

RESEARCH NOTE

Building a more robust framework on revisionism: a reply to Lawson and Legrenzi

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Abstract

The comments by Lawson and Legrenzi to our RISP/IPSR article ‘Tracing the modes of China’s revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: a comparison with pre-1941 Shōwa Japan’ contribute to moving the debate on revisionism in international politics a step forward. Their notes on the several issues affecting the International Relations understanding of the phenomenon are on the same page as ours and we appear to share similar doubts and a like-minded curiosity on the subject. While grasping some key topics and shedding light on crucial shortcomings in the literature on international change, power transitions and international order, however, their observations do not come unproblematic. In this reply to their timely remarks, we highlight the perks of their argument but also stress how this falls through in providing a complete framework to understand revisionism in international politics.

Keywords: Alliances; means; moderation; objectives; perimeter of action; revisionism

We would like to express our gratitude to Fred Lawson and Matteo Legrenzi for the accurate discussion to our work on the modes of post-Cold War Chinese revisionism (Lawson and Legrenzi, 2022), published by Italian Political Science Review (Natalizia and Termine, 2021). Their constructive critique allowed us to reconsider not only some aspects of the article but has also given insightful suggestions for our broader research program on the struggle between conservative and revisionist powers (Termine and Natalizia, 2020; Natalizia, 2021; Termine, 2021; Natalizia and Carteny, 2022), whose middle-term purpose is to provide a more detailed typology of revisionism and to bring out the different modes of pursuing international change.

As a preliminary consideration, it should be noted that the challenges posed by the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) shift to an open revisionist stance, as well as its yearning for a change in the post-Cold War order have attracted the interest of an increasing number of scholars over the past decade. Despite some significant contribution to a more nuanced categorization of revisionist powers (i.a., Davidson, 2006; Ward, 2017), most of previous studies take on the classic definition of revisionist as a rising state dissatisfied with the distribution of power and the moral ideas on which the status quo is based (Carr, 1939; Morgenthau, 1948).

However, this monolithic representation suffers from an extreme degree of abstractness so that it becomes almost useless for understanding the present age. First, because the fact that states develop dissatisfaction with the status quo tells us nothing about their motives, intended as the dispositions that drive states in international politics – e.g., security or greed (Glaser, 2010). Likewise, and more important to our article, it does not contribute to predict their intentions, or the policies they put in place (Sushentov and Wohlforth, 2020). Indeed, each revisionist state outlines its peculiar strategy – one that combines different and frequently substitutable

means of foreign policy – to challenge the status quo. The most pernicious consequence of this void is to expect that contemporary China will inescapably turn to a large-scale challenge against the international distribution of the resources and to the rejection of the existing normative architecture, following the footsteps of the most influential radical challengers of the past, such as the Nazi Germany, late Imperial Japan or the Soviet Union (Natalizia and Termine, 2021). To avoid this fatal mistake, our RISP/IPSR article refers to Robert Gilpin’s seminal distinction between ‘revolutionary’ and ‘incremental’ revisionists (Gilpin, 1981). However, also this original distinction still risks being fuzzy. In the light of this we fully understand Lawson and Legrenzi’s (2022) doubts and motivated by the same goal of refining the notion, we are working on a more nuanced subcategory of ‘moderate’ revisionists.

Coming to the first major observation by Lawson and Legrenzi (2022), we have the chance to spend some more words about the perimeter of action of revisionist challenges. It remained in a shadow within the article because its purpose was to trace the *modes* of China’s revisionism rather than its *objectives*. We have chosen to circumscribe the analysis to the regional level in both cases to make the comparative historical methodology more robust (Ragin and Zaret, 1983). Indeed, we do not distinguish the ‘revolutionaries’ and the ‘incrementals’ on the basis of the extent of their revisionist challenge, nor do we associate the global objective with the first and the regional objective with the second. However, we cannot exclude that a state may pursue a radical change both in the distributive and in the normative dimension but circumscribed to the regional scale. As in the case of the Shōwa Japan in the Thirties, when Tokyo did not claim global hegemony but was committed to establish its primacy over the region that its propaganda named ‘East Asian sphere of co-prosperity’ (Beasley, 1991).

For this reason, we are not convinced when Lawson and Legrenzi write that a revisionist power manages its ‘immediate vicinity in ways that keep current and future vulnerabilities to a minimum’ and ‘pursues change-inducing policies outside its home region’. A robust literature describes rising powers as – primarily, if not exclusively – committed to establishing regional hegemonies or spheres of influence (Morgenthau, 1948; Wight *et al.*, 1978; Gilpin, 1981; Mearsheimer, 2001) and this purpose implies contestation of the distributive and normative dimensions of the existing order at local or regional level. Furthermore, our doubts derive also by the history of last two centuries, to narrow our field of investigation. After a first overview, we found few cases of transregional revisionists (the Second and Third Reich and the USSR), several cases of regional revisionists (for example the US in the half of the XIX Century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1908–1918, Italy in the Interwar period, the PRC in 1950s and 1960s, the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979) and only sporadic cases of states for mostly engaged with reviewing orders outside their home region (such as France in 1875–1904 and, arguably and paradoxically, the US in the Middle East after the 9/11 attacks). In the light of this, we tend to not agree with Lawson and Legrenzi (2022) when they suggest that for illuminating ambitions and priorities of a revisionist power we should look at ‘the ways it interacts with states and multilateral institutions located at distance’. Indeed, if we cannot exclude that states may implement revisionist policies outside their home region, we regard this as an exception rather than a recurring pattern of action.

Furthermore, our readers outline the possibility that state revisionism may take different forms – revolutionary or incremental – at different levels – namely global or regional (Lawson and Legrenzi, 2022). As we have already emphasized, most revisionist threats – both revolutionary and incremental – have historically remained confined to the regional level because only great powers have global interests and are able to project their power – regardless the nature of the strategy adopted, be it revolutionary, incremental, or moderate – worldwide (Wight *et al.*, 1978). Therefore, the number of observable cases is very low. However, it is consolidated that large-scale challenges implemented with extreme means and objectives typically have a profound impact on regional political dynamics. As demonstrated by the Cold War’s most intensive phases, the global confrontation launched by the USSR against the US-led order took a very similar form in every region in terms of confrontation (Aron, 1962; Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Colombo, 2010).

Concerning the comment on alliances formation, Lawson and Legrenzi (2022) argue that Shōwa Japan and contemporary China have triggered the counterbalancing of status quo-oriented states by allying with other revisionist states – the former with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the latter with Northern Korea. Considering this, they posit that a revisionist power may join its forces with a conservative one to conduct a more astute and effective strategy of change. In a nutshell, they outline the formation of a ‘heterogenous’ alliance, namely those formed by states that ‘obey to diverging constraints or react to mutually contradictory opportunities’ (Cesa, 2007: 105).

We absolutely agree with them on the fact that between conservative and revisionist states occur frequent forms of partnership on specific issues (Lawson and Legrenzi, 2022). In another article based on the same research, we argued that moderate revisionist states may opt for a swaying alliance politics, oscillating between one camp and the other (Termine and Natalizia, 2020). This is confirmed by several cases, such as late Fascist Italy which pursued a utilitarian alliance politics or more recently, the NATO-Russia Council. However, events tell us that when the international order gets unstable, most of these attempts of cooperation suddenly expire (as has happened to the cases mentioned above).

Furthermore, the conjunct pursuit of specific goal for states with opposite intentions (conservatives or revisionists) could imply an attempt to use the partner for achieving specific goals – for which collaboration is necessary – or be part of a wider strategy of engagement aimed at shaping the other’s attitude. If this strategy is successful, the collaboration can also turn into a formal alliance. As happened to the United Kingdom and France, the Entente Cordiale (1904) was struck only after the signing of the Anglo-French Treaty on West Africa (1898), London’s renunciation of joining the Triple Alliance (1898–1901) and the mutual neutrality in the face of the clash between the respective allies in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) (Taylor, 1954). More often, the cooperation turns into a strong partnership, as in the case of the Chinese defection from the revisionist bloc led by the USSR in the 1970s. Then, Beijing obtained its seat on the UN Security Council due to US pressure, engaged in ‘ping pong’ diplomacy with Washington and was blessed by the ‘one China’ policy (Yahuda, 1983). Sometimes, instead, this strategy fails and produces a departure between the two sides. As it occurred to the UK and Italy, when after fifteen years of support to the Italian process of Unification London lost its influence over Rome due to Berlin’s crucial role in its Third War of Independence (1866) and the British recognition of the French prerogatives on Tunisia (1881) (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006).

However, the mutual participation to international institutions or regimes (Krasner, 1982) is not the same as being allies. According to some classics of the IR literature, alliances occur only in presence of ‘promises of mutual military assistance’ (Wolfers, 1968: 268). Moreover, the existence of an alliance needs a formal or an informal agreement between states (Walt, 1987), as in the cases of the Franco-Russian Alliance (1892), the Treaty of Washington (1949) or the Collective Security Treaty (1992). According to the realist tradition, the alliances usually stem from the converging security interests between two or more states. The origin of this convergence can be twofold. They can be the reaction to a threat shared by at least two states, or they can be justified by the common pursuit of coherent gains by at least two states (Cesa, 2007).

In the first case states prefer ‘to balance against threats rather than against power alone’ (Walt, 1987: 5). As a result, the promise exchanged between allies is particularly intense since it concerns a phase of profound crisis for states’ survival. Therefore, the presence of an imminent threat to the interests of both a conservative power and a revolutionary power can favor the emergence of a ‘heterogeneous’ alliance between the two (Shiffrinson, 2018). This alliance arises in the name of a common cause – contrasting the attacker – but in presence of contrasting particular causes – the preservation of the existing order for the conservative power and its change for the revisionist one (Cesa, 1987). For this reason, it is expectable that after the defeat of the threat the alliance will suddenly run out. The case is clearly illustrated by the ephemeral cooperation formed by the United States and the USSR to counter the threat of Nazi Germany, and its fast dissolution in the war’s aftermath.

In the second case, that of alliances based on obtaining common advantages, a power satisfied with the status quo will tendentially align itself with other conservative states, while an unsatisfied one will tendentially align with other revisionist states (Schweller, 1994). Although we cannot exclude the possibility that a revisionist power would ally with a conservative coalition (or state) and vice-versa, this event could assume two different meanings. On the one hand, the will of the conservative coalition (or state) to coopt on its side and control the – former – revisionist state through a *pactum de contrahendo* (Cesa, 2007). The case is well illustrated by the Pact of London (1915) through which Italy secretly passed from the revisionist field to the conservative one. On the other hand, it can be the instrument for a State to communicate its passage from a conservative or revisionist camp to the opposite one and to denounce all previous agreements. The case is exemplified by the Franco-Austrian alliance (1756) through which Vienna moved towards revisionism and denounced the previous alliance with Great Britain (Cesa, 2007).

As for what regards the third observation (Lawson and Legrenzi, 2022), we totally agree with the colleagues. Giving a single, unitary full-fledged indicator to military build-up, one that grasps the different technological frontiers, is a bumpy road. First, one should account for the different technological and scientific inputs that are integrated in each weapon system knowing that one hundred years of military innovation have completely changed the face of tech and its employment in war (Gilli and Gilli, 2019). We are currently working on a framework that includes a more nuanced understanding of military buildup so to give a more detailed depiction than simple military spending. This framework could embed and resort to the notion of offense/defense balance and analyze each weaponry in this light. However, it must be noted that when it comes to historical comparison, the difficulties of doing such differentiation multiply as the number of cases increases. This is why we have preferred to keep the indicator as simple and as clear as possible and we have employed military spending, even though we perfectly understand the colleagues' doubts.

Finally, we not only understand but also share the same doubt by Lawson and Legrenzi (2022) on the problem of typology-building when it comes to studying revisionism. Typological studies have a long tradition in the study of revisionism (e.g., Schweller, 1998; Mazarr, 2015; Ward, 2017; Krickovic, 2021) so many answers and contributions have been advanced on the topic. However, conceptual and empirical flaws are still affecting the scholarship so that we purposefully avoided to advance a typology in our RISP/IPSR article. It must be indeed noted that our matrix (Termine and Natalizia, 2020: 90) is a summary of findings and by no means a typology. Typologies can have the useful effect of explaining when 'the dimensions of the property space – its rows and columns – reflect alternative values of the theory's independent variables' so that 'each cell in the space is associated with predicted values of the theory's intervening or dependent variables' (Elman, 2005: 296). Giving a new lifeblood to categories, typological theory (George and Bennett, 2005) can also furnish rational, model-based expectations and as analytic framework, typology can and often does provide 'discriminating and contingent explanations and policy recommendations' (George and Bennett, 2005: 231). On the contrary, our matrix is purely an outline of the comparison's findings for crucial arenas of the revisionist challenge so to highlight the differences between the two cases. The 128 types are totally out of the purpose of the article. Instead, one of us, Lorenzo Termine, is working on a typological study which will include a fresh contribution on the types of revisionism starting from a two-continuous variables matrix. Power and satisfaction will be taken as independent variables so to produce a 13-cells typology. Then, Logical compression will be carried out with the purpose of deleting 'combinations are logically impossible or highly improbable' (Elman, 2005: 305). Likewise, pragmatic compression is also conducted to erase cells of no theoretical use which thus can be left unaddressed. A final four types-matrix will be advanced. This effort of typology-building is then central to our current research efforts but had no place in our RISP/IPSR article.

In conclusion, we want to thank RISP/IPSR for the opportunity to go deeper into some passages of our 'Tracing the modes of China's revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: a comparison

with pre-1941 Japan' and contribute further to the debate on a crucial issue of our time. The 2022 US-China confrontation over Taiwan stands as confirming evidence.

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