

Student Feature - Theory in Action: Towards a Global IR?

Written by Amitav Acharya

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AMITAV ACHARYA, JUN 28 2019

This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

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.

Universalism vs. Particularism

https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/68816/10.1177_002234338402100304.pdf?sequence=2

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 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

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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.

What is the Global South?

<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/globalsouthpolitics/2018/08/08/global-south-what-does-it-mean-and-why-use-the-term/>

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 they 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 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

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institutions at the regional level either to challenge or to support and strengthen global order.

Agency of the Global South

<https://theconversation.com/the-global-south-is-changing-how-knowledge-is-made-shared-and-used-113943>

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.

Political Science and International Relations in a Multiplex World

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.

About the author:

Amitav Acharya is Distinguished Professor of International Relations and the UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance at American University, Washington, DC. His latest book is *The Once and Future World Order* (2025, Hachette). Prior books include *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at Its Centenary* (co-author with Barry Buzan, Cambridge, 2019), *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, 2018); and *The End of American World Order* (Polity, 2018).