Much of the international relations literature has focused on the most powerful states, although the politics of regions and the role of regional powers have become increasingly salient in the post–Cold War environment. Many scholars now contend that regional powers are critical, if not central, to our understanding of world politics (Acharya 2007; Lemke 2002; Lake and Morgan 1997; Sbragia 2008). Regional powers are important to our understanding of global politics for at least two reasons. First, these states often shape and establish order within their respective regions. Regional powers vie with challengers within the region as well as states outside of the region to establish mechanisms for governance, as they seek to create order in accordance with their policy preferences. Among the regional powers we identify, this behavior is quite common. South Africa, for example, has made a concerted effort to shape its region by stressing the “recovery of Africa” and “the realization of the ‘African Renaissance’” as foreign policy priorities through the promotion of regional institutions and regional integration (Nathan 2005: 362).

The club of regional powers plays a second important role, as it constitutes the pool of potential challengers to existing global powers (Hurrell 2006). Regional powers can use their geographic base to develop alternative systems of rules and norms that may challenge salient aspects of the international status quo. As their capabilities and activities increase, many within the regional powers club have received attention as global power aspirants (Cooper, Antkiewicz and Shaw 2007; Soares de Lima and Hirst...
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A number of these regional powers “share a belief in their entitlement to a more influential role in world affairs” (Hurrell 2006: 2), consistent with self-attrition-based status noted in chapter 1. Due in part to self-attrition as well as increasing capabilities, their rise has been described as the “major challenge to world stability in the twenty-first century” (Tammen 2006: 579). This dual role of regional powers—as global power aspirants and as creators of regional governance—makes this club of states an important part of the international landscape.

Despite the increasing importance of regional politics, there have been relatively few attempts to systematically identify and compare members of the regional powers club. This chapter creates a method for such a comparison, using an approach we adapt from the conceptualization and operationalization of global powers presented in chapter 1. We utilize a three-part framework of opportunity, willingness, and status attribution, identifying regional powers as those states that possess an “unusual amount”—relative to their region—of each of the various indicators that capture aspects of these three concepts.

Note that this framework differs from the original in chapter 1, where opportunity and willingness are matched against various constraints acting against attribution for global power status. Here, we are not specifying the range of constraints for regional status attribution. While they clearly exist and likely influence how much status will be attributed to states in regions, the specification of such constraints requires a theory of regional dynamics, a subject that is too complex for the space limitations imposed on this chapter. Therefore, we leave these constraints formally unspecified, although we speculate about some of them in our concluding discussion.

Opportunity, which includes both military and economic capabilities, constitutes a well-known aspect of international relations. With greater resources to coerce or entice, powerful states are better able to pursue their interests. The willingness of states to use their capabilities provides a second necessary dimension, indicating a desire to interact with and potentially structure their region. Finally, high status accounts for a state’s legitimacy as a regional power, representing substantial independence from other regional or global powers, as well as additional capacity to influence other states. A state that is viewed as a legitimate regional power will have a greater ability to establish and build regional architecture, negotiate with powerful states outside of its region, and will be better able to mount a challenge to global powers.

We proceed by first describing our approach to identifying regions. After delineating the contours of regions, we determine the set of potential regional powers and challengers through the application of this framework to data collected from 1990 to 2005. What emerges is a distinct club of regional powers that meet the thresholds for opportunity, willingness,