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ESSAY

Why define ? Towards a pragmatic approach of Central Asia as modern international region

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Abstract

The observation of inter-sovereign behaviours in the 20th c. is that of regionalisation. First as regional groupings or *Ententes* (Baltic, Balkanic ...), then as regional Communities (Benelux, EEC, ECOWAS ...), finally as regional Organisations/Unions (EU, WAEMU, EAEU, SCO ...). From before the Second World War and, even more so, after the Cold War, States have reached an agreement/grouped together among neighbours systematically enough so that this be a fact characterising a new (world) ordering. The innovation/rupture goes beyond the form (grouping/invention of partnership) and derives its meaning from the rationality pursued: to build security i/ among neighbours and ii/ at the material (economic) level, and not (any more) on the i/ global (blocs) or ii/ military level. This article begins from a contextual horizon : the emergence/thrusting of this phenomenon for Central Asia.

Keywords

regional dynamics, post-cold war, comparative international politics, juxta-sovereignty, Asia, Central Asia, Europe, Shanghai cooperation

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APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of South-East Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia Europe Meeting
BRICKSAM	Brazil, Russia, India, China, Korea, South Africa, Mexico
CA	Central Asia
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSCE/OSCE	Conference / Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
CW	Cold War
EAEC	EurAsian Economic Community
EAEU	EurAsian Economic Union
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organisation
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EDC	European Defense Community
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
ESDP	European Security and Defense Policy
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Area
GDR	German Democratic Republic
IR	International Relations
KEDO	Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation
LAA	Latino-American Association
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PCW	Post Cold War
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
TCI	Territorial Construction of Independence
UNO	United Nations Organisation
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
USA	United States of America
WAEMU	West African Economic and Monetary Union
WW	World War

Introduction

Is it possible, since the 20th century, to ignore regions as a generalized and polycentric regional fact? Approaching this space beyond its geography and its history, as an object without definition¹, thus of a region, notably post-Soviet, for example Central Asia, is a challenge.² Accuracy is mainly accessible *ex-post*. Defining this space by its morphogenesis³ is only one stage in a post-systemic historical aftermath – fall of the USSR – or any post-war – world/cold war. Suggesting that this space, within “figure-borders”⁴, is but an “invention”⁵ relaunches the question⁶: what to do with Central Asia in the PCW?

Beyond the past⁷ and the reinventions of the present, a region is a rich object, renewed by the context. It changes as we observe it⁸. Exploring the social and human sciences⁹, from a quest for identity and mutual recognition¹⁰ to the affirmation of the Self on the international scene¹¹, offers, then, a **methodological and epistemological breakthrough**¹².

¹ Echoing the postulate ‘About CA, we almost all know it, we know almost nothing’, Workshop “CA in new interregional relations”, 2nd Congress, Asia Network, Paris, 2007.

² Svetlana Gorshenina, *De la Tartarie à l’Asie centrale: le cœur d’un continent dans l’histoire des idées entre la cartographie et la géopolitique* (Genève: Droz, 2008), and Svetlana Gorshenina, *L’invention de l’Asie centrale: Histoire du concept de la Tartarie à l’Eurasie* (Genève: Droz, 2014).

³ The delimitation of space, the epistemology of its borders and of their horogenesis. Julien Thorez, “Les nouvelles frontières de l’Asie Centrale,” *Cybergro European Journal of Geography*, 2011, article 534, pp 1–29, and Michel Foucher, *Fronts et Frontières* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

⁴ Selim Rauer, “Les frontières de l’exil, ou les différentes figures et territoires de l’étranger” (PhD diss., Universities of Minnesota and Paris III, 2019).

⁵ Svetlana Gorshenina, *Asie centrale. L’invention des frontières et l’héritage russo-soviétique* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2012).

⁶ Impression of evanescence of landmark-borders, products of opposite histories of neighbours. Svetlana Gorshenina, *Asie centrale. L’invention des frontières...* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2012).

⁷ The invention of the borders of a CA whose definition since the end of the 19th century is artificial: why five? and Afghanistan? Xin-Jiang? Halford MacKinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal*, 23, no 4 (April 1904).

⁸ “The present [...] is already in the past when it becomes the object of study”. Marcel Prélot, “Politique – La science politique,” (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1975), 904–14.

⁹ I mainly consider history, sociology and politology. The (new?) geography is the analysis of the intentions of decision-makers; the (material?) economy is the motor of social/economic history; law (positive?) is the codification of reality. The ‘new Asia’ is a paradigm. Pierre Chabal, *La coopération de Shanghai : conceptualiser la nouvelle Asie* (Liège: Presses de l’Université de Liège, 2019).

¹⁰ To recognize oneself for what one is : a (fragile) region whose construction conditions its strengthening. Catherine Puigelier, ed., *La Reconnaissance* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 2011).

¹¹ Regional construction means an ability to assert oneself. Cf. “Malaysia that can say no” (1980s), “Korea that can say no” (1990s), China’s Eurasian positioning (Shanghai Cooperation and New Silk Road) at the time (2013–2014) where Russia confirms a Eurasian Economic Union. François Joyaux, *Géopolitique de l’Extrême-Orient* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1993).

¹² Marek Malinowski, and Marcell Burdelski, (eds.), *Taiwan, Poland and Europe in the Age of Globalisation* (Warsaw: Adam Marszałek, 2006).

Out of essentialist naivety, one asks what a region consists of and what inspires the question. Paraphrasing Lukes¹³, “what are we interested in when we say that we are interested” in a region: to model European integration (Wallace, Telo)¹⁴; postulate Asian specificity¹⁵ in order to shed light on it; suggest that Latin America is an actor¹⁶ capable of loosening the continental grip; approach Africa as an entropic idiosyncrasy¹⁷ to put its post-colonial nature into perspective ?

The factual¹⁸ statement therefore spreads in space. The latter is decried¹⁹ by political scientists as plainly geopolitical²⁰. With good reason if one intends to interpret this space beyond the purpose that it may serve²¹. Addressing this meaning, from history, nevertheless sheds light on what this space enables one to construct²².

Wanting to understand the regional object²³ opens the **methodological stage**. How to understand it: through the sociology

of its actors²⁴ and elites²⁵; the historical context²⁶, whose rupture²⁷ renews its meaning; the semiotics of change²⁸ – post-Soviet change in general, republican change in AC, openness for China or neo-nostalgia for Russia – ? Everything is open, starting with the identity of preserved state entities²⁹.

Observers, faced with the regional object, with the momentum of Regional *Ententes* since 1934, which in less than a century have become a global multicentric pluri-polarity, adopt one of **three epistemological attitudes**: to content not to define; to concern with why to define; to meet the challenge of how to define. The first means not to consider regions as central to the study of the bipolar PCW. The second enables one to take into account the evolution of neighborhoods. The third contributes to the historical and socio-political debate on cooperation among actors. I address here the second query³⁰.

¹³ From power (Lukes) to the region (here). “When we are interested in power [a region] ... what is it that we are interested in? ...its essence, its reality, its use, its purpose?”. Steven Lukes, *Power: a radical view* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1974), and Steven Lukes, *Power. Readings in Social and Political Theory* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1.

¹⁴ Analyzing Europe (H. Wallace 1973-2013: approx. 30 publications; M. Telo 1993-2015: approx. 20 publications), postponed interregional comparisons that, today, global regional effervescence demands.

¹⁵ Geopolitical, civilizational, contemporary... Asia would be difficult to compare with other regions. However, it is a driving force behind controlled Sino-Russian rivalries. Documentation Française, “Crises et tensions en Asie”, *Questions internationales* 93 (special issue, septembre 2018), 47–50.

¹⁶ School of Liège (CEFIR): holistic approach of mega-regions as coordinated actors of IR.

¹⁷ Instability becomes an independent variable (Africa’s possible political take-off). Jean-Pascal Daloz, and Patrick Chabal, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Jean-Claude Gautron, “Le fait régional dans la société internationale,” in *Régionalisme et universalisme dans le droit international contemporain*, ed. Société Française pour le Droit International (Paris : Pedone, 1977).

¹⁹ The geopolitical method is considered too focused on the link between space (material?) and the constitution of power (hegemonic?).

²⁰ Guillaume Devin, *Méthodes de recherche en Relations Internationales* (Paris: Presses de Sciences-Po, 2016), 33.

²¹ Thus (functionalist approach) the goal one wants to achieve. Example: transform the inter-sovereign space into a (same) space of free movement.

²² Thus (institutionalist approach) the establishment of formal procedures/ decision-making arrangements (partly jurisprudential) making it possible to administer even during crises. According to Monnet, Europe will be made by its capacity to face crises (‘empty chair’ 1965, migrations 2014+, Brexit 2016+, Covid-19 2020+).

²³ The object/method dialectics leads to the testing of causal hypotheses. This text asks what a region is (object) in order to categorize its elements of definition (method): how does a context (post-war) lead to the regional phenomenon (causality? rather concomitance).

²⁴ At the helm of government, they seem to influence history, despite historical relativism (Braudel, Tolstoy). In the short term (20th century) who bears upon the facts of regionalization? Those in power at the time of agreements/treaties whose determinants draw on “forces profondes” (Renouvin).

²⁵ The decisions to rupture are theirs but Bentley (everything is a process transcending individuals) differs from Crozier/Friedberg (action is part of a system where the individual has room to maneuver). Arthur Bentley, *The Process of Government...* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1908); and Michel Crozier, and Erhard Friedberg, *L’acteur et le système...* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

²⁶ A fact (here: regional) is “located” in context. Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973) and Jean Leca, “Le repérage du politique,” *Projet* 71, no 1 (Janvier 1973). A fact draws its relevance (explaining change) if it weighs/attempts to weigh on the forces moved in this context. The EC are inspired by the Benelux (post-war context). NAFTA responds to Maastricht (AGF context). ASEM occurs at the same time as the Shanghai Group (context of AGF/China’s regional assertion).

²⁷ ‘Rupture’ evokes an innovative construction among neighbors, open over time, if not irreversible. The EU retains its capacity to integrate new members despite the exception to this lasting commitment (Brexit).

²⁸ ‘Change’ in social sciences is a “stumbling block” (Roche) or a possible dynamic (Green), a dialectics between dramatized (rupture), phenomenological (construction), analytical (change) registers. It is in reality a transition from one state (confrontation) to another (cooperation)... starting from the same ingredients (same history). Jean-Jacques Roche, *Théories des Relations Internationales* (Paris: Montchrestien, 1991), 125 ; and Duncan Green, *How Change Happens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁹ Agitable by repetition (history): neo-realism (the ‘return’ of States) nuances i/ the transnationalism of free movements, ii/ the nationalism stiffening the emergence of Nations (Europe 19th/20th), iii/ the sovereignism stiffening the creation of Republics (CA late 20th), leading to torn identities: Russia ‘is’ European, Asian, Eurasian... Polina Traver, “Trois étapes dans les relations post-soviétiques entre la Russie et l’Asie centrale,” in *Concurrences Interrégionales...*, ed. Pierre Chabal (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2015), 163–169; and Clémence Danguy-des-Déserts, “Russia’s Asian-ness and Russian European-ness”, in *Evolving regional values...*, ed. Yann Alix *et alii* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2020), 307–317.

³⁰ Two others (Not to define? How to define?) complete elsewhere my ‘definitory trilogy’ of modern international regions.

To favor a **method using an inductive approach** enables one to confront reality. Reality imposes itself on the observer. It does not derive from an *ex-ante* vision, nor from explanations of the world as it could be, but “as it really is”³¹ (Wittgenstein). To pragmatically observe inter-sovereign behaviors in the 20th century is to observe/notice regionalization. First, regional groupings or *Ententes*, Baltic and Balkanic; then regional Communities – Benelux, EEC, ECOWAS... –; finally regional Organizations or Unions – EU, UEMOA, EAEU, SCO...³² Already before World War II – more so after the CW – States have grouped together among neighbors systematically enough to characterize a new ordering. Innovation or rupture goes beyond the form – regrouping, inventing a partnership – in order to draw a meaning from the rationality thus pursued: building security among neighbors – on a material and economic level –, no longer in a bloc – global and military.

The **aim of this article** is to simply observe the regional phenomenon as it presents itself, pragmatically, at the contemporary level. As a phenomenon of innovation and of constructive rupture, it is a new means that nation-States give themselves in order to build cooperative neighborhoods, no longer dwelling in zero-sum competition.

The regional fact springs forth from a context and expresses itself above all through a rupture (§1). Regions impose themselves on the observer, whether the latter studies their “nationality” or their “globality”³³ (§2). Letting regions spring forth for what they are: adaptations among neighbors (§3). If the regional fact can be characterized, it is as a super-structural moment, beyond space (§4). The dialectic of explanation distinguishes cooperation from integration, the means, common to regions, from the end, differing between regions (§5). Such a construction consists of recentering among neighbors in order to construe this regional means, before turning it towards other regions, using it to assert one region in the competition among all regions (§6).

§1 – From the observation of regions in (re)recomposition, organizations spring forth

If Mr Barnstaple³⁴ had traveled in the Europe of the 1950s³⁵, the Asia of the 1960s, the Africa of the 1970s, the America of the 1980s or in any other region of the world from the 1990s, he would have witnessed, surging forth, not new Beings of human appearance but political dynamics of regional substance. These modern regions have become, through regional organizations, essential structures of humans’ life in common.

This shift, from country-nations to continental-regions, transcends the history of regionality. It began among nationalist paroxysms, it displayed itself in the bipolarity of a CW, it imposes itself when the PCW is heralded as a commercial globalization and an economic deterritorialization. Above all, this shift reinforces itself not in a zero-sum competition against the national and global orders, but in interspersed complement to them. Modern regions do not abolish national borders among neighbors – they do not federalize – but they transform their free crossings into a common-sense practice: the functionalization of borders in the “juxta-sovereignization”³⁶ of wills.

The springing-forth of regions affects countries³⁷. A bad trick played on social sciences would be to impose a single approach. Can one imagine a political scientist suggesting political science ? Comparison as a method does not impose a choice among human sciences – geography or geopolitics – or social sciences – political science or IR. Comparative political analysis does not prejudice observation, starting with geography.³⁸

According to Thorez³⁹, the new borders of CA create a “re-borderization” of the region. By contrast, I suggest a regionalization of its actors. What Thorez calls the “territorial construction of independence”⁴⁰ (TCI) complements my observation of the regionalization of neighbor-partners. This TCI would work against infra-national regions, at the micro level, especially cross-border regions, and against the supra-national region, at the macro level. However, occurring at the same time as the creation of macro-organizations – CIS, CSTO, CICA, SCO... – the TCI rather explains that a dual space, post-Soviet and Chinese, becomes one, a – Sino-post-Soviet – region.

The TCI can be studied from the geographical and political angle of the cohabitation among regions – micro, macro – and nations. What emerges is a regional spatial system, where ‘system’ refers to the social sciences, notably sociology, ‘spatial’ to the human sciences, notably geography, and ‘regional’ to the socio-history of ruptures, notably post-war ruptures. For Thorez, the “markers”⁴¹ of this construction are the borders, approached empirically.

As markers of identity, borders are mobilized as a political resource to territorialize Central Asian populations. This policy, which aims to assign a territory, a citizenship and an innovated [*inédite*] identity to individuals, is [also] based on operations of ‘passportization’.⁴²

³¹ *Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (in the present tense for an approach still under construction). Brian McGuiness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2002), 184.

³² A few regional organizations: dozens would give the impression of a description. Giovanni Barbieri, “Regionalism, globalism and complexity: a stimulus towards global IR ?,” *Third World Thematics* 4, no 6 (Spring 2019): 424–41.

³³ Julien Thorez, “Les nouvelles frontières de l’Asie Centrale,” *op. cit.*, 7.

³⁴ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Penguin, 1905).

³⁵ Baltic/Balkan regions (1930s), the (future) Benelux, the Gulf of the 1980s...

³⁶ Pierre Chabal, *La coopération de Shanghai: conceptualiser la nouvelle Asie* (Liège: Presses de l’Université de Liège, 2019).

³⁷ See below §2: the regional meaning of a division (Korea), the regional issue of a candidacy (Türkiye), the regional affiliation of a nation-State (Mongolia).

³⁸ Julien Thorez, “Les nouvelles frontières de l’Asie Centrale,” *Cybergeo European Journal of Geography*, 2011, article 534, pp. 1–29.

³⁹ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 13.

⁴⁰ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 12–13.

⁴¹ Kalevi Holsti, “The Problem of Change in I.R. theory,” Working Paper no 26 (Decembre 1998). The University of British Columbia, Institute of International Relations.

⁴² Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 13.

The TCI is a matter of realist decisions – new AC republics have been declared; populations/multi-nationalities must enter them. This forcing into new structures connotes this regional construction as neither the maintenance of the local past – micro – nor the subsumption from above – macro.

The construction of Nations tends to take place to the detriment of regions⁴³. A national territorial order replaces a regional approach.⁴⁴

This contradiction suggested in the innovative space of CA is neither specific nor stronger than in Europe. The West European construction uses a legal paradox, forcing supra-sovereignty within the Westphalian order. The Central Asian construction plays with *palettes* of apparent incoherence.

The agreement signed in Bishkek by the CIS countries provided that their nationals could continue to move freely within the post-Soviet space. (...) The decision of the Central Asian authorities to activate the new borders, taken in the second half of the 1990s, reflects their will to accelerate the process of differentiation and of individualization of state territories.⁴⁵

Then the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) legalized the free movement of workers among member states⁴⁶, completing the construction launched by the CIS: an Economic Community, then a Free Trade Zone, finally a Union.⁴⁷

A coherence between Thorez and my analysis, despite a surprise⁴⁸, makes it possible to i/ functionalize borders, ii/give them a meaning, iii/ deal with their alterity. The functionalization of borders is (Thorez) a matter of manipulation/compartmentalization; in my analysis, it results from a multiplier effect of the *laisser-passer*, therefore from a partial de-sovereignization. The search for a post-rupture meaning granted by leaders to citizens ascribes (Thorez) to the national scale – such or such Republic of CA. In my view, it reflects a regional strategy – in Western Europe, then of Europe –, in both cases for the Self and facing the Other. As for alterity, an ingredient of nationalization (Thorez) or regionalization of space (my analysis), the emphasis is placed (Thorez) on its recreation – the Other is no longer the Other of the USSR but the neighboring Republic –; in my analysis, the alterity of neighbors having become partners is overcome/displaced towards the rest of the world.

These comparisons explain why it is necessary to define a region. To compare is to let differences spring forth, above all

a common thread: the coherence of space. This coherence is of another and deeper nature than institutional. It is a foundation. Regional organizations, which give regions the appearance of institutional constructs, are the emerging part of the phenomenon. As a decision to build through rupture, a modern region gives coherence to a space, a coherence introduced in fits and starts, slowly, and which characterizes contemporary multi-regionality⁴⁹.

Following the crystallization of borders, (...) the territorial base of States remains deficient, because unlike Belarus or the Baltic countries, the State territories are *not coherent spaces* in CA.⁵⁰

The emphasis placed on borders – invented, contested, fragmented, functionalized, legitimized, nationalized... – an emphasis expected of the geographer, is no more logical than of the political scientist, who sees in them crystallizations of rigidity or focal points of facilitation. The sociologist, the historian, the economist would point in conclusion to the same shift in meaning: borders, invented to separate, thus to “divide and rule”⁵¹, are opening up to new circulations in order to “delimit, modernize and rationalize the administrative system”⁵². In Asia and Europe, these circulations intensify differently but are evident to the observer in both cases.⁵³

Modern regions clearly present themselves through their “insertion into the globalized space”⁵⁴ at one stage or another in the construction of poly-regional subsystems. If Thorez thinks that global integration and the (re)composition of nations are distinct – for CA, for republican unity – he does not oppose them:

As a result, CA is experiencing, in parallel to its insertion into the globalized space, a recomposition of nations [countries] and regions [micro] which, paradoxically, is similar (...) to deregionalization.⁵⁵

§2 – We must ‘consider as things’ the regions which present themselves in history

Faced with the risk of ethnocentrism or “the dilemma of exteriority”⁵⁶, considering regional facts as things in history means situating them in concomitances, not causalities. Modern regions are at the same time functionalization of borders,

⁴³ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 19.

⁴⁴ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁴⁵ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 13.

⁴⁶ Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, then Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan (2020) observer (with Moldova and Cuba).

⁴⁷ Michaël Levystone, *Asie centrale : le réveil* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2024), 177.

⁴⁸ Thorez analyses (in 2011) Central Asia since 1996-2001 without mentioning the Shanghai cooperation.

⁴⁹ More than a ‘mere’ multilateralism.

⁵⁰ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 15, emphasis added.

⁵¹ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁵² Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 7.

⁵³ Closing borders to survive (regime, North Korea) or in the face of crises (Covid-19) ? The other hypothesis by Domenach (opening up to enrich the nation, reclosing in to develop), is it still relevant ? Jean-Luc Domenach, “Le relâchement de la Chine,” in *L'ordre mondial relâché. Sens et puissance après la guerre-froide*, ed. Zaki Laïdi (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1993), 157–174.

⁵⁴ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 23.

⁵⁵ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 23.

⁵⁶ Claude Lefort, “Sociologie – examen,” (Paris: Editions Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1975), 1089.

para-militarization of interactions, complexification of identity issues, de-fractionation of national spaces, institutionalization of procedures, historical ruptures designed to overcome the errors of the past...

Whether artifact or ideal-type, regional coherence enables one to speak of the Self, a region, in relation to the Other, other regions, the world, nations. Alterity is then only a fact, not a threat. To notice [*apercevoir*] modern regions, epistemologically, enables one to avoid one dilemma – a particularist *sui generis* – without yielding to another – a universalist globalism.

The regionalization of the world⁵⁷ articulates the whole and its parts. The openness of the PCW as a fact rubs shoulders with another: geographical “proximity” determines exchanges among partners. Renamed “contiguity”, it becomes a criterion of regional coherence – implicit for the Europe of the EU until 2007, explicit for the Asia of the SCO from 2001. The regionalization of space sheds light on these spatial dynamics, which play at certain moments in history, often the post-war periods. An acceleration of scale precipitates adaptive decisions and behaviors by superimposing levels that are henceforth required to cooperate with each other: the still-sovereign States, the Nations now united by their Charter (1945), the modern regions which are emerging.

The regions offer themselves to be seen through the multiplicity, not the unicity, of their organizations and by “concomitance”⁵⁸. In Europe, the same moment saw the emergence of Benelux, Council of Europe, ECSC..., shortly before CSCE/OSCE, EFTA... shortly after the failure of a EDC. This proliferating effervescence characterizes the ruptures from the past – alliances and wars. In Asia, the same momentum saw the emergence of the CIS – cradle of the CSTO and the EAEC –, the CICA, the OIC⁵⁹ shortly before the Shanghai Group; it saw the SAARC being reactivated and the ASEAN being enlarged. This culminated in the SCO from 2001 and the East Asia Summit from 2005.

No regional *sui generis*: Europe and Asia are both embedded in the global. A broader Atlanticism for Europe; a continentalization for Eurasia – after the thawing/opening of the 15,230 km of Sino-post-Soviet borders⁶⁰ towards functional free-movements made concrete by the EAEU from 2015.

The regional is concomitant with the global and the national. Correspondences exist in the past – to nationalist errors; regional solutions – and the present – global events

relayed by the regions.⁶¹ Modern regions draw the political eye towards a regional solution. Several national situations suggest this: Korea, Türkiye, Mongolia, Germany...

The division of Korea is less a Korean issue⁶² than an international and regional one. The division perpetrated in 1945–1953 by instrumentalization of the peninsula⁶³ has been perpetuated since 1953 by an external balance of power: USA/USSR from 1953 to the 1990s then USA/China since the 2000s. To requalify the Korean War as “CW in Korea” sheds light on this dimension of division. The failure of KEDO 1995–2003 and then of the Six-Party Talks 2003–2009 was predictable due to the confusion between the actors of the instrumentalization for centuries – Japan, China –; or decades – Russia, United States –, and ‘neighbors’ who would be ‘benevolent’⁶⁴. The regional dimension since the 1990s – ASEAN+; ARF –⁶⁵ and 2000s – East Asia Summits – sheds light on the delicate balance between non-regional forces – USA allied since 1945 with the historic Japanese invader – and constructive forces: Korea joined the CICA in 2006, but the CICA rejected Japan and the USA as members – and the SCO rejected Japan and the USA as observers. The North Korean regime has survived internationally since 1994 through agreements/meetings with the USA, again in 2019⁶⁶. The solution – a Korean confederation or unification – requires the regionalization of the peninsula.

The Turkish regional question, after having been essentially European from 1963, Association Treaty, to 1995/2002, creation/confirmation of an FTA, has since 2012 been reoriented towards Asia. Having become in 2012 an SCO dialogue partner, Ankara is transforming a regional *impasse*⁶⁷ into a pan-regional opening⁶⁸. The regional analysis of Türkiye is no longer European but objectified in concentric circles: partnerships with Arab countries in the 1980s, membership of the ECO from its very creation by Iran in 1985, military cooperation with Israel from 1996 to 2012, partnership with the

⁵⁷ Alia Gana, and Yann Richard, (eds.), *La régionalisation du monde. Construction territoriale et articulation global/local* (Tunis: IRMC-Karhala, 2014).

⁵⁸ Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris ; Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), 130. See also infra §3.

⁵⁹ Organization of Islamic Cooperation, new name (2011) of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

⁶⁰ Julien Thorez, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁶¹ The contextual analysis sheds light on the stages of the European construction. Richard Balme, “L’Europe et le monde à venir,” in *The EU and East Asian Regional Community*, ed. Yves Schemel and Masaharu Nakamura (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 2012), 381–401. See “Réflexions sur le Vivre ensemble européen”, special issue of *Public Administration and Regional Studies* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2015).

⁶² Except by confusing the period of the Three Kingdoms (-58 to 668) with the diptych of a ‘civil’ war.

⁶³ Since the 1590s (after the Three Kingdoms) and the Taft-Katsura Agreement (1905).

⁶⁴ ‘Neighboring’ United States... by ideational vision ! Alfred Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (New York: Little, Brown, 1990).

⁶⁵ Served by the interregional dynamic (ASEM from 1996, especially its 2000 summit in Seoul).

⁶⁶ The CdN-USA framework agreement (1994), early in the AGF, ‘perpetuates’ this projection in the Sino-Korean ‘neighborhood’.

⁶⁷ Turkish application for the European ‘criterionised’ Club.

⁶⁸ ‘Shanghai’ cooperation going from 6 ‘affiliated’ countries (2001), to 15 (2012), 19 (2017), 21 (2021), 26 (2024).

SCO which is becoming militarized... The question, outdated, of Türkiye's EU candidacy is crackling, like that of its membership in NATO⁶⁹.

The Mongolian regional situation – between giants of Asia, China, and of Eurasia, Russia – marginalizes Ulaanbaatar on the continental level. This territorial landlocking remains but its regional status has been reversed, from buffer-territory to link-territory⁷⁰. Since 1991, the regional question – a cultural, diplomatic, economic belonging in Central⁷¹ Asia or in North-East⁷² Asia ? – is resolved by the foreign policy concept of the Third Neighbor (decree of 1993). The regional analysis of Mongolia balances between her accepting the status of first SCO Observer in 2004 and refusing that of SCO Member – despite the SCO enlarging from 6 to 10 members over 2017–2023 – membership being incompatible with this Third Neighbor diplomacy.

Korea, Türkiye, Mongolia... national issues – division-unification; candidate-member; landlocked-landlink – are therefore indeed regional questions.

Regional Germany moved from centripetal sanctions – the division of 1945 – to centrifugal inclusions in 1950 – Council of Europe; ECSC –, 1955 – NATO –, 1957 – Euratom; EEC –, 1963 – a European axis: Elysée Treaty –, 1972–1975 – Helsinki process, Inter-German *Ostpolitik*. The GDR was inserted, as a subordinate, in the military regionalization of the Warsaw Pact. No dynamic, nor reunified Germany today, has a meaning without the European region.

The contextual regional(ist)e perspective is validated by the facts and from a constructivist angle, as much as but beyond the national(ist)e perspective until 1914 and the international perspective since 1945. This regional perspective now interposes itself between the national and international levels in the chronology – and above all in the meaning – of the regional phenomenon.

The study of the regional fact escapes reductionist idiosyncrasies⁷³. Considering regions as disruptors of the national/international order is a contradiction in terms. Regions complete this order. In sociological or neo-institutionalist terms, the regional fact is sub-systemic. It complements national systems. It fits into the world-system.

⁶⁹ Incompatible if Ankara's SCO status is upgraded to Observer and especially to Member.

⁷⁰ Nosgoi Altantsetseg, "De l'enclavement territorial au territoire-lien inter-régional. La Mongolie dans les échanges eurasiatiques," in *Concurrences Interrégionales Europe-Asie au 21^e s.*, ed. Pierre Chabal (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2015).

⁷¹ Close to its historical, Turkic and nomadic roots.

⁷² Close to the macroeconomic credibility of some (Japan, South Korea, China - ASEAN+3).

⁷³ Institutional (law); end-of-history (geopolitics); commercial (economics); de-sovereignising (ideology).

53 – The recourse to phenomenology as method

Letting modern regions spring forth is a methodological suggestion, which helps to see in them benchmarks of the PCW world, not an exception from globalization. The global village⁷⁴ is above all multi-regional, or pluri-region-“centric”⁷⁵. It is as much necessary to “notice” hitherto “unnoticed” facts in history⁷⁶ as to “account for them based on their variations”⁷⁷. The phenomenon that pushes neighbors to be open partners, no longer unstable allies, offers various systemic forms.

Sociology and philosophy of science then come together in the concept of system. Analyzing the regional fact externally means aiming for a “sociological representation of reality”⁷⁸ avoiding the risk of ethnocentrism (or “exteriority dilemma”⁷⁹). It is to apprehend a negentropic tendency in history: “[a]ction cannot move in the unreal[...], a detour through the history of systems becomes necessary”⁸⁰.

From the observation of the regional phenomenon to its phenomenological analysis, there is therefore more than a semantic/semiotic shift. There is a methodological choice between causality and concomitance. Phenomenology, a philosophical method, describes things themselves in order to discover the structures beyond/connecting them, such that these things manifest themselves to consciousness. This method intends to “relate to each other phenomena which present themselves as disjointed”⁸¹, therefore to shed light on their concomitance, not simply on a causality, nor even just a systemic link.

Between two phenomena, the concomitance may be due not to the fact that one phenomenon is the cause of the other; but in that they are both effects of a same cause; or even that there exists, between them, a *third phenomenon, interspersed* but unnoticed, which is the effect of the first and the cause of the second.⁸²

Which such ‘rule’ (Durkheim) would the observed phenomena follow ? Durkheim evokes “two concomitant phenomena” – in my analysis: neo-European regionalism and neo-Asian

⁷⁴ Marshall McLuhan, and Bruce Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁷⁵ Jaras Ibrashhev, *Манифест панасиациентризма [The Manifest of PanAsiaCentrism]* (Almaty: Al-Farabi Kazakh National University Press, 2006). Jaras Ibrashhev, *Панасиациентризм [PanAsiaCentrism]* (Almaty: Al-Farabi Kazakh National University Press, 2011).

⁷⁶ Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), 130.

⁷⁷ Gérard Wormser, “Phénoménologie,” in *Dictionnaire des concepts philosophiques*, ed. Michel Blay (Paris: Larousse, 2013), 618.

⁷⁸ Claude Lefort, “Sociologie – examen.” (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1975), 1089.

⁷⁹ Claude Lefort, *ibidem*.

⁸⁰ Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1912), iv & viii.

⁸¹ Claude Lefort, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

⁸² Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, *op. cit.*, 130, emphasis added.

regional cooperationism - referring “this concomitance... not to the fact that one of the phenomena is the cause of the other” but to a ternary dialectical logic. These regional phenomena are “both the effects of the same cause” – in my analysis: the post-war period – an upheaval that they both use for a necessary rupture. They are also such “that there exists, between them, a third phenomenon⁸³, interspersed but unnoticed, which is the effect of the first and the cause of the second” – in my analysis the ‘non-choice’: the turning of the page of history. Both are a phenomenon made possible by a post-war period: in Europe, integrative communitarianism after WWII; in Asia, integrative cooperationism after the PCW.

The diachronic comparison notices these post-war “things” in order to “relate to each other” phenomena presenting themselves as “disjoint”⁸⁴.

The study of what appears – phenomenology from a methodological angle – apprehends regional reality as it presents itself to be seen. Leaving philosophy, to enter again into geography, even into history, no longer with Thorez, 2011 and the morphogenesis of borders, but now with Gorshenina 2008 and the perception of the space between the Self and the Other, this enables us to seek that which does not appear at first glance. To say what things are but also how they come to attention.

Distinguish what a border “is” from the question of how it “is perceived”. Beyond the simple law of the strongest, it is both a territorial object and the subject of a desire for space.

To be. A border ascribes to three notions. The European notion of a line which separates, by fixing an inter-sovereign line placing side by side, or face to face, two contiguous spaces, each looking down and hard at the other. The Chinese notion of ‘confines’ which distance, separating civilization, the Self, from the barbarians, the Other, by a buffer-zone whose crossing will/would drain the resources of the aggressor. The Nomadic notion of grazing areas fluctuating according to seasons and animal demographics, therefore a concerted custom, except in cases of drought or of overpopulation of livestock. Post-Westphalian international law has reduced these notions of borders but made their perception more complex, unified by force.

To be perceived. A border condenses often violent assertions of the Self towards the Other. Gorshenina⁸⁵ extracts such a phenomenology from a Tsar envoy in the 1870s missioned to explore and then impose Russia’s imperial borders on China. To designate the buffer-zone which the Xin-jiang is, in the Chinese perception – 新疆 new border/greater west, capital Urumqi -, where St Petersburg wants to impose a border-line⁸⁶,

this Russian official uses a formulation that is a revealing expression of the perception of the Other:

(...) Ürümči [today: Urumqi] and, further, [the] *strictly speaking* Chinese lands.⁸⁷

The phrasing reflects a biased perception of reality, colonial and ethnocentric, a-legal, a-historical and even a-ethnological. Strictly-speaking Chinese lands ? Lands beyond Urumqi, therefore that may remain – who makes the ukaz ? – within the Chinese sphere of authority and sovereignty. And lands within Urumqi, destined to fall into the Russian fold, military and then sovereign. The peremptory argument is intended to be justificatory – why not scientific ? – of the pre-decided annexation. Reductionist and exaggerated, therefore useless – if it is a question of conquering, force is enough – it is unjustified, therefore inoperable if it is a question of negotiating, which is not in the minds of the Russians.

The region, Russia’s Middle Asia, that of the projected Self, simply does not take into account the Other, China.⁸⁸

The border- and territorial phenomenon is therefore only one aspect of the regional fact but it is a practical angle of apprehension of that fact. Non-purely philosophical phenomenology enables us to see reality as it is, not forcing it to reveal itself. The phenomenon presents itself to be seen, but it still needs to be explained. This methodological phenomenology approaches reality without preconceptions, as sociology and ethnology warn us against ethnocentrism.

The analysis of modern regions does not ambition to provide idiosyncratic integrative models – European or Community Europe. It opens up to the contextual explanation of decisions taken in reaction to history, more than the institutionalization of structures.

The analysis of the regional fact seeks validity despite its plural variations since the 1990s. The singular – a post-war regional fact – evokes the philosophical mechanism of phenomenological reduction as a method (Heidegger). A reduction-singularization of the regional fact, not a quest for essentialization, even less for universalization.

§4 – The ability to turn the page of history: the rupture

The geographical analysis *supra* gives meaning to the space it constructs. The historical analysis *infra* gives meaning to the shift in time of political solutions. Where the philologist evokes personal history “as if there were parallel series in time”⁸⁹, the political scientist sheds light on the underlying structural change⁹⁰.

⁸³ The first is integration (Europe); the second, cooperation (Asia).

⁸⁴ Claude Lefort, *op. cit.*, *ibidem*.

⁸⁵ Svetlana Gorshenina, *Asie centrale. L’invention des frontières ...* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2012), 130, note 120.

⁸⁶ Gulnar Kendirbai, *Russian practices of governance in Eurasia: frontier power dynamics, 16th to 19th centuries* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁸⁷ Svetlana Gorshenina, *Asie centrale. L’invention des frontières ...* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2012), 130 emphasis added.

⁸⁸ The Chinese Turkestan becomes Russian by Anglo-Russian agreement (1880s) in CA (Wakhan corridor, 1894).

⁸⁹ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Galimard, 1919), 202.

⁹⁰ Arthur Bentley, *The Process of Government. A study in Social Pressure* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1908, reprint 1967).

Geography nuances between space as a framework for action and the territory as a support for invention. History dialectalizes change and continuity. I call rupture what is, to varying degrees, a moment, a super-structural moment for Gramsci⁹¹.

These moments of history trigger an innovated regulating of political dynamics – national, regional, international... The long history or *histoire longue* (Braudel) erases the rough edges of crises, suggesting deep trends or *tendances profondes* (Renouvin, Duroselle)⁹². Historians get annoyed⁹³ when they are asked to clarify dates⁹⁴. Will they accept the political scientist's notion of time scales, which the sociologist will call moments ?

It matters less when a historical moment occurs than what it contains. The emergence of regions produces the acceptance of competition among neighbors, towards mutual tolerance, then cooperation with the neighbor as another self⁹⁵: accepting rivalry beyond the zero-sum game. This shift accompanies, in history, the awareness of neighbors. A super-structural moment, where

[the] tolerance of conflict must replace dead-end rivalry, where the weakest ends up succumbing. The methods (...) which help to admit diversity and establish mechanisms for discussion, naturally find... their place within these major programs of change.⁹⁶

Change must come as a solution: dead-end rivalry entails mutual destruction⁹⁷. This necessary change is structural: mechanisms – procedures – among partners who retain their differences – or diversity – as sovereigns. These common dynamics make it a regional phenomenon, which establishes discussions replacing violence. They create mechanisms, from mere formalized cooperation to lasting institutional integration.

According to Frank⁹⁸, the idea that processes are part of a temporality is at the heart of an effort to “think historically” events among nations. Reading regional dynamics in this

manner brings them back to the relevant time perspective, both international (Frank) and regional (my analysis). I consider regional dynamics in IR. Frank calls the European order a “subsystem”⁹⁹ of the international order. The shift of time-scales frees itself from chronologies in order to construct a meaning, not just values or consciousness.

[T]he IR, both in their short-term ups and downs and in their duration, reveal (...) the synchrony and diachrony of contradictions and complementarities (...) between the necessities of global balance (...), real power relations (...) mechanical ones (...) but also (...) an awareness.¹⁰⁰

Dialectical history sheds light on the meaning that presents itself to be seen at a given moment. Frank wants an encounter between human and social sciences to shed light on the same subject: international and regional dynamics in their broad contextual historical specificities¹⁰¹, confirming the limits of an institutional approach.

‘Thinking historically’ modern regions aims for the “historian comprehension”¹⁰² beyond IR as a discipline¹⁰³ in order to discern the fundamental categories of historical thinking that be a grammar of time. Frank draws from philosophy – the categories of thought (Kant) – and from the grammar of civilizations (Braudel). His ambition exceeds mine – I merely examine some origins of modern regions. His ambition inspires him by freeing him of over-narrow categories – conceptual positivism – in the face of the regional phenomenon.

A regional epistemology reaches beyond interactions among States and governments. It integrates relations among populations, therefore also their identities, if not all of their values.

Modern regions, because they result from an encounter between ideas and decisions (supra §3) combine deep forces and the making of decisions of historical significance, or rupture. These decisions, as a regional rupture, resulting from a context and a conscience, are transformed into/by rationalized procedures. They could not otherwise last beyond crises, institutional crises – Europe of the 1950s; Asia of the 1990s – or sectoral crises – migrations: Europe of the 2010s; Asia of the 2000s. Economic forces characterize modern regions as regions built among partners – of a market – transcending strict security – military¹⁰⁴.

⁹¹ Hughes Portelli, *Gramsci et le bloc historique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2019).

⁹² Along with “material forces (geography, demography, economy), there are spiritual forces or collective mentalities”. Robert Frank, “Penser historiquement les RI,” *Annuaire Français des Relations Internationales*, vol. IV, (Paris: AFRI, 2003), 43.

⁹³ But not College de France professor P. Boucheron, “When history makes dates” (Arte TV series).

⁹⁴ Robert Frank, “Penser historiquement les RI,” *Annuaire Français des Relations Internationales* (Paris: AFRI, 2003), 61.

⁹⁵ Cf. the expression ‘near abroad’ (blijniéé zaroubiéjé) for the space formed by the 14 former RSS.

⁹⁶ William Ackermann, “Sociologie – Critique sociale” (Paris: Editions Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1975), 1085.

⁹⁷ In Europe (17th-20th centuries), 160 international wars, 17 ‘decisive’ battles. Michel Foucher, *Fronts et Frontières. Un tour du monde géopolitique* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

⁹⁸ Robert Frank, “Penser historiquement les RI,” *Annuaire Français des Relations Internationales* (Paris: AFRI, 2003).

⁹⁹ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 64.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 64–65.

¹⁰¹ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 42 and 65

¹⁰² Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 60–64

¹⁰³ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 49–59

¹⁰⁴ Failure (CED), delays (ESDP) in Europe. In Asia, being out of the CSTO (China) and declining militarisation (OCS) regarding the New Silk Roads.

Thinking historically regions means analyzing how they seek, by building themselves, to free themselves from the past – their inter-imperial and economic rivalries – through a rupture in behavior: community economies of scale since the early Europe of the Six; privileged partnerships from the early SCO of the Six. The regional phenomenon is both a rupture in consciousness and a shift in behavior. It changes the respective weight of the factors in the relations among neighbors since

economic relations between (...) powers carry within them as many factors of tension as factors of solidarity.¹⁰⁵

The changing balance among regional factors triggers historically, at a certain moment, a phenomenological inflection. The geography of neighbors does not change, it hardly can, but the influence of mentalities and psychologies, these other “components” of deep forces or *forces profondes*¹⁰⁶, prevails over the decisions of neighbors. The opinions of populations – which can be manipulated¹⁰⁷ – must be “placed in the context... of systems of representation and social imaginaries”¹⁰⁸. Consciousness of the Self¹⁰⁹ strengthens itself at the same time as the perception of the Other shifts, from enemy to competitor, in an inter-regional complement of regional emergence.

By concomitance, this shift between defense – national – and security – regional –¹¹⁰ is complementary, and not exclusive. Otherwise, bellicose regionalisms today would relay the warmongering nationalisms of yesterday.

Thinking historically “the specificity of inter-European relations and Europe in IR”¹¹¹ does not exclude other regions. Africa, Asia, America... are studied as much for themselves as in their relations based on institutions – ASEM, EU-LAA... – commerce – agreements –, ideas – soft power –, inter-identity – values. .. Socio-histories of peoples and socio-politics of decision-makers come together. The ideas of region, long-dating ideas for Europe¹¹² and Asia¹¹³, are rooted in the complexity of an open present thanks to political decisions.

[Between] those who favor a socio-history and (...) those who [privilege] political decision-makers (...)

[t]here is more complementarity than divergence (...) on the side of decision-makers and (...) on the side of the *forces profondes*.¹¹⁴

Historiography “meets”¹¹⁵ other disciplines – geography, demography, sociology, anthropology, politology¹¹⁶ – in order to “think openly” regions “beyond” – positive – law and existing theories of IR¹¹⁷.

The complexity of reality and the singularity of the event make impossible... the reproduction of a causal chain... the formulation of laws...¹¹⁸

Frank¹¹⁹ lists discussions of Schools – realism, idealism, transnationalism... –, especially the constructivist “temptation”, useful as a methodology for defining a region. According to his historiography, a European interest is not natural in history. It is created by the promoters of a new European order, in particular, by regional rupture, in general, a passage from a mechanical balance which does not work – alliances – to an organic balance – integrative cooperation – which innovates in mixing power/structure and a new shared culture.

This legitimizes the regional object¹²⁰. Internal stability aims for an outreach : the influence beyond common borders¹²¹. “Collective subjectivities”¹²² do not replace realist factors of power but they connote these by creating “sentiments of belonging”¹²³ which legitimize the regional construction.

A regional sentiment of belonging, without finalising the invention of a region, contributes to making the region possible through an act of conscience. The construction of the subjectivity of a common destiny – Xi Jinping’s speech in 2013; Schuman’s in 1950 – and the need for a region – without any other choice – contribute to this awareness. This legitimizes the concession made, in Asia, to consensus as SCO decision-making method (SCO Charter, 2002, section 16) and, in Europe, to many community constraints. Even without an “essentialist conception of collective identity”¹²⁴, a collective subjectivity emerges from the bottom-up construction of regions. Thinking IR historically leads Frank, quoting Laïdi¹²⁵ to

recommend intermediate spaces [between globalization and balkanization] larger than the Nation-State to be

¹⁰⁵ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 45

¹⁰⁶ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹⁰⁷ Eric Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

¹⁰⁸ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Never again’ (1918), ‘the peace that works’ (1945) in Europe. In Asia, ‘peace at the borders for 50 years’ (1978), ‘good neighborliness’ (1996 then 2001).

¹¹⁰ Common security (CFSP) in Europe. In Asia, the fight against three scourges (SCO).

¹¹¹ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 48.

¹¹² Pierre Gerbet, *La construction de l’Europe* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007).

¹¹³ Yun-Ping Wang, “L’idée d’Asie et l’asianisme dans la pensée politique moderne de Chine et d’Asie de l’Est,” in *Concurrences interrégionales Europe-Asie au 21^{ème} siècle*, ed. Pierre Chabal (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2015), 39–52.

¹¹⁴ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 48–49.

¹¹⁵ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 49.

¹¹⁷ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 42–59.

¹¹⁸ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 49.

¹¹⁹ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 52–58.

¹²⁰ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 53, note 46.

¹²¹ Centripetal construction (regional self) then centrifugal influence (the region ‘towards’ other regions).

¹²² Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 54.

¹²³ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 54.

¹²⁴ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 56.

¹²⁵ Zaki Laïdi, (ed.), *Géopolitique du sens* (Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), and Zaki Laïdi, *Un monde privé de sens* (Paris: Hachette, 2001).

effective in (...) globalization, but not too vast to retain (...) “meaning” among citizens. (Frank, p.60)

These intermediate spaces, for me the modern regions, thus relate to a space of meaning. **We therefore come through history to modern regions**, as spaces of meaning and of regional integration – EU, Mercosur or ASEAN (Frank) – and of cooperation – the new Asia (my analysis). All are sub-regions of the world historical space/system.

Modern regions ‘thought historically’ are a rupture, not a falling-apart. They enable an adjunction of intermediate regional meaning between national and international realities, “syndromes” of memory¹²⁶ and “games of scale”¹²⁷. Therefore, a “third phenomenon” does in deed and fact “intersperse itself”¹²⁸ between the process of politicization and the process of internationalization. This is regionalization.

§5 – Regionalization: regional cooperation as a means

Not necessarily integration as an aim. The Asia-Europe comparison¹²⁹ as a regional moment (§4) is not an abstraction. This moment occurs among neighbors in a concrete space. As they become partners, neighbors modify lastingly and openly their interactions and suggest several syntheses. A synthesis between anthropology and law: procedures are but the codification of practice. One between individuals and communities: the approval of the former, their opinion, legitimizes the latter. Between political goals/teleologies and economic means/materializations: modern regional constructions contain some of the States’ economic policy and some political economy of scale.

The *rapprochement* of neighbors makes it possible to overcome dynamics which still, ultimately, complement each other. Regional phenomena, as they present themselves to be seen, enable the emergence – without exclusive – of phenomena of association as in ASEAN, of cooperation as in APEC, of integrative cooperation as in the SCO, of integration as in the EU... Through shifts and evolutions, in Europe from Community to Market and Union, in Asia from a Shanghai Group to a Shanghai Organization; in Africa, from an ECOWAS Community to a UEMOA Union; in Latin America from an Andean Pact or a Rio Group to a Common Market or Mercosur...

One must avoid the bias of a false comparativist consciousness – cooperation would be an incomplete integration, and integration an advanced cooperation – and not coefficient cooperation and integration. Both enable a third phenomenon to emerge (§4), which is inserted between the national-statist and the international-global. This third phenomenon – the regional – is relevant, well before its institutions and results, by

the historical meaning that it gives to a space. This meaning, I call coherence.

The cooperation-integration couple “innervates” international dynamics, through its pre-institutional meaning¹³⁰. A definition of integration¹³¹, influenced at the time by the European tropism of integration beyond cooperation, relates to the historiography of Frank (supra §2) by emphasizing the diffusion of the community meaning¹³² in space.

By ‘integration’ we mean obtaining, within a territory, of a sense of community and institutions and practices sufficiently strong and widespread to ensure, for a long time, expectations of peaceful change among its population.¹³³

Interchanging “integration” and “cooperation” does not intrinsically alter the value of the search for meaning over time, nor the modification of the management of space. Not that integration and cooperation are interchangeable, much less synonymous¹³⁴. They both shed light on a third phenomenon: the lasting modification of the meaning of a space. Human and social sciences come together. The geographer recovers the space, the historian recovers the time, the political scientist recovers the decision, the economist recovers the substance, the sociologist recovers the community...

The construction of modern regions is a dynamic phenomenon, both concrete – a territory, and institutions – and cultural – practices “sufficiently strong and widespread” to produce “expectations”¹³⁵. These are institutions that offer a meaning because they reflect practices – decisions for bringing change – and practices legitimized by the passage of time – towards a neo-regional tradition – and above all an anchoring towards peaceful change.

This link is made clear by the regional meaning¹³⁶ of peace among neighbors. Deutsch cannot escape his context. Shortly after the Korean War, in the midst of the Vietnam War, the Karl Deutsch edition cited (1978) closely followed the new forms of war – hunger wars – among neighbors. The regional project is therefore also a teleology of peace.

¹³⁰ Strictly speaking: codified (opposable) procedures – this meaning is debatable, as a simple emerging part of the process.

¹³¹ Karl Deutsch, *The analysis of International Relations* (London: Prentice Hall, 1978).

¹³² Frank concludes : if “[t]he historian does not believe in the meaning of history... his duty is to write the history of the meaning... the meaning that the world gives itself at such... a moment”. Robert Frank, “Penser historiquement les RI,” *Annuaire Français des Relations Internationales* (Paris, AFRI, 2003), 65.

¹³³ Karl Deutsch, *The analysis of International Relations* (London: Prentice Hall, 1978), 3–5.

¹³⁴ To cooperate is to work with others without merging. To integrate is to structurally combine capacities to act.

¹³⁵ Karl Deutsch, *op. cit. ibidem*.

¹³⁶ Zaki Laïdi, (ed.), *Géopolitique du sens* (Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), and Zaki Laïdi, *Un monde privé de sens* (Paris: Hachette, 2001).

¹²⁶ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 62

¹²⁷ Robert Frank, *op. cit.*, 63

¹²⁸ Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), 130.

¹²⁹ Here, the (mere) cooperation. There, the integration (as common ambition).

The modern region as an innovative fact transcends a desire for peace and the question of values when political regimes decide to regionalize themselves. The spectrum is wide: democratic practices and values that are sometimes criterionized – the 1998 European Summit –, at times authoritarian forms – several SCO members – but still open – the SCO admits democratic India in 2017 –, pragmatism – association of disparate regimes – ASEAN 1967–1999 –, some members coming in shortly after a *coup* – Myanmar –, and post-authoritarianism assertions in South America.

This meaning is that given by modern regions to the space in which they ascribe. The nature of this meaning, its origin, its coherence, its solidity or its durability, its capacity to communicate itself to other neighbors in concentric circles, this is its link with an interregional power strategy.

Why define regions (this article's title question) ? In order to understand the reasons for the gradual but profound transformation of State relations among neighbors.

Is it the culmination of an evolution begun by a peace which did not work – Westphalia –, the differed reaction to a universal peace which failed – League of Nations – or which disappoints by its very indirect impact – the UN ? Or is it above all a regional fact which has interfered/mingled between the sum of Nation-States and of inter-governmental relations ?

Unresolved in Europe – union of nations or of States ? – these questions are uneasy to resolve in Asia – the ASEAN associates projects; the CICA promotes mutual trust; the SCO coordinates fights against three threats to States. The tension between integration and cooperation is attenuated thanks to the concept of regional construction. The use of a term in the singular – construction/dynamic – avoids the hesitation from the outset between degrees/progress of a phenomenon. The link between modern regions and constructivist analysis suggests the same conceptual register. Qualifying the regional dynamic as construction sheds light on, in both cases – cooperation, integration –, a phenomenon of change, of overcoming past obstacles to peace, and of opening towards concrete results through relations among neighbors.

To speak of modern regions is to notice their construction as an element of definition. To approach it as dynamic is to draw from geometry the nuances, centripetal and centrifugal, of this “transformation of declared intentions into effective changes”¹³⁷. Words are clarified by consensus as to their heuristic axiology. A region is at the same time an animated territory, a dynamic time-scale, a vision or a project, a fear and a solution. Its construction combines all of this in order to build a subsystem.

¹³⁷ William Ackermann, “Sociologie – Critique sociale” (Paris: Editions Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1975), 1085.

§6 – The construction dynamic is centripetal then centrifugal

A geometric analogy situates CA in a binary position. As the “pivot of history”¹³⁸, CA complements a periphery – Europe – or its amphibious equivalent¹³⁹, Japan. The political scientist's approach to the dynamics of regulating tensions among neighbors presupposes, first the recentering on the Self through a centripetal capacity to invent, with one's “near abroad”, a new neighborhood; and then the centrifugal building, with this new neighborhood, of a common credibility and stability in order to engage the Other, beyond the region.

To examine this centripetal means with which to compete with this Other – inter-regional balance of power after the bipolarity of the GF¹⁴⁰ – presupposed a methodology of analysis as to the meaning of modern regions (supra §5). Regions are constructions of power embedded in relevant levels, national, regional, global.

Nolte¹⁴¹ thus analyzes the notion of “regional powers” as States within regions, approached not as multilateral constructs but as simple regional dynamics, a mere particular case of international dynamics. He analyzes such or such a State as a regional power in its region, its power having a meaning first of all in relation to its neighbors. He evokes the possible hegemony of a regional power within the collective institutions of that region.

This methodological adjustment avoids the bias of regional studies pre-concluding the relevance of the regional level: the institutionalized community-region.

In the emerging global governance structure (...), the new global governance structures (...) reflect the weight of these rising [regional/individual] powers as well as the fact that they *represent* different *world regions* in these more or less formalized international institutions.¹⁴²

It is from a power exercised in their region that Brazil in South America, Russia in Eurasia, India in South Asia, China in Asia, even Singapore in South-East Asia, South Africa in Southern Africa, South Korea in East Asia... constitute a new inter-regional south: the BRICKSA¹⁴³.

¹³⁸ Halford MacKinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal*, 23, no 4 (April 1904): 421–37.

¹³⁹ Nicolas Spykman, “Frontiers, Security, and International Organization,” *Geographical Review* 32, no. 3 (Summer 1942): 436–47.

¹⁴⁰ Sebastian Santander, (ed.). *Concurrences régionales dans un monde multipolaire émergent* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2016).

¹⁴¹ Detlef Nolte, “How to compare regional powers: analytical concepts and research tools,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no 3 (Summer 2010): 881–901.

¹⁴² Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 882, emphasis added.

¹⁴³ The acronym suggests (3rd way) a South gaining in commercial power: BRIC then BRIC(K)S(A)(M) (Brazil, India, China, South Africa), the R becoming Russia, the S Singapore, the K Korea, the M Mexico...

Their degree of formalization matters less than the fact that they are growing powers in global regions. This frees their epistemology from the weight of an institutional model of such or such particular region – the syndrome of a European mentor-model. *A propos* global regions, the plural is heuristically liberating. The pan-regional dynamic is twofold. It enables States in their own region to build this region, to make it credible and stable, economically prosperous and securely viable. I call it the centripetal dynamics: the constitution of Self. It enables these world regions to enter lastingly into the global game of competition among regions, especially an economic, commercial and therefore industrial competition. I call it the centrifugal dynamics: the contribution towards/against Others.

Nolte suggests it, by allusion to the centripetal before the centrifugal, but the dynamic duality is clearly present.

On the one hand, (...) regions will play an important role in the future world order, (...) we live in a world of regions (...) a 'multiregional system of international relation' is in the making. On the other hand, (...) the rise of regional powers (...): [w]hat consequences for the corresponding regional orders (...) repercussions for the global order... more conflict-prone?¹⁴⁴

The methodological difficulty is however twofold. One must identify regional, or medium, or individual powers, compare them, and link them to the concept of power. The power structure is international and regional, and its distribution is polarized. The capacity of an actor in a region, and that of a region in the world, to exercise a leadership of influence is no longer essentially military – Russia is struggling in the CSTO; the USA dominates in NATO but NATO is not regional. This capacity is political, it is the capacity to weigh on decisions of global impact, firstly economic, and to win the race for macro-economic indicators.

Complexity is not a prohibitive obstacle to analysis. Where Nolte sees a difficulty, I suggest merely a reflection.

The relation between the regional power and the corresponding region can be ambiguous... Regions can reduce rather than increase the power projection of regional powers on the global level.¹⁴⁵

In the centripetal construction of the regional capacity or power – a State in this region; a grouping of states in this region? – a multiplier lever intervenes, before the centrifugal phase. The lever of a privileged axis, which anchors this construction

around two – or three – States in the region¹⁴⁶. These can be aspirations as much as actual achievements of regional power. The hypothesis of the multi-regionalization of the world is a strong one. On the one hand, each world region lets such an axis of States emerge in a post-war context – in Europe, Germany and France in the 1960s; in Asia, China and Russia in the 2000s –; and on the other hand each region shows its ambition to influence the world through interregional relations – Europe and Asia in ASEM; Eurasia and Asia in the SCO...

A material form of power – commercial/industrial – is at the service of a political ambition of regulation/domination of others. China herein combines trading openness – 1980s –, economic growth – 1990s –, commercial domination – 2000s –, logistical domination – 2010s –, an ambition for political domination – 2020s...

Regional power – that, centripetal, of a State/axis in the region; that, centrifugal, of the region in the world – requires material resources and the recognition of this power by other regions¹⁴⁷. Overall, it needs both an objective, even quantifiable dimension, for example trade, and an ideational, subjective dimension of acceptance and of legitimacy. The stake of this legitimacy is precisely the plurality of regions. The transition from the 20th to the 21st century transforms a global bipolar order, temporarily unipolarized in 1991 – demise of one bloc – into a multi-regional order which replaces a bipolar *confrontation* with an interregional *cooperation*.

Yet, in defining a regional power, Nolte¹⁴⁸ defines less a modern region than a powerful State in a region – by its demography, its economy, its army. Nolte's regional powers fit into the existing world power order.

My modern regions, by contrast, innovate beyond this existing order by inventing new forms of interaction among neighbors, forms that have never existed in history, by seeking to compete with other regions in power – commercial power, not firstly military power.

The question is no longer that of a pluri-imperial world order – centrifugal empires or projected overseas as colonial empires or blocs of the CW – but that of a pluri-regional world. In such a novel world order, modern regions compete without conquering each other or invading their physical

¹⁴⁶ Cf. (§6 of “How to define a region ?”) the invention of regional integrating axes.

¹⁴⁷ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 887.

¹⁴⁸ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 893.

¹⁴⁴ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 882.

¹⁴⁵ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 884.

space¹⁴⁹. The nuance between middle and regional powers keeps the former as classic powers, therefore dated ones; and sees in the latter new powers, therefore innovative ones.

Regional powers, in contrast to middle powers, (...) bear a special responsibility for regional stability... [and] order in the region.¹⁵⁰

Analyzing the role of a state in a region, Nolte only indirectly evokes the innovation which, according to me, characterizes fully a modern region. The leadership exercised in a region by a State depends nowadays on the construction of the region, more than in the region.

Such a state should... demonstrate i/ a willingness... to assume the role of regional leader (...) [and] should be ii/ acceptable to its neighbors (...) as a leader.¹⁵¹

This is the historical change (§4) necessary for the emergence of modern regions. The lasting inflexion in the will of one or more neighbors, in the perception and in the trust on the part of other States in the region. Extra-regional or global credibility or acceptability is no longer sufficient.

To acquire regional power, not that of a State in the region but that of a region in the world, resources – material or immaterial – and perceptions – subjective, cultural – of legitimacy are needed. In Europe, Germany is legitimate but one cannot imagine the EU without Belgium. In Asia, China is legitimate but one cannot imagine the SCO without Kazakhstan. In Eurasia, Russia is legitimate¹⁵² but one cannot imagine the CSTO without Uzbekistan.

Nolte's methodological reflection does not see the institutional dimension as a key resource of regional power, which derives *ex-post* from the acceptance by neighbors to build the region together¹⁵³. The institutionalization of regions does not create the "cooperative hegemony"¹⁵⁴ of one member. It makes such a hegemony directly impossible, and even illegitimate.

The question is the emergence of a multipolar, pluri-regional order around regional axes. Not a multipolar "cartel"¹⁵⁵ but a concert of new regions inserting themselves lastingly between Nation-States and global governance. Why define

these new regions? In order to understand them. Because they matter.

Conclusion: Central Asia, a relevant example of a modern international region?

A *propos* modern international regions, if "to define is always in some way to self-appropriate"¹⁵⁶, two directions emerge. A political socio-history of the richness of the regional fact, the history of the regulation/integration of tensions/rivalries into new dynamics. Above all, a historical socio-politics of the complexity of this regional fact, contextualized in the medium term by the "concomitance" of "dependent" things¹⁵⁷ after the war.

The new Asia in general and the new Central Asia in particular illustrate this. Since 1991, this post-Sino-postsoviet space has concentrated initiatives completing the pluri-regionalization of the world. It has added a sub-regional system to "Eurasia in the making". And there was indeed a need to define what we were talking about.

Despite Bergson's warning against any finalized approach – "instead of seeking to resolve the question, [let us show] the illusion of those who ask it"¹⁵⁸ – and that attributed to Lacan – "one never asks questions other than those to which one already has the answers" – a modern international region is

a super-structural moment of awareness among neighbors as to an absence of other choice than to set up new interactions, hitherto non-existent in history, associating partners in an open - if not irreversible - manner, even at the price of preserving, or even strengthening, their individual sovereignty in order to integrate their rivalries into an innovative regulatory framework. (article's author)

To illustrate this object with the New Asia as a post-Sino-postsoviet, multi-sectoral and sub-systemic space, facilitates the understanding of the regional fact. As the latest region to reach the regional phenomenological scene, the new Asia of the center is a region still in search of a completed definition, if not any more in search of authors.

Ethics and consent statement

Ethical approval and consent statement were not required

Data availability statement

No data associated with this article

¹⁴⁹ This has been confirmed since 2022 by Russia's loss of status in regional organizations – CIS, SCO and especially the EAEU. Michaël Levystone, *Asie centrale : le réveil* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2024), 271.

¹⁵⁰ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 891.

¹⁵¹ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 891.

¹⁵² The decline in this legitimacy since 2022 only generates a shift towards Kazakhstan, or another State, simply taking over the baton of the relay race in the construction of the modern region.

¹⁵³ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 894–896.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Pedersen, "Cooperative Hegemony: power, ideas and institutions in regional integration," *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 677–96.

¹⁵⁵ Detlef Nolte, *op. cit.*, 896.

¹⁵⁶ Marcel Prélôt, "Politique – La science politique," (Paris: Editions Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1975), 910.

¹⁵⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), 130.

¹⁵⁸ Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1940), 55.

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The aim of this article is to investigate from a cross-disciplinary perspective and an inductive approach, why and how to define the regionalization process in Central Asia ("the New Asia as a post-Sino post-Soviet entity"). By this innovation, nation-states are building cooperative neighborhoods, no longer dwelling in zero-sum competition. Such breakthrough in modern regions like CA is characterized by changes in the function of borders, the features of sovereignty, the military nature of interactions, increasingly complex identities, the scope and meaning of national space, and institutionalized processes. All of them may contribute to a new system striving for peace and interregional balance; they suggest a pattern of association which in theory could combine individual sovereignty with an innovative regulatory framework.

Further comments and suggestions:

- Rather than "rupture" as a shattering of matters or structures with little prospect, why not use the more positive "innovative breakthrough"?
- "LAA" is "Latin American Association".
- Replace acronyms e.g. PCW or CW...with full names.
- Re. methodology, elaborate in footnote on what "international change" means in IR.
- Need for another footnote on the goals and means of international cooperation (with bibliographical references).
- On p. 7, explain "... regional coherence -implicit for the (...) EU until 2007...".

The relationship between note 58 (Durkheim, concomitance) and EC building stages is a little far-fetched; besides, dates are not so close and the time scale covers ca. 55 years: Benelux 1944 and 1958, Council of Europe 1949, ECSC 1952, CSCE/OSCE early 1970s-late 1990s, EFTA 1960...

- P. 9, either change "negentropic" for word with a clearer meaning, or have a footnote to detail the need for it.

- In following pages, e.g. p. 17, need for an elaboration/a footnote on power in IR, not by the dated references of classical early-mid- or even late 20th century sociology or law, but in more recent IR pieces on power as relational (cf. Stefano Guzzini, etc.), on trust in IR, and on international legitimacy.

Indeed, rather skip several references in the bibliography to outdated textbooks/essays from the 1970s or even the early 20th century.

- Avoid quoting PhD dissertations.

- P. 21, footnote 14, need to select appropriate, updated, and full references of works by Wallace and Telo.

- P. 22 write out dates in footnote 22. And pick updated references instead of those in footnotes 25 and 26.

- Take advantage of footnote 28 on "Change" to summon up CONTEMPORARY references on international change, e.g. Barry Buzan and Mathias Albert on "Differentiation: a sociological approach to international relations" (EJIR, 2010, 16-3), and various other pieces that bring sociology to IR...

- P. 18, ESSENTIAL: on "multi-regionalization of the world" and "interregional cooperation", add fundamental references to B. Hettne on interregional, R. Higgott on East Asia and US IPE, F. Söderbaum on Africa and micro-regionalism, and P. Katzenstein on regionalism in Asia in comparative perspective...

- Do not forget Mario Telo, ed., EU and New regionalism: Competing regionalism and Global governance in a post-Hegemonic era (Ashgate, 2014). And other pieces on post-hegemonic regionalism (such as A. Acharya's multiplex world), as both a theory-based concept and a strategy, a manifest of governance that gives new meaning and value to the regional space as one of action and contestation...

Overall a very stimulating piece combining history, IR, and public policy-making.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?

Yes

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: IR and international political sociology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 24 January 2025

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- This paper proceeds with an alternative view towards the construction of regions, and provides methodological and epistemological perspectives. The discourse involves a number of circumstances, based upon the Western political and social science features. Paper suggests a broader viewpoint about modern regions, regional systems and their structures.
- The author compares various regional frameworks along with their historical background to illustrate the evolvement of the regions from the past outlooks to the present scenarios.
- There persists a specific focus on Russia and China as key elite actors in the region, to the detriment of other influential players, who have been attempting to reconstruct and reshape Central Asian region as well in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War.
- While contemplating the region through the lens of political integration and social constructions, the latest geopolitical and geoeconomics events should also be taken into account; they continue to heavily contribute into the overall standing of Central Asian region and result in the complex foreign political decisions taken by the regional leadership.
- At the same time, the paper mentions the attempt to engineer the concept of the New Asia without delving into specific details, its origins or methods. Other aspect might include a question about the process of differentiation in CA region and how it can be achieved.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?

Yes

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: International relations, geopolitics, Central Asian countries, European Union countries, regional security issues and integration issues

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
