Interview – Barry Buzan

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Barry Buzan is Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the LSE and Honorary Professor at Copenhagen, Jilin and China Foreign Affairs Universities, and the University of International Relations (Beijing) and a Senior Fellow at LSE Ideas. In 1998 he was elected a fellow of the British Academy. He has written, co-authored, or (co)edited thirty-four book and over 170 articles and chapters. Among his recent books are*Re-Imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese and Islamic Civilisations* (2022, with Amitav Acharya); *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind Across Three Eras* (2023); *The Market in Global International Society: An English School Approach to International Political Economy* (2025, with Robert Falkner). He is currently working on *Timelines for Modernity: Rethinking Periodization for Global International Relations* (2025), which is coming out in April with Bristol University Press.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I cannot answer this question in the usual way because unlike most people in IR I have not confined myself to a specific 'field' in the sense of a particular region, issue-area, or theory. My approach is global, my interests range across all the sectors, and my use of theory is eclectic. It might even be questioned whether I am still mainly within IR. My recent work feels more like Global Historical Sociology than IR. So, either I am trying to push the boundaries of what 'IR' means, or I have stepped beyond them into interdisciplinary space.

From that perspective, two things excite me, and I see them as linked. First, is work that brings into a single frame World/Global History and Global Historical Sociology on the one hand, and IR including International Political Economy (IPE) on the other. Second, is work that moves the discipline towards Global IR. Global IR involves not just widening who participates in the discipline beyond the West, but also opening the discipline to histories, concepts, and theories other than Western ones.

Bringing a deep view of history into IR is in my view a necessary counterpoint to grand theoretical abstractions like neorealism. Both big history and grand theory are pathways towards getting a big picture view of the subject matter of IR. They can be seen as rivals in a zero-sum game, but I prefer to see them as complementary, each having insights that are unavailable through the lens of the other. Up to a point they can be combined. I tried to do this in Making Global Society (2023) which uses a mid-level theoretical abstraction (the primary institutions of global society) to construct a history-style narrative across a canvas of several thousand years. This type of approach might open the way towards solving IR's often lamented imbalance of trade in theories with other social science disciplines.

In turn, a more global historical approach naturally opens the way to a more global IR. As the Western world order of the last two centuries gives way to a multi-civilizational world order that is deeply pluralist, it is a matter of urgency to move IR away from West-centrism that defined it because of the timing and conditions of its origins as a discipline. If that is not done, IR will become more part of the problem than part of the solution.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

This is an autobiographical question, so I can only give you my version of the story. In my view, the main turning

points in my intellectual development are three. The first came when I was in secondary school during the early 1960s, when I encountered the work of H.G. Wells. I read both his *Outline of History*, and his science fiction novels, and they stuck with me. Wells showed me two things. First, that it was possible to write a one-volume history of everything and still make good sense of it. And second, that science fiction was like history in reverse. It enabled me to get a perspective (or rather, like history, many perspectives) on the present from the future as well as from the past.

The second came later in the mid-1960s when I was introduced to Waltz's then emerging polarity theory as part of an Introduction to IR course taught by Kal Holsti. Having mainly been steeped in the endless complexities of history up to that point, I was blown away by the idea that you could make quite a lot of sense about life, the universe and everything by applying a few big and simple concepts to the huge canvas of history. That alternative, structural, approach to the big picture, which crystallized into neorealism, dominated my thinking and writing for a quarter of a century. I only managed to escape from it during the 1990s while writing *The Logic of Anarchy* with Charles Jones and Richard Little. By that time, the limitations of neorealism were becoming clear to me. Other than in a few narrow ways it did not actually explain much. And my encounter with Ole Wæver's securitization theory showed that much of its force came from the fact that it operated in the constructivist realm as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The third shift came in the late 1990s when, helped by the influence of Richard Little and Ole Wæver, I turned away from the mechanical theoretics of neorealism towards the English School. The English School opened the way not only to a more sociological approach (international society) to IR, but also towards a (re)engagement with world history. It also allowed me to keep the structural approach that I found congenial to my way of thinking. That is the path I am still on. It is possible that I might be seen as having left the English School and moved into interdisciplinary space. But in my view, that move still has its foundations in English School theory.

Can you expand on what the "new Cold War" means, particularly in the context of US-China relations? Does this term accurately capture the dynamics of the current international system?

I think 'Second Cold War' does accurately describe one key dynamic of the global system/society. I have argued this position in a recent (2024) article in International Politics. I take a strictly definitional approach to the question. For me, *cold war* defines a type of war that is differentiated from *hot war*. Cold war means that the principal parties have issues and differences that they think are worth fighting over, but they are constrained from resorting to hot war because of the fear of all-out great power wars fought with weapons of mass destruction. Cold War is a type of war. It is not the same as *cold peace*. Those who define cold war by saying that it has to be very similar to the First Cold War can easily find big enough differences to reject the idea of a Second Cold War. That approach renders the concept useless for any theoretical application.

The Second Cold War is, however, not the only big dynamic currently in play. The other one is the transition out of two centuries of Western world order in which one civilization, having taken an early lead in the process of modernisation, dominated all the others, and structured the global political economy in its own interests. I have argued this view in a new book: Timelines for Modernity (Bristol University Press, 2025). From the 1840s, the Western world order was led by Europe during its colonial phase, and by the US after 1945. Since the 1970s, a second round of modernization is underway mainly rooted in Asia. That is the basis of the multi-civilizational, deep pluralist, world order that is currently emerging to replace the Western one. In my view, the Second Cold War is the form that this transition in world orders is taking. It was not inevitable that the transition be contested in this way, but it is now sufficiently embedded to make it likely that it will have to play out over the coming decade or two. Cold wars tend to be longer than hot ones.

Nothing signifies the demise of the Western world order more strongly than the Trumpian turn to 'America first'. This abandons US leadership, and places the US in the company of other great powers who put pursuit of their own narrow interests above any responsibility for managing global society. As I write this, the US seems to be loosening, or possibly abandoning altogether, the tie to Europe that has anchored the Western world order since 1945.

How would you describe the role of Chinese civilizational thought—both historical and modern—in

shaping its approach to international relations?

I take the view that China is a civilizational state, and that there is a lot of continuity in its thought between past and present. I am influenced by the argument of Yuri Pines (2012), who argues that China's history generated a different view of politics and world order from that which unfolded in the modern West. He focuses particularly on the extremely violent experience of the Warring States period (453-221 BC) that led up to the unification of China, interpreting this as being so traumatic that it instilled in Chinese culture a permanent fear of the dispersal or separation of power. The Warring States period, and the turbulent Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BC) that preceded it, were the golden age of Chinese philosophy and political theory, and the trauma of these times drove many of these thinkers, Confucius most notably, to search for arrangements and practices that would prevent any repetition of it.

Whereas the West learned the lesson that political pluralism both at home (democracy, separation of powers) and abroad (an anarchical international society based on separated sovereignty and territoriality), was to be desired, China came to the opposite conclusion. The lesson of the Warring States period, and of many other periods of disunity in Chinese history, was that political pluralism was a recipe for a ruthless round of fighting and disorder that would last until someone could once again reunify the country and accept the Mandate of Heaven to reign over all. Hierarchy in all relations, and unity at home, were thus China's default political preference, and anarchic separation of powers its nightmare.

Pines comes close to arguing that the CCP, despite its self-understanding as a revolutionary party, looks increasingly like a successful rebellion that has founded a new dynasty with an emperor (Xi Jinping), a meritocratic Mandarinate (the CCP itself), and the Mandate of Heaven (the right to suppress rebellions, and rule eternally, so long as it does a good job of government – in modern terms, performance legitimacy). Although it oversimplifies a more complex reality, I think this view quite insightful.

How has globalization affected the dynamics between Western and non-Western theories and practices in international relations?

Other than that, for a time, it made globalization theory and neoliberalism leading strands of thought about IR, I have no clear view of what the impact of globalization as such has been on IR theory. Not much in the sense that it was just another replay of the dialectic between the global market and economic nationalism that has been going on since the 19th century.

On the practice side, the impact has been large, not just between the West and the rest, but also within the West. The neoliberal project of marketizing the world came with both big costs and big benefits to all the countries involved. It was a bold venture that hugely overestimated the self-regulating capacity of markets and similarly underestimated the required degree of global political coordination to make such a project viable. Peoples in the core got cheaper goods but discovered both their jobs and their capacity for self-government disappearing. Peoples in the periphery got more foreign investment and better access to trade, but became vulnerable to foreign corporate and financial whims, and to a zest for sanctions imposed by the US. American governments were keen to exploit their central position in the global economy, and careless of the downstream consequences that would have for the system as a whole. Globalization empowered the radical right in many countries in both core and periphery. It played a big part in the crisis of liberalism that has swept through the West since the economic crisis of 2008. Opposition to it, both economically and by associating it with migration, has been Trump's pathway to power.

With the increasing recognition of non-Western paradigms in IR, how do you think the field might evolve in the coming decades? What role will interdisciplinary approaches play in this transformation?

This is perhaps not the most salient question about the future of IR. I think, as well as hope, that non-Western histories, theories, and people will become an increasing part of IR. There has already been substantial progress down this road – there are now, for example, world class IR journals published in Asia. I expect that trend to continue.

The bigger question in my mind is how IR will cope with the Anthropocene crisis plus various transformative technologies (AI, biotechnology, access to space) that could (individually and collectively, and possibly quite soon) tear up the political, economic, and societal foundations and assumptions on which IR has been built. The idea that humankind is facing the limits of planetary capacity to carry its civilizations is a game changer for IR. Carrying on with business as usual in the global political economy will almost inevitably lead to an existential crisis for our civilizations and possibly our species. IR is not well geared up to deal with a major regression or collapse of achieved levels of civilization. Confronting this crisis collectively will add entirely novel conditions to the game of IR. We have permanently to take up the role of planetary stewardship, and doing so will redefine radically what IR is about. The current rise to power of the radical right makes the 'business as usual' approach look the more likely.

What role do you think scholars and practitioners from the Global South can play in reshaping the discipline of IR?

Global South scholars should focus on looking ahead to making a discipline based on a wider range of histories and theories, rather than looking back to perpetuate and amplify historical grievances against the Western world order. Contemporary issues, climate change first among them, are too big and too urgent to leave us the time and space to linger on the injustices of the past as the main order of business for global society.

I say that in full acknowledgement that there were injustices in the past – many, and on a large scale – and that these do need to be addressed. But do so in forward-looking ways that take full account of the pressing issues now facing us all. Focus, for example, on restructuring the secondary institutions of global society to give more equal status to members based not just on sovereignty, but on the real distribution of wealth, power, and political and cultural authority. The pressing need is to create a set of international institutions that can carry the responsibility of dealing with the shared-fate threats (and opportunities) now facing us. An obsession with post-colonial grievances, however justified morally, will join the Second Cold War in obstructing any possibility of a collective response to these threats. Small-minded self-centeredness remains the dominant approach to international relations on all sides at the moment. It is the opposite of what the circumstances of humankind call for, and Global South IR scholars, as well as those from China and the West, need to point this out.

What advice would you give to emerging scholars interested in exploring non-Western theories of international relations?

It has always been, and remains, my advice to emerging scholars that they should study what interests them most. Where such scholars are from plays no role in this. Being able to follow your own concerns is one of the few remaining advantages of an academic career anywhere. Don't waste that opportunity on some fashionable or instrumental choice. Remember that it will define what you do for the rest of your life. First choose what interests you. Then figure out how to make it pay for your keep.