Towards a Global International Relations?

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The study of International Relations is growing rapidly all over the world. IR students in Western universities are an increasingly multicultural lot, drawn from many different parts of the world. There is also a proliferation of IR departments and programmes in universities outside the West, especially in large countries such as China, India, Turkey, Brazil and Indonesia. However, IR is not yet a truly global discipline that captures the full range of ideas, approaches and experiences of both Western and non-Western societies. IR theories and concepts remain heavily biased in favour of Western Europe and the United States. Consequently, they neglect the experiences and relationships in other parts of the world, or offer a poor fit for understanding and explaining them.

The idea of a global IR challenges traditional IR's neglect and marginalisation of the voices and experiences of the non-Western world, or the Global South. The principal aim of global IR is to 'bring the Rest in'. It calls for greater participation from scholars from the Global South in the IR discipline and the broadening of the way IR is taught and written in the dominant centres of knowledge in the West. The purpose of global IR is to ensure the transformation of the discipline into something that actually captures and explains the relationships among states and societies in all parts of the world: East, West, North, South. A global IR perspective on IR theory does not seek to displace existing theories, but challenges them to broaden their horizons and acknowledge the place and role of the non-Western world.

The reasons for the hitherto Western dominance of IR are many. One is the hegemonic status of Western scholars, publications and institutions in IR and their widespread belief that the Western IR theory has discovered the right path to understanding IR, or the right answers to the puzzles and problems of the day. Compounding the problem is a serious lack of institutional resources in the non-Western world. Add to this the challenges facing scholars from non-English speaking countries in getting published in major IR journals or to pursue the major debates and developments in the field that are mainly carried out in the English language. Another factor is the close link between IR academics and governments in many developing countries (although this is also a feature in the West), which promotes policy-oriented research at the expense of theoretical work. There is also the tendency among many IR scholars in the Global South towards an uncritical acceptance of Western theory – and a resulting lack of confidence to take on Western theorists. In this situation, what passes as theory is mostly the application of Western theoretical concepts and models to the local context, rather than injecting indigenous ideas and insights from local practices to the main body of IR theory.

The discipline of International Relations, as often presented in its mainstream textbooks and the learning and training programmes of major institution teaching, is said to have nominally begun in the United Kingdom in 1919 when the first named department and professorship in international politics was created in Aberystwyth, Wales. But it really developed in the United States after the Second World War. It can hardly be a coincidence that these countries were the leading powers of the world before and after the Second World War. According to the traditional view, IR begins with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), when Europe developed the sovereign nation-state. This also coincided roughly with the rise of 'the West' via the European states system that expanded to the rest of the world due to European colonialism.

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As non-Western nations became independent during the period of decolonisation post-1945, they inherited and adopted European ideas, institutions and practices. After the Second World War, while some European ideas retained their centrality, the United States added its own ideas and approaches. Europe before 1945 had managed international relations through a balance of power system, based on the idea that the stability of an international system is best ensured through an approximate parity among its major powers. Any attempt by any single power to become hegemonic (dominate the rest) should be defeated by an alliance among other powers in the system. The United States on the other hand sought to manage inter- national order through multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund. Although these institutions were theoretically open to participation by all nations, their purpose and agenda were heavily influenced by the interests and preferences of the United States and its allies.

Shaped by the ideas and practices of the West, the field of IR gave little attention to 'the Rest'. The traditional literature viewed non-Western countries as 'norm-takers' or 'passive subjects' – recipients of Western ideas and institutions – rather than active contributors to international order in their own right. Against this traditional view, Global IR offers an alternative narrative. IR as a discipline might have been invented in the West, but the substance of IR did not begin with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which marked the beginnings of the period of Western dominance. Other and older civilisations – such as India, China and Islam – pioneered different international systems and world orders. For this reason, their contribution should be more central to the study of IR. IR should study not only anarchic international systems like the Greek city-states system and Europe after the Peace of Westphalia, but also hierarchical systems such as prevailed in Asia and the Middle East before the advent of European colonialism.

Global IR also argues that international systems should be studied in terms of not only political-strategic interactions but also cultural and civilizational interactions. Many of the so-called modern concepts such as economic interdependence, balance of power, and collective management of security – which are often traced by traditional IR to European ideas and practices – actually have multiple points of origin, both within and outside of Europe. With such a broader scope, IR then offers more space to the history, culture, economic systems and interactions and contributions of non-Western civilizations and states. IR is best understood as the product of interactions and mutual learning between all civilisations and states, even though some have been more powerful than others at different stages in history.

Broadly stated, the idea of global IR revolves around six main dimensions (see Acharya 2014 and 2016).

First, global IR calls for a new understanding of universalism or universality. The dominant meaning of universalism in IR today is deeply influenced by the European Enlightenment. As Robert Cox (2002, 53) puts it, 'In the Enlightenment meaning, universal meant true for all time and space.' His conception of universalism may be called 'particularistic universalism', in the sense of   one set of ideas from Europe applying to all of humankind. This conception of universalism had a dark side: the suppression of diversity and the justification of European imperialism – which was inspired by the belief that European ideas, institutions and practices are superior to those of others and hence deserve to be imposed over other societies through force and occupations. An alternative to particularistic universalism is pluralistic universalism. This recognises the diversity among nations, respects it and yet seeks to find the common ground among them. It views IR as a discipline with multiple and global foundations.

Second, global IR calls for IR to be more authentically grounded in world history, rather than Western history – and in the ideas, institutions, intellectual perspectives and practices of both Western and non-Western societies. 'Bringing the Rest in' does not mean simply using the non-Western world as a testing ground to revalidate existing IR theories after a few adjustments and extensions. Global IR must be a two-way process. A key challenge for theories and theorists of global IR is to develop concepts and approaches from non-Western contexts on their own terms, and apply them not only locally but also to other contexts, including the larger global canvas.

Third, global IR subsumes, rather than supplants existing IR knowledge, including the theories, methods and scientific claims that we are already familiar with. I fully recognise that IR theories are hardly monolithic or unchanging when it comes to dealing with the non-Western world. Some theories, especially postcolonialism and feminism, have been at the forefront of efforts to recognise events, issues, agents and interactions outside the West

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and drawing theoretical insights from them to enrich the study of IR. Realism is ahead of liberalism in drawing insights from the non-Western world. For example, realists recognise the thinking of India's Kautilya or China's legalist thinkers, such as Han Feizi, as forerunners of Machiavelli or Hobbes. Realism has also added new variants to its theoretical family that have rendered it more relevant to the non-Western world than in its classical forms. Constructivism has been especially important in opening space for scholarship on the non-Western world because of its stress on culture and identity. Realism and liberalism privilege material determinants of international relations, such as power or wealth. These are often in short supply in the developing world. But ideas and norms are not, and they are often the main mechanisms through which the developing countries make their contribution to international relations. Liberalism is also useful in this sense as it identifies and prescribes three major pathways to peace: economic interdependence, multilateral institutions and democracy. The world has seen increasing trends towards these in the developing world. Global economic interdependence has grown since the end of the Cold War. There has been growing regional economic interdependence in East Asia, a critical region of the world. Multilateral institutions have proliferated, including in relatively newer areas such as cyberspace and climate change. To a lesser degree, democratisation has taken hold in the developing world, especially in Latin America and parts of East Asia, such as Indonesia and Myanmar. These developments could potentially make liberalism more relevant to understanding the international politics of the non-Western world.

At the same time, global IR does not leave the mainstream theories – realism, liberalism and constructivism – *as is*. Instead, it urges them to rethink their assumptions and broaden the scope of their investigation. For realism, the challenge is to look beyond conflicts induced by national interest and distribution of power and acknowledge other sources of agency, including culture, ideas and norms that make states and civilisations not clash, but embrace and learn from each other. For liberals, there is a similar challenge to look beyond American hegemony as the starting point of investigating multilateralism and regionalism and their institutional forms. Liberalism also needs to acknowledge the significant variations in cooperative behaviour that exist in different local contexts, as no single model of integration or interactions can account for all or most of them. For constructivism, taking stock of different forms of agency in the creation and diffusion of ideas and norms remains a major challenge.

Fourth, global IR gives centre stage to regions. Regionalism today is less state-centric and encompasses an ever-widening range of actors and issues. Regionalism is sometimes viewed as the antithesis of universalism, but the two can be complimentary. Groupings such as the European Union (EU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the African Union (AU) actually compliment the role of the United Nations in peacekeeping, humanitarian operations and conflict management. The study of regions is not just about how regions self-organise their economic, political and cultural space – it is also about how they relate to each other to shape global order. In addition, focusing on regions is central to forging a close integration between disciplinary approaches (which often have a global scope) and area (or regional) studies.

Fifth, a truly global IR cannot be based on cultural exceptionalism and parochialism. Exceptionalism is the tendency to present the characteristics of a social group as homogenous, collectively unique and superior to those of others. Claims about exceptionalism are frequently associated with the political agendas and purposes of the ruling elite, as evident in concepts such as 'Asian Values' or 'Asian human rights' or 'Asian Democracy'. These are usually associated with variations of authoritarian rule because the originated in the 1990s from such countries as Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore, Mahathir Mohamad's Malaysia and Deng Xiaoping's China. Similarly, exceptionalism in IR often justifies the dominance of big powers over the weak. Before its defeat in the Second World War, Japan sought to establish an empire over Asia under the pretext of a distinctive pan-Asian culture and identity. Today, the rise of China has raised the possibility of an international system in Asia dominated by Chinese (Confucian) values and suzerain institutions, such as its historical tributary system.

Finally, global IR takes a broad conception of and multiple forms of agency. Not so long ago, agency in international relations was primarily viewed in terms of a 'standard of civilisation' in which the decisive element was the

capacity of states to defend their sovereignty, wage war, negotiate treaties, enforce compliance and manage the balance of power. This self-serving, ahistorical and brazenly racist formulation by the European colonial powers ignored the fact that even the most sophisticated forms of statecraft were present in many early non-Western

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civilisations. While the mainstream IR theories viewed the so-called Third World or Global South as marginal to the games that nations play, some of the critical theories actually thrived on this presumed marginality. They rightly criticised mainstream theories for excluding the South but did little exploration of alternative forms of agency in the South. While global disparities in material power are not going to disappear, we need to adopt a broader view of agency in international relations, going beyond military power and wealth. Agency is both material as well as ideational. Agency is not the prerogative of the strong, but can manifest as the weapon of the weak. Agency can be exercised in global transnational space as well as at regional and local levels. Agency can take multiple forms. Agency means constructing new rules and institutions at the regional level either to challenge or to support and strengthen global order.

For example, China's nationalist leader before the Second World War, Sun Yat-sen, is the father of the idea of international development that came to underpin post-war institutions such as the World Bank. India's Jawaharlal Nehru was the first to propose a ban on nuclear testing. The Latin American countries adopted a declaration of human rights months before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted at the United Nations in New York. And Asian nations played an important role in the making of subsequent United Nations covenants on civil and politics rights and economic, social and cultural rights.

Agency means conceptualising and implementing new pathways to security, development and justice. In the 1960s, African countries developed formal and informal rules to maintain their postcolonial boundaries within the framework of the Organization of African Unity, which was later replaced by the African Union in 2000. Along with the African Union, a major role in the creation of the '*Responsibility to Protect*' (R2P) norm was played by African political leaders such as Nelson Mandela, diplomats such as Francis Deng (a Sudanese) and Mohamed Sahnoun (an Algerian) and the former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. Indian economist Amartya Sen and Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq frontally challenged the orthodox Western model of development that focuses on national economic power and growth rates in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). They put forward the alternative and broader notion of *human development*, which focuses on enhancing individual capabilities through primary education and health. As is evident, some of these acts of agency are not just for specific regions or for the South itself, but are important to global governance as a whole. Using this broader framework of agency, global IR gives a central place to the voices   and agency of the South, to Southern perspectives on global order and to the changing dynamics of North–South relations.

With the fundamentals of global IR now laid out it is important to recall Robert Cox, who warned that 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose' (1981, 129). Who is global IR for and for what purpose? Because global IR does not reject IR's existing theories, but seeks to accommodate them, it is open to criticism that it might end up preserving IR's basic structure – albeit filling in new contents by collecting concepts around the world. In other words, global IR might end up globalising traditional IR theories and concepts. There is also the risk of over-focusing on the stronger and more resource-rich non-Western countries at the expense of the weaker countries of the developing world. Another challenge for global IR is how to study all nations, civilisations and issue areas under one framework without obscuring the cultural, political and economic variations among them. Attempting this also carries the risk of making IR too broad, lessening its analytic value and making theory-building difficult. These risks are not trivial, but keeping them in focus would help scholars to positively advance a discipline that clearly requires a new, global, perspective.

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