

**Between Eurocentrism and Babel:  
A Framework for the Analysis of States, State Systems, and International Orders**

**Abstract**

Mindful of the growing interest in non-Western and pre-modern political systems, we propose a framework for the analysis of states, state systems, and international orders. We provide a culturally neutral definition of the state and outline a method for assessing variation in political organization both within and above the state. Our framework cleanly delineates hierarchy from anarchy and can be applied to a diverse set of state systems. We then show how the content of international order inter-relates with system structure and the local density (interaction capacity) of a region. We argue that our framework captures similarities—and exposes differences—between different systems and orders over time and space. It strikes a balance between the traditional focus on the Western experience and the current trend toward regional studies in which it is difficult to accumulate knowledge in a rigorous manner.

## Introduction

Recent scholarship has shown a growing interest in the study of non-Western and pre-modern state systems and regional orders (Bull 1977, Watson 1992, Herbst 2000, Buzan and Little 2000, Centeno 2003, Hui 2005, Nexon 2009, Kang 2010, Phillips 2011, Ringmar 2012, Donnelly 2012b, Branch 2014, Besley and Reynal-Querol 2014, Møller 2014, Phillips and Sharman 2015a, Phillips and Sharman 2015b, Kwan 2016). This interest follows partly from a belief that past research relied too heavily on the European experience of political development and neglected other areas of the world. In his call for a new agenda for international studies, Acharya (2014, 647-9) argued that scholars need to examine non-European regional systems and orders and include societies that have hitherto been ignored. He stated that international relations scholars should aim for a pluralistic universalism that applies to all, but recognizes and respects global diversity.<sup>1</sup>

We agree with these sentiments but worry that this new agenda suffers from a proliferation of ideas and concepts. As Buzan and Little (2000, 2-3) argue, we lack a consensus on how to define international systems and their key characteristics. That lack of agreement drives the production of competing theories that build from conflicting definitions. Without a *baseline* and *unified* vocabulary for identifying, on the one hand, actors in a system and, on the other hand, variation in order, we cannot mount a rigorous comparison across systems. In the absence of a framework for comparative-systems analysis, we risk replacing the traditional Eurocentrism of the field with a babel of regional studies. This makes it difficult to accumulate knowledge.

We take up Acharya's challenge by proposing a framework for the analysis of states, state systems, and international orders. Borrowing from Tilly (1992, 1-2), we anchor our

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<sup>1</sup> See also Buzan and Little 2000, 3, Ringmar 2012, 1, Phillips and Sharman 2015a, 5.

framework with an acultural definition of the state as “coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priority in some respects...over all other organizations within” a territory and have control over their foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> This concept of the state cleanly delineates hierarchy from anarchy, a crucial step that permits analysis of the variation in political order both within and above the state. The resulting framework can be used to identify different forms of the state depending on the way in which they are internally organized (structural differentiation). Moreover, the framework is useful for revealing different patterns in inter-state relations (functional differentiation). To this framework, we add the variable of “interaction capacity”: a measure of the organizational capacity within a system (Buzan and Little 2000, 80). This variable is partly exogenous to any system but plays a determinative role in shaping political order.

All state systems are composed of, and shaped by, their units (that is, states), their variation in structural differentiation and functional differentiation, and their level of interaction capacity. Set above that base are the norms, rules, and diplomatic practices that constitute an international order. As we discuss, there is a local character to any international order (for example the Mandala or Tribute systems) that makes them unique. But international orders are also the product of these base factors—the units, structural differentiation, functional differentiation, interaction capacity—and we see striking similarities across regions.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, we demonstrate the need for a general model that can balance Eurocentrism with regionalism and reach across diverse systems to uncover similarities and differences. Second, we present the theoretical framework and explain the interaction of its parts. Third, we discuss the terminological clarifications and theoretical benefits of our model and provide answers to potential criticisms.

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar conception of the state see Steinmetz (1999, 8).

## Between Eurocentrism and Babel

The Eurocentric bias in international relations extends all the way to the quantitative work in the field and its operational definition of the state. An interesting example of this bias exists in the Correlates of War (COW) Project, which hosts roughly a dozen datasets regarding alliance formation, trade, conflict, etc. (Correlates of War Project 2011). These data have provided a foundation for a vast number of quantitative analyses, but they are keyed to a core dataset that identifies the sovereign states in the international system for every year since 1816. Determining what counts as a state is no easy task, especially in the pre-1920 period, which lacked globe-spanning membership organizations of sovereign states like the League of Nations or the United Nations. The architects of COW decided that, to code a polity as a sovereign state during this time, it needed sufficient diplomatic relations (at the level of *charge d'affaires*) with both Britain *and* France—on the grounds that the two countries constituted the two key “legitimizers” in international life (Singer and Small 1966, 246). However, as a number of scholars point out, this decision led to the elision of a substantial number of states in regions of the world that were only loosely connected to the expanding European-centered system (Gleditsch and Ward 1999, Fazal 2007, Griffiths and Butcher 2013).<sup>3</sup> This creates a clear Eurocentric bias in the list that reverberates throughout the remaining COW datasets—all of which use the same definition of the state. One wonders if the resulting COW-based research would have reached substantially different conclusions on a variety of topics had the dataset pinned diplomatic relations not to Britain and France, but to China and the Ottoman Porte.

A relatively new wave of international-studies scholarship focuses on non-western and pre-modern systems (Hui 2005, Kang 2010, Ringmar 2012, Yongjin and Buzan 2012, Besley

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<sup>3</sup> See Griffiths and Butcher 2013 for a discussion of the elided cases.

and Reynal-Querol 2014, Kwan 2016, Phillips and Sharman 2015a and 2015b). We welcome this shift of the pendulum, but worry that it lacks a consistent vocabulary for defining states and related terms like hierarchy, anarchy, and empire. That creates a problem for attempts to draw broader conclusions about international relations. For example, in their excellent study of international order in the Indian Ocean between 1500 and 1750, Phillips and Sharman (2015a) argue that units in a system need not converge on one form through practices of selection and emulation. Their argument builds—in part—from the premise that the Mughal Empire differed fundamentally in form from the sovereign state of Portugal. But numerous other studies treat Portugal as an empire (Doyle 1986, 108, Abernethy 2000, 3, Burbank and Cooper 2011, 153-62).

This issue of conceptual ambiguity extends to the way we theorize political order both above and below the state. In his study of the diplomatic performance practices of the Sino-centric, Tokugawa, and Westphalian systems, Ringmar (2012) argues that the two East Asian systems were better adapted to life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet part of his argument is built on the premise that the Sinocentric system was a hierarchy, in contrast to the Westphalian anarchy, despite the fact that the Chinese “emperor did not claim sovereignty over the system as a whole and the constituent units were free to carry on their affairs much as they pleased” (Ringmar 2012, 5). Such a rendering is inconsistent with the work of other scholars who see such relations as hegemonic but nonetheless anarchical (Gilpin 1981, 7, Lake 1999, 17, Kang 2010, 3). The problem is not that Ringmar is using terms incorrectly – or Phillips and Sharman for that matter – rather, it is that concepts like ‘empire’ and ‘hierarchy’ receive different, and even contradictory, definitions.

These conceptual ambiguities make sense when seen in the context of competing theoretical visions of political order. There is a developing consensus that the states-under-

anarchy framework most associated with Kenneth Waltz (1979) is poorly equipped to explain important features of different state systems across time and space. In particular, the assumption that international systems are populated by sovereign states existing in a realm of undifferentiated anarchy appears implausible when applied to historical systems characterized by a diversity of unlike units and hierarchical relations (Milner 1993, Lake 1996, Ruggie 1998, Chapter 5, Jackson 1999). The application of the states-under-anarchy framework in these contexts feeds concerns about Eurocentrism. That is, the vision of political order undergirding that framework derives from a specific historical milieu, and its continued use reflects a bias towards seeing history through a European lens (Hui 2005, 8-10, Hobson and Sharman 2005, Barder 2015, 24-5).

Recent research into state systems has been influenced by two alternative (but overlapping) visions that are partly rooted in a critique of the states-under-anarchy framework. First, heteronomy-based critiques highlight the divisibility of sovereignty and the existence of polities that hybridize authority in varying ways within and across systems (Ruggie 1998, Chapter 5, Hobson and Sharman 2005, 70, Phillips and Sharman 2015a). This critique provides the theoretical basis for current work emphasizing diverse units in different state systems (Spruyt 1994, Ruggie 1998, Chapter 5, Phillips and Sharman 2015a). Second, hierarchy-based critiques point to state systems stratified by sovereign and semi-sovereign polities (Lake 1999, 2009, Cooley 2005, Cooley and Spruyt 2009, Sharman 2013, Mattern and Zarakol 2016). The early modern Sino-centric system, the Soviet Bloc, and the European Union all provide examples of hierarchies in a supposedly anarchic international system (Watson 1992, Chapter 8, Hobson and Sharman 2005, Ringmar 2012). Research on hierarchy and empire often conceptualize graded, rather than sharp, differences in the extent to which polities bargain over sovereign prerogatives

(Lake 2009, Cooley and Spruyt 2009, Barder 2015). Overall, these critiques offer important insights, but they highlight the fact that we do not have a commonly used theoretical framework for comparative systems analysis.

Finally, we lack a consistent lexicon for not only describing political order, but also the constituent units in the systems we study. This is partly the influence of the literature on European state formation, which has utilized an array of terms including state, national-state, nation-state, sovereign state, territorial state, city-state, empire, composite monarchy, composite state, city-empire, league, modern state, and others (Tilly 1992, Elliott 1992, Spruyt 1994, Agnew 1994, Ferguson and Mansbach 1996, Ruggie 1998, Nexon 2009). How all of these concepts come together, and whether the differences between them are quantitative or qualitative in nature, depends on the theoretical orientation of the scholar (for example historical sociology, structural realism) and the argument that they make. To a large extent it is upon this unstable foundation that research on other systems is being built. We expect that the developing literature on other systems will only amplify this confusion as it introduces new terms from regional studies, such as “galactic polity”, “mandala”, and “tribute system”, to name a few (Tambiah 1977, Scott 2009, 26-28, Kang 2010, 51, Ringmar 2012, Kwan 2016).

We can gain a great deal from comparative study of diverse state systems and orders. But we need a coherent framework and consistent vocabulary to do so. That framework should blend the parsimony of the states-under-anarchy approach with the nuance of the heteronomy and hierarchy literatures, and strike a balance between Eurocentrism and Babel. That would enable us to accumulate knowledge across systems and differentiate the general from the local and the similar from the unique.

## **An Analytical Framework**

We make several theoretical moves when constructing our framework. First, we adopt a lean definition of the state, one that is culturally neutral and that has existed across time and space. Moreover, we restrict our concept to those units that are free to conduct their own foreign policies. Second, we measure the structure of a given state and state system by observing the extent to which states allocate authority functions to other states (functional differentiation) or to sub-state entities (structural differentiation). Third, we argue that the level at which you define the state – in our case as a foreign policy-making unit – is critical because it divides the internal politics of a state from the external, and hierarchy from anarchy. Finally, our framework maps out the relationship between states, state systems, and international orders, and theorizes the relationship between these elements and interaction capacity, a crucial analytical variable (see Figure 1). The remainder of this section is given to developing these concepts.

### **Figure 1: Analytical Framework**

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We define states as “coercion-wielding organizations that...exercise clear priority in some respects...over all other organizations within” a territory and have control over their foreign policy (Tilly 1992, 1-2). This definition begins with Tilly’s broadly drawn conception that “includes city-states, empires, theocracies, and many other forms of government” (Tilly 1992, 1-2).<sup>4</sup> However, we extend the definition to require that the state manage its own diplomatic affairs – i.e. have external sovereignty. Tilly’s definition is unclear about the respect(s) with which states must exercise priority, and, as we show further on, it is not a trivial extension to require that states exercise priority specifically with respect to foreign policy.

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<sup>4</sup> It is also similar to Weber’s concept of the state (Gerth and Mills 1946).

Indeed, it is precisely this move that opens the way to a stable measurement of variation in order above and below the state, which is fundamental to the task of comparative systems analysis and to cumulative work in the field. This move combines, and allows us to differentiate between, two traditional facets of the state, the internal and the external, or as Poggi (1978, 2-6) put it, “Politics as Allocation” and “Politics as Us Against the Other.” When we say “foreign policy” we are referring to the management of relations with units outside the state’s realm of authority, particularly in regard to war-making and alliance formation. These are the units that are able to participate freely in the politics of the system.

Foreign policy-making is a theoretically sensible requirement for independent statehood as the right to make foreign policy is an authority claim when interacting with other states (Watson 1992, 15).<sup>5</sup> When other units recognize this claim, they are formal equals and units in the system. When polities recognize the claim of a state to represent them in the realm of international relations, these are non-equal polities and subordinate to another. This conception is consistent with the spirit of the Montevideo Declaration on the Rights and Duties of States. It is also consistent with most of the sovereign state datasets, including the Correlates of War and the International System(s) Dataset (ISD) (Correlates of War Project 2011, Griffiths and Butcher 2013, Fazal 2007, 16). It differs from conceptions of the state that admit polities possessing internal but not external independence. One example is the Gleditsch and Ward (1999) dataset that includes units like Oman from 1891-1971 when its foreign policy was formally managed by the British. Thus, the state needs to enjoy both internal control and external independence in our framework, and this excludes those federacies, protectorates, and various other types of vassalage that cannot enter into relations with other states as an equal.

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<sup>5</sup> Watson (1992, 15) writes that “the term independent states in a system indicates political entities that retain the ultimate ability to make external decisions as well as domestic ones.”

To capture variation in political order, we follow Buzan and Little (2000, 87) in arguing that one needs to examine both functional differentiation and structural differentiation (see also Buzan and Albert 2010, Donnelly 2012a). Functional differentiation is a measure of political order above the state, apprehending the degree to which states hand over authority functions to other states (i.e. to other foreign-policy controlling entities). Structural differentiation measures political order below the state, assessing the extent to which sovereigns delegate key prerogatives to sub-state actors and polities. Functional differentiation and structural differentiation are concepts measured at the unit level that can then be aggregated to summarize features of a state system. A system with high levels of functional differentiation exists where a large number of states hand over authority functions to other sovereign entities or institutions above the state. A system with high levels of structural differentiation exists where a large proportion of the states are decentralized.

A stable measure of variation in political order above and below the state requires a clear and operational definition of the state, one that ultimately divides anarchy from hierarchy. If the line is drawn above indirectly-ruled units, treating them as only semi-autonomous, as we do and illustrate in Figure 2, then there will be less functional differentiation and units in the anarchic realm will appear relatively homogenous. However, more permissive definitions of the state that include vassals and protectorates will record higher levels of functional differentiation because protectorates surrender decision making power to other sovereign entities. That is, if one takes a more expansive definition of the state and lowers the bar to include highly independent but formally unequal units – represented by the shaded area in Figure 2 – then anarchy becomes more variegated just as the level of structural differentiation is reduced. The composition of both

anarchy and hierarchy depends on how you define the state.<sup>6</sup> This critical distinction is confused in the literature on state systems, a point we return to below.

### **Figure 2: The Line Between Hierarchy and Anarchy**

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Importantly, our framework uses a thin notion of both hierarchy and anarchy. We do not imply that they represent organic and mechanical solidarities, as Waltz (1979) does. Anarchy is not a master explanatory variable, and it does not represent an undifferentiated space. Following Donnelly (2015, 418), we understand anarchy as the absence of an “authoritative governing institution or actor.” We also use the hierarchy/anarchy distinction as a demarcation criterion pinned to the level at which we have defined the state. We reject the binary vision of political order that characterizes the traditional states-under-anarchy framework, and adopt insights from the literatures on heteronomy and hierarchy (Milner 1993, Spruyt 1994, Lake 1996, 1999, 2009, Ruggie 1998, Cooley 2005, Hobson and Sharman 2005, Cooley and Spruyt 2009, Sharman 2013, Phillips and Sharman 2015a, Barder 2015, Mattern and Zarakol 2016). There is variation in the units (vassals, leagues, etc.), relations of super and subordination within anarchy, and the parceling out of authority functions, but these patterns are captured with the concepts of structural and functional differentiation.

Authority functions are those key decision making powers independent states typically claim for themselves. Specifically, these include functions such as taxation, the mobilization of armed force, and the creation/administration of law and justice. Systems where states allocate these decision-making powers to other sub-state entities have high levels of structural

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<sup>6</sup> Following Lake (1999) and others we see variation in the composition of hierarchy and anarchy. We contend that this variation can be measured with the concepts of structural and functional differentiation.

differentiation. For example, in nineteenth-century West Africa most states afforded substantial autonomy to powerful families and regional kingdoms or cities (Herbst 2000, Chapter 2, Oliver and Atmore 2001, 9). In return, these sub-state groups acknowledged the center's supremacy and accepted limits on their ability to interact with other states. This kind of arrangement was very common in pre-modern state systems (Watson 1992, 123-124). Systems where states pool aspects of their decision making with respect to foreign policy either through treaty and/or through the creation of international organizations have high levels of functional differentiation.

The framework depicted in Figure 1 utilizes several additional concepts. Following Tilly (1992, 5), we contend that “states form systems to the extent that they interact, and to the degree that their interaction significantly affects each party's fate.” Functional differentiation measures political order between states just as structural differentiation measures political order inside states. In addition, we posit the causal role of interaction capacity in determining the level of both structural and functional differentiation. Buzan and Little (2000, 80, 85) define interaction capacity as “the amount of transportation, communication, and organizational capability” within the system, and they note its structural effects: “when interaction is high (e.g. regular trade amongst the units) structural effects should be strong; when it is low (e.g. sporadic and small-scale trade) structural effects should be weak.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, international orders are built upon these deeper structures. Here we adopt Phillips' (2011, 5) definition of international order: “the constellation of constitutional norms and fundamental institutions through which co-operation is cultivated and conflict contained between different political communities.” Such orders are comprised of the states in the system, but they are also textured and shaped by the level of interaction capacity, and the degree of both

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<sup>7</sup> Ruggie (1998,151) made a similar argument when he identified dynamic density – “the aggregate quantity, velocity, and diversity of transactions that go on within society” – as the determinant of change within systems.

functional and structural differentiation. Orders typically possess legal, ideological, and ritualistic features that are drawn from local culture, but this content is developed in relation to these base elements listed above (Steinmetz 1999, Bukovansky 2002). The Mandala system of Southeast Asia provides a fascinating example. From at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward the region was characterized by a patchwork of states with clear, defined centers but dissipating orbits of control. The form of political governance was undergirded by Hindu and Sanskritic ideas on political order and social hierarchy, and this was evident in the court rituals and attendant iconography (Tambiah 1977, Mabbett 1978, Geertz 1980, Wolters 1982).

The relationship of a state system to an international order is one of base and superstructure. There are feedback effects between them and both are influenced by the level of interaction of capacity at that time and place. But states and systems are the base and orders are built over them. In the next section we show how diverse regional systems and orders can be sorted using this framework and we highlight the benefits of our approach.

### **Clarifications, Benefits, and Controversies**

Our framework offers advantages for comparative systems analysis. It begins with an acultural definition of the state that is transportable across diverse regions. Critics may contend that the state is a modern concept and that the kingdoms of antiquity are different in kind. While it is true that many contemporary states possess substantial state capacity, a comprehensive national identity, and the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern welfare state, many current states with a full seat at the United Nations possess few or none of these attributes. Our leaner definition avoids the high standards in this archetype, and therefore captures a much wider set of

states over time and space. States with internal control and the freedom to interact with other states are not a modern or Western phenomenon.

Our concept of the state is focal in nature. It is different in kind from hunter-gather bands, roving bandits, and other non-state actors (Olson 1993; Donnelly 2012b). Our definition of the state is also fundamentally different from sub-sovereign units like federal jurisdictions, provinces, and protectorates because it requires that the polity in question has control over its foreign policy. We think of our units as “sovereign peaks” in political landscapes that resemble contour maps. Accordingly, subordinate units like federacies and protectorates are also peaks, but they are local maxima within a state because they have surrendered control over their foreign policy to a higher authority.

Our framework combines the strengths and insights of several competing visions of political order. It takes the parsimony and generalizability of the states-under-anarchy framework, but adopts thinner, more descriptive understandings of anarchy and hierarchy (Waltz 1979). It recognizes the insights from the heteronomy literature, but offers a template for sorting that diversity and comparing across systems (Spruyt 1994, Ruggie 1998, Phillips and Sharman 2015a). It treats political order as continuous, as the hierarchy literature does (Hobson and Sharman 2005, Lake 2009, Sharman 2013, Barder 2015, Mattern and Zarakol 2016), but holds on to the anarchy/hierarchy demarcation and pins it to the level of the state.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the portability and measurability of the framework offers advantages over competing models. It goes beyond the Buzan and Little (2000) framework by defining the level of the state – the line between structural and functional differentiation – and showing how political organization can be measured. Moreover, it relies on fewer and more observable variables than other frameworks that aim for thicker, more sociological descriptions (Donnelly 2009; Mattern and Zarakol 2016).

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<sup>8</sup> In Donnelly’s (2015, 418) view, the overuse of hierarchy is just as problematic as the overuse of anarchy.

Our framework clarifies the varied terminology in the literature. Many terms like national-state, empire, and city-state are types of states that are subsets of our broader definition. But critically, they are not qualitatively different. For example, Tilly (1992, 1-4) sees the national-state as a more developed and more modern type of state, one that combines the use of coercion and capital. But he contends that it is merely a form of the state, one that is not qualitatively different from other state types.

The fuzzy distinction between empires and states is an excellent example of the confusion in the literature. Some scholars argue that empires are different in form (Spruyt 1994, 4, Reus-Smit 2013, 39-42, Phillips and Sharman 2015a, 81), but others contend “empires *are* states” (Motyl 1997, 20, Tilly 1997, Burbank and Cooper 2011, 8). Much of this confusion comes down to the specific ways in which these terms are used. Indeed, it seems odd that France and Britain are held up as paragons of both the state and the empire (Spruyt 1994, Doyle 1986). In our view, they were both territorially expansive states that projected power over distance using forms of direct and indirect rule and heterogeneous contracting (Nexon 2009, Chapter 2). They exhibited high levels of structural differentiation, as all expansive and compound states do. We contend that the purported differences in unit-type come down to differences in unit success and the manner in which states expand and compose themselves internally.<sup>9</sup> But these are quantitative differences and there is no bright line separating states from empires. The normative loading in the term “empire” is one sign of its ambiguity (Nexon and Wright 2007); small states have often called themselves empires for rhetorical purposes, just as big and modern states like the USA and the USSR have tried to deny the moniker (Maier 2006, 36).<sup>10</sup> Maier (2006, 24-25) points out that empires are usually identified by their internal structure and/or process by which

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<sup>9</sup> Buzan and Little (2000, 171-4) note that city-states could be prolific colonizers and that empires were commonly city-states that expanded to absorb other city-states and polities.

<sup>10</sup> French Equatorial Africa was known in the 1970s as the Central African Empire, under the Emperor Bokassa.

they expanded. But he maintains that these are fuzzy distinctions that lack clear thresholds telling us at what point internal structures and territorial expansion become imperial.<sup>11</sup> One person's empire is another person's state.<sup>12</sup>

Research on heteronymous political forms will benefit from our framework (Spruyt 1994, Ruggie 1998, Phillips and Sharman 2015a.). In his study on early modern Europe, Spruyt identifies several different unit types, including city-states, leagues, and sovereign states. Although he provides a marvelous theory of political development, we contend that that he overstates the degree of variation. According to our model, city-states are small states where power is located in a key city—such as Venice or Genoa—that conducts its own foreign relations. Spruyt points out that peripheral town and cities, subjects of the center, would periodically challenge the dominant city for power and/or independence. But were they different in kind from states like France? We assert that the difference was primarily one of scale—France was bigger and could project power farther. There may be differences in the degree to which Venice allocated partial authority to outlying towns and cities—i.e. structural differentiation—but states vary considerably along this spectrum from highly decentralized, often asymmetric federations to highly centralized autocracies. Venice also engaged in imperial practices. Hence, Tilly (1997, 6) refers to it as the “Venetian Empire” (see also Nexon 2009, 77).

Our framework also clarifies the relationship between leagues and states.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that it was referred to as a league, the Hansa was part confederation and part federation with substantial variation over time. As we illustrate in Figure 2, federations are decentralized states

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<sup>11</sup> Nexon (2009) holds that empires employ indirect rule and use heterogeneous contracting. But many asymmetric federations like Spain or Papua New Guinea would seem to count by these criteria.

<sup>12</sup> As Muldoon (1999, 17) and Go (2011, 6-7) discuss, the word “emperor” implied different things to different people during the European middle ages. The term doesn't translate perfectly across languages and in many ways it is an historical convenience to call large states of antiquity “empires” when they did not call themselves that.

<sup>13</sup> Spruyt 1994.

where there is substantial structural differentiation, and confederations are collections of states with high levels of functional differentiation.<sup>14</sup> The centralization and scope of the Hansa waxed and waned over its 400 year history, sometimes fitting the description of a confederation, not unlike the modern European Union, and at other times operating like a highly decentralized federation.<sup>15</sup> Our framework captures these differences as measures of structural and functional differentiation.

A central benefit of our framework is that it helps sort the similar from the unique. For example, we find a remarkable similarity across systems with respect to states, their structural differentiation, and the effects of interaction capacity. Prior to colonialism, states in sub-Saharan Africa had limited reach and therefore tended to allocate significant political functions to outlying groups (Bates 1983, 35).<sup>16</sup> The result was a “vast pointillist landscape” of scattered independent states, where the authority of the ruler tended to dissipate as a function of the distance from the center (Herbst 2000, 44). Oliver and Atmore (2001, 9) characterize these patterns of paramountcy and vassalage as a “typically medieval scene.” Likewise, states in Southeast Asia have been described as mandalas: a center of power that radiated outward through diminishing orbits of control (Scott 2009: 58-9, Tambiah 1977, 69-74, Geertz 1980, 23). Strikingly similar language invoking center and periphery has been used to describe states and empires in other regions including South Asia, West Asia, and Europe in their pre-modern and classical periods (Barkey 2008, 86, Branch 2014, 77-78, Phillips and Sharman 2015a, 81-86, Watson 1992, 13). We theorize that this is a common pattern in political order throughout

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<sup>14</sup> Our view is consistent with how Riker (1975: 101) and Elazar (1998: 8) conceive of federations and confederations. Whereas Spruyt (1994: 109) see leagues and confederations as alternative institutional solutions to the state, we see them as collections of states with high levels of functional differentiation.

<sup>15</sup> At points decisions made by the Hansa were binding and included setting trade policy, taxation and levies, and even declaring war (Spruyt 1994: 125).

<sup>16</sup> Bates (1983, 35) notes the relationship between population density and political centralization in Africa.

diverse systems over time, and that there is a close relationship between structural differentiation and interaction capacity. The projection of power over distance in regions with low to medium levels of interaction capacity forces rulers to adopt practices of vassalage and indirect rule.

Perhaps more remarkable is the type of dual sovereignty that arises in low-density landscapes because of the distance from state centers. Local groups on the edge of these dissipating orbits of power often find themselves in a tug-of-war between two states and can exploit the distance to create a form of dual sovereignty. “Thus, Chiang Khaeng... was tributary to Chiang Mai and Nan (in turn, tributary to Siam) and to Chiang Tung / Keng Tung (in turn, tributary to Burma)” (Scott 2009, 61). The existence of these “two-headed birds” implies that the lines and boundaries between states break down in low-density environments. Instead of sovereign borders as we know them today, we see frontiers and shatter zones, especially when there exists unclaimed land and wilderness into which dissatisfied populations can disappear (Adelman and Aron 1999). This was a common pattern from the desert frontier of the northern Sahara (Oliver and Atmore 2001, 37), to the hill tracts of Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1977, Geertz 1980, Scott 2009), to the Spanish March of pre-modern Catalonia (Chandler 2002).

Conversely, high levels of interaction capacity tend to be associated with, and may even be necessary for, higher levels of functional differentiation (Buzan and Little 2000). For example, Western Europe and South Asia during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were high-capacity and functionally diverse systems (Butcher and Griffiths 2015). Relative to West Africa during that time, these systems possessed more developed international orders, replete with alliance formations, systems of diplomacy, and archaic forms of transnational organization like the Zollverein and Mughal Court. The Sinocentric Tributary system that existed from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the

19<sup>th</sup> century was similar in that regard (Kang 2010, 54). Interaction capacity plays a determinative role in shaping international order.

That which is truly unique often falls under the category of international order. The Sinocentric Tribute system integrated local forms of ritual with relations of power (Kang 2010, 72, Ringmar 2012). The Mandala system explained power relations using concepts drawn from Hindu cosmology (Tambiah 1977, Mabbet 1978, Geertz 1980, Wolters 1982). The Ottomans and the Safavids developed complex notions regarding sovereignty and Islamic rule (Streusand 2011, 13). Branch (2014) has argued persuasively that the character of the modern international order is partly the result of advances in cartographic techniques that enabled rulers to both delineate and imagine their borders (also see Sassen 2008). Nevertheless, a common feature throughout these orders is a base structure composed of states as we define them. To be sure, there are differences in both functional and structural differentiation, but these patterns recur and are rarely unique.

What then is the relationship between system and order? We contend that it is the relationship of base to superstructure. For example, the cosmological notions of order in the Mandala system were clearly native to South Asia and Southeast Asia, but did they play a purely determinative role in the form of governance and the structural/functional differentiation across space? We think not. As Scott (2009) shows, the geography, human density, and interaction capacity of the region shaped state control. The extensive interior hill country that cut across the region – Zomia – created frontiers and shatter zones and made possible patterns in dual sovereignty (Scott 2009, 13). Similarly, Tambiah (1977, 72-3) argues that the cosmological ideas inherent in the Mandala system developed out of practical considerations of power and control. Structure determined order more than the other way around. Notably, that system is comparable

to the European Medieval system, among others, with its patterns of vassalage, suzerainty, and overlapping forms of control. The commonality between the two historical regions was not the ideological and philosophical content of their systems – both were drawn from local culture. Rather, it was the basic structure of each system. Of course, order also shapes structure. European law in the early modern period provided an “epistemological framework” for organizing and categorizing types of authority on the frontiers of European expansion (Benton 2010, Keene 2002).<sup>17</sup> In the contemporary order, relations between states (functional differentiation) are influenced by international organizations like the UN and WTO, just as the intra-state creation of autonomous regions (structural differentiation) is often shaped by the international norm of self-determination. Our framework makes these comparisons possible.

Some may see our positing of an acultural framework as controversial, and contend that our thinking is ultimately rooted in the Western experience. We disagree, and argue that it is possible to devise a framework that is applicable to diverse regional systems. Our framework is generalizable and it is mostly in the category of international order that local cultural content truly emerges. Coercion-wielding, foreign-policy making states are a timeless solution to human organization. There is variation in terms of how states compose themselves internally, or vis-à-vis other states, but most of this variation is a matter of structural and functional differentiation. This is the DNA of different systems across time and space.

Critics may object that we are smuggling Western concepts into our framework. Take sovereignty for example. We concede that sovereignty has a strong Western connotation, especially in the context of jurisprudence. We agree that formal-legal sovereignty is a feature of the modern international order—one with Western roots (Ruggie 1998, Philpott 2001, Reus-Smit 2013). However, in a weaker sense, the term merely connotes mutual recognition, and those

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<sup>17</sup> Benton (2010, 24-6) calls the invocation of legal codes to make frontier space legible “legal posturing.”

practices are not simply some Western invention (Krasner 1999, Buzan and Little 2000).<sup>18</sup> It is in this ‘lighter’ sense that we use the term when describing the external sovereignty of states.<sup>19</sup> Critics may contend that our internal/external distinction is also modern or Eurocentric. But we have found that the distinction generally holds across pre and early modern systems.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Buzan and Little (2000, 141, 161) see elements of the inside/outside distinction emerging as early as the first chiefdoms, and note that chiefs typically retained the sole “authority to engage in diplomatic relations with other chiefdoms.” Such distinctions were rarely as formalized as in the modern order, and, to be sure, the degree of autonomy inside and between states varies considerably across time and space. But the inside/outside distinction is observable across regional systems.

An alternative criticism holds that our conception of the state is too general, or too ahistorical, and thus forfeits analytical traction. We defend its generality on theoretical terms, and argue that our conception is focal in nature. It differs qualitatively from non-state actors and sub-sovereign forms of political organization, such as protectorates. However, more particular forms of the state—such as empire, national-state, or city-state—do not differ qualitatively from one another. Rather, they vary primarily in terms of their structural differentiation. Some might argue that we treat the state as an ahistorical concept. But our purpose is to make different systems legible and comparable, and the connections between these systems diminish as we look further back in time. That requires a framework that is not rooted in a specific time and place.

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<sup>18</sup> Mutual recognition would appear to go back at least as far as relations between the Macedonian Empire and India around 300BC, and probably earlier (Watson 1992, 73). Persia and the Roman Empire also established a relationship in “equal terms” (Buzan and Little 2000, 211).

<sup>19</sup> Branch (2014) claims that sovereignty involves the linear demarcation of borders, a modern development according to him. We argue that the modern fixation on borders is a feature of international order and not the consequence of a fundamentally different type of state.

<sup>20</sup> The distinction does not preclude creative configurations of sovereignty. One example is the Oyo Empire in 19th century West Africa that established a treaty with the kingdom of Dahomey such that Dahomey acceded to Oyo’s authority but remained free to raid surrounding villages. Allowing Dahomey the right to manage relations on its border was Oyo’s way of managing its external affairs more generally (Rodney 1975, 273).

Once our definitions are thickened with local historical content (for example, European thinking on sovereignty), we forfeit the ability to compare and comprehend other *unconnected* systems in a neutral manner.

All of this begs the question: what would be a different unit from the state? Donnelly (2012b) makes a persuasive argument that hunter-gather societies are different in kind given their distinctive relationship to territory. Similarly, international corporations may represent different types where they become independent and territorially mobile. Early modern European trading companies pushed the envelope in that regard, especially given their corporate structures and the fact that owners typically resided in the metropolises of states (Stern 2012, Erikson 2014, Phillips and Sharman 2015a, Chapter 3). At points, however, these companies began to resemble stationary bandits. They hovered on the line between independent states and vassals of the states from which they came (Olson 1993).

Finally, one might challenge our notion of “sovereign peaks” and argue that earlier forms of authority were cross-cutting and polyfocal. Many contend that political order in medieval Europe was characterized by overlapping jurisdictions (Poggi 1978, Tilly 1992, Spruyt 1994, Ruggie 1998, Philpott 2001, Nexon 2009); some consider this a qualitatively different system and/or order from what came later (Spruyt 1994, Ruggie 1998). We believe our framework sheds light on these matters. Much of the overlapping authority and dual sovereignty occurred on the margins and frontiers of political power, and, as we have discussed, this is a common dynamic in low-capacity systems with high levels of structural differentiation. But importantly, controlling foreign policy does not preclude states from sharing other functions within or across states and our framework opens the way to understanding the degree to which systems were different as a

function of structural and functional differentiation. The coercion-wielding, foreign-policy making state is the lodestar for the study of systems and orders.

### **Conclusion**

In his master work on world politics, Gilpin (1981, 43) identified the “need for a comparative study of international systems that concentrates on systemic change”. We agree, but think that related studies tend to focus too much on phase shifts instead of gradual change, and identify key moments for these shifts like the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Philpott 2001). To use Gilpin’s (1981, 40) typology, there is a difference between a systems change (change of the system) and systemic change (within system change), and a defining feature of the former type is a change in the nature of the units. Seen through our framework, the transition from the European medieval period to what came after was not a systems change because the units were always states. In fact, what happened all along was systemic change brought about largely by gradually increasing interaction capacity and declining structural differentiation, as states were able to centralize functions often afforded to regional lords or petty kingdoms. The view that this was systems change— and the corollary perception that fundamentally different types of units inhabited different systems over time and space— misses the trees for the forest. The belief in liminal moments in the history of international relations like 1648 runs the risk that research will be organized around those thresholds (Philpott 2001; Osiander 2001; de Cavalho et al. 2011). This is where a consistent vocabulary and general framework will prove useful, especially as research increasingly focuses on non-western and pre-modern systems.

Acharya (2014) recently called for a new agenda for international studies that reaches beyond the Eurocentric model to include previously ignored systems and local patterns of order.

Our article contributes to this welcome and vital direction in scholarship. Rather than mount an exhaustive study of a particular non-Western system or compare two systems in detail, we provided a framework that pins sovereignty to a lean and culturally-neutral conception of the state, one that divides the internal composition of hierarchy from the external variation in anarchy, and one that can be applied across a diverse set of state systems and orders. This framework reveals many surprising similarities across diverse systems and it helps sort the general from the truly unique.

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