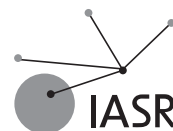




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Article

Why States Become Revisionists: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Why have more and more states turned into revisionist states in the past decade? With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the international norm of respecting states' sovereignty and territorial integrity seems to be broken, and we may expect to see more revisionist behaviors by states. This paper reviews existing studies on why states become revisionists from various theoretical perspectives, including paradigms in international relations and the issue approach to studying international events. It highlights the importance of investigating both internal and external factors in explaining the revisionist behaviors of states.

Keywords

State revisionism, Status quo, International conflict, International relations theory

The rise of countries such as China and India triggers a fierce debate on whether they will maintain the status quo or challenge the existing international order with revisionist intentions (Turner & Nymalm, 2019). The international community's concern for state revisionism has been especially intense since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. If not punished, Russia's encroachment on Ukraine's territories may set a precedent and encourage assertive foreign policies toward their neighbors by countries with similar territorial ambitions (Hensel et al., 2022). Territorial disputes, among all issues that may cause conflict among states, are most likely to escalate to war (Vasquez & Henahan, 2023). State revisionism is highly destabilizing to the international order. The stakes are very high here. To deal with it, we need to understand state revisionism better first. The central theme of this paper is to investigate why states become revisionists.

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Introduction: The Increase of Revisionism

In the 2022 National Security Strategy, the Biden Administration judges that “The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy. It is their behavior that poses a challenge to international peace and stability—especially waging or preparing for wars of aggression” (White House, 2022: 8). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is an immediate threat to the international system. At the same time, China may possess both the willingness and capability to reshape the world order. However, Russia and China are not the only states accused of being revisionists. Indeed, America has fought more foreign wars and has been involved in more militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) than any other country since 1945. From 1992 to 2017, it engaged in 188 military interventions, which increased more than fourfold from 46 during the Cold War period (Toft, 2017). Nor are major powers the only type of states that could turn into revisionists. Minor powers may be a heavyweight in a region, thus having viable revisionist agendas. Under the leadership of former President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela consolidates a regional coalition, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), to facilitate its revisionist agenda toward the U.S. role in the international order in the Western Hemisphere (Trinkunas, 2013). Japan becomes more assertive in its disputes with China’s maritime claims, while Iran tries to cooperate with Syria and Hezbollah to shape a new order in the Middle East (which is dominated by Sunni Arab states) with one centered on Tehran (Mead, 2014). Even for small countries, we may also observe increasing tensions among themselves. For instance, Azerbaijan made offensive moves against Armenia in September 2023 over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, which has been a highly disputed area for a long time (Umarach & Muhammad, 2023).

Furthermore, potential revisionists can be emboldened by major powers’ revisionist behaviors. Russia’s taking of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and its recent effort to seize other territory from Ukraine threaten the territorial integrity norm which has been predominant in the 70 years since World War II and could embolden other countries to have similar irredentist actions (Hensel et al., 2022). Indeed, the revisionist challenge to the existing liberal international order (LIO) not only causes serious concerns of policy makers but also attracts fierce debate among academics. The *International Organization* devoted a special issue in 2021 to discuss challenges to the LIO and the Westphalian order. Populism, extreme nationalism, and anti-globalism within its members and “outside” states, such as Russia and Turkey, are trying to damage the existing liberalism in the LIO (Lake et al., 2021: 242).

The common element in the contrasting views about the vigor or death of the LIO is that the challenge of potential revisionists is dangerous and real, whether regarding major or minor powers. In the increasingly interconnected world, given the devastating consequences of international conflict, it is worth exploring why states become revisionists in the first place. If we can detect patterns and causes of revisionist behavior, preventive measures or accommodation policies bear the potential of reducing the likelihood of international conflict, which perhaps is the biggest concern of international relations scholars.

The Concept of State Revisionism

The concept of state revisionism, just like any other concept in social science, is complex and subject to debate. But we do have some consensus about its basic element. Revisionism is usually in sharp contrast with the concept of status quo, either dissatisfaction with it or aspirations and actions to change it. For instance, Behravesch (2018: 838) defines state revisionism as

“dissatisfaction activated towards changing the existing pattern of structures and distribution of resources, material or ideational, in ways that involve conflict/war or are prone to cause it.” As succinctly summarized by Chan et al. (2021: 6), scholars share the basic view that when assessing state revisionism, we need to consider not only state’s changing power relations but also their respective intentions, foreign policies, and agendas. DiCicco and Sanchez (2021) categorize revisionism into three conceptual forms: preferences, strategy, and tendency or role. Revisionist preferences originate from a mismatch between the distribution of benefits and the expectation of the revisionist states on what that should be. It is simply dissatisfaction with the status quo. States may have such preferences, but they may not act on or reveal them. They may be recognized as taking revisionist strategies based on their observable actions. Such actions involve armed conflict and other actions that challenge or undermine the existing status quo. Furthermore, besides the agency of potential revisionist states, the social structures in the international system may also affect states’ revisionist tendencies. For instance, a rising power may be ascribed the revisionist role by other states, in which way it is antagonized, and it cannot escape from such a role. This collective act of exclusion is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Based on the scope of goals a revisionist state seeks (Schweller, 1994), we may classify them as unlimited-aims revisionist (wolves that pursue reckless expansion without the fear of losing, even if losing means extinction) and limited-aims revisionist states (jackals that may bandwagon with wolves to seek spheres of influence). Distributive revisionist aims to have a larger share of resources, while radical revisionist wants to overhaul the international order (Ward, 2017). Similarly, thick revisionism means a state’s campaign to redistribute resources in its favor, and thin revisionism refers to an expression of defiance against or dissatisfaction with the status quo (Behraves, 2018).

This brief survey of state revisionism concept shows that revisionist states tend to aspire to redistribute the share of resources or benefits, or change the existing “rules of the game” (Chan et al., 2021: 31). The tricky part is that all states would like to improve their share while all can lend support to the existing rules in some issues while change parts of them in other issues (Johnston, 2019). Realizing this problem, Chan et al. (2021: 32) defines revisionist states as those that are “motivated to change the basic norms, rules, and institutions of international order.” This definition seems to include only great powers as revisionists as minor powers lack such capabilities to overhaul the international order. But the usefulness of their definition is that they distinguish “hard revisionism” that relies on military means from “soft revisionism” that emphasizes non-military means to alter and shape international institutions toward its values and interests (Chan et al., 2021: 32).

The Origins of State Revisionism

This section reviews existing research on why states become revisionist states. It shows that status-inconsistency theory, power transition theory, realism, and different levels of analysis approaches offer compelling yet incomplete explanations. I also argue that we need to further study diversionary conflict and the moral hazard concept to better understand how factors within states and outside states lead to revisionist behaviors.

Status-Inconsistency Model

With the rise of developing countries, especially the BRICS, the concept of revisionist states caught scholars’ attention again. Sociologists have argued that when there is “rank-disequilibrium” in social positions (Galtung, 1964: 98), aggression is more likely. Individuals, groups, and states

may have top-dog positions in some dimensions but underdog positions in other aspects. For instance, in the international system, a state may be high on military power but low in past glory. Such rank-disequilibrium may cause states to make wars for three reasons (Galtung, 1964). Disequilibrium may mean differential treatment. Although a state may have strong military power, it may not be treated with respect for its past glory as it does not have one. Secondly, disequilibrium may affect available resources. A state lack of past glory may rely on its military strength to create such glory in the present. Thirdly, disequilibrium may also mean a sense of self-righteousness. A militarily strong state may convince itself that it is entitled to be respected with some glory by other states and has a right to achieve that status. In short, the disequilibrated states have both the resources and inner justification to improve their status, thus causing instability (Galtung 1964). IR scholars draw on such theories and develop the status-inconsistency model. When the rank of its diplomatic status is inconsistent with that of its military status, for instance, a state may engage in more aggressive behaviors (e.g., Renshon 2017; Wallace, 1973), although it may improve its international standings through other means, such as foreign direct investment and cultivation of connections with other states (Zhang, 2025).

Power Transition Theory

The idea that dissatisfaction with the status quo leads to revisionist state behaviors is found in the power transition theory (PTT). The PTT theory also argues that there is a hierarchical structure in the international system (Kugler & Organski, 1989; Organski, 1968). By definition, the dominant power on the world stage is satisfied with the status quo while states below the pyramid of hierarchy in the system are dissatisfied. They become more dissatisfied with the further lowering of their position in the international structure. However, dissatisfaction does not necessarily lead to war, and another factor that enables conflict is power parity (Tammen et al., 2017). If there is a power parity between a challenger and the dominant power, war is more likely to happen. In this model, dissatisfaction with the status quo by states other than the dominant power and power parity are the two factors affecting revisionist behavior. The rising power aspires to the benefits of being the dominant state in the international hierarchy, such as rewriting the rules to its satisfaction after the war if it wins. The dominant power can spread satisfaction as much as possible to the potential challenger to prevent conflict (Tammen, 2008). Yet the balance of power theorists argue that a roughly even allocation of power in the international system tends to produce a peaceful equilibrium (e.g., Morgenthau & Thompson 1985; Waltz, 1979). Kadera (2001) develops a dynamic model to demonstrate that in different conditions, both schools of thought might be true. It is important to acknowledge that the international system affects states' revisionist tendencies.

Both the status-inconsistency model and the PTT model emphasize the rank of states in the international system. The former emphasizes that a state can be ranked according to different dimensions, such as military and economic power, while the latter tends to treat the overall power of a state as a whole, and the dominant power in the international hierarchy tends to have the greatest amount of power. In brief, both models argue that states may become revisionist when their international status does not reflect their power in reality. As we will see in the following parts, these and other systemic theories emphasize the importance of power in affecting states' revisionist tendencies.

Defensive Realism

Other scholars treat the revisionist status from the perspective of anarchy in world politics. For

instance, defensive realists assume that the world system is anarchic populated by states wishing to survive (Morgenthau & Thompson 1985; Waltz, 1979). To survive, the primary concern of states is to maintain their position in the system instead of maximizing their power (Waltz 1979: 126). They assume that states are satisfied status quo powers (Schweller, 1996: 101). Status quo states are the most commonly seen states in the international system (Posen, 1984: 69). As written by Rynning and Ringsmose (2008), defensive realists argue that states have no strong reasons to become revisionists. They describe a world of all cops without robbers: all security-seeking states and no aggressors (Schweller, 1996: 91). If there appear aggressors, it is due to reasons within particular abnormal states (Rynning & Ringsmose, 2008: 26). States' expansionist behaviors "cannot be a rational response to the international environment" (Zakaria, 1992: 192).

Offensive Realism

Instead of accepting the view that revisionist behaviors are the exceptions, offensive realists argue that anarchy encourages self-extension. The anarchic nature propels states to maximize their share of world power to ensure their survival and become more secure (e.g., Gilpin, 1981; Schweller, 1996). The best strategy for survival is to maximize one's power (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2014). In this view, states should be expected to be revisionists, and it is totally rational for states to adopt revisionism. Indeed, it is an anomaly when a state does not exploit an opportunity for expansion (Snyder, 2002). Similar to defensive realists, offensive realists have to rely on state-level variables to explain the anomaly, but here the anomaly is why states do not always seize every opportunity for expansion.

Both the defensive and offensive realisms treat survival as the primary concern of states, but they fundamentally disagree whether revisionist behavior is conducive or detrimental to the goal of surviving in the international system, thus debating whether revisionist behavior is the rule of thumb or an anomaly. Either way, survival plays a central role in explaining states' revisionist tendency toward other states, and both branches of realism highlight the importance of anarchy, which is a feature of the international system, in affecting states' revisionist tendency. The emphasis on power and security highlights the point that revisionist behaviors involve high stakes and are risky.

Neo-Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism

Neoliberal institutionalism highlights the importance of international institutions in facilitating international cooperation (Keohane, 2005). Accordingly, efforts to change the existing institutions could be treated as revisionism. For instance, He et al. (2021) offer a concept of soft revisionism where states can challenge the existing institutions, including institutional reform and institutional competition. In contrast, constructivism focuses on how norms, ideas, and identity may affect state behaviors. From this perspective, state revisionism "means challenging dominant narratives and norms of international society" (Groitl, 2023: 59). Both system-level theories seem to focus more on major powers, as only such states can change the institutions or norms of the international society.

Neo-Classical Realism

There are also theories explaining the roots of state revisionism from the state level instead of only the international system level. Neoclassical realists acknowledge the primary importance of states' positions and material capabilities in driving their behaviors, but such scholars argue

that there is no smoothly functioning mechanical transmission belt linking the international distribution of power and state behavior. Instead, intervening variables at the unit level, such as decision-makers' perceptions, the strength of state apparatus, and state structure, also greatly affect state behaviors (Rose, 1998). In this sense, to understand revisionist behaviors, we need to further explore such intervening variables. Usually, the link between the external environment and states' foreign policy choices is complex and can only be revealed through detailed case studies (Schweller, 2003). But the challenge for this theory is how to combine different levels of variables without merely providing *ad hoc* explanations (Wivel, 2005).

There is also research from different schools of thought that emphasizes the domestic sources of state revisionism. Regime type might be an explanation of state revisionism as autocratic domestic political structure and ideology could make states more aggressive (e.g., Kupchan, 1998), while others find that there is little difference in democracy and authoritarian states' revisionist tendency (Götz & Merlen, 2019). State identity may also be a source of revisionism. For instance, Miller (2009) argues that the state-to-nation balance can affect a state's revisionist tendency. When the state is strong, but nation-building is incongruent, we are more likely to witness state revisionism. And the interaction of different actors within a state may also affect state revisionism, including "political and economic elites, political parties, bureaucratic departments and agencies, lobbies, the mass public, civil society, and other stakeholders" (DiCicco & Sanchez, 2021: 21). As written by Fordham (2011: 602), the goals of foreign policy "depend heavily on the time and space in which they find themselves." Such findings inspire us to investigate specific issues that states compete for and calculations of gains and losses by state leaders when we investigate sources of state revisionism.

The Issue Approach

Instead of focusing on high politics such as pursuing security or power, some scholars argue that state behaviors vary greatly when the nature of specific contentious issues at stake is different (Hensel, 2001; Mansbach & Vasquez, 1981). A contentious issue is "a disputed point or question, the subject of a conflict or controversy" (Randle and Rapp, 1987: 1). The degree of salience and tangibility/intangibility of issues can all affect the likelihood of interstate conflicts (e.g., Vasquez, 1983). The issue approach focuses on many diplomatic issues (e.g., territorial, maritime, river, identity), but the relationship between territorial issues and international conflict is explored most thoroughly.

Territorial issues are prominent in interstate wars. Territory is "an issue in twenty-nine of thirty-eight wars between 1816 and 1945 (76.3 percent) and twenty-two of thirty wars (73.3 percent) between 1946 and 1989" (Hensel and Goemans, 2021: 8). Territorial issues are closely related to state revisionism and status quo satisfaction/dissatisfaction. For instance, Kacowicz (1995) argues that there is peace among democracies because democracies respect each other's territorial integrity. Miller (2009: 89) even defines revisionist states as those that are dissatisfied with the existing international order and these states are "willing to incur high costs by using force to change the territorial status quo or change the regime of other states." Furthermore, it is found that non-democratic states have more unsettled border issues than democratic states (Owsiak, 2013). But we are not sure of the causal mechanism concerning whether nondemocracies are more revisionist-oriented. Indeed, Gibler and Miller (2021) argue that from the process of state formation, territorial threat creates autocracy and when there is territorial peace (the presence of stable borders and absence of existential threat to territory), democracies are more likely to happen. We can indeed argue that when there are territorial disputes, we are more likely to witness revisionist state behaviors. The issue approach provides us with opportunities to explore

in more detail why states may take revisionist behaviors and distinguish how different types of issues may play different roles in affecting state propensity toward conflict.

Diversion and Moral Hazard

All these theories and arguments provide insights into sources of the state's revisionist behaviors, but such explorations are incomplete in explaining risk-taking behaviors as consequential as state revisionism. For major powers, a rising state faces high uncertainty by provoking a dominant state through initiating MIDs, while a dominant power may end up with self-destruction through overexpansion (Kennedy, 2010). For minor powers, a military adventure abroad is risky, as it not only faces resistance from the target state but may also well meet with punishment from dominant powers for breaking international norms such as nonaggression. As revisionism may result in a war whose result is full of uncertainty, state revisionist behaviors are inherently risky. Expanding foreign policy ambitions through the threat or actual use of force "has always been costly and has frequently ended in defeat and ruin" (Fordham, 2011: 587).

Are there situations where the probability of winning an international conflict is quite low while states still take risky revisionist foreign adventures? The diversionary literature confirms such a possibility (e.g., Fordham, 2017). When a state has lots of domestic turmoil, an embattled political leader may resort to external conflict to boost her domestic power by relying on the rally around the flag effect (Mueller, 1973), although there may be a curvilinear relationship between levels of domestic turmoil and diversionary tendencies (Zhang, 2024a). In this sense, the diversion thesis highlights the importance of situations in affecting state's risk-taking behaviors, including revisionism.

Diversionary incentive is not the only condition where states may engage in risky behaviors (e.g., Zhang, 2024b). If a third party will bear the consequences of their behavior, people or states will also engage in more risky behavior, which is known as the moral hazard problem (Kenwick & McManus, 2021: 49). The same logic applies to alliance politics and other forms of support from third parties, especially Great Powers. In international politics, a state may take assertive actions toward another state if the risks of such behavior are shared with its allies (Benson, 2012: 43). In such a case, the problem of moral hazard may produce a situation that a third party does not want to be in. This problem could "distort the behavior of state leaders when they expect to receive third-party military assistance if war occurs with their adversaries" (Benson, 2012: 43). We may treat a state's ally as the principal and the protégé as the agent. The protégé and its ally might have divergent preferences, as allies' interests are generally not identical (Snyder, 1984). In such cases, the protégé may become more assertive, and it may even entrap its ally in an unwanted conflict.

Conclusion

In brief, at a time of rising nationalism and anti-globalization movements, the risk of observing revisionist behaviors by states in the future is also increasing. Factors from the international, state, and substate levels all may trigger the initiation of revisionist behaviors by states. Furthermore, besides rational calculations, diversionary incentives within a state and the moral hazard problem caused by forces without a state also affect states' revisionism. Scholars and policymakers alike need to pay close attention to these elements in evaluating the revisionist tendency of states. The situation may become worse with the intensification of great power competition and the increase of economic inequality both among and within countries. Furthermore, the issue approach reminds us to investigate the specific nature of issues at stake, as well as interactions among states

for these issues, in dealing with revisionist behaviors. Since territorial issues are among the most conflict-prone, managing them, especially by great powers such as the United States and Russia in the Ukraine War, has implications that extend beyond the war itself and influence international stability.

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