

Interview – Amitav Acharya

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Dr. Amitav Acharya is the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance and Distinguished Professor at the School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC. Previously, he was a professor at York University, Toronto, and University of Bristol, U.K., Fellow of Harvard University's Asia Center, Research Fellow of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and Christensen Fellow at St Catherine's College, Oxford.

His previous books include *Whose Ideas Matter* (Cornell 2009); *The End of American World Order* (Polity 2014, 2018); and *Constructing Global Order* (Cambridge 2018). His articles have appeared, among other journals, in *International Organization*, *International Security*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *World Politics*, and *Foreign Affairs*. Acharya is a three-time recipient of the Distinguished Scholar Awards given by the International Studies Association (ISA), the largest and most influential global network in international studies. These awards recognized his "exceptional and sustained contribution to research on global south international studies" (2016); "influence, intellectual works and mentorship" in the field of international organization (2018); and "extraordinary impact" in globalizing the study of International Relations and "mentorship of emerging scholars" (2023). His most recent books are *Divergent Worlds: What the Ancient Mediterranean and Indian Ocean Can Tell Us About the Future of International Order*, co-authored with Manjeet S. Pardesi (Yale, 2025); and *The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization will Survive the Decline of the West* (New York: Basic Books). For Dr. Acharya's previous interview with E-International Relations, see [here](#).

Your new book is an exciting project. It covers a vast span of history. What inspired you to undertake this ambitious project?

Thank you for your interest and the questions. Before I answer them, let me start by explaining what I mean by "world order," because it has so many different meanings. In this book, world order simply means a framework of power, ideas, and interactions that its makers believe is beneficial for the stability and well-being of their own societies and beyond. Let us also keep in mind—and this is a core point of the book—that creating world order is not the monopoly of any civilisation or nation, that world orders have existed throughout all ages, that they have varied in form—from empires to independent state systems—and that none of them, including the British Empire and the post-war American-led order that is sometimes called the liberal international order, have been truly "global," covering all the geographic regions of the world.

Keeping this in mind, I wrote this book for two reasons. The first is to highlight the contributions of different civilisations to world order and to challenge the view that only the West has the ability to create a world order, including the type we have today. We often take for granted that the ideas and institutions of the current world order, whether it is the independence of states, territorial integrity, diplomacy, peace treaties, freedom of the seas, inter-state cooperation, humanitarian principles, etc., were exclusively created by the West. But this is questionable. World order is actually a shared creation where these and other ideas to maintain peace, stability, and economic interdependence were developed by many different regions and civilisations around the world. Identifying these contributions is a key purpose of my book. I will elaborate on this later.

Second, and closely related to the above, I wanted to contribute to academic and policy debates on the future of world order, addressing questions such as: Is Western dominance ending? If it is, will this be good or bad for the

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whole world? What comes in its place? Will this post-Western world, which I call a global multiplex, bring total chaos or generate more avenues for peace, stability, and well-being? Again, the answers to these questions that we find in mainstream Western books and media are overwhelmingly pessimistic. Is this justified? The “world” does not look the same from Beijing or New Delhi as it does from Washington, D.C., or London. What may be causing despair in Western nations may be giving hope to places around the world that have suffered for centuries under a world order that has been, on balance, overwhelmingly beneficial to the West, thanks to imperialism, colonisation, and racism. Why should the decline of such an order be seen as a bad thing for the world?

Why do you think the study of the deep past is important to IR? Why does IR privilege European history and neglect the contributions of other societies? How does your methodology address this, and what are the risks and limitations?

This question is central to the book and deserves some elaboration. I am not saying that the ideas and institutions of world order were created by earlier civilisations exactly in the form they exist today. However, there were plenty of foundations, prototypes, and approximations of these supposedly modern concepts that we use to understand world order today. They may seem imperfect by modern standards, although not always so; in some cases, they were more developed. For example, humanitarian values in warfare and the protection of non-combatants were more advanced in ancient India than what we have today in the Geneva Conventions. Why do we ignore these foundations? Due to a combination of ignorance and prejudice in the present way of teaching and learning IR, and a certain timidity in challenging its big gurus and texts. My book argues that while IR as a discipline might have emerged in the West, the subject matter of IR, or the ideas and institutions we study in IR, despite being named in English with mostly Greek or Latin roots, are not exclusively Western. If anything, they evolved well before Europe took off and the idea of the West emerged.

Let me elaborate. First, IR scholarship as it stands now is very presentist, often viewing the starting point of IR as the Peace of Westphalia or even later, World War I and II. Few IR textbooks used in classrooms give more than perfunctory attention to earlier history, and even then, mostly to European history. Yet, the period since the Westphalia treaties is, for the most part, the period of European and Western ascendancy and dominance. Hence, this kind of starting point for IR perpetuates the myth that IR is a Western construct, or that only Europe or the U.S. created the contemporary world order’s most important institutions. However, if one studies IR from a 5,000-year perspective, one finds that for most of history, many civilisations and world orders in what we call the “non-Western” world were powerful both materially and intellectually, relative to Europe, and that they developed ideas and institutions in broad, foundational, and in some but not all cases, imperfect but consequential forms. Yet, IR scholarship only looks at their contemporary forms and meanings, thereby conveniently ignoring their deeper historical foundations, unless they came from ancient Greece, Rome, or modern Europe.

Here I turn to a second factor in why we ignore the contributions of societies outside Europe to world order. This has to do with a blatant but pervasive epistemic hypocrisy or double standard that pervades IR, as in all social sciences and humanities, whereby anything that was not invented in Greece, Rome, or later in Europe and the United States is considered inauthentic, not generalisable, and therefore of marginal interest or importance.

While the book’s title, *Once and Future World Order*, may create the impression of historicism, I do not argue that history repeats itself. I do not claim that the Roman imperium or the Chinese tributary system can be revived—however much some scholars and leaders in the U.S. and China, respectively, might wish for their reemergence. Rather, my argument is that history reveals a broader range of possibilities for shaping and organising world order than what is typically considered in contemporary IR thought and practice. For example, history demonstrates that a world order based on the hegemony of a single power is not the only way to organise international affairs—contrary to what IR’s Hegemonic Stability Theory suggests, which has also served as a key foundation for the idea of liberal hegemony and the liberal international order. Alternative models have existed, such as the Indian Ocean system before the arrival of European imperial powers, where trade and interaction flourished despite the absence of a dominant global power. This is a key example of what I call a multiplex international order. My book shows that world orders can be structured around different principles and institutions—Westphalia is merely one such model, and it is neither universal nor permanent. By exploring these historical alternatives, the book

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expands the scope of IR as a discipline, offering new ways to conceptualise and study world order.

At the same time, I do not project modern concepts backward onto history. Rather, I argue that many of the ideas and institutions underlying world order are universal and timeless, even as they have evolved across different historical contexts. One cannot fully understand the contemporary world order without examining its earlier origins—many of which lie outside of Europe. Above all, my book tells a globally connected story about the foundations, evolution, and shaping of world orders—past, present, and future. It highlights the interlinkages and reciprocal influences among civilisations in developing these ideas and institutions. To fully grasp concepts such as sovereignty, empire, hegemony, great power management, balance of power, moral norms, and economic interdependence, one must acknowledge their multiple and diverse origins. For instance, the origins of the independent state system—or what IR scholars call “anarchy”—cannot be understood without reference to the Sumerian city-states. Similarly, the study of authority and legitimacy in ancient Egypt and Persia is essential for appreciating concepts like hierarchy, empire, and universal monarchy—an enduring political institution that has shaped world order for millennia and continues to do so today. The purpose and functions of diplomacy and peace treaties, which persist in modern times, have striking parallels in the Amarna system of the mid-second millennium BCE. This was far more than a mere exchange of gifts—it was an early example of a great power concert that lasted longer than the European concert of the 19th century. Likewise, the Treaty of Kadesh (circa 1259 BCE) between Egypt and the Hittites prefigures modern principles of non-aggression, extradition, and alliance-making.

Similarly, the principle of freedom of the seas—often credited to Hugo Grotius, the Roman and British Empires, and the hegemonic United States—was first realised in the Indian Ocean, where maritime order was maintained not by China or India, but by a network of small port cities stretching from Malindi on the East African coast to Malacca in Southeast Asia. The idea of a competitive civil service, which has been fundamental to world order—from the British East India Company to the U.S. government—originated in China. The protection of non-combatants in war, a principle enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, can be traced back to ancient India.

IR’s rational mode of inquiry owes much to Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in the 12th century, who revived and expanded Greek notions of the eternity of the world—ideas that had been suppressed by medieval Christian theology. The Persian, Gupta, and Inca empires offer alternative models of decentralised world order. The concept of peaceful coexistence, often attributed to China, can be found in an enduring and robust form within the Iroquois League—a system that influenced the Founding Fathers of the United States.

In the more recent period, postcolonial states have played a crucial role in shaping key aspects of modern world order, from the drafting of the United Nations Charter to contemporary debates on international development, self-determination, human rights, anti-racism, and gender equality. These are the forgotten foundations—to borrow Canadian scholar Eric Helleiner’s term—of the world order we inhabit today.

You engage with themes previously explored by figures like Kissinger, Zakaria, Niall Ferguson, and Fukuyama. How is your work distinct from theirs, particularly in its treatment of civilisations and world order?

My book challenges the notion that world order is the monopoly of any single civilisation, whether Western or otherwise. It also contests the idea that the study and discussion of world order should be dominated by Western writers. Most major books on world civilisations published in English by international presses are authored by Western scholars—examples include Henry Kissinger’s *World Order*, Niall Ferguson’s *Civilisation*, Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilisations*, and Fareed Zakaria’s *The Post-American World*. While there are excellent works by non-Western scholars on specific regions or civilisations, these often remain narrowly focused on their own cultural or geographical domains. Few, if any, attempt a holistic, globally comparative study of world order. As a result, these widely circulated books tend to be heavily Eurocentric, often portraying Western dominance as both inevitable and beneficial, while presenting its decline as destabilising. Take Kissinger, for instance—his narrative begins with Europe (Westphalia and the Concert of Europe) as the ideal model of world order and concludes with the United States as its supposed global saviour. He relegates discussions of China, India, and the Islamic world to middle chapters, implicitly treating them as peripheral, despite the fact that the rise of Europe and the United States

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was deeply influenced by the ideas, institutions, and resources of these civilisations. Similarly, Ferguson attributes the rise of the West solely to European ingenuity and “killer apps,” dismissing the role of imperialism, slavery, and racism—what I call Europe’s “magic potion.” Huntington’s clash of civilisations thesis is based on a superficial and selective reading of history, ignoring numerous instances of peaceful interaction and mutual learning between civilisations. Fukuyama’s end of history thesis, predicting the ultimate triumph of capitalism, liberalism, and democracy, was largely a product of post-Cold War Western hubris—one that has proven to be deeply flawed.

My book fundamentally rejects these perspectives. While some Western scholars, such as John M. Hobson and Josephine Quinn, have challenged the narrative of the West as the teacher and the Rest as its pupil, my work goes much further. It is global in scope, covering Pre-Columbian civilisations, Africa, and the Indian Ocean world, and it places greater emphasis on political ideas, institutions, and governance structures rather than merely focusing on scientific and technological advancements. Above all, it demonstrates that similar ideas and principles of world order emerged independently in different parts of the world or through diffusion—not as a unidirectional process of Western transmission.

As for Zakaria, while he was among the first mainstream commentators to acknowledge a future in which the U.S. is no longer the dominant global power, he largely views U.S. hegemony as a net positive for the world. His work is primarily concerned with strategies for preserving U.S. primacy. To this day, he remains nostalgic about the American-led order, echoing the sentiments of the liberal establishment. However, what is missing from Zakaria’s narrative is the darker side of U.S. global dominance—its exclusivity, racism, interventionism, and imperialism. I challenged this perspective in my earlier book, *The End of American World Order* (2014), which was the first to explicitly proclaim the decline of the U.S.-led liberal international order. This book extends that argument, particularly in its final chapters. I contend that the U.S.-built liberal order was not as benign as its defenders claim—it was exclusionary, violent, and deeply unjust for many postcolonial states. More importantly, the erosion of this order presents an opportunity for a more just and inclusive world system, one in which the West and the Rest can engage as equals. Instead of lamenting the end of U.S. hegemony, the West should embrace the transition.

Your book emphasises decolonizing our understanding of “world order”. What exactly does that entail? What steps are necessary to make this approach more mainstream in academic and policy-making circles?

First, let me clarify that terms like “West,” “non-West,” and “Global South” are artificial constructs that lack internal homogeneity. I use them merely as convenient labels, a point I have consistently emphasised in all my previous works. Furthermore, colonial mindsets are not confined to the West; they have been mainstreamed into global academic and policy discourses through curricula, institutions, and media. Decolonizing world order studies means rejecting narratives that privilege the agency and contributions of Western societies while either dismissing or marginalising the agency of others. It entails critically questioning frameworks that uncritically accept the universality, applicability, and supposed benefits of Western concepts. Many of the dominant narratives in international relations (IR) emerged during the long era of European colonisation or were shaped by its ideological legacies. These perspectives tend to ignore or downplay how non-Western civilisations have historically contributed to the management of conflict, the promotion of justice, and the maintenance of peace and welfare.

There are multiple ways to decolonize the study of world order, and no single approach can fully satisfy all scholars engaged in this effort. In my book, I adopt a twofold strategy. First, I provide a historical analysis of how and why the study of world order has been colonised, examining the political, economic, and linguistic dominance of the West. Second, I demonstrate how adopting a longer historical perspective—one that acknowledges the diverse origins of world order—can enrich our understanding of its many forms. At the same time, I do not ignore the similarities among different civilisations’ approaches to world order, reinforcing the book’s argument about the shared development of these ideas.

While my approach is not the only way to decolonize world order studies, it is among the few that directly tackles this issue. I anticipate that some will critique my work for not going far enough in rejecting existing paradigms—a criticism I find simplistic. Others may argue that I have not given sufficient attention to specific regions or intellectual traditions,

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and to some extent, that is true (for instance, my book does not extensively cover the South Pacific or certain economic ideas). However, my work goes further than most in supporting those who seek to decolonize world order studies. It challenges colonised discourses and provides scholars with additional tools and analyses to advance this effort.

You introduce the idea of a “multiplex” world order. How does it differ from previous models of global governance and world order, such as multipolarity or unipolarity (liberal hegemony)?

I first introduced the term “multiplex” in *The End of American World Order* (2014) and have since developed and refined it further, as seen in the second edition (2018) and articles such as “After Liberal Hegemony” (*Ethics and International Affairs*, 2017) and the co-authored “Multipolar or Multiplex” (*International Affairs*, 2024). In this book, I add the prefix “global,” emphasising the concept of a “global multiplex.” The term “multiplex” differs significantly from “multipolarity,” which has become a default term for policymakers, often used in an overly simplistic manner. Multipolarity, like unipolarity (liberal hegemony, a U.S.-centric notion) and bipolarity, primarily describes the number of major powers shaping global stability and conflict. These terms focus almost exclusively on the distribution of material power—economic and military—where the key actors are great powers, as seen in Europe before World War II.

In contrast, a multiplex world order involves a more diverse and complex set of actors. It includes not only great powers but also regional powers, international institutions, multinational corporations, transnational social movements, terrorist and criminal groups, and even individuals, especially in the digital age of mass communication and social media. World order is no longer monopolised by states or great powers alone. Additionally, a multiplex world order takes into account the role of ideas, interaction capacity, and leadership, which do not always align with material power. For instance, while the U.S. remains the most powerful nation, it is neither willing nor able to exercise leadership across all global issues. Meanwhile, countries such as Australia, Canada, and Sweden have taken the lead in promoting humanitarian norms and peacekeeping, while Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, the UAE, and Indonesia exert influence within their respective regions and occasionally on the global stage. Leadership also depends on issue areas—for example, China in infrastructure development and the EU in climate change initiatives.

A multiplex world order captures this pluralistic and decentralised system of interactions, leadership, and governance.

As Western dominance declines—due to long-term economic and political shifts beginning with decolonisation and continuing with the rise of China, India, and other BRICS+ nations, as well as the erosion of U.S. leadership, particularly under Trump—new actors are stepping up. However, there will be no single hegemon to replace the U.S.; China is both unwilling and incapable of assuming such a role, and India or the BRICS+ bloc remains too divided to provide unified leadership. Instead, world order will be shaped by dynamic and shifting combinations of great powers, rising powers, middle powers, regional influencers, and new transnational arrangements that cross the traditional “West vs. Rest” divide. Moreover, this will be a multi-civilisational world in which no single culture or civilisation dominates. Unlike Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis, my concept of a global civilisation envisions a world that retains cultural, ideological, and political diversity, marking the arrival of a post-Western era.

As the West faces relative decline, how do you envision its role in the emerging “multiplex” world order?

Historically, the concept of “the West” has evolved from a Christian, imperial, and racial notion into its contemporary Cold War meaning, where it became synonymous with the U.S., its European NATO allies, and a few former European colonies like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. During the Cold War, the West was united by liberal-democratic values and a common goal: to prevent the expansion of the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact. After the Cold War, instead of dissolving, the West was strengthened. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine initially revitalised Western unity, leading to NATO’s expansion with Sweden and Finland. However, three years into the war, the supposed “revival” of the West has not materialised. Instead, the opposite is occurring. Trump’s rhetoric and actions have weakened transatlantic solidarity. He has portrayed European allies as national-security free riders and has threatened to abandon NATO members who do not meet defence spending targets. His allies, such as Vice

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President J.D. Vance, have openly dismissed European values. Trump appears willing to negotiate with Russia at Europe's expense, further straining Western cohesion. Consequently, the two core pillars of the West—America and Western Europe—are drifting apart in an unprecedented manner. Ironically, Trump may accomplish what the Soviet Union never could: the unraveling of the Western alliance.

For much of the world, the decline of the West is not necessarily a negative development. The term “West” carries a legacy of imperialism and racial hierarchy, stemming from European colonisation and later reinforced by the U.S., itself a product of settler colonialism and slavery. For many in the Global South, the West represents not just a geographic or cultural identity but an assertion of political, moral, and racial superiority.

It was against this Western dominance that concepts like the “Rest,” “Third World,” and “Global South” emerged—expressions of resistance through decolonisation. Some argue that the term “Global South” should now be retired due to its diversity and lack of unity. However, just as the idea of “the West” has persisted despite shifts in global power, the Global South retains its historical significance as a counterpoint to Western hegemony. To retire the term “Global South,” one must first dismantle the ideological construct of “the West.” This does not imply hostility toward Western civilisation or its nations. Rather, it calls for a transformation of the West's self-perception—moving away from its claim to be uniquely liberal, tolerant, and progressive, and instead embracing cooperation with others on the basis of equality and mutual respect. Ironically, Trump's presidency may accelerate this shift, creating an opportunity for a world order that transcends the “West vs. Rest” binary. As I argue in the book's final paragraph, the decline of this divide will facilitate the emergence of a global multiplex world, fostering new opportunities for civilisational and international cooperation, even as sources of conflict persist.

Your work reads more like a historical narrative rather than a traditional work of political science or international relations. How do you see it contributing to or reshaping how we think about global politics?

More precisely, my book aims to integrate history more deeply into political science and international relations (IR). It draws from deep historical contexts to examine the origins of key concepts in IR—sovereignty, balance of power, hegemony, nationalism, interstate cooperation, warfare, human rights, interdependence, and free trade—without necessarily framing them in conventional IR terminology.

Bringing history into IR to challenge its Western-centric foundations was a key theme of my 2014 Presidential Address to the International Studies Association (ISA). The field of historical IR is gaining traction, and this book contributes to that trend by demonstrating the value of historical insights in understanding contemporary global politics. However, my intended audience extends beyond the IR community. As noted in the final chapter, the book is relevant to various social sciences and humanities disciplines, including history, philosophy, and sociology. This is why I deliberately avoided framing it strictly within IR or political science concepts.

The book expands the scope of inquiry in IR by uncovering the global origins of foundational ideas in social sciences and international affairs. It encourages students and scholars to explore new research topics and methodologies, enriching multiple academic fields. Within IR, it challenges dominant paradigms—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—by exposing their Eurocentric origins and advocating for a more inclusive and pluralistic approach. My work on Global IR, which I introduced during my ISA presidency, aligns with this effort to decentralise Western dominance in the field. By providing extensive historical evidence and alternative perspectives, this book helps push IR toward a truly global and multi-perspectival discipline, free from the constraints of Western theoretical paradigms.