
DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HIERARCHY IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE: ANALYTICAL APPROACHES AND EMPIRICAL REFLECTIONS

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The article is dedicated to dimensions of international hierarchy in the post-soviet space. The phenomenon of hierarchy in International Relations is a specific theme. Given the traditional divide between domestic and international domains of political life, hierarchy as an ordering principle is traditionally ascribed to the domestic sphere of the modern state, whereas anarchy is the feature characterizing the relations between states on international arena.

Key words: hierarchy, International Relations, the post-soviet space, Russia, Eurasia.

The thesis of anarchy as structuring principle of International Relations is a widely acknowledged and, in fact, prevailing conceptual argument for almost all the major strands of thought in IR. International anarchy as a system-level phenomenon of international arena does not *a priori* presupposes the chaos in relations between the basic units of the world politics — the states, — yet the absence of central and legitimately accepted global government patterned along the domestic political framework is a matter of fact. For instance, the postulate of international anarchy underpins the conceptual approaches of the neorealist school of IR manifesting itself, among the others, in the problem of security dilemma. Here, noteworthy is K. Waltz's dichotomous argument that all the systems can be either anarchic, or hierarchic [1. P. 115]. On the other hand, the neoliberal institutionalists believe that effects of international anarchy could potentially be mitigated through the variety of institutionalized liberal practices and frameworks of cooperation. From the methodological and conceptual standpoint, the constructivists differ from those main two paradigms in eschewing to ascertain any preordained parametric features to the international relations such as anarchy, instead claiming that “international anarchy is what states make of it” [2. P. 62—63].

In social theory, a hierarchy is approached as a system of stratification, yet in international system the basis for stratification rest on power and status that are unevenly distributed between its member states [3. P. 19]. In practice, the structure of international relations stipulates that some states possesses greater potential to leverage their influence and power over the other participants of the system [4. P. 8—9], whereby “one country has governed a greater or lesser range of actions of a second but stopped short of overthrowing the latter's formal sovereignty” [5. P. 55].

Semantically, hierarchy in international relations does not usually purport the outright hegemony by the one country, but rather a continuum, a variable spectrum of power and authority that ranges from a complete independence (absence of hierarchy) to complete subordination (empire). At the same time, the modes of hegemony employed

in practice greatly influence the “status” of real hierarchy sustained/exercised by the dominant state. The main proposition here is pivoted around the assumption that different states yield different degrees of power and authority over the other states (group of states), however, the notion of power/authority in international system, as D. Lake argues, rest on the relational logic that does not contradict directly the principle of sovereignty as formalized legal norm of international life [6]. The subordination relations, in this context, found upon mutually accepted obligations between the pair of states as the rightful rule of hierarch is acknowledged as legitimate authority. Authority is exercised without resort to coercion, though substantial coercive capabilities are kept in reserve.

Besides the social (contractual) character as an explanative base, another explanation of international hierarchy existence rest on econometric approach of structuring dualistic relations between the sovereign states. The major conceptual claim here is that security is the product, commodity, a kind of functional utility which is produced by the states; principle actors of international community. And, as interpretation of historical evidence could helpfully suggest [7], the states are interested to collaborate in security realm not so much under the coercive arrangements of the single hegemonic state, but rather by analogy with private firms that are eager to reduce the transaction costs in competitive setting through the institutionalized formats of interactions. What is important in this context is the notion of transaction costs and governance costs; one of the major building blocks of the Williamson's model borrowed by the international affairs scholars for the conceptual and analytical framing of hierarchal pattern of relations among the sovereign states as among economic units (firms) [8].

In spite of its contested character as a theoretical notion, the phenomenon of hierarchy in international relations is manifested across the variety of institutional and political levels. From the empirical standpoint, the three broad aspects of hierarchy can be delineated: first, structural resources/power under the disposal of hegemonic power and the general parameters of regional order as predisposed for leadership; secondly, the operational dimensions of the potential hegemon's engagement (into the regional security system) and upholding of hierarchy (including bargaining/contracting specifics, cost — benefit correlation); and, thirdly, the institutional dimensions of hierarchy.

One of the “classical” cases of obtaining hierarchy in the modern times is the US-centered system of subordinate relationships scattered across the different parts of the world and ranging from the almost complete dependency on the US-preferred options to the moderate acceptance of the American primacy [9. P. 57—61]. After the Soviet demise, the post-Soviet Eurasia emerged as geopolitical area predisposed for a hierarchal structuring of interstate relations. Though featuring dynamics of power transition, the macro region has been unipolar since the early 1990's with Russia being the major power.

Due to space limits and the complexity of presenting the whole array of problems and issues of hierarchy phenomenon in the FSU (former Soviet Union) within the single research paper, below I will analytically trace the two generic dimensions of the Russian-centric hierarchal system in the post-Soviet area: the general structural parameters of Russia's power vis-a-vis the countries of the “near abroad” and conflict containment

capacities (including, the policy-driven mechanisms of up-holding of Russia's engagement into its immediate neighborhood), making reflections upon some aspects concerning the South Caucasian region.

Over more than the past twenty years since the Soviet breakup the post-Soviet space has been gradually losing its significance as some separate geopolitical and economic construct while diffusing into the larger streams of international processes and structures. Yet, some basic features and factors still stand for a special treatment of the Eurasian macro-region as distinct security and economic phenomenon in the world politics. The key geopolitical and strategic variable is the polar character of the Eurasian region with Russia being the major and strongest power with obvious potential to play structuring role across the whole region.

After the Soviet Union disintegration, several parametric factors *a priori* could have been assumed as conducive to yielding the Russian-centric hierarchal international system across the post-Soviet space. Particularly, in terms of the both pillars of national power, social-economic and military, as D. Drezner notes, “these newly independent states started their existence with greater asymmetric dependencies than normally exist among international actors, and are archetypal candidates for threats of economic coercion” [10. P. 66].

At the same time, in spite of rapidly expanded economic and social-political ties with the West over the past post-Cold War period, Russia has not been structurally integrated into the core of the capitalist liberal order neither materially, nor in terms of ideational affinity. The European vector continues to remain as a distinct and, to some extent, normative orientation in a wider Russian foreign policy discourse, while the Russian economy suffered tangible losses due to recurring global financial crisis and the economic sanctions imposed on it with regard to the Ukrainian crisis — a dimension that comes to attest the growing interdependence links between Russia and the international system. However, Russia being among the first tenth of the world largest economies continues to be rather isolated and occupies a place of semi-periphery which “has its own regional periphery that it exploit like a typical semi-peripheral actor” [11. P. 326].

Secondly, Russia's preponderance over the processes unfolding in the post-Soviet space continues to be a dominant independent variable in any assessments of strategic development trends in the central Eurasia. Even before the political and economic consolidation in Russia had been set on track during the time-frame of Putin's administrations, indispensable character of RF as principle powerhouse in any regional equations was acknowledged as a matter of fact [12. P. 87]. After more than two decades since the Soviet collapse, sober-minded assessments of geopolitical and geoeconomic situation in this part of the world still assess Russia as the “dominant military force in the post-Soviet space” capable to rapidly defeat its smaller neighbors [13. P. 24].

Finally, since the early 1990's onward bilateral relations with Russia for the each of the post-Soviet successor states bore far more crucial and strategic character than any of the CIS states can have with each other [14. P. 219]. Not only is Russia by far the strongest state in terms of size, military forces and economic potential, but it also

wields the strategic role of a 'hub' to which former Soviet states are joined by a more strategically significant relationship than any pair of such states can have with each other [15. P. 168].

Though the abovementioned strands of comparative structural capabilities still remain at the same proportional levels, if not tilted in Russia's favor, yet the behavioral, institutional and policy-driven variables are of great importance for perpetuating a hierarchal role in the post-Soviet area. In A.I. Butt's opinion, there are two conditions that matter greatly for hegemonic state to render its hierarchic status. First, the hegemonic power must be meaningfully engaged with the region as a superior power and, secondly, it must be impartial and disinterested actor in its dealings with weaker states and be perceived as such [16. P. 582—583].

In literature, a generally accepted point in obtaining hierarchy is the solid basement of hegemon's authority, whereby sources of that authority derive from variety of dimensions. In case of the post-Soviet Eurasia, Russian-centered hierarchal pattern of relations rest, in principle, on structural power asymmetry between RF and that of all other FSU countries combined; perception of Russia, in terms of degree of acceptance of its authority; and regional (hegemonic) stability provision, including credible arbitration and mediation capabilities.

Another aspect of regional leadership in international relations posits that one of the dimensions of the leader's sustained power is the coalition building that comes along with the efforts of institutionalizing the regional context [17. P. 56—57]. What was specific for Russian policies in its own milieu is that Moscow first of all strived to nest the potential functionality of coalition into the bilateralism as primary vehicle of upholding hierarchal dependency links while placing those arrangements into the organizational frames *en route*. The major reason behind this approach is apparently analogical to N. Macfarlane's observation concerning the US regional policies: bilateral relations between the strong outsider and the weaker regional party enhance the outsider's capacity to control the agenda [18. P. 448].

Since the beginning of the 2000's Russia made clear its preparedness to translate its structural preponderance over the post-Soviet space into the organized and institutionalized dominance, pivoted around the political expediency of sustaining "the new architecture of international relations" in the CIS space. Former RF Foreign Minister I. Ivanov postulated Moscow's four main goals *vis-à-vis* the CIS states: to ensure reliable stability in all areas; to help in transforming CIS countries into politically and economically stable states, with policies friendly to Russia; to strengthen Russia's leadership role in creation of new system of intergovernmental political and economic relations; and to extend and further institutionalize the process of integration among the member-states of the CIS [19. P. 84]. Already in October of 2003, the document entitled "Urgent Tasks for the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" emphasized the changing priorities for the aspired status and perspective posture of Russia in the global and regional equitation. Particularly, the document reflected the prevailing conceptual underpinning of the new proactive course: the period of crisis and instability had been deemed as gone, whereby the status of Russia in global affairs was on rise [20. P. 635].

At the policy level, certain contradictory trends could be discerned in the Russian strategies vis-a-vis the CIS member-states. Specifically, from the very onset the Putin's administration significantly raised the **formalization** "threshold" in its bilateral and multilateral dealings with those republics clearly emphasizing that Kremlin was interested in further delineation of interstate relations across the formalized division of domestic and foreign realms. If for the previous period it was typical to craft the relationships with the post-Soviet republics in a bit "blurry" discursive manner reflecting the political undertones of the shared legacies, since the early 2000's onward the Russian attitudes towards its immediate neighbors have officially highlighted the position of treating the latter group as sovereign equals, officially. That shift was even pronounced at the doctrinal level: officially accepted wording of "near abroad" as replaced with the more general connotation of abroad [21. P. 10].

At the same, V. Putin's administration drive to the business-like relations with the neighboring states fostered more pragmatic solutions and economically justified partnership schemes. Business-like style of dealing with the neighbors rests not only on pragmatic footing, but also serves as a preparatory political background for formalization of bilateral relations, thus enhancing a bargaining position of Moscow.

Politically, those changes had two types of implications: first, Moscow signaled that it ceasing its erstwhile subsidization practices in relations with the FSU states and shifting to more balanced "burden-sharing" approaches concerning the neighboring states. A. Cooley and H. Spruyt maintain that due to highly asymmetric distribution [between Russian and the CIS] Russia was thus less concerned than former imperial metropolises that the periphery would capitalize on their bargaining leverage and renege on arrangement reached on strategically important infrastructural objects on their territory that Russia has been interested to continue to use [22. P. 89]. Now, that evidence started to "operationalize" itself via openly visible assertiveness. Domestic political consolidation coupled with the economic growth significantly contributed to the change of Russia's image and status: perception of Russia among the FSU states transformed from the typical for the 1990's "enfeebled and erratic" country towards more sober-minded and rationally accepted image of a centralized state capable to change the strategic calculus of FSU states [23. P. 327—328].

In the South Caucasus, while not being directly engaged into arms race through openly bolstering or just backing one side against the other, the Russian regional preponderance materialized through several avenues, among them persistent drive of institutionalization of its strategic presence for a longer term perspective. For example, in 2010 Russian president D. Medvedev during visit to Armenia signed an agreement on prolongation of 1995 Treaty on Russian military base in Armenia (102th Russian base in Gyumri) up to 2044. Moreover, the scope of the geographic applicability of mutual defense was extended beyond the formerly fixed external borders of Armenia to cover wider spectrum of mutual security concerns [24. P. 1060—1061]. Simultaneously, Russia institutionalized its military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia [24. P. 1653], reached an agreement with Ukraine on prolongation of its Black Sea fleet leasing period up to 2042.

In hierarchal system, one of the major and principle functions of the dominant state is conflict containment from escalating to outright war. At the same time, under meaningful engagement A. Butt refers several aspects, including the dominant state's substantive interest in the dispute and preparedness to take political and risks of other character within the realm of its regional interactions [16. P. 582—583].

In August, 2008 Russia directly intervened into the military conflict in the South Ossetia to expel the Georgian troops from the South Ossetia and restore the status quo. The follow up of the 5-day Russian-Georgian war was de facto defeat of Georgian army. From the standpoint of engagement criterion, Russia was more than just meaningfully engaged into the region. Strategic rationale of subsequent Russian official recognition of Abkhazia's and the South Ossetia's recognition was *inter alia* to give up a geopolitical uncertainty surrounding the foreign and domestic activism of the Georgian leadership. Specifically, Georgia's posture under M. Saakashvili to question Russia's supposedly undisputed leadership status in regional strategic calculus fostered some uncertainty in perceptions of Russia.

Moscow's basic venue of strategic engagement in the region is the condition of higher degree of securitization and infrastructural dependence on Russia. Some experts agree that since the August events of 2008, the Russian positions in the region were bolstered, providing Moscow with more opportunities for assertive policy. Particularly, in structural terms Russia emboldened its material presence in the region though its economic and technological attractiveness does not match the military and security frames of influence. In this light, context of securitization of the regional politics objectively plays into the hands of tighter hierarchal pattern of relations between the FSU states and Russia. Russian heavy presence in the Caucasus could not but to influence as a strategic reference point in forming the regional actors attitudes and positions towards the perspectives of regional developments.

For example, August 2014 witnessed unprecedented since 1994 armistice escalation of military tension along the contact line of Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan as well Armenian-Azerbaijani borderlands proper, including in some cases direct clashes between the warring parties. The already tense situation aggravation risked to spiral out of the both sides control (ratio of casualties/ damage in offensive-defensive correlation is usually calculated by 3 : 1, yet reportedly the Azerbaijani casualties as offensive side were higher than the proportion). It is hard to discern all the peculiarities and behind-the-scene maneuvers, yet in about ten days after the hostilities start, the trilateral meeting was staged between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Sochi with V. Putin as the main mediating person. Just several days after that meeting the situation rolled back to its standard state.

As D. Drezner notes, hegemony relies on multiple channels of power, and those actors who rely on the hegemon's security umbrella are less likely to question or subvert its economic order [25. P. 62—62; P. 73]. The evidence of the past two post-Soviet decades demonstrates that structural dependence of the CIS countries upon Russia would

remain a persistent trend for the foreseeable future though variable in its scale, intensity, and region-specific aspects. Yet politically, to uphold its aspired status of regional leadership Russia needs to invest substantially into the strengthening of institutionally binding mechanisms and frames of bilateral as well as multilateral relations within the FSU neighborhood. In a strategic perspective, Russia's readiness to commit the substantial resources to the post-Soviet area along with elaboration of the more sophisticated instruments and leverages of influence is to be a key condition for sustaining the hierarchal order in the FSU. To put it in other way, in order to "operationalize" its a commonly acknowledged status of unipolar power in the region into the organized hierarchal order under Moscow's aegis Russia needs to synchronize the various dimensions of its power; be that framed within newly created Eurasian Union, or some "hub" of interlocking bilateral formats.

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