy, inaugurated with the launch of the BRI (2013), aimed to spread Chinese capital in the world and create new structures to promote China's development through its vast currency reserves and reduce the effects of the 2008 crisis on exports. The BRI has five pillars: policy coordination, infrastructural connectivity, increase in trade, financial integration and cultural exchanges (National Development and Reform Commission 2023). At this stage, the Chinese challenge has adopted two strategies to achieve the same goal: to increase Chinese economic power at the global level.

Means. The first strategy was a broad credit structure for developing countries, the second involved creating the AIIB to challenge the influence of the IMF and World Bank, both controlled by the US, and stabilising the Chinese presence in the financial, investment and credit markets. Although this second strategy represents an example of institutional competition, as we have seen, it aimed at achieving economic objectives and prestige as one of the pillars of the BRI. The available data show that, from 2016 to 2020, the AIIB funded over sixty annual BRI projects for an average value of 10 billion dollars per year (European Parliament 2022).

Prevalent revisionist strategy. The real meaning of Chinese reformist revisionism is, therefore, Beijing's need to ensure a peaceful environment to expand its economic power and turn more neighbours into friends, partners and even allies, and to control them through its financial and credit instruments. A gradual increase in the participation of other countries in Chinese financial and credit structures implies a consequent reduction in the American role in the world economy.

To conclude, China's revisionist trajectory confirms three things: 1) the use of peaceful means to achieve its objectives; 2) the global nature of the economic and financial institutions of Chinese foreign policy; and 3) China's desire to change the international power hierarchy in its favour. Unlike Russia, China has so far chosen not to accept the risks and consequent uncertainty associated with the possible use of force.

Conclusion

This study has presented a new typology of revisionism, which is composed of six items based on the relationship between four variables: power capabilities, objectives, means and level of action. Moving from the presence of economic and/or military capabilities as an essential factor for the implementation of a revisionist policy, the analysis proposed a theoretical framework to understand and identify present (Russia and China, but also Iran or Turkey) and past forms of revisionism (Nazi Germany) and explain the evolution of different revisionist trajectories (United States). Furthermore, the reference to soft power has made it possible to explain those types of revisionism that go beyond the possession of military and economic capabilities (developing countries).

The analysis has also confirmed that Russia and China currently represent two opposite types of revisionism: Russia expresses a nationalist form of revisionism by choosing the military option at the regional level to recover lost territories, counterbalance the American and European influence in the post-Soviet space and improve its international position; China is a case of reformist revisionism based on a global strategy implemented by economic and diplomatic means to increase its power on a global scale.

In recent times, the Ukrainian war has corroborated the hypothesis that territorial and strategic-military dimensions are not yet obsolete and, indeed, have been put back on the agenda by Putin. The Russian military aggression has marked a clear discontinuity with respect to previous interventions (in terms of the impressive number of civilians and soldiers killed, among other things), which could have a strong impact on the foreign policy of the major powers.

If Russia is defeated, its territorial claims and power/prestige aspirations could be halted, while China could continue on the path it has already taken. On the other hand, a Russian military and diplomatic success could change the international order and demonstrate to other states – dissatisfied or not – and especially China that the military option is a potentially successful strategy. This eventuality could fuel tensions in the East and South China Seas and enable China to intervene in Taiwan to bring it back under its control. Even the effectiveness of the current alliance between Russia and China could be jeopardised by the outcome of the war; the prolongation of a stalemate or an eventual 'entrapment' would not benefit Chinese economic interests. Moreover, ever since the beginning of the war, the Biden administration has favoured the stalemate hypothesis to weaken Russia economically and militarily, challenge its leadership politically and separate it from China. In the long run, the effects of international sanctions on the Russian economy could undermine its ability to continue military operations also at the regional level.

In sum, Russia's elimination from the rank of great powers would mainly benefit the United States, which could aspire to bring back the 'unipolar moment' at the expense of China and other rising powers – such as Turkey – that aim to change the status quo to

their advantage and counterbalance the American presence in the world. Whatever the outcome of the war, satisfied and dissatisfied powers will continue to confront each other. When they do, any one of them might put forward a revisionist aim.

Notes on contributor

Barbara Pisciotta is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy.

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