

How Global is Security Studies? The Possibility of “Non-Western” Theory

Written by Bryony Vince

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The academic discipline of security studies emerged within Europe as a sub-field of International Relations (IR) in the wake of the Second World War. This essay will therefore analyse the extent to which security studies today is global. To do so, the orthodox theories that underpin and determine the production of knowledge within the discipline, such as realism and more recently constructivism, will be analysed. It will be argued that both traditional and critical theories of security studies still remain intrinsically Eurocentric. Despite a rise in postcolonial approaches, it will be claimed that the current search for a global or “non-Western” security studies is futile as the discipline was inherently made, not for the “globe”, but by and for the West. In order to uncover a truly global security perspective, scholars should detach themselves from the parochial boundaries of the Western academic discipline of IR and security studies, and look to the international realm more broadly for approaches that may not necessarily *look like* orthodox (Western) theory.

The Eurocentrism of Security Studies

As an academic discipline, security studies is dominated by Western academics discussing and creating theories that allegedly explain international security. Traditional approaches, such as (neo)realism, have historically dominated the field and determined the discipline’s core features. Realism claims states are always in perpetual competition due to the absence of a higher authority; because of this, security is defined in terms of the power of the state, understood exclusively in military terms.[1] The fundamental interest of the state must be “to protect [its] physical, political, and cultural identity against encroachments by other nations”. [2] In one instance, it can be argued that neorealism is a global theory of international security as it assumes applicability to the entire international system. Waltz explicates neorealism’s alleged universalism as he claims that all states should adapt to the logic of anarchy, regardless of their location, time, social properties or culture.[3] In this instance, because states are “functionally undifferentiated” regardless of geographical location, neorealism can be applied to the entire international system, arguably making it a global theory of international security.[4]

Despite neorealism’s claims to universality, in reality the approach has suffocated the discipline of security studies within a Eurocentric bias, making it inapplicable outside of the West. Neorealism constructs international politics as a realm solely constituted by the interactions of the great (Western) powers, essentially omitting the “non-West” from security studies. This is explicit as Waltz claims, “it would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be to construct an economic theory of oligopolistic completion based on the minor firms in a sector of an economy”. [5] Evidently, neorealism admits to the omission of Eastern agency on the rather ironic grounds that it is “ridiculous” to incorporate “weaker” (non-Western) states into a theory about *international* security.

This can be further explicated through Waltz’s omission of Eastern agency. Neorealism’s claims to “universal” objectivity under positivism, as additionally argued by Hobson, instead act as a veil to disguise the inherent Eurocentric bias within the theory and the incessant need to put the West on a pedestal.[6] Through these claims to objectivity, neorealism is able to assert (a false sense of) Western universalism. For example, adhering to positivism allows neorealism to obscure the hierarchical property of the international system by ignoring the fact international

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hierarchies under anarchy have existed throughout history.[7] Waltz’s omission of Western imperial-hierarchies enables him to completely erase Western (neo)imperialism from the historical record, re-writing the image of the imperial West as one of peace and harmony. In addition to this, it is argued that neorealism further omits Western imperialism and therefore Eastern agency through the depiction of Cold War bipolarity as “peaceful”. [8] Waltz “glosses over” the “silent war” between the East and the West under the guise of alleged “stability”, therefore ignoring Western neo-imperial interventions in the East.[9] As Hobson argues, intra-Western stability was only enabled because military conflict between the US and the Soviet Union was displaced from the West onto Eastern terrain.[10] Waltz’s theory of “international” politics therefore fails to incorporate the East as a category of analysis. Neorealism’s focus on great (Western) powers, the omission of Eastern agency and its subsequent dominance over security studies dramatically hinders the disciplines ability to accurately theorise about *international* security, rendering it anything but “global”.

That being said, the discipline has recently taken important strides to oppose the parochialism of traditional approaches. This is explicated in the rise of more interpretivist approaches such as constructivism. Acharya and Buzan claim that constructivism’s emphasis on “ideational forces compared to the material ‘powerlessness’ of the developing countries” produces a greater appreciation of their ability to challenge Western dominance.[11] However, while it may look like constructivism’s dismissal of scientific rigor and objectivism has paved the way for a more global security studies, the approach is still premised on a Western-centric meta-narrative. Acharya and Buzan claim that constructivist scholarship “primarily focuses on security processes and outcomes taking place in the North Atlantic region and Europe”; an overwhelming 45% of sampled constructivist research relates to the North Atlantic region, with only 13.1% in Asia, and a miniscule amount in regions such as Latin America, Africa and the Middle East.[12] Evidently, even a deviation from traditional approaches cannot globalise the discipline.

Due to its historical origins within IR, it can be logically deduced that the aforementioned Eurocentrism of security studies has been directly assimilated from the mother discipline of IR. As depicted below, the search for a global security studies therefore relies on and cannot be undertaken in isolation from the search for non-Western IR theory more broadly.

The Futile Search for “Non-Western” Theory

In light of the historical omission of the “non-West”, scholars such as Barkawi and Laffey and Acharya and Buzan have attempted to expose the Eurocentric nature of the discipline and lay the groundwork for a non-Western IR and security studies. While this could be linked to the creation of a more global discipline, these contributions actually serve to further reinforce Eurocentric dichotomies. The majority of scholars attempting to create a global security studies merely outline the non-Western void within the discipline and leave the antidote in the hands of the West. For example, in *The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies*, Barkawi and Laffey outline the oriental gap within the discipline and conclude that we (Western scholars) need to recognize the mutually constitutive character of world politics.[13] While it is important to outline this Eurocentrism, their analysis does little in the way of actually making security studies more global. It can be argued that they ironically reinforce the Western-centrism of the discipline by placing the West – despite being critical of it – at the centre of their analysis, making them “Subliminally Eurocentric”.[14] This is explicit as they focus on World War II and the Holocaust as examples of the discipline’s Eurocentrism, yet fail to realise that they too are reinforcing the centrality of these “great” Western wars.

Acharya and Buzan similarly adhere to this Subliminal Eurocentrism as the entire agenda within their 2007 book “Non-Western International Relations Theory” is based on a search for non-Western theory that *looks like* Western IR. For example, the authors are preoccupied with finding Eastern contributions to theory that will fit “broadly within our understanding of IRT” and claim that they “almost never meet the criteria for hard theory”.[15] Whilst their exposure of the many modes of thinking that have emanated from Asia is hopeful, the authors take issue with the fact they have not been developed or interpreted from the perspective of IRT.[16] Buzan and Acharya are therefore essentially dismissing the relevance of these Eastern modes of thinking due to their absence within or inapplicability to conventional (Western) IRT. In addition to this, the authors believe that in order to judge the significance of the work of Asian scholars, we should look for contributions that “may be regarded as pre-theories”, which are essentially generalised works that “may not have the full ‘casual’ or predictive attributes associated with American

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style IRT”.[17] This explicates how the authors are assessing and judging the value of non-Western approaches against Western-based criteria. In – potentially subliminally – placing the West at the centre of their analysis, the authors set out to search for theories in the East that are reminiscent of Western IR theories. It is therefore questionable how this approach will create a truly global discipline.

Ten years since the publication of their book, the authors have reflected on the claims made and now advocate the creation of a Global IR, instead of “non-Western IR theory”. Acharya’s Global IR agenda seeks to “enrich [existing IR theories] with the infusion of ideas and practices from the non-Western world”.[18] Under this assumption, the antidote to the Eurocentrism of the current discipline is the assimilation and integration of Eastern practices into current orthodox IR theories, such as realism, liberalism and constructivism. This however plants the author firmly back into the realm of Subliminal Eurocentrism due to the underlying assumption that mainstream Western IR theories still remain superior to any alternative. Put differently, claiming the assimilation of Eastern perspectives into current IR theories is the only way peripheral voices can gain an international theoretical voice essentially strips them of any agency in regard to peripheral theory formation. The Global IR agenda fails to acknowledge and account for the possibility of an Eastern conception of the international system that is wholly different to mainstream IR theory.

Possibilities for a Global Security Studies

Evidently therefore, security studies is by no means global in nature and attempts to rectify this have arguably emphasised the discipline’s inability to overcome this Eurocentrism. It can be argued that the attempts made by scholars, such as those aforementioned, have been futile primarily due to the fact that security studies never had “global” intentions. As a discipline born out of IR in the wake of the war, security studies automatically adopted the pre-existing Eurocentric bias that overwhelmed the academic discipline. IR was created by and for the West in order to explain and analyse European imperialism and *Western* interactions within the international system.[19] It is therefore unsurprising that attempts to create a global security studies within a discipline inherently based on the lives and experiences of the West, have failed. Edward Said for example, acknowledged how “the intellectual, however sceptical, always enters already existing structures of power and speaks within the framework and history of already articulated values and ideas”.[20] Security studies therefore entered into a discipline that favoured Western structures of power, and spoke within the framework and history of Western values and ideas.

In order to tackle the marginalisation of peripheral international security perspectives, we must therefore look beyond the parochial boundaries of Western IR and to the international system more broadly. It is in this way that we will uncover truly indigenous cultures and perspectives – detached from the West – that can subsequently be applied to the international system. As a result, this will lay the groundwork for the creation of a peripheral approach to international (security) theorising that does not blindly conform to pre-set Western IR criteria. Contra to Acharya, once these peripheral perspectives are realised they should work alongside, not integrated within, orthodox IR theories in order to sustain their indigeneity.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of both traditional and critical theories of security studies, this essay has argued that the discipline is inherently based on Western historical experiences and can therefore never be global in nature. Despite the rising awareness of the discipline’s Eurocentrism, academic attempts to both create and uncover non-Western theories have proven futile due to the inability of the discipline to theorise outside of the West. This is not to say that a global theory of security isn’t possible, it is just not possible within the Western discipline of security studies itself. The academic discipline of security studies was created and therefore remains, not for the globe, but by and for the West. In order to uncover a truly global security perspective, scholars should instead detach themselves from the boundaries of the Western academic discipline of IR and security studies, and look to the international realm more broadly for analyses of security that may not necessarily adhere to the mainstream.

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Notes

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[2] Ibid., p.530.

[3] John Hobson, 'Re-viewing the Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: A Response to Knutsen, Ling, Schmidt, Tickner and Vitalis', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 42 (2013), p. 497-8.

[4] Kenneth Waltz, 'Political Structures', in *Theory of International Politics*, ed. Kenneth Waltz (USA, Waveland Press, 1979), p. 97.

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[7] John Hobson, ‘Re-viewing the Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: A Response to Knutsen, Ling, Schmidt, Tickner and Vitalis’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 42 (2013), p. 484.

[8] John Hobson, ‘Orthodox subliminal Eurocentrism: from classical realism to neorealism, 1945-1989’, in *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*, ed. John Hobson, (Cambridge, University Press, 2012), p.206.

[9] *Ibid.*, p.206.

[10] *Ibid.*, p.205-6.

[11] Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is there no Non-Western International Relations Theory? Ten years on’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 17 (2017), p. 345.

[12] *Ibid.*, p.346.

[13] Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies’, *Review of International Studies*, 32 (2006), p.348.

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[15] Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory’, in *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia*, ed. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (Oxon, Routledge, 2010), p.10.

[16] *Ibid.*, p.11.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.15.

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Written by: Bryony J. Vince

Written at: The University of Sheffield

Written for: Dr. Jonna Nyman and Dr. Benedict Docherty

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