

**THE LIMITS OF HEGEMONIC REGIONALISM FOR
EXPLAINING REGION-BUILDING: A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC
READING OF THE RED SEA COUNCIL**

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The limits of hegemonic regionalism for explaining region-building: A counter-hegemonic reading of the Red Sea Council

In the last few years, the Red Sea has witnessed unprecedented attention from scholars and policymakers. However, this does not preclude the fact that it has held enormous importance for the actors surrounding it long before. Yet, it has never qualified as a region due to a worldview deployed by hegemonic regionalism that determines what qualifies as a region. This article seeks to explain why hegemonic regionalism is ill-suited to explain regionalism in the Red Sea. We propose a theoretical framework establishing the distinct elements of hegemonic regionalism and how they have been countered by other perspectives. Then we turn towards the Red Sea Council to discuss its emergence and how it challenges the key elements of hegemonic explanations.

Keywords: Red Sea, hegemonic regionalism, region-building, Red Sea Council, regional order, counter-hegemonic regionalism

Os limites do regionalismo hegemónico para explicar a construção regional: Uma leitura contra-hegemónica do Conselho do Mar Vermelho

Nos últimos anos, o Mar Vermelho tem sido alvo de uma atenção sem precedentes por parte de académicos e decisores políticos. No entanto, nunca se qualificou como uma região devido a uma visão do mundo utilizada pelo regionalismo hegemónico que determina o que se qualifica como região. Este artigo procura explicar por que razão o regionalismo hegemónico não é adequado para explicar o regionalismo no Mar Vermelho. Propomos um quadro teórico que estabelece os elementos distintos do regionalismo hegemónico e a forma como foram contrariados por outras perspetivas. Em seguida, voltamo-nos para o Conselho do Mar Vermelho para discutir a sua emergência e a forma como desafia os elementos-chave das explicações hegemónicas.

Palavras-chave: Mar Vermelho, regionalismo hegemónico, construção regional, Conselho do Mar Vermelho, ordem regional, regionalismo contra-hegemónico

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The most pernicious sea in Africa's history may well be the Red Sea. This thin line of water has been deemed to be more relevant for defining where Africa ends than all the evidence of geology, geography, history, and culture.
(Mazrui, 1992, p. 56)

During the past years, the Red Sea has witnessed an unprecedented level of attention from scholars, analysts, and policymakers. Developments such as the intervention of Saudi Arabia – and other Arab states – in the internal conflict in Yemen, coupled with the pressures of Arab states on the countries of the Horn of Africa to cut ties with Iran and the crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, have awakened a renewed interest in the area.

Up until then, the Red Sea has been conceived as a mere water strip, with the main function of allowing the passage of international trade cargo and oil tankers from the Far East and the Gulf towards Europe. Some attention was directed to the region in the mid-2000s due to the recurrence of attacks against this transportation by Somali pirates. Consequently, the Red Sea was a mere scenario where Western (but also Chinese and Russian) ships deployed international operations to safeguard the freedom of maritime transport, securitizing the sea in this way.

This renewed attention from analysts and academia, does not preclude the fact that the Red Sea has held enormous importance for the actors surrounding it during all these decades. Relations between the two shores date centuries back and were strengthened after the expansion of Islam, together with its culture and language, although other issues such as the slave trade contributed to creating a divide between them (Meester et al., 2018). In fact, looking back in time we can ascertain the importance that the Red Sea has had for countries like Egypt, whose “Arab Lake” policy developed during Nasser’s reign was aimed at countering Israel by using its geostrategic position at the Strait of Tiran. No less important were regional dynamics during the Cold War, when regional dynamics became entangled with global superpower dynamics. The emergence of Soviet-allied regimes in South Yemen and Ethiopia pushed Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to get involved in regional conflicts. These interventions included supporting the Somali invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia or the Eritrean resistance movements, with the twofold aim of countering the expansion of communism but also gaining strategic allies and areas of influence. This was done using tools such as Pan-Arab solidarity, which pushed some Horn countries to join the Arab League, in what Aliboni sees as “an Arab policy, part of the ‘great’

inter-Arab politics” (Aliboni, 1985, p. 69). Yet, we still speak nowadays about “involvement”.

This importance has been captured by the work of authors such as Mordechai Abir (1972), Roberto Aliboni (1985), Ali Mazrui (1992), Daniel Kendie (1990), Jeffrey Lefebvre (1998) and Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma C. Murphy (2011), and from a more historical point of view by those of Jonathan Miran (2014) and Alexis Wick (2016). However, as pointed out by De Waal (2017, p. 5), “the Red Sea is seen as a fundamental socio-cultural gulf dividing Africa from south-west Asia; similarly, it divides the domains of scholarly policy expertise” due to the fact that “it is divided between two continents”. This point, as we will see throughout the paper, is clearly informed by a worldview deployed by hegemonic regionalism which has determined what qualifies as a region and what does not.

Nevertheless, as mentioned at the beginning, some attention has been paid to the Red Sea in recent years, not as a region but rather as a certain kind of regional arena. Early analyses from this period have focused on the rivalry between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Al-Maashi, 2017) and in the Horn as a scenario for what has been termed the ‘New Middle East Cold War’ (Gause, 2017). Much of the recent literature has emphasized the imbalance between the two shores of the sea. Expressions such as “East Africa becomes a testing ground” (Dudley, 2018) or “the new scramble for Africa” have been widely used by the media and think tank analysis, depicting a play where Gulf countries and other regional actors such as Turkey or Iran are full agents while the African countries are passive receivers of those policies. Without denying the clear differences in terms of GDP, military power, or size of the economy (Meester et al., 2018; Vertin, 2019a), these are not the sole elements that matter in defining and implementing regional policies, lest to understand how those unfold.

This brings into question the inadequacy of applying the analysis of Middle East geopolitics to the Red Sea and to the countries of the Horn of Africa, whose form of political marketplace cannot be grasped by those analyses (De Waal, 2015). Events such as the reconfiguration of alliances in the Horn of Africa, with a new emergent tripartite between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia (Sharamo & Demissie, 2021) or the impact of the ongoing conflict in Tigray for the whole region cannot be explained by the involvement of Gulf countries. This current state makes necessary the development of other knowledge frameworks to understand current regional dynamics. These alternative perspectives have been better addressed by other authors who have sought to approach the Red Sea as an object of study in itself, be it through frameworks such as the regional se-

curity complex or addressing an emerging political and security architecture in the region that spans over the Africa-Arabian peninsula divide to encompass the geographic area named Red Sea as a whole (De Waal, 2019; Institute for Security Studies, 2020; Melvin, 2019; Mahmood, 2019; AA.VV., 2020; Verhoeven, 2018).

This article seeks to explain why hegemonic regionalism is not well suited to explain regionalism in the Red Sea and in areas outside the West more broadly. Firstly, we define which are the distinct elements of what has been coined as hegemonic regionalism, namely a standard teleological model, considering regions as naturally given, and institutionalism as the sole valid model. For each of these elements, we discuss how they have been challenged by alternative perspectives seeking to understand regional processes. Secondly, we turn towards the Red Sea Council, briefly discussing how it emerged and the context which made it possible to then move towards how it challenges the elements identified in hegemonic regionalism as being constitutive of a region. Finally, we conclude by highlighting how this case study can inform the advancement towards a counter-hegemonic study of regionalism.

The limits of hegemonic regionalism

What is hegemonic regionalism?

We understand hegemonic regionalism as traditional regional building projects defined by defensive regionalism and liberal governance. This understanding has defined how regional projects have come to be considered during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, with particular attention to the trade liberalization wave in the 90s and the focus on the “advanced industrial states as the systemic rule makers par excellence” (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012, p. 11). In this sense, the term post-hegemonic regionalism means:

The regional structures characterized by hybrid practices as a result of a partial displacement of dominant forms of (US-led) neoliberal governance in the acknowledgement of other political forms of organization and economic management of regional (common) goods. (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012, p. 11)

But it also refers to the theoretical perspectives that have studied those regionalist processes and have endorsed those understandings as the dominant ones (neoliberalism as a political and economic paradigm, as a model of market democracy, and as a sustainable and inclusive model of development (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012, p. 11), labelling alternative and non-fitting regionalist projects as an *absence* of regionalism. These theoretical perspectives include (neo)-realism and

neoliberalist approaches but also the English school and certain currents inside the New Regionalist Approach (NRA). This second understanding is the one we will be using throughout the article, although is attached to the first one.

Characteristics of hegemonic regionalism

The perspectives of what we have termed here as “hegemonic regionalism” share some of the distinct elements that define what constitutes a region. We have grouped them into three main themes that encompass different characteristics of mainstream regionalist approaches.

Standard teleological model

Stein (2003, p. 7) writes that “there is no reason to assume that security regimes develop in a linear sequence to become ‘security communities’”, yet all the analysis of regionalism has been built based on that end. One of the most influential concepts in the development of regionalist knowledge has been the metanarrative of Bela Balassa. His model distinguishes five sequential degrees of economic integration: free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union, and complete economic integration (Legrenzi, 2008, p. 113). This metanarrative posits that “all processes of economic integration seek to achieve the same end, that is, full integration” (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 10). This, in fact, points to one of the most often denounced pitfalls of ‘old regionalism’ as purporting a standard teleological model that needed to be followed in order to achieve full *regionhood*, which in this case is the one represented by the European Union (EU). Despite these denouncements, many NRA scholars failed to overcome this bias and, in fact, endorsed it. Examples are Fawcett and Hurrell’s definition of regionalism, Hettne and Söderbaum’s definition of ‘regionness’, and Adler and Barnett’s concept of ‘security community’.¹

In her study on Arab regionalism, Ferabolli criticizes that “the acceptance of Balassa’s premise by IR scholarship – that all region making processes are heading to the same point – has prevented the discipline from properly addressing the phenomenon of regionalism” (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 12). Despite the development of the concept by different authors, the metanarrative has not changed: a continuum of five different levels marking different degrees of evolution, where five

¹ Fawcett and Hurrell divided the concept of regionalism into five different categories: regionalization, regional awareness, regional inter-state cooperation, state-promoted regional integration, and regional cohesion. Hettne and Söderbaum developed the concept of regionness dividing it into five levels: regional space, regional complex, regional society, regional community, and region-state. Lastly, Adler and Barnett designed security communities on a three-tier basis: precipitating factors prompting states to coordinate their policies; “structural” variables of power and ideas and the “process” variables related to transactions, international organizations, and social learning; and the consolidation of the two previous tiers leading to the development of trust and collective identity formation (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 11).

means the maximum degree of integration, i.e., the EU (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 12). New regionalist approaches denounced this Eurocentric bias, which has led to depictions of other models of regionalism/regionalization as “loose, informal, or failed” (Söderbaum, 2013, p. 14), reflecting a “teleological prejudice informed by the assumption that ‘progress’ in regional organisation is defined in terms of EU-style institutionalisation” (Söderbaum, 2013, p. 14). Contrarily, new approaches have re-thought regional space, moving “away from sovereignty transfer and political unification within inter-state regional organizations” (Söderbaum, 2013, p. 10), making possible “to speak of relevant and truly regional dynamics and patterns that are not per se mirrored by formal regional efforts and projects” (Söderbaum, 2013, p. 16). As Ferabolli puts it, the study of regionalism “must be done for the sake of grasping the nuances, idiosyncrasies and internal contradictions of a given region making process, not defining how close (or far) they are to the EU in its idealized form” (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 12). An alternative view of regionalism aims to overturn this teleological progression towards an ideal model and consider regions as “work in progress [...] perpetually unfinished [and porous] projects, [...] interlinking, influencing and being influenced regularly by other actors and regions” (Fawn, 2009, p. 14, quoted in Ferabolli, 2015, p. 15).

Regions as naturally given

Geographical determinism has impregnated the study of regionalism for decades, by defining subjectively constructed ‘given regions’ and imposing them on the reality. A good example of this is the term “Middle East”, around which there is no accord neither among scholars of the area nor among the individuals belonging to it. The artificial character of these constructs is shown by the fact that their borders and names are defined through a power-knowledge relationship (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 27). This geographical determinism has denied oceans and deserts their capacity to be considered as regions (Bentley, 1999) and is even present in some of the most successful regionalist theories, namely Buzan and Waever’s “Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)”. Despite being one of the most prolific regional theories and having been praised by some authors as “an advancement in the study of the field” (Acharya, 2004, p. 4), it is an eminently geographical theory. This view divides the world into different regional security complexes (RSCs), defined as “sets of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 44). Although it has the merit of trying to overcome the Eurocentric bias mentioned above by establishing criteria for its self-definition rooted within in-

digenous patterns of security interdependence (Acharya, 2004, pp. 4-5), its strong geographical determinism prevents it from further exploration.

For Buzan and Waever, threats travel easily over short distances than over long ones (2003, p. 45), stressing geographic proximity as a key variable in region-building. The entities that compose an RSC “must possess a degree of security interdependence sufficient both to establish them as a linked set and to differentiate them from surrounding security regions” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 48). In other words, RSCs are mutually exclusive. Other authors have countered this view, stressing that geographical adjacency is a “conceptual presupposition” (Castellano da Silva, 2012, p. 13) or that RSCs can be exclusive or overlapping, depending on the security externalities linking the RSC (Lake & Morgan, 1997). For Buzan and Waever, “dissolving the levels of analysis with the argument that ‘geographical proximity is not a necessary condition for a state to be a member of a complex’” destroys the hierarchy of levels of analysis inside the RSC and “voids the concept of region, which if it does not mean geographical proximity, does not mean anything” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 80). Here we have the perfect definition of ‘given region’.

Against this backdrop, new regionalist studies established “processes and social constructions” as one of the main defining factors of a region (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 23; Hettne, 2003, p. 28) and, therefore, not naturally ‘given’. In fact, they are “made, remade, and unmade – intentionally or non-intentionally – in the process of global transformation, by collective human action and identity formation” (Söderbaum, 2015, p. 18). Consequently, regionalism scholars will abandon the quest to define regions and regionalism since the concept is an “increasingly diffuse and unmanageable” one (Bach, 2015, p. 4). Defining regionalism as a social phenomenon “challenges essentialist conceptions of the region as ‘a limited number of states linked together by a geographic relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence’”, as Nye said (Bach, 2015, p. 6). Besides, the fact that there are no ‘natural’ or ‘given’ regions results in unclear spatial delimitations. This last idea has been developed by Adler and Greve (2009), who contend that practices and security mechanisms influence how we determine regional boundaries. “Boundaries between regions are [...] determined not only by the values and norms member states of a region share, but also by the things they do, by what they practice” but also who is “part of ‘us’ or ‘them’” (p. 81). This turn into practice is worth it to be highlighted as it brings a new perspective to study security allowing us to go beyond the focus on linguistic practices of traditional securitization research to focus on the everyday production of security (Bueger, 2015, p. 9). The approaches based on practice claim that the speech acts described

in the traditional securitization account are the exception rather than the norm and prefer to focus on routinized performances. In the same way in which security is practiced and not articulated, the same could be said about regions: they exist beyond a formal declaration.

Constructivist scholars focused on the idea that regions are, above all, “social and cognitive constructs that are rooted in political practice” (Katzenstein, 2002, p. 105). As such, they are shaped by region-builders, defined as “political actors who, as part of some political project, see it in their interest to imagine and construct a region” (Söderbaum, 2015, p. 18). These processes can be endogenous or exogenous (Hettne, 2003). However, region making processes do not develop in an “ideational vacuum” but they “come into existence already embedded in a conceptual and ideational framework that is constitutive of their emergence” (Feraboli, 2015, p. 37). This perspective is at odds with constructivist understandings such as Neumann’s region-building approach which sees regions as “just a passive surface, awaiting the region maker’s penetrating act which will endow it with meaning” (Feraboli, 2015, p. 45).

From a post-structuralist perspective, both subjects and objects are constituted in discourse, which means that they cannot precede regions because their existence is dependent upon the existence of a region (Feraboli, 2015, p. 39). Hence, “regions are the structural effects of the reiterative regional discursive practices that make regions appear to exist” (Feraboli, 2015, p. 38). Discourses are here understood as something else than language or speech: they are the “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1982, p. 49, quoted in Feraboli, 2015, p. 18). Following Foucault, these discourses are not the mere result of the institutions and social practices in which they take place, but they contribute to the way in which these institutions and social practices emerged and continued their existence (Vigo de Lima, 2010, p. 53, quoted in Feraboli, 2015) but they also define who has the power to speak (Feraboli, 2015, p. 39). Therefore, a region is the performative materialization of a regional discourse through reiterative regional discursive practices.

In this sense, regions do not exist apart from the mental representations human beings make of them. When these representations are articulated around cumulative sets of reiterative regional discursive practices, they lead to the materialization of the region. This process is inherently political because regions are sites of permanent contestation, which makes the performative materialization of regions a process fundamentally embedded in power relations. (Feraboli, 2015, p. 185)

Institutional regionalism as the sole valid model

Both neoliberal and institutional approaches understand regionalism as a synonym for cooperation. That is so much as this since the existence of a region was only understood through the materialization in an international organization, for which a certain level of cooperation is required. This is not the case for other currents such as neorealism, which have understood the international system and the regional systems as anarchic formations determined by the distribution of power among their units, which is what ultimately produces “this pattern of profound and pervasive political conflict among the actors (and not the other way around)” (Morgan, 2003, p. 52). Buzan and Waever also acknowledge this in their theory when establishing that this pattern generates internally in the region “by a mixture of history, politics and material conditions” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 47). For Krause, regional order-building is foremost a political project, bigger than “a simple coming together of pre-given and instrumentally rational actors who are trapped within the anarchic logic of conflict” (Krause, 2003, p. 104). This conception allows for moving the focus off the state as the object of security and instead seeing it as an instrument for its achievement, an argument in line with the one advanced by Mohammed Ayoob, for whom “the ultimate issue for building regional security is not the security of the regimes or states per se [...], but the overall place of violence in political life” (Krause, 2003, p. 105), which in the case of authoritarian regimes has resulted in involvement in regional conflictual behaviour. For post-structuralists, regionalism includes both cooperative and conflictive regional dynamics. A region can only be understood as the result of this “perpetual tension” and “permanently ongoing process” (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 156) between pro-regionalism forces and those against it.

The focus on cooperation has resulted in equating regionalism with regional organizations and a great deal of the scholarship has been done based on this premise, which has led, as we saw before, to term most regionalism outside the West as ‘failed’. New regionalist approaches emphasized the need to not take regions for granted or analyse them as regional organisations. For them, regional inter-state organisations are less important in comparison to the processes that underlie regionalization in a particular geographical space (Söderbaum, 2012, p. 18). This resulted in a greater interest in informal regionalization, which acknowledges the role of transnational non-state actors operating at the regional level, within as well as beyond state-led institutional frameworks. “Within each regional project (official or not), several competing regionalizing actors with different regional visions and ideas coexist” (Boas et al., 2003, p. 201).

The distinction between regionalism and regionalization is a fundamental cleavage. A consensus understands regionalism as the ideas, identities and ideologies related to a regional project, whereas regionalization is most often defined as the process of regional interactions creating a regional space (or the outcome). What is more, “the focus on the regionalism-regionalization nexus, is also durably contributing to call attention to issues that ‘put... mainstream approaches to a serious test’ while highlighting that ‘there are many roads to regionalism and not all of them lead to new forms of regionalism’” (Börzel, 2012, p. 283, quoted in Bach, 2015, p. 9). This dichotomy has led to the equation of regionalism/formal/state and regionalization/informal/non-state, which results in the exclusion of non-state actors from political agency. However, from a post-structuralist perspective, the separation between regionalism and regionalization is not sustained because it implies the separation between discourse and practice when they are in fact mutually constitutive (Ferabolli, 2015, p. 16).

How the Red Sea Council challenges hegemonic regionalism

When addressing the Red Sea as a regional formation some obstacles arise. From the point of view of hegemonic regionalism, there is no such thing as a region in this area. In this regard, the Red Sea follows the trend of other regions such as the Middle East (and its subregions). Many authors have pointed to the absence of regionalism in the region, including Aarts (1999) who labelled it as “a region without regionalism”. Other authors arrived at that conclusion through the study of the secondary institutions developed in such regional international society, that is, international organizations (Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2018; Legrenzi & Calculli, 2013). While Maoz (2003, p. 34) considers that “what marks the formation of the region as a whole is the establishment of the Arab League in 1945, [...] it is difficult to talk of a region before 1947”. Contrastingly, from an English school perspective, Valbjorn (2009) discusses how a regional international society was shaped through many different steps which predate the surge of modern Arab nationalism. A certain regional identity in the Middle East does not stem solely from the creation of the Arab League and revolutionary Pan-Arabism but can be traced back in history. However, the focus of the English school on states and secondary institutions leads to the analysis of international organizations as the main form of regionalism in the area, which again shows it as a failure (Murden, 2009, p. 118).

Other authors have situated the region in what has been called “the mismatch between failed regionalism and a growing regionalization” (Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2018, p. 2). At the same time, it cannot be denied that societies in the broader Middle East regions share historical, cultural, political, and personal ties that allow for the construction of a common space. As Santini posits, “times of increased regionalisation can actually correspond to a slowing down of institutional integration” (Santini, 2017, p. 96), particularly if 1) heightened regionalisation is perceived as an ideational threat to regime security and 2) when the identification of enemies spans different ideological camps. Prominent among the application of new approaches is Silvia Feraboli’s study on Arab regionalism. In *Arab Regionalism. A Post-Structural Perspective* (2015), the author criticizes the tendency to take Arab nationalist discourse as the measure of Arab regionalism, which repeatedly leads to qualifying Arab regionalism as failed (p. 5). Feraboli applies a post-structuralist methodology and studies the different material and non-material dimensions that construct the Arab region, that is, reiterative regional discursive practices (p. 18).

In the case of the Red Sea, few have studied the area from a regional point of view. One of them is the work of Ehteshami and Murphy which addresses the international politics of the Red Sea, assuming that it forms an identifiable unit, “some type of sub-regional configuration with identifiable sub-regional tendencies”, although without compromising on if that translates into a specific regional character (Ehteshami & Murphy, 2011, p. 7). Following the RSC approach, they analyse the Red Sea from a statist point of view, focusing on the importance of the colonial state, its global importance during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, the flows of arms, security and militarization, territorial conflicts, economy, and transportation networks. Another study is the one presented by Verhoeven (2018). In this article, the author addresses the different and competing visions for regional order being deployed in the Red Sea, understanding the interactions between both shores “not a transient phenomenon but the result of structural shifts and long-term gambits by regional powers that accompany a history of interregional connectivity to provide an explanation that goes beyond transactional geopolitical jockeying” (Verhoeven, 2018, p. 3).

The Red Sea Council

On January 6, 2020, the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden was officially launched in Riyadh. As its name indicates, the council is formed by the coastal states of the Red Sea, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen (the internationally

recognized government) (Bagnetto, 2020). The new organization was the fruit of several years of work and negotiations among littoral states in the pursuit of the best model to govern the region. The new organization has twelve objectives aimed at improving cooperation and coordination among member states, but it has a strong focus on governing security by guaranteeing the safety of international navigation and preventing threats stemming from terrorism, piracy, smuggling, cross-border criminality, and illegal migration (Silva Sánchez, 2020). But the new organization is modelled upon the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and commanded by Saudi Arabia, which has imposed its preferred model over the preferences of the rest of the member states.

However, Saudi Arabia was not alone on that trip. The leading voice in developing a regional institution has been Egypt, and it has been so for long time. But gradually Saudi Arabia took upon the leadership of the project in 2018, aligning it with its interests. Saudi and Egyptian visions are opposing ones: while Egyptian diplomats defended a more informal approach in the shape of a forum to discuss common issues, ranging from environmental pollution to conflict management, the Saudis envisaged an organization mirroring the GCC, with a formal structure and focused on security issues. By April 2019 the Saudi delegates were already able to present a draft of the charter of the new organization and less than one year after, the project was already in motion. But this quickness did not come without concerns (Vertin, 2019b).

Crucial issues pertain to the membership of the organization, from which key regional actors have been left outside, including Ethiopia, Somaliland, Israel and, why not, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These exclusions already point out the deficits with which the organization has been born and which are at the core of the security governance that it seeks to deal with. The scope of the organization is also a source of disagreement. The Egyptian approach of a forum was widely supported by the African members, with the idea of establishing a looser and multidimensional framework to address issues of concern for all the members. The Saudi hierarchical and narrow approach does not suit the needs and interests of most of the countries, which have finally accepted to take part in it moved by the need to keep Saudi aid and favour. Sadly, what this new initiative seems to prove is that it is a mere instrument for Saudi policy and regional ambitions (Ylönen, 2020).

How the Red Sea Council challenges hegemonic regionalism explanations? A counter-hegemonic reading of the Red Sea

Once we have understood the basic characteristics of this new organization, we will carry out a counter-hegemonic reading of the Red Sea Council. We will do so by exploring how it challenges the three key elements of hegemonic regionalism underlined in the previous section and how its existence is better explained by alternative regionalist approaches.

Standard teleological model: a pipedream

The Red Sea Council challenges the standard teleological model proposed by hegemonic regionalism since it does neither aspire to integration among its member states nor to develop a security community as established in the literature. The fact that it follows the model of the GCC offers some lessons about the path that the nascent organization (in paper) can follow. On one side, the GCC, like most other regional organizations outside the West, is considered a failed one because it has been unable neither to achieve full integration nor progress enough in Balassa's scale. Many reasons have been laid out to explain that failure, but prominent among them is the fact that Saudi Arabia acts as the hegemon inside the organization, which pushes the rest of the countries away from stronger integration (Ulrichsen, 2018). Since the Red Sea Council is based on that same premise, it is hard to imagine how it can follow that teleological model when other member states are stronger countries (in political and military terms) than those belonging to the GCC. On another side, the Red Sea Council has been felt as a Saudi imposition by the rest of the member states against their own interests and preferences. In fact, many have accused Saudi Arabia of using it as an instrument in its confrontation with Iran, following much of its regional policy since 2015. As an Egyptian diplomat put it: "Iran is a problem. But it can't be the defining problem for the region, or for a Red Sea forum. You can't succeed by defining yourself only in opposition to something" (Vertin, 2019b, p. 21). These two reasons seem to pave the way for another inoperative and ineffective multilateral organization (if it ever enters into force).

The Red Sea Council also contests the EU standard model as the preferred option to be followed. This is clear in the answer to European insistence in developing a regional forum to address security issues: rejection of EU proposals, mediation, and any role it could play in such a formation. In fact, this rejection of the standard model is proven also by the rejection of coastal countries to acquiesce with the proposals put forward by both the African Union (AU) and the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (Vertin, 2019b, pp. 14-

17). Some countries went beyond and rejected to be part of the Council, such as Eritrea, which opposes the growing Saudi influence in the region (Fagan, 2020). Asserting their independence, the outcome of the process has been one entirely owned by the coastal countries, although it deviated from its original path as we saw in the previous section. In the preferred model by most littoral states, the formation would be simply an informal forum that allows for the exchange among state leaders and the building of trust between them, with no purpose of achieving or deepening that formation (Vertin, 2019b, p. 19). Hegemonic regionalism has been unable to explain this kind of regional dynamics and interactions which do not fit in the established frameworks and models, consequently labelling it as a lack of regionalism.

From a counter-hegemonic perspective, the Red Sea is a region in the making and the Red Sea Council is the materialization of the security practices of the coastal states. In fact, the emergence of this regional organization can be better understood as an ongoing process where the practices deployed by the different actors are entangled in a relational way and that can advance towards stronger integration, remain in the current state, or even disappear.

Not for granted: regions as social processes

The sole creation of the Red Sea Council is a challenge to the hegemonic regionalist narrative which understands regions as naturally given. As we have repeatedly pointed out, the Red Sea is considered a border, a division line between two continents and not a common space. Buzan and Waever show this clearly when they define the Middle East RSC as “a pattern of security interdependence that covers a region stretching from Morocco to Iran, including all of the Arab states plus Israel and Iran. Cyprus, *Sudan and the Horn proto-complex are not part of it*” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 187).² In fact, they discard the possibility of the Horn being a fourth subcomplex of the Middle East RSC in order “to concur with the firm consensus among the experts that the Horn subcomplex is part of Africa and should not be considered part of the Middle East” (Buzan & Waever, 2003, p. 187). This uncritical acceptance of the sacrosanct Western geographical division of the world resulted in a contradiction with the pre-eminence they give to geographical adjacency as a key element of an RSC and discredited their theory for many others in both sides of the academic spectrum (Castellano da Silva, 2012; Ferabolli, 2015). The history of the Red Sea shows that this understanding is far from accurate. For example, the Soviet understanding of geography worked differently: “[...] the Soviet view considers the entire western Indian Ocean re-

² Italics are mine for emphasis.

gion a single strategical arena. This view contrasts with the American tendency to divide the arena into several distinct sub-regions" (Aliboni, 1985, p. 31). This contrasting view lasts until today, as demonstrated by the great design of Russia connecting its naval presence from the Mediterranean until the Indian Ocean (Scott, 2022).

The denial of previous history is another mechanism that helps to obscure the regional character of the Red Sea. This is done by presenting current dynamics as new and unprecedented phenomena, focusing on particular issues and dynamics as detached from previous developments. But relations between the two shores go centuries back in time. In fact, the establishment of the Red Sea Council is the ultimate recognition of the *regionhood* of the Red Sea. Regions are historical contingencies, which means that most of the nowadays regions are the product of previous projects going back decades and even centuries (Söderbaum, 2015, p. 5). In this sense, the creation of the Red Sea Council as an instrument to manage regional security emboldens decades of different projects and proposals dealing with regional security and is, ultimately, the materialization of the security practices of certain regional actors.

If we turn towards the Ethiopian revolution of 1974, it is easily perceived the great impact that it had in the region since it entailed a change in the system of alliances. Aliboni considers the Ogaden war

as the last event of a long diplomatic chain orchestrated by the Saudis for the sake of their own security and supported by Sadat with the aim of leading a NATO-like, pro-Western Arab coalition which would show the West that the Arabs were capable of policing the area against the Soviets. (Aliboni, 1985, p. 111)

This deliberate interest in influencing regional dynamics leads Aliboni to say, about Saudi Arabia, that "this no longer appeared as a sub-regional scheme, part of its foreign policy, but as an Arab policy, part of the 'great' inter-Arab politics" (Aliboni, 1985, p. 69). Yet, we still speak about "involvement" nowadays. The Ogaden war resulted in the establishment of two opposite alliances: the radical front formed by Libya, Ethiopia and the PDRY which was formally established through the Tripartite Pact, and the moderate alliance between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan. So, all this Arab meddling in the Horn's affairs is not new and, same as today, it was viewed with preoccupation. "Pan-Arab assertiveness in Eritrea and Arab sponsorship of the sweeping Somali irredentism were bound to act as factors of serious disruption and continued disturbance to the OAU's principles of boundaries and non-interference" (Aliboni, 1985, p. 108). Consequently, the domestic interference of Gulf states, Iran and Turkey in the Somali federal

elections of 2018 should not come as a surprise, but rather as a clear reminder of past developments. Both the AU and the EU called on regional actors to stop interfering in voting and to refrain from backing their own candidates (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 21).

The defence pact signed between Egypt and Sudan in 1976 was conceived to guarantee the security of the Nile Valley for both countries, and we can see it as a clear precedent of the one they signed in 2021 (Egypt Independent, 2021). Both Sudan and Egypt have a distinct vision of the region, marked by the so-called Afro-Arab approach, conscious of the need to balance African and Arab interests to favour regional stability. This is determined not only by their dual Afro-Arab identity but also by reasons related to their very ontological security. But before, same as now, Saudi policies hurt Afro-Arab relations and failed to eradicate the communist presence in the area. Therefore, same as today,

despite the efforts made by the Arabs in extending aid and in supporting forms of political understanding within the Afro-Arab multilateral network, the African perception is inevitably affected by the grave and constant upsetting of OAU principles as a result of pan-Arab assertiveness in the Horn. (Aliboni, 1985, p. 110)

All the above are just some examples that speak about the intertwining of regional dynamics since decades in the Red Sea and that which have, ultimately, resulted in a formation like the Red Sea Council. A counter-hegemonic perspective acknowledges that the constellation of relationships and security practices in place is tantamount to a form of regionalism, one that does not require its institutionalisation to be considered as such.

Questioning institutional regionalism as the sole valid model

For years, the *regionhood* of the Red Sea has been denied on the basis that the absence of an international organization equates absence of regionalism. For instance, the EU Council stated in its Conclusions on the Horn of Africa/Red Sea of 25 June 2018 that

the absence of an organised and inclusive regional forum for dialogue and cooperation around the Red Sea impedes progress on a wide range of issues, including economic integration and regional peace and security. (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 3)

Hence, the EU says clearly that the absence of a regional multilateral organization impedes the consideration and discussion of regional issues and, consequently, does not recognize the area as a region. In the Conclusions of May 2021, in point 39 the Council refers to “the Red Sea region” and states its support to:

regionally-owned initiatives such as the Council of Arab and African States on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and the IGAD Red Sea Task Force, while promoting more inclusive formats. (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 12)

We can perceive this change of positioning as directly related to the establishment of a formal regional organization as the multilateral approach favoured by the EU.

However, this approach presents two questions: the first one is that there are already regional organizations seeking to govern regional security, including the AU, the IGAD and the LAS. The existence of these regional organizations has not guaranteed better governance of regional security, so the belief that another one will do so is completely baseless, particularly because these organizations are characterized by a reluctance to compromise on questions affecting national security and to relinquish national sovereignty (De Waal, 2019; Legrenzi, 2008). The second one is that this belief in institutionalisation as the sole solution for every problem has even justified the intention to enforce a regional institution by the EU.³

The resistance of regional countries, for whatever reasons, is already a challenge to this perspective. In fact, the idea of having a kind of forum to discuss common issues is not new at all. During the 60s and 70s, Saudi Arabia already laid some proposals to establish some governance in the region. Weber (2017, p. 4) contends that “the region around the Red Sea does not perceive itself to be a region, nor are there efforts to establish a collective security or common trade architecture”. However, the existence of regional awareness has been a constant since the 1960s.

Every coastal nation in the region lays claim to the intellectual genesis of Red Sea cooperation. The Eritreans cite a vision advanced by their president in 2008, the Egyptians and Yemenis point to respective efforts dating back to the 1970s. The Saudis peddle a fact sheet outlining half a dozen initiatives between 1956 and the present. While none of these came to fruition, a changing geopolitical context prompted renewed efforts toward multilateral governance in 2017. (Vertin, 2019b, p. 9)

Ultimately, the differences between the Egyptian and Saudi approaches explained above hold the key as to why this organization, as it is defined right now, might not have any history. Egypt was adamant about developing a perma-

³ The UE and Germany made efforts on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2018 to “brainstorming” with the concerned states. However, many of these key states, including Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti did not attend and those who did, expressed reservations (Vertin, 2019b, p. 14).

ment mechanism to deal with regional issues but running away from hierarchical structures and addressing other issues of interest for regional states beyond security. They were intent on this due to being conscious that a different format could force members into zero-sum postures and run contrary to their goal of building a common understanding (Vertin, 2019b, p. 19).

Even so, the Saudis proceeded with their idea, proving in the way that institutionalisation per se does not create regionalism but that other forms of regionalism are already existing in the region, being acknowledged by the actors taking part from it and being shaped in ways that hegemonic regionalist theories cannot fully grasp with limited worldviews. A counter-hegemonic reading not only understands the Red Sea Council as an indigenous pattern of regional governance (Acharya, 2004), but also acknowledges the different agencies taking place in shaping that regional order and how they unfold beyond the cooperation-conflict and hegemon-submissive binaries.

Concluding remarks: towards a counter-hegemonic regionalism approach

This article aimed to shed light on the emerging region in the Red Sea, represented by the ultimate manifestation of that regional character, that is, the Red Sea Council. We have laid out that hegemonic regionalism theories are unable to grasp different models and regional dynamics that do not fit the qualifying standards of region status. Therefore, three elements have been identified as the main focus of hegemonic regionalist explanations: 1) a standard teleological model, which presumes an evolution towards full integration as the maximum goal of regionalist projects; 2) the belief that regions are 'naturally given', informed by a Western geographical determinism that divides the world in spite of regional history, political and social dynamics, and regional identity; 3) institutionalism as the sole valid model for regional projects, that is the need for establishing regional institutions that account for the existence of a region.

However, we contend that to study regionalism in the Middle East and the Red Sea, it is necessary to acknowledge that regionalism per se is not a positive nor a negative phenomenon, and neither is an end in itself. Accepting that regions are social constructs shaped by regional discourses materialized in regional practices, defined by historical processes and in permanent contestation, allows the accommodation of other forms of regionalism that do not necessarily fit the paradigm of hegemonic regionalism. 'Liquid alliances'⁴ (Soler i Lecha, 2017) or

⁴ The promotion of alternative forms of regional cooperation when actors are prevented of taking full control of already established organizations.

‘virtual regionalism’⁵ (Russo & Stoddard, 2018) are other concepts that permit understanding the mechanisms of region-building in the Middle East, particularly because they explain better region-building by authoritarian actors. These concepts are becoming more relevant since regional dynamics are portrayed as “becoming increasingly blurred as sub-regions are transformed into the borderlands of specific regional cores” (Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2018, p. 2), as in the case of the Red Sea.

This paper aimed at showing the limits of hegemonic regionalism for explaining region-building in different geographic areas. The case of the Red Sea Council is of interest because it demonstrates how regions – and regional organizations as an individual manifestation of them – cannot be only explained by focusing on one parameter, be they geographical proximity or cooperative or conflictual dynamics, neither they can be understood through mainstream lenses of regionalism, particularly in its institutional branch. Rather, the Red Sea Council offers an example of how regional institutional designs can be an answer to diverse goals, encompass differentiated agencies and, ultimately, have a wider meaning beyond their mere existence.

In fact, the establishment of the Red Sea Council does not merit much study as a classical international organization. When it comes to understanding regional dynamics, voting processes, formal structures and procedures are irrelevant to explaining how that region works. What matters is the process that has resulted in the establishment of that organization, not only as an institution of its own, but as the materialization of the practices deployed by regional actors in their quest for building a region. This is where we should focus if we want to understand how regionalism works on this side of the world.

⁵ The continuation of regional cooperation despite limited functional output.

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