

Review - International Order in Diversity

Written by Nathan Sears

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NATHAN SEARS, MAR 28 2017

International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean
By Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015

Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman's book, *International Order in Diversity*, poses the interesting question, "How can we account for the emergence, operation and persistence of durably diverse international systems?"^[1] The book explores the case of the Indian Ocean region between 1500-1750 and beyond, where the authors' principal finding is that interaction reinforced the heterogeneity of the region's principal political units, especially sovereign states (e.g., the Portuguese Estado da India), sovereign companies (e.g., the Dutch and English East India Companies), and empires (e.g., the Mughal and Ottoman Empires). The authors challenge what they see as the conventional assumption in International Relation (IR) theory that interaction leads to the homogeneity of political units, explaining that this was not the case for three main reasons. Firstly, the Europeans and regional empires possessed distinct, but generally compatible goals and preferences that permitted a degree of cooperation, instead of zero-sum conflict. Secondly, this favorable distribution of interests was reinforced by a (structural) cultural commitment to heteronomous (i.e., layered and non-exclusive) political authority. Finally, processes of "localization" permitted Europeans and indigenous polities to adapt to one another's practices at the local level.

This part of the authors' argument is generally compelling, and the book represents an excellent example of theory-informed, puzzle-driven research in the IR discipline. It also provides a rich historical description of war, trade, and order that is likely to be usefully new for IR scholars unfamiliar with international history beyond that of modern Western Europe. However, many of the authors' theoretical claims are less convincing and/or exaggerated, and some of their analysis engages in essentially "revisionist" history. This book review will critique some of the authors' less compelling theoretical reasoning, identify some "strawman" claims about existing IR theory, and examine three of their more problematic historical arguments.

Theoretical Flaws and "Strawmen"

In framing their theoretical puzzle, the authors argue that realism, rationalism, and constructivism tend to assume that interaction will ("eventually") lead to a convergence of "like units."^[2] This basically occurs through a homogenizing process of "competition" and/or "conformity"—or "selection" and "socialization" in the more common Waltzian and Wendtian jargon. The basic empirical puzzle of the book is the persistent polity diversity (or the existence of "unlike units") in the Indian Ocean during the period of 1500-1750 and beyond, despite increased interaction. However, there are several parts of their framing of the puzzle and theoretical work that are problematic. Firstly, the general usage of the term "like units" by IR scholars, following the work of Kenneth Waltz, does not refer to the institutional and/or ideational similarity of (political) units, but to their *functional* similarity.^[3] The point is not that the units "look alike," but rather that they "do the same things," otherwise we would have to conclude that the contemporary international system is not populated by "like units" at all, but rather by a highly distinct set of democratic (republican/parliamentarian, etc.), authoritarian (secular/religious, etc.), and weak/failed polities (etc.). The question, then, is whether the units in the Indian Ocean were functionally differentiated?

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While Phillips and Sharman *could* make this case, they should not overstate it. After all, the three archetype actors that the authors identify in their case study (i.e., sovereign states, sovereign companies, and empires) clearly gave significant attention to the dominant activities of war and trade. The most illustrative example of this—which the authors show in their own analysis—is how the Dutch East India Company (the “VOC”) entered the Indian Ocean region in search of profits (i.e., the corporate “bottom line”), but ended up engaging in war, diplomacy, and even governing local populations and territory (e.g., in Java).^[4] This not only seems to echo Robert Jervis’s analysis of system effects,^[5] where outcomes do not necessarily follow from the intentions of actors, but more importantly appears to demonstrate the exact *opposite* of the central claim of the book. Instead of interaction reinforcing durable heterogeneity, as the authors argue, interaction actually led to the functional homogenization of units! Hence, the history of interaction in the Indian Ocean might still be framed in terms of the theory behind Charles Tilly’s *Coercion and Capital*, which also traced a long—and arguably still quite similar—process of state-formation in Europe, through the master variables of coercion and capital, and the functions of war-making, state-making, extraction, and protection; all of these were clearly present and exerted strong effects in the Indian Ocean.^[6]

In considering the meaning of *International Order in Diversity* for IR theory (especially neorealism), it is worth questioning whether Waltz would not recognize his theory of “like units” interacting under the structural condition of “anarchy” in the case of the Indian Ocean. Clearly the Indian Ocean international system was never organized hierarchically under a single (“sovereign”) power center. Neither the Mughal and Ottoman Empires, nor the European sovereign states and companies were able to achieve anything like the “ordering principle” of hierarchy that Waltz used to distinguish between domestic and international politics.^[7] The Indian Ocean could therefore be classified as structurally “anarchic,” even during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the Mughal Empire was preponderant, and in the nineteenth century when the British Empire/EIC achieved preeminence. Instead, what the authors call “hierarchic heterogeneity” (or “top-down localization”) emerged only at the level of the *units*, and therefore fits comfortably within Waltz’s framework of hierarchically organized units and an anarchically organized international system.^[8] Therefore, one might legitimately reinterpret the authors’ case study as demonstrating that the anarchic structure of the Indian Ocean international system contributed to a process of functional homogenization of the Estado de India, the Dutch and English East India Companies, and the Mughal Empire in terms of the dominant functions of war and trade, through a process of increasing political, commercial, and military interaction.

Conversely, what is much more damaging for neorealism is the significance of Phillips and Sharman’s evidence against balance-of-power theory, which they do not consider. Through the authors’ historical work, they demonstrate consistent balancing failures in the Indian Ocean international system. Multiple times throughout the period of 1500 to 1900 specific actors were able to dominate the region, whether it was the Mughal Empire on land; the Portuguese, Dutch, and English in loose succession on the seas; or the British Empire on both land and sea. In this way, the authors make an important contribution to the IR literature that demonstrates the failure of this basic prediction of neorealism when applied to different regions and times in world history.^[9]

Furthermore, the authors continuously characterized (caricatured?) “realist” explanations in a way that recalls the butchered attempts by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik.^[10] This can be seen in the authors’ separation of “material” and “ideational” factors with such perplexing rigidity that, in essence, if you can’t throw it or shoot it at somebody, it’s not realism. In order to preempt the realist claim that the compatibility of European, Mughal, and Ottoman goals and preferences was merely a result of the geopolitical and technological circumstances of their relative military power, the authors argue that it was more deeply about their differing sea and land-based strategic cultures. This is clearly ideational/cultural, and therefore constructivist. This argument pigeonholes realists by preventing them from studying strategic culture (something realists had been doing long before constructivists). Nevertheless, if forced to defend this “strawman” materialist version of realism, one might refer Phillips and Sharman to H. J. Mackinder’s geopolitical argument that these strategic cultures were themselves constituted by the geographic (and hence “material”) contexts from which the military power of the Europeans and Mughal Empires originated (i.e., the Atlantic and Central Asia, respectively).^[11] The authors’ critique of “military Darwinism” is similarly lacking in nuance, since its theoretical logic is reduced to “selecting out” weak units from the international system. It therefore takes no account of the “sameness effect” of learning/emulating the successful practices of powerful states, which is prominent in explanations from Tilly to Waltz, but clearly does not fit within the authors’ material-ideational divide. Finally, “military Darwinism” cannot *only* lead to convergence, otherwise there would be no way of

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explaining the emergence of the sovereign state in the first place. To complete the “evolution” metaphor, one must allow for “mutation” as well as “selection,” which means that “convergence” is only half of the story of what is really a perennial process of military and political change throughout history.

Revisionist History

While *International Order in Diversity* provides a generally rich history of the Indian Ocean region, and represents a welcome return to (especially non-Western) history for the IR discipline, there are times where the book becomes overly “revisionist” in its history. This reader found three glaring cases. Firstly, in explaining the emergence of the Portuguese Estado da India, the authors aim to demonstrate that their rapid expansion was due primarily to the lack of local resistance and their compatible preferences with the terrestrial empires, while downplaying Portuguese military superiority and institutional efficiency. Contemporary historiography would probably confirm the first point, but reject the latter.^[12] It is simply bad history to downplay the importance of Portuguese (naval) military superiority at this time, both in technological and tactical terms. The Portuguese ships were not only bigger and faster than their competitors in the region (at least since China’s Zheng He), but were the only ships to place large artillery and cannons on board their ships in order to mount “broadside” attacks to sink the ships of their competitors. The local ships simply were not equipped, nor did they conceive of naval combat, in this way.^[13] In one account, “[the Indians] drew the obvious moral that the Portuguese were invincible at sea. The battle of Diu was the greatest naval action of the Portuguese in Asia in the 16th century. Never again was there a formal naval engagement between the Portuguese and an Indian fleet.”^[14] More generally, the Western strategic (cultural) preference for the “decisive battle” paid dividends in the annihilation of their competitors.^[15] Moreover, the fact that the Estado da India met initially with only decentralized and disorganized resistance by merchants and pirates is very clearly a testament to the military institutional efficiency of Portugal’s state-like “monopoly of [naval] violence.”

Secondly, it is highly misleading to explain the decline of the Estado da India and the rise of the Dutch VOC and English IEC as a result of the comparative institutional advantage of the sovereign companies over the sovereign state, without considering the broader geopolitical context of their competition. In all three cases, the trajectories of the Estado da India, VOC, and EIC mirrored the rise and fall of Portuguese, Dutch, and English national power in Europe.^[16] For example, the Estado da India enjoyed its heyday with the Portuguese state, and shared in its eventual decline relative to the Spanish Habsburgs. Portugal was ultimately annexed (some argue conquered) by the Habsburg Empire in 1580—an event that, though crucial to the story, is mentioned only in passing by the authors.^[17] From 1580 to 1640—a period which completely encompasses the Estado da India’s replacement by the Dutch VOC as the preeminent naval and trading power in the India Ocean—the Portuguese and all of their overseas possessions came under the sovereignty of the Spanish Habsburg Empire. Importantly, the Habsburg Empire was thoroughly focused on (and strategically overextended in) their wars in Europe, including an 80 year conflict with the Dutch.^[18] Moreover, the authors fail to even mention one of the most important naval episode of the period: the defeat and destruction of the Spanish Armada by the English in 1588. The destruction of Armada sapped the naval strength of the Spanish and Portuguese just on the eve of Dutch expansion into the Indian Ocean, but is conveniently left out of the author’s story. One might ask, how could the Estado da India be expected to retain its monopoly in the Indian Ocean when the Portuguese could not even maintain their sovereignty from Spain? How could it survive an “Iberian Union” that clearly prioritized Europe first, the Americas second, and the Indian Ocean as a distant third? This does not seem like a fair fight for drawing such stark theoretical conclusions about the relative merits of the sovereign state and company.

Thirdly, the authors exaggerate the degree of separation of the VOC and EIC from the English and Dutch states. While it is true that the Dutch had a longer leash than their English counterparts, according to one historian “until 1648 [the VOC] operated as the right arm of the Dutch state in its offensive against the Iberian power.”^[19] In general, the authors underestimate how much private profits and public power were mutually reinforcing, which seems to perfectly fit the “extraction-protection” relationship described by Tilly, with close collusion between state and corporate interests. More generally, because of the functional similarity of the units, it becomes difficult to draw a sharp dividing line between “states” and “companies,” which all seem to conform more or less closely to Tilly’s “organized crime” metaphor.^[20] Thus, while there are many things that are theoretically and empirically interesting about *International Order in Diversity*, and the book was a genuinely enjoyable read from start to finish, there are a

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number of problems with its theoretical framing and historical analysis that require a more skeptical reading.

Footnotes

[1] Andrew Phillips and J. C. Sharman, *International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[2] Phillips and Sharman, *International Order in Diversity*, Chapter 1.

[3] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979).

[4] Phillips and Sharman, *International Order in Diversity*, Chapter 4.

[5] Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[6] Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in eds. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1990).

[7] For the most relevant sections, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 88-97.

[8] Phillips and Sharman, *International Order in Diversity*, Chapter 5.

[9] See for example William C. Wohlforth, et al. "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2007), pp. 155-185.

[10] Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1999), pp. 5-55. See also Peter D. Feaver et al., "Correspondence: Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (Or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1999), pp. 5-55.

[11] H J Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 4 (2004), pp. 298-321.

[12] See for example Douglas Porch, *Wars of Empire* (London: Wellington House, 2000), pp. 60-61.

[13] For an example from one account, "The importance of naval superiority in establishing the Portuguese is exemplified from a passage in *Revista de Cultura* (International Edition 26). It describes Civet Sodre's successful command of 18 vessels against some 90 ships from Kerala. The Portuguese obtained victory by firing broadside at the Indian vessels with heavy guns as well as smaller munitions. They targeted the body of the ships with the large guns and with the smaller weapons fired on the masts and crew from Kerala. Meanwhile, the Indian vessels made no significant damage because they possessed only small guns incapable of structural damage and the Portuguese crew kept mainly below deck." Michael Hong, "Portuguese Maritime Meddling In the Indian Ocean," <http://history.emory.edu/home/documents/endeavors/volume3/MichaelHonig.pdf>, p. 42.

[14] K. M. Mathew, *History of the Portuguese Navigation in India, 1497-1600* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), p. 213.

[15] For a discussion of the Western and non-Western "cultures" of warfare, and the "Western Way of War," see respectively John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (Random House, 1994); and Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War* (California: University of California Press, 1994; 2009).

[16] For a still masterful account, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (United States of America: Random House, 1987).

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[17] Phillips and Sharman, *International Order in Diversity*, p. 72.

[18] Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Power*.

[19] Engel Sluiter, "Dutch Maritime Power and the Colonial Status Quo, 1585-1641," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1942), p. 32.

[20] Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime."

About the author:

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